The Kids Are Alright

by Ultra

Summary

AU Season 2; Paris' parents are finally divorced but now her father has fallen for the most unlikely of women and moved her and her son into the house. Paris has a new step-brother who is about to start attending Chilton. His name? Jess Mariano! (Eventual Literati and probably JavaJunkie too)
Chapter 1

Rory was in two minds about how she felt when it came to returning to Chilton for Junior Year. She had to admit there was plenty to like about the school, the classes, the facilities, some of the teachers even, but there were downsides to going back too. One issue was always going to be Mr Medina. It was barely a couple of weeks since her mom dumped Max, at very short notice before their wedding, and Rory was feeling all kinds of awkward about it.

The other fly in the Chilton ointment was one Paris Geller. She had quite decided that she and Rory were enemies by the end of Sophomore year, despite the two of them being some kind of quasi-friends for a while there. Trust a guy to mess things up, especially when that guy was Tristan DuGrey. Now it seemed Rory and Paris were destined not to get along at all, and Ms Geller certainly wasn’t in a great mood when they first ran across each other in class that first day.

“It’s not you,” Louise insisted when Paris nearly snapped Rory’s head off for just walking within three feet of her. “Honestly, it’s way bigger than you,” she rolled her eyes.

“You heard what happened, right?” asked Madeline in a low voice. “With Paris’ parents?”

“Er, no,” Rory shook her head, looking across at where Paris had taken her seat a short distance away. “I mean, she mentioned their relationship wasn’t great.”

“They’ve been circling each other in the divorce stakes for months now, total ongoing saga,” said Louise in a voice just above a whisper. “Finally, her father decides to pull the plug on the whole thing, pretty much pays off the little wife just to get rid of her.”

“Then he takes off on some kind of ‘business trip’ to New York,” Madeline air quoted. “Comes back a week later with a new bride!”

“He... He remarried that fast?” asked Rory, stunned by the revelation and feeling just a little sorry for Paris if she were honest.

After the break down of the relationship between her parents, the last thing she needed was a hastily selected step mother. Unless of course Mr Geller had been seeing this woman all along. Rory frowned at all the negative implications. She hated to think badly of people without good reason, as a rule. Paris’ parents didn’t seem to have much time for her, or for each other, but she really didn’t know either of them well enough to make judgements.

“If you’re going to talk about me behind my back, at least get in all the important facts!” said Paris herself as she came storming over.

Rory literally stepped backwards as her frenemy came at her in a fury.

“You want the gory details, Gilmore?” she asked, not waiting for a response before she continued, her arms folded across her chest. “Here it comes. My parents got their divorce finalised in record time. Mom is gone, Dad went off to New York to find himself or some other vague and ridiculous Satre-esque idea. What he actually found was a waitress, and in a fit of insanity, he believes he fell in love with her. So home he comes with a new wife and just moves her right in with us to play happy families. What do you think to that?”

“Well, I...” Rory began, not really sure what to say for the best.

Paris didn’t seem to care much about giving her time to think of a reasonable response and powered
on regardless.

“Oh, and it’s not just the step-monster that I gained, I get a step-brother too! How about that?”

Madeline and Louise shared a troubled look and then started to back away to their seats. Clearly they had heard this rant a few times already, so Rory completely understood their need to run. Still, she could’ve used not being left alone with a crazy-mad Paris.

“So, this new love in your father’s life has a son. How old?” she asked curiously, thinking at least that was a reasonable question that couldn’t cause too much more of an explosion.

Apparently she was wrong.

“Seventeen!” Paris yelled so loud that several people in the class room who hadn’t been paying attention before now looked over out of curiosity. “And the worst part?”

“So, this new love in your father’s life has a son. How old?” she asked curiously, thinking at least that was a reasonable question that couldn’t cause too much more of an explosion.

“Um, you don’t have to share a room or anything, right?” checked Rory, trying to think of the worst case scenario that might be making Paris so upset.

“Obviously not,” she rolled her eyes dramatically. “But I have to share my academia. He’s coming here! That reprobate, that commoner! At Chilton, on my father’s dime!”

She was practically growling about it and Rory wanted to continue to feel at least sympathy but it was pretty tough. Rory herself was technically a commoner in a rich kids’ school. Sure, her grandparents had money, but not herself or her mom.

“Paris, I don’t think you should...”

“What? I’m supposed to be all politically correct to some random son of a waitress that my Dad brings home like a stray dog?!” yelled Paris, once again exploding at anyone who so much a glanced at her.

A couple of fools dared to make eye contact as they looked over and were soon shot down. Rory winced, and Paris carried on yelling.

“I’m glad my disastrous family situation is amusing to you! God, you must be saving a fortune on the movie channel by staring at me!”

“Paris,” said Rory, almost putting a hand on her arm but thinking better of it at the last moment and pushing her own hair back behind her ear instead. “Um, well, maybe they won’t be so bad to live with. I mean, you haven’t known them long. Given time, you could get to know them, they might turn out to be nice people.”

Paris snorted in unladylike fashion that that suggestion.

“I guess you’ll find out for yourself soon enough, at least where the son is concerned,” she explained, finally quietening down some when the teacher walked into the room. “He’s with Headmaster Charleston for his induction talk, then I’m guessing he’ll put in an appearance in class,” she sighed heavily.

“Do these new step family members have names at least?” asked Rory carefully.

“Liz and Jess Mariano,” said Paris grumpily. “I mean, how dumb is that? Jess? That's not even a name!”
“Well, I'm guessing he didn't name himself...”

Rory was prevented from finishing that thought and thankfully Paris was stopped from reacting to it either when Ms. Smith called the class to order. Everybody took their seats and the actual educational portion of the day began. Rory wasn’t thinking much about Paris and her step family after that, just concentrating on her work, though it was hard to ignore the fact that her usual rival wasn’t raising her hand to answer half so many questions as usual.

It was not long before the bell was due to ring when a knock came on the door. Ms Smith had the class quietly reading the next chapter in the text book by then, and so it got a lot of attention when she called for whomsoever was knocking to come in. Rory looked up from her book, just like everybody else in class, as a new boy walked in. He had to be Paris’ step-brother, Jess, it was the only explanation, but Rory was surprised by how he looked. She had expected some punk with piercings and green hair, or maybe a real loner with a duffel bag and a weird smell coming off him. Paris certainly described something repulsive, but Jess really wasn’t anything like that at all. Actually, Rory couldn’t help but think how surprisingly good-looking he was as she watched him quietly converse with the teacher. He was dressed in the standard issue Chilton uniform like everybody else, and yet somehow he carried it off better, made it look cooler. Rory couldn’t figure out how that worked but it did. He had dark hair and dark eyes, if she had to guess Rory would say he was maybe a little bit Italian or something, certainly the name Mariano suggested it, she realised, when the teacher introduced the newcomer to the whole class and then pointed him towards the only empty seat, two rows across from Rory. She hadn’t realised she was staring until she found he was staring right back, smirking at her apparent inability to look away. Rory blushed furiously and put her eyes back to her book.

When she spared Jess another glance at least five minutes later, he was reading too, but from this angle it didn’t look like he was nose-deep in the text book for class at all. If Rory didn’t know better, she would say he was reading Slaughter-House Five. The bell rang, the teacher dismissed class and chairs scraped against the tile as everybody got up to leave. It took Rory a moment to realise she was the only one not moving. She gathered her books quickly then, focusing on getting to her next class and not expending any more energy on wondering about the new kid. Perhaps that would have been easier if she had been looking where she was going and not ploughed right into that very person.

“Sorry,” she said, righting herself fast. “Um, yeah, I am sorry,” she repeated lamely.

“Is that your given name or...?” he asked amusedly.

Rory opened her mouth to explain herself and then realised at the last that he was joking. He was smirking again, and it was getting real old, real fast. She just wished he would move so she could successfully get out of the door this time, but he didn't.

“My given name is Lorelai, but most people call me Rory,” she explained, a little snippily.

“Lorelai? Like the mermaid?” he checked. “Because I’m not really getting the temptress vibe, though you do seem like you might be dangerous to know,” he teased, referring to their collision moments before.

Rory found a smirk of her own forming as she lifted her chin defiantly and gave him a light shove out of her way.

“You have no idea,” she said then as she walked away.

Jess watched her go and a genuine smile replaced the smirk he had been wearing this whole time. Maybe having to go to this snotty private school wouldn’t be so bad after all.
Chapter 2

Rory was in two minds about the first meeting of the Franklin. She was so glad to be on the paper, but with Paris as editor, it was never going to be easy. Their run in first thing when Ms Geller had gone kind of crazy about her step-family had been followed by a brief and stilted conversation at lunch about trying to get along whilst they worked together on the Franklin. Paris had begrudgingly agreed that it was better to put all energies into the paper (and hating on her step-brother in her own case) instead of battling each other, and had shaken hands with Rory. She told her the first meeting was at four and she would see her there, and Rory had walked away with a smile of triumph.

Now it was a quarter to four, and she was hanging out in the library. She had completed one homework assignment and knew she hadn’t the time to start another right now. Rory daren’t start reading a book because she knew she would get engrossed and miss the Franklin meeting, so in the end, she decided to head down to the newspaper room and wait outside until everyone else showed up. She got up from her seat and turned to pick up her bag. When she turned back she found she was no longer alone.

“What are you trying to do? Scare me to death?” she asked Jess in a harsh whisper, knowing speaking any louder would just gain unwanted attention. “Geez. Lurk, much?”

“You like that?” he asked, nodding towards the book on the table in front of her that Rory had yet to pick up.

Apparently he was ignoring her questions to pose one of his own. She really couldn’t be bothered to call him on it right now.

“So far, yeah,” she nodded, smiling as she picked up The Holy Barbarians. “Do you read much?”

“Not much,” Jess shook his head.

Rory shifted awkwardly, giving him a look. Finally he moved out of the way and let her go. She thought that was the end of the conversation until she reached the library door and realised Jess was right on her heels, moving fast to open the door for her like a gentleman.

“Thank you,” she said politely as she passed through and still he followed her. “So, how do you like Chilton so far?” she asked as they headed down the hallway together.

“Oh, it’s a riot,” he dead-panned. “And the teachers love me. You can’t see all the gold stars plastered on my forehead?” he joked.

Rory didn’t find it all that funny, at least she tried not to. Jess had this way of talking that made her want to smile and she couldn’t help it, but it shouldn’t be so amusing. School was to be taken seriously, especially a school like Chilton that did not come cheap.

“Y’know, you’re pretty lucky to be here,” she told Jess as they walked. “Mr Geller must think you’re smart enough if he paid out the tuition for you to even come to Chilton. You shouldn’t blow this chance...”

“Wow, I had no idea you were a cheerleader,” said Jess then, throwing Rory completely off what she was saying.

“I’m not,” she frowned.
“Then maybe put down the pom-poms,” he suggested with a look. “You do realise that you’re giving me the ‘go, fight, win’ speech, right? And that’s pretty presumptuous seeing as we only met today,” he reminded her. “You don’t know me,” he pointed out, said in such a way as to suggest Rory was dumb for ever presuming such a thing.

She did not care for that attitude at all, even though he did have a point.

“Well, excuse me for trying to be friendly,” she snapped. “I just thought since you’re Paris’ step-brother, I would make an effort, but hey, never mind.”

She stormed away from Jess then, or she would’ve done if she had the space to do so. Unfortunately, they were within three paces of the newspaper room and she had to stop right outside of it. She sat down on the seat there and deliberately turned her body away from Jess who was still stood staring at her. Opening up The Holy Barbarians, Rory set to reading, or trying to. It was difficult when she was feeling so wound up, and when Jess was still there, watching her. She saw him move in her peripheral vision, and then suddenly he was stood right by her chair. Rory didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of looking his way, at least not until he spoke.

“You do know the newspaper meeting started at 3.15, right?” he checked.

Rory narrowed her eyes at him, sure he was lying. Paris had said four o’clock, and Paris wouldn’t lie to her. The realisation struck Rory then that lying is exactly what Paris would do in order to make her look stupid after the idiotic falling out they had recently. Jess sure didn’t look like he was kidding anyway. Rory closed her book fast and leapt up from the seat, turning to the door and opening it. Lo and behold, behind it she found the Franklin meeting which had been going on for a good while without her. When she glanced back at Jess then, he was already gone.

“Nice girl that Paris,” said Lorelai with a sigh, after Rory explained what had happened at school.

Between lying about the time of the Franklin meeting and then sticking her with an article on paving, Ms Geller had certainly pulled out all the stops in trying to make her life difficult, but Rory wouldn’t yield. This she told her mother as they sat down on the couch to enjoy a movie, complete with popcorn and jelly beans.

“I’m going to write the greatest article on paving that anyone has ever read!” she said definitely.

“That’ll show her,” Lorelai agreed, all full of support, as she patted Rory’s hand.

“It should,” she nodded. “Although, Paris has enough suffering of her own right now, I guess. You know her father got remarried over the Summer?”

“Remarried?” her mother checked with a frown, stopping half way to putting on the movie. “He’s not married to Paris’ mom?”

“Well, he was, but they’ve been getting divorced for months now. It got finalised during the Summer, and then Mr Geller went to New York and came back with a new wife, and a step son!”

“Wow! Drama, drama, drama!” Lorelai exclaimed, pulling her legs up under herself and getting comfortable with the popcorn on her lap. “This is getting more interesting than the movie. Tell me more!”

Rory grinned at her mother’s enthusiasm, as it tended to be both over the top and infectious.

“I don’t know much,” she admitted. “Apparently the wife was a waitress. Some say in a diner, others
say in a strip club. Paris didn’t confirm either way, mostly because everybody is afraid to ask,” she explained. “As for the step-son, he goes to Chilton now.”

“Ooh, I’ll bet Paris loves that!” Lorelai laughed around a mouthful of kernels. “What are we talking? Anthony Michael Hall or James Dean?”

“Definitely James Dean,” said Rory, nodding vigorously. “He’s seventeen, his name is Jess, and he’s just... I don’t know, I kinda get that ‘too cool for school’ vibe, but he seems sort of studious in a weird way.”

“Ah, the smart-but-I-wish-I-wasn’t-’cause-it’s-just-so-embarrassing type,” said Lorelai knowingly. “Is he cute?”

“I don’t know,” Rory shrugged and looked away. “I don’t notice things like that, I have a boyfriend.”

“Oh, come on!” her mother argued. “Being in a relationship does not stop you noticing if other guys are cute. Hell, I’m pretty sure being married doesn’t stop that. So...?”

“I guess he’s kinda cute,” Rory admitted then, grinning too much. “He’s got that dark, mysterious thing going on, and he does this smirking thing that I just hate but somehow it’s kinda sexy too.”

“Ooh, the Chilton faculty are not gonna like that, but the girls are gonna go wild,” Lorelai giggled like a girl half her own age. “Methinks Junior year just got interesting.”

Rory laughed too because she just couldn’t help it. She couldn’t deny her mom was probably right. Jess Mariano was bound to shake things up at Chilton. Not rich and privileged like most of the students there, and the child of a step-parent with a questionable background - he was always going to make waves. Rory felt a little bad for being happy that Paris had to put up with the repercussions, and yet she couldn’t help but think she kind of deserved a little pay back. Paris Geller put a lot of other people, Rory included, through a whole lot of crap. A little of her own medicine might even do her good.

Jess almost got the door in his face as he followed Paris into the house. She was pissed enough at gaining a step-mother and a step-brother the way she had, Jess knew that, but she really did not like being told by her father to drive Jess back and forth for school. Jess didn’t take it personally. Honestly, he wasn’t so sure he wanted to come here in the first place. Leaving New York, his home, his school, his friends, all the things he knew, to come to some fancy house in Hartford, Connecticut? It wasn't his idea of a good time, and given Liz’s track record, the guy she was marrying was doubtless going to be another idiot. As it turned out, Mr Geller wasn’t so bad. He had to be pretty smart to run businesses the way he did, and it didn’t suck to have a decent sized room in this fancy house, complete with new stereo and TV installed. Jess didn’t have much to complain about, even if he didn’t much care for going to private school in a dorky uniform.

“Hey kids!” said Liz as she emerged from the living room with a glass in her hand. “How was the first day, honey?” she asked Jess, reaching out to him.

He easily dodged her advance and headed for the stairs.

“Fine,” he told her sharply.

“Paris?” she called after her new step-daughter.

She stopped two paces ahead of Jess on the stairs and turned around with the world’s most fake grin
plastered on her face.

“Just ducky, thank you,” she said snarkily and then continued walking.

“Oh, okay,” said Liz, trying to force a smile. “Well, I guess you have homework to do so... Okay!” she finished lamely as the teens disappeared from sight.

Paris and Jess hit the landing and headed to their own separate rooms. The doors were right across from each other, and since Liz and Jess moved in, there had been a padlock on Paris’ door. Jess wasn’t offended so much as amused. As if he would, for any reason, want to get into her room! He leaned on the opposite wall by his own door as she fumbled with the lock.

“So what’s the story with you and the Gilmore girl?” he asked casually.

Paris finished unlocking her door and then turned to glance at him.

“No story,” she said simply. “She’s the competition.”

“Academic or romantic?” smirked Jess, curious as to whether Paris even had some semblance of a dating life - he highly doubted it somehow.

“Both,” she told him, sticking out her chin like she just proved something. “Why do you care?”

“I don’t,” he shrugged.

“Good,” she nodded.

It seemed as if their conversation was over, and yet Jess wasn’t quite done. Paris had got her door open but only one foot inside when he spoke again.

“You made her late for that meeting of yours on purpose, right?”

Paris sighed heavily as she faced him again.

“Maybe,” she admitted. “What does that have to do with you?”

Jess didn’t answer her at first and then pushed off the wall with a shake of his head and turned to his own door. He opened it up and went to head in when Paris spoke up.

“She’s not perfect, you know?” she said of Rory. “She has this reputation, all sweet and innocent, like butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, but it’s not true. She’s clever, devious even. Y’know her mother was involved with our English teacher. I wouldn’t be surprised if she got together with him to try and up Rory’s grade point average. To think my father could have done something similar for me after the divorce, but no. I get the ditzy waitress and the beatnik loser,” she groused.

Jess turned to her with a smirk on his face that wouldn’t shift.

“I love you too, sis,” he teased her, ducking into his room and closing the door before she could react.

He wouldn’t be surprised if Paris was capable of a full on physical attack if provoked enough. It might be worth pushing her just to see what she would do. Jess found her very amusing, for now. Throwing himself down on the bed, he stared up at the ceiling and contemplated his life. This last month had been pretty crazy, but not as bad as he thought. This new life that his mother had gotten for them, it was unlikely to last all that long. Her relationships rarely lasted, not even when there were vows and rings involved. Still, for as long as they were here, Jess would enjoy the perks that
came from being a rich man’s step-son. Geller was fine, a decent kind of guy that just wanted what was best for people, apparently. He felt moved to buy both Jess and Liz whatever they wanted, and Jess wasn’t going to argue with that. For once he was actually getting something good out of one of his mother’s marriages and that was nothing short of a miracle.

As for attending Chilton, he could handle that. Jess was smarter than most people would reckon on. He could pass his classes without all that much effort, he always had before. Sure, he had to wear the dumb clothes and put up with being surrounded by rich bitches and trust fund losers, but they could be used for sport if all else failed.

Of course, not everybody at Chilton was rich or an idiot. Rory Gilmore seemed different and interesting. Getting to know her better probably wouldn’t be so bad, and it didn’t hurt that it drove Paris crazy. Jess couldn’t keep the smirk off his face as he thought of all the fun he could have here yet. Maybe it wasn’t so bad being moved to Hartford and handed a rich kid’s life for a while. For as long as it lasted, he may as well try to enjoy it.
Lorelai was headed to Luke’s for very important supplies. The dance practice at Miss Patty’s for Rory’s ‘coming out’ was proving to be a long and complicated process. Rory wasn’t so bad. She had the combined co-ordination and grace of Lorelai herself and Christopher also. The problem was Dean. Sweet as the boy was and as hard as he was trying, he just seemed to have two of the biggest left feet ever in the known world. Lorelai tried not to smile thinking about that as she headed towards the diner for much needed coffee and Danishes. She stopped by the window when she heard a commotion. The door flung open, the bell ringing crazily as the door itself crashed around on its hinges.

“Hey, stranger!” a woman called, someone Lorelai had never seen before, but she seemed to be talking to Luke and a second later he came rushing to gather that same woman up in his arms.

“That’s... weird,” said Lorelai to herself, though she wasn’t sure why.

Sure, Luke wasn’t much for the hugging, but he had dated before, she knew that. Not so long ago he was trying to make things work with his ex, Rachel. Maybe this was another visiting previous lover. They certainly seemed friendly from the way they were holding onto each other and smiling like crazy people. Not that it bothered Lorelai, at least, that was what she told herself. There was no reason in the world why she should not want Luke to have a special lady friend, none whatsoever, and yet...

Lorelai shook her head and kept walking, straight past the door to Luke’s and on to Weston’s. She could get coffee and pastries there instead, no biggy, and yet she wasn’t sure why she wasn’t going into the diner. Just because Luke had a friend visiting, it wasn’t as if he had closed up in an instant. He would still give her coffee, he always gave Lorelai coffee, he was her coffee angel.

Lorelai suddenly pictured Luke with wings and felt strange. Shaking her head again she doubled back and walked right in through the still partially open door before she could change her mind again. She found her friend back behind the counter now, serving coffee to his lady friend who spoke animatedly to him from the nearest stool. Taking a deep breath, Lorelai approached with a purpose.


“Lorelai, hey,” he grinned back at her. “I want you to meet somebody,” he encouraged her closer, as the blonde on the stool turned to look.

“Hey there, I’m Liz Danes,” she smiled, holding out a hand. “No, no, sorry!” she retracted it again, literally face-palming before she started her introduction over. “Liz Geller now. I keep on forgetting about the new name.”

“Nice to meet you, Liz,” Lorelai told her, shaking her hand. “I’m Lorelai, and also a little confused. You said Danes first, right?”


“Yes. Yes, you did” she agreed with a much more genuine smile now as she hopped up onto the stool next to Liz’s own. “Wow, it must be a while since your last visit. I mean, I’ve been coming here practically every day for years now and I’ve never had the pleasure.”

“Oh, I know. It’s just... I’ve been meaning to visit for so long,” Liz explained. “ Mostly I’ve been in
New York, and then just a few weeks ago, I meet this guy. Long story short, it was instant romance, love at first sight, y’know?” she said to Lorelai. “One second I’m plain old Liz Danes, and the next Mrs Liz Geller with a big house in Hartford, and my kid in a private school!” she said, laughing at how ridiculous that sounded to her own ears.

“You got Jess into Chilton?” asked Luke, clearly hearing this part for the first time now.

“Yeah, Ira got it all figured out and he’s paying for it. Well, it made sense. Paris already goes there so...”


“You said that already,” Luke pointed out, though neither woman was listening.

“You know Paris, Lorelai?” asked Liz with interest.

“She knows my daughter, Rory, who also goes to Chilton.”

“Hey, small world!”

“The smallest!”

Both women laughed, but Luke didn’t. He wasn’t a massive fan of girlish giggling at the best of times, and at least with kids and teens he understood it. With grown women it just seemed stupid to chuckle and squeal over basic facts like their kids going to the same school. He just wanted to get back to the facts of what the hell had happened here, since his sister took up with husband number five. Or six. It really was getting tough to keep count these days.

“So, you married Ira Geller, businessman of the year apparently, and you moved to Hartford,” he recapped. “When did this happen, Liz?”

“Oh, like three or four weeks ago,” she told him. “And I swear I meant to come visit sooner, big brother, but everything has been so darn crazy! I mean, the day he popped the question, we pretty much decided to get the ceremony done as soon as we could. Ira wanted me and Jess all moved in and the paperwork fixed up so Jess could go to school, and then the kids started back, and... I don’t know, time just flew right by until suddenly today I decided, I just gotta go tell Luke the good news!”

“Liz, I get it, I do, but you could at least have called to let me know there was gonna be a wedding. I’d’ve driven up, even at the last minute,” he insisted.

“Oh, I know you would’ve, Luke, but there really was like no time, and... well, you weren’t too happy with the last guy I got hitched to... or any of the guys I got hitched to,” she told Lorelai off to the side before continuing. “And Ira is... well, he’s different, but you probably still won’t like him. Big brothers, huh?” she said to Lorelai then. “What can you do?”

“Since I’m an only child, I honestly wouldn’t know,” she admitted. “But speaking of children, I’m supposed to be getting snacks and coffee for my kid, and Dean and Chris. We’re all over at Miss Patty’s practicing for Rory’s coming out thing,” she waved her hand in a vague gesture, before giving Luke her order.

He was pouring coffee into to-go cups when a thought struck and he glanced up at Liz again.

“So, speaking of kids, where’s Jess?” he asked curiously. “You didn’t bring him to see me?”
“Luke, it’s not like when he was two and I could just wheel him here in a stroller,” she rolled her eyes. “Jess is seventeen now. I mean, I got him into the car to come here, but the second the wheels stopped turning he was off to explore or hang out or whatever the kids get up to these days. Honestly? He could be anywhere by now. I can’t keep up with that boy.”

“Well, if it’s any comfort, you can’t really come to much harm in Stars Hollow,” Lorelai assured Liz as she paid Luke for the drinks and snacks. “Plus no worries on his getting lost. You make three left turns in this place, you kinda end up back where you started. Which I’m now realising you already know, because hey, you’re Hollow born and raised!”

“I am that,” Liz agreed with a nod of her head. “Place sure doesn’t seem to have changed much.”

“Unfortunately, no it hasn’t,” Luke agreed, waving to Lorelai as she finally left.

Lorelai couldn’t explain the sigh of relief as she stepped out of the door of Luke’s into the fresh crisp air. Liz was his sister, not his girlfriend, not even an old flame. Lorelai felt good about that, and she altogether refused to think too much on why that was.

Jess didn’t know quite what to think of Stars Hollow. So far he had seen a store dedicated to cats, way too many places peddling ceramic unicorns, and an antique store that seemed to be run by the craziest Asian lady he ever saw in his life. Of course, it also had a bookstore he wouldn’t mind investigating sometime (the owner had a ‘back in five’ sign in the window when he came past) and was apparently the home of both Jess’ uncle, and a certain Rory Gilmore.

When Liz insisted on coming over and on bringing her son with her, Jess didn’t fight it too much. Honestly, he was in no hurry to see his so-called Uncle Luke. From what he remembered of the guy, and that wasn’t much, he was a decent enough person, but Liz tended to gush a lot about her precious big brother, and Jess could do without bearing witness to too much of that. Instead he insisted on being allowed to wander a bit and see what this Stars Hollow was really all about. So far he was somewhere between unimpressed and entirely confused by what he saw.

Jess vaguely wondered if he might come across Rory in his walking. She could have a part-time job in a store or something. Maybe she would just be hanging out with her friends somewhere. She hadn’t mentioned anything or anyone specific in the few times they had talked so far, so Jess couldn’t be sure. He had to admit, he had deliberately started conversations with her, in class before the teacher called order, at lunch one time, in the halls as she dug in her locker. His reasons were two fold. Most importantly, he found Rory to be the most interesting girl he had met in his life so far, even if he couldn’t actually figure out why that was. As a bonus, it drove Paris crazy that her new step-brother and her best frenemy might actually get along!

Jess was smiling at the thought of Ms Geller’s highly amusing rage as he passed by a building that stated in large letters that it was ‘Miss Patty’s Studio of Dance’. He wasn’t at all interested in that, until suddenly he heard someone yell a familiar name.

“Rory! No, no, no, sweetheart. You must let the man lead!”

Walking up the steps towards the door, Jess peered in to see a large lady carrying a cigarette holder (he assumed she was Miss Patty) directing Rory and some overly tall oaf in a waltz or whatever it was. It was amusing as hell to see them try to move in time to the music. Rory looked as if she might be okay, if her partner had any kind of rhythm or grace, but the guy had neither. He tried to twirl her and Rory spun so hard she flew half way across the room and nearly fell right on top of Jess in the doorway. The record scratched as Miss Patty took the needle off and sighed heavily.
“Jess?” said Rory, looking equal parts surprised and embarrassed as she pulled away from him.

“Hi,” he greeted her with a smirk that he couldn’t help.

“Who is this?” asked the guy that Rory had been ‘dancing’ with.


“Huh,” he replied, looking the other guy over, before his eyes returned to Rory. “I didn’t know you had a boyfriend.”

Immediately she seemed defensive, and Jess found it highly amusing.

“Of course I do.”

“You never said.”

“Well, she’s saying now,” the tall one cut in.

Jess only smirked.

“Oh and this is my Dad, Christopher Hayden,” Rory suddenly introduced, realising she hadn’t before, “And my Mom, Lorelai Gilmore,” she added as her mother suddenly came in through the door, bearing coffee and snacks.

“Oh, let me guess,” she said, pointing at him with her only free finger. “Paris’ step-brother, Jess?”

“That would be me,” he agreed with a single nod, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“I just met your mother,” said Lorelai with a polite smile, but Jess only frowned.

“My condolences,” he told her.

Lorelai wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“Okay then - coffee!” she announced, turning away from Jess to hand around beverages and snacks.

Jess started to back off, thinking maybe now was the time to get out of here since there was a whole family vibe going on. He heard Rory’s father offer her mother the chance to ‘show these kids how it’s done’ and turned around in time to see them dancing like seasoned professionals. The boyfriend laughably asked ‘Isn’t that what I was doing?’.

“No, sweetheart,” said Miss Patty with a chuckle. “But come on, we can figure this out.”

Jess was ever more amused to see the over-sized dance teacher dragging the overly tall Dean around the floor. Of course, that left Rory on the side-lines, and suddenly Jess wasn’t sure he wanted to leave right now. He moved up next to her without her noticing, making her jump when he suddenly spoke.

“So, this is how you spend your weekends?”

“Not usually,” Rory told him, watching the dancing and barely looking his way at all. “I’m going to this cotillion kind of a thing.”

“They still have those?” Jess smirked, seriously not realising that was still a thing.
“Apparently. It means a lot to my grandparents.”

“Huh. And your boyfriend is going to take you?”

“Yup,” Rory nodded once, then winced as Dean stepped on Miss Patty’s toe and made her yelp. “He’s not the world’s greatest dancer,” she said softly.

“No kidding,” said Jess, biting his lip.

“But he’ll learn,” said Rory definitely, as she turned to look at him with as much defiance as she could muster.

“Of course,” Jess agreed, even if he didn’t believe it and was pretty sure Rory didn’t either. “Well, as riveting as this is, I should go find Liz. You wanna point me in the direction of Luke’s diner?”

Rory nodded and they both turned towards the doorway. She pointed off into the distance.

“Out that way, keep going straight, you can’t miss it,” she explained.

“Thanks,” he nodded and then stepped out.

“I guess I’ll see you around,” he heard Rory say behind him and turned with a smile to answer her.

“Seems to work out that way, doesn’t it?”

Rory watched Jess go and wondered why she cared that he wasn’t hanging around longer. Jess Mariano was like an enigma. He came off ‘too cool for school’ and yet she knew he was book-smart. He called his mother by her first name, but he never said anything really bad about his step-family. The strangest thing perhaps was that Jess really seemed to like seeking her out and starting conversations. Rory didn’t mind that so much, she just thought it was strange.

“Hey,” said Dean then, his hand on her arm. “You okay?”

“Sure, yeah,” Rory replied with a smile. “Let’s get back to practising,” she suggested.

“Hey, hon” said Lorelai as Rory re-joined the group. “Did Jess really not mention he was Luke’s nephew?” she checked.

Rory’s eyes went comically wide.

“What?” she gasped at that particular revelation.

“Jess’ Mom, Liz, she’s Luke’s sister, so that would make Jess his nephew,” her mother explained plainly. “You didn’t know?”

“Really didn’t,” she shook her head, glancing back over her shoulder at Jess’ retreating form. “Wow.”
And I heard from Bitty Charleston that Ira Geller has not only divorced Barbara, but that he’s married some waitress from Boston, and moved her and her obnoxious son into their home!” Emily said, appearing scandalised by the news she was imparting.

Lorelai was more than a little amused to have had this news before her mother and was eager to tell her so, only Rory cut in first.

“New York,” she corrected her grandmother.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Liz and Jess aren’t from Boston, Grandma, they’re from New York, and Jess isn’t really obnoxious. A little annoying sometimes, but... yeah, that’s all,” she ended quickly when she saw her grandmother’s expression.

“You know these people?”

“Jess goes to Chilton now,” Rory shrugged.

“And in some weird twist of fate, it turns out that Liz is in fact Luke’s sister,” explained Lorelai with a grin. “So we have in effect kinda met the whole family. Wow, look at that, we have all the gossip before the great Bitty Charleston has time to spread it around. I swear, it’s a crazy world, isn’t it?”

“Crazy is not the word I would use,” said Emily sourly. “Lorelai, I cannot believe you and Rory had all this information and you kept it from me. It’s so embarrassing!”

“Mom, we didn’t keep it from you,” her daughter rolled her eyes. “I mean, sure, we hadn’t told you yet, but it just hadn’t come up. I mean, isn’t the Gellers business just that? Their business? It’s not ours, right?”

“Lorelai,” her father said in a warning tone. “You know very well that the social standings of our friends and neighbours is of great importance to your mother. I have never entirely understood why, but I can see how potentially embarrassing it might be for her not to know as much as her fellow DAR members or similar.”

“Thank you, Richard,” his wife thanked him for the support. “Really, Lorelai, I expected more from you.”

“Hey, she didn’t tell you either,” she countered, pointing her fork at Rory across the dinner table. “And she knows this Jess kid way better than I do. Paris too, unfortunately.”

“It is unfortunate,” said Rory with a sigh. “But I can only tell you what I know, Grandma, and you already seem to know most of that. Mr Geller married Liz in New York, she and Jess moved in with Paris and her father, and now Jess goes to Chilton. Like Mom said, it turns out Liz and Jess are also related to Luke who owns the diner in Stars Hollow, but that’s it, all the gossip.”

“Yes, I remember Luke,” she said with some distaste. “Well doesn’t that just show you what kind of people this Liz and Jess are if they’re entangled with the diner owner?”

“And what kind of people is that, Mom?” asked Lorelai with a look, immediately defensive of her friend as she should be. “Working class? Is that it?”

Chapter 4
“No, that is not it, Lorelai,” Emily rolled her eyes. “Though you have to admit, this Liz has clearly married far above her place in life. I simply meant they are hardly suited to be part of a family like the Gellers. My goodness, I doubt they’re even Jewish.”

“Well, Luke’s certainly not,” said Lorelai with some amusement as she imagined him complete with yamukah, spouting Yiddish. “But then I’m not sure he has any specific denomination.”

“He’s really not the religious kind,” said Rory as she considered it. “But I guess love doesn’t know religion.”

“Different strokes for different folks,” Lorelai quoted. “Anyway, Mom, now you have all the information that we have, well, at least everything I have. Rory could probably tell you more about Jess if you really want to know.”

“From what Bitty has told me I already know quite enough, thank you,” Emily shook her head before taking another dainty bite of her dinner. “There are quite a lot of stories about him and his behaviour at his previous schools, as well as the mother’s previous dalliances...”

“Dalliances?” Lorelai practically snorted with laughter. “You can’t just say she’s dated a lot of guys, Mom?”

“However it’s phrased, Lorelai,” said Richard carefully, “it is still not an example of a well-bred young woman, especially one who already has a child to think of.”

They were all well aware of how shameful it had been for Lorelai to have her daughter at sixteen and out of wedlock. Rory was never to be made to feel as if she were a problem or a mistake, but Lorelai always knew how she herself was seen here, as the embarrassment to her parents.

“So, Dad, how’s work?” she asked then, going for the ultimate subject change.

It was clear to Lorelai immediately that was a bad plan, just from the look on his face. She looked at Rory in panic and as usual the golden girl saved the day.

“Speaking of work, it’s a real shame Dad had to go home for that meeting and miss dinner, but he promises to be back in time for the ball,” she smiled first at Grandpa and then Grandma. “I think he’s looking forward to it almost as much as I am.”

“Christopher is a good father when given the opportunity to be,” said Emily with a smile that somehow managed to be venomous as she glanced at Lorelai. “And it will be a beautiful occasion, Rory, of that I promise you,” she continued to her granddaughter.

At least both grandparents were smiling at this point. That was a win for the Gilmore girls.

It was a relief to Rory when the Cotillion was over. She didn’t mind being all dressed up like a princess, that was actually kind of fun, but the pressure of being presented that way, things being expected of her, it wasn’t her idea of a good time. Thankfully, no-one she really knew well from school had been there. That would have been more than she could handle. Instead, it was just the grandparents, both her parents, and a slightly awkward but very handsome looking Dean. Sure, her boyfriend complained about the clothes and the dancing and all, but at least he showed up and her father had too. Rory was very proud of the men in her life right now. She even found a smile for Jess when he came and sat down across from her at the lunch table in school.

“What did you do? Swallow a hanger this morning?” he asked as she grinned at him.
“I happen to be in a good mood, that’s all,” Rory countered, still smiling. “That okay with you?”

“Sure”, Jess shrugged. “Personally, I just can’t see what there is in this place to be so happy about.”

“Chilton’s not so bad,” she told him. “I mean, you’ve been here a couple of weeks now and no real dramas, right?”

“I guess not,” he agreed. “I could use not being dressed like a Ken doll though.”

“I actually like the uniforms. Not because it exactly looks great, but it does save a lot of time trying to figure out what to wear in the morning. That’s something guys wouldn’t understand, I guess. Clothing choices are much tougher for girls.”

“Not if you’re Paris,” he rolled his eyes. “I swear she shares her closet with somebody’s grandmother.”

Rory bit her lip so as not to laugh. It wasn’t fair to judge people like that, and honestly, she had a distinct lack of evidence when it came to how Paris dressed outside of school. She had only seen her a couple of times in ‘casual clothes’ and she didn’t recall her looking grandmotherly exactly. She wasn’t entirely fashionable or looking much like the average teen either, but Rory knew that wasn’t really something to laugh at anyway.

“You should be nicer to Paris,” she told Jess.

“Why?”

“Because, she’s your sister.”

“Step-sister. Not the same thing.”

Rory couldn’t argue with that, but it did make her wonder. She stared across at Jess as he ate his lunch, not even noticing she was looking at him apparently. Rory couldn’t quite figure this guy out. He intrigued her. Jess seemed so smart but he didn’t like to participate much in class. He acted like nothing bothered him, but he didn’t seem to have had the best life. Rumours said his mother wasn’t exactly the most decent woman ever, that she’d had a string of husbands and boyfriends before Paris’ father came along. It was also strange to think that Jess was Luke’s nephew, in fact, it was so odd that Rory kept on forgetting about it altogether.

“Y’know it’s rude to stare,” said Jess, without looking up.

Rory shook her head; “I’m sorry.”

They both continued eating for a bit before Rory decided to speak up again.

“So, Luke is really happy to have you and your mom around,” she told Jess. “I think he’s missed having family close by.”

“He seems like a nice enough guy,” he shrugged. “I remember him coming to visit a few times when I was kid but I don’t really know him yet.”

“Luke’s such a good guy,” Rory confirmed. “He’s really been there for me and my mom. I mean, we cope pretty well on our own most of the time, but there’s some stuff around the house that requires a man and a toolbox, and Luke is always there. Plus he feeds us and supplies the coffee, which in the Gilmore girls house, pretty much makes him a heroic figure.”
Jess smirked at that, finding the imagery amusing. Still, he didn’t mind so much that his uncle meant so much to Rory. It was yet another connection he had to Miss Gilmore and her world. Jess was all for that right now.

“So, how’d the coming out go?” he asked her, recalling her dance practice for the event when he was in Stars Hollow the other day. “Did the boyfriend learn his steps in time?”

“Dean was fine,” she nodded. “And it was fun, I guess. A little weird. I’m not really the fancy upper-class world type.”

“Makes two of us,” Jess agreed.

The pair smiled across the table at each other in a nice moment of understanding. Of all the people at this school, they were certainly the odd ones out. His mother had married money, and her mother had walked out on it. Neither of them really belonged at Chilton, at least not in terms of social status, but here they were. At least they had each other now, Rory thought, before immediately dismissing the idea. She didn’t have Jess and he didn’t have her, that was just ridiculous. They barely knew each other yet and she had a boyfriend. Of course, that didn’t stop her and Jess being friends, she supposed.

“Well, isn’t this cute?” said a voice.

Rory visibly winced as she realised who was approaching.

“Hi, Tristan,” she greeted him with a sigh of annoyance. “Did you want something specific or are you just here to be a pain?”

“Harsh words, Rory,” he feigned heart-ache from her attitude. “I just wanted you to know, I think it’s adorable that you’re making friends with the new kid. I mean, can’t be easy for him, the poor kid in the rich school,” he said of Jess, though he barely looked at the guy as he spoke about him.

“Yeah, ’cause everything’s about money,” he replied anyway. “That’s probably a good thing. I mean, if they let you in this place purely based on brains, some people might never make it,” he said, looking up at Tristan with a wicked smirk on his lips.

“You don’t wanna make any more enemies here, Mariano,” the other guy warned him.

“Is that so?” he countered.

Rory felt increasingly uncomfortable, convinced as she was there was about to be some kind of confrontation of the physical kind at any moment.

“Ohay,” she said, getting to her feet. “Why don’t we take this whole testosteroney thing and just walk away from it before things get stupid?” she suggested. “Jess! Tristan!” she commanded their attention when they didn’t quit staring at each other menacingly for a whole minute. “This is not a scene from ‘The Outsiders’,” she told them sternly.

“Don’t blow a fuse, Mary,” Tristan rolled his eyes, and then turned to walk away.

Just as soon as he was gone, Jess pushed his tray of food away and muttered a few obscenities that Rory could well understand.

“Ignore him,” she advised. “Tristan is... Well, he lashes out because he’s unhappy. I know that’s kind of a cliché when it comes to bullies, but honestly, it’s true with him. He doesn’t really want to cause too much trouble anyway, trust me.”

“Well, no, but we’re getting to know each other. Don’t I seem trustworthy so far?” she asked with a sweet smile before taking a bite out of her apple.

“I guess so,” Jess agreed, finding her joyful look kind of infectious. “So, what’re you reading right now?” he asked, poking at the book Rory had been engrossed in before he came and joined her.

With a grin even larger than she was wearing before, Rory happily showed Jess that she was knee deep in ‘The Sound and the Fury’. Of course, Jess had already read it and was happy enough to hear Rory’s thoughts on what she had read so far, giving his own opinions too. Given this was the fourth book discussion they’d had since they first met, Rory couldn’t help the question that came to her lips next.

“So that day in the library, I asked if you read a lot. Why’d you say ‘not much’?” she checked.

Jess shrugged easily.

“What is much?” he asked with a smirk that was as natural on his face as anything ever could be.

Rory couldn’t help but laugh and shake her head. He was such an enigma sometimes, but she didn’t mind at all. Lunch time passed quickly after that, with hardly any food eaten, as she and Jess talked about all kinds of other books they had read or that they wanted to get around to. Neither of them really even noticed quite how much attention they were getting from the rest of the Chilton alumni, or maybe they just didn’t care.
“What do you think you’re doing?”

Rory tried not to show that she had been startled by Paris’ sudden appearance, which was made easier by the fact she had her head in her locker when it happened. Slamming the door, she looked at Paris with a face that showed all the exasperation she felt.

“I think I’m getting some books from my locker,” she said sharply. “Is that causing you a problem, Paris?”

“You know I’m not talking about your locker and your books, Gilmore,” her so-called friend countered. “What are you doing with my obnoxious step-brother?”

Rory huffed out a sigh.

“I’m not doing anything with him,” she said definitely. “We go to the same school and so sometimes we talk to each other, that is all. I really don’t see what your problem is with that. Somebody has to be nice to Jess. You’re certainly not.”

With that Rory turned to storm away. She should have expected that Paris would give chase, because Paris always did, most especially when she had something on her mind.

“Why would I be nice to that... that imbecile! I mean, come on, you really think Jess Mariano deserves to be in this school? He’s a disgrace to the uniform!”

“Paris, just stop!” said Rory, rounding on her at the corner and really getting in her face. “You know what you’re saying is crazy. You know it and still you won’t stop. Jess is not stupid, he is as smart as anyone in this school, in fact, he’s smarter than most. As for deserving, what does it take in your eyes for people to deserve anything? Do we all have to be princesses and... and knights of the round table? Or do we all just have to be Paris Gellar?”

“Wow, Rory’s really losing it,” said Louise quietly, but not quietly enough in a corridor that was silent the moment Rory stopped yelling.

“Anybody else want to tell me how people like Jess don’t belong here? How people like me don’t belong here? Because I am not in the mood for this today, so come on, bring it on!”

Nobody said anything, not a single word. Rory’s eyes flashed angrily as she glanced from Paris to Louise and Madeline, past a bunch of people she barely knew, and then landed on Tristan. Even he looked a little shocked by her explosion and seemed to have no response to her rant either. Tristan Dugrey and Paris Gellar both speechless in the same moment. Rory would be proud if she wasn’t suddenly very embarrassed to realise she was entirely centre of attention.

The bell ringing brought everyone back to life after a long moment of absolute shocked stillness. The crowd dispersed, a little at a time, so many people whispering and muttering about how Gilmore had gone psycho and how Paris finally got hers. Rory didn’t know exactly what they all thought right now, and for the most part she didn’t care. She let out a long breath and turned to go, but apparently Paris had one ore parting shot.

“You’re losing it, Gilmore,” she told her coldly. “But hey, so much the better for me. You go off the rails, and I’m back to being king of the mountain.”
Paris walked away after that and all Rory could think to do was glare after her. A minute later, when
the hallway was almost entirely empty, Rory turned and walked the other way, grumbling to herself.

“And they wonder why I don’t want to be social in this school!”

Rory still wasn’t in a great mood when the end of the school day came. Honestly, she couldn’t wait
to get home to people who knew and understood her, that would agree with her opinion that being a
loner in school was okay, because it wasn’t as if she didn’t have friends, they just didn’t happen to
go to Chilton. All afternoon, she had heard the murmur or whispers all around her. Some people
thought she had gone crazy, others were saying things about her and Paris, and some about her and
Jess, at least she was pretty sure that’s what she heard. Rory couldn’t care right now, she just wanted
to ignore everybody and get home. She sat down on the bus, pulled out a book and put all her focus
on the page. She didn’t even react when somebody sat down right next to her, at least not until that
person spoke.

“So, I heard you made quite the stir in the halls today. I’m sorry I missed it,” said Jess with a smirk.
“They’re comparing it to the greats. Somewhere between Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have A Dream’
and the St Crispin’s Day speech.”

Rory looked at Jess with fire in her eyes, but the moment she saw his grinning face, her anger failed
her. He just made her laugh, she couldn’t help it. Rory closed her book and shoved her shoulder
against Jess’ own.

“You’re an idiot,” she told him, turning her attention to the window.

“Huh,” he responded. “Now that’s not what I heard. In fact, a little bird told me that you were the
one telling Paris how smart I am.”

Rory felt the heat rise in her cheeks then. Maybe it was because Jess knew she had spoken so highly
of his intelligence. Maybe it was because he was sat next to her right now, so close she could
practically feel him breathing. Maybe she was just somewhat mortified by her own behaviour in the
halls of Chilton Prep today. Any and all seemed to apply right now.

“Don’t you hate this school sometimes?” she asked, turning to face him then, determined she wasn’t
going to admit anything unless she had to. “I mean, not the classes or the teachers, but the people.
The stupid, ignorant, unbending, judgemental people!” she ranted, perhaps not quite as loudly as she
had earlier when she yelled at Paris et al.

Jess shrugged and shook his head.

“People are people,” he told her. “They wanna judge? Doesn’t matter to me. Why’s it bother you so
much?” he asked curiously.

Rory opened her mouth to answer and then closed it again fast. She really didn’t know the honest
answer to that question. It shouldn’t bother her what people thought of her or of Jess for that matter.
It normally wouldn’t and yet today she just lost it when Paris started in on her. She knew why, she
realised it all in a rush, and it bothered her when the real reason hit her right between the eyes.

“Rory?” prompted Jess when she failed to speak. “Rory? You look like you’re gonna hurl...”

“No,” she shook her head, and then realised the bus was starting to move. “Jess, you can’t be on the
bus!” she said suddenly. “This bus is going to Stars Hollow!”

“I know that,” he assured her.

Jess grabbed her hands that waved around like they were performing crazy semaphore and forced her to calm down.

“I know I don’t live in Stars Hollow, but that doesn’t stop me visiting, right?”

Rory relaxed, pulled her hands out of his grasp because somehow it just felt wrong to be having that kind of contact with Jess right now, not least because half the bus was staring at them for one reason or another.

“You’re coming to Stars Hollow... to visit Luke?” she guessed.


Rory looked over at him as he leant back in the seat. He appeared almost defeated, which was much how Rory felt after today. She joined Jess in slouching down in her seat and sighed.

“Today sucked!” she said definitely.

“Tell me why,” he offered.

“I don’t like Mondays?”

At that he laughed; “And the real reason?”

Rory heaved another sigh.

“The guidance counsellor pulled me out of lunch today.”

“Yeah, I thought it was weird I didn’t see you.”

“She says I’m not socially adept, that I don’t have enough extra-curricular activities, that I don’t mingle enough. How is that her business?”

“Beats me.”

“I mean, I talk to Paris... when I have to, and I talk to you. Don’t I get points for that? I befriended the new kid!”

Jess smirked at being termed the ‘new kid’. It wasn’t that it was an inaccurate statement. He was new to the school and he had talked with Rory way more than anybody else in the place, with the possible exception of Paris. The difference was when he talked to his step-sister, Jess rarely got a response, and he was usually just trying to make her crazy because it was fun.

“It’s dumb to tell you that you have to be social,” he told Rory the moment he realised she was looking expectantly at him for a response. “They try to tell me that and I’ll be the next one yelling obscenities in the halls.”

“There were no obscenities,” Rory giggled, blushing profusely regardless. “I just don’t like people telling me what kind of person they think I am or should be, and then Paris started in on you and... and...”

“And?” Jess prompted.

He knew what he heard, the rumours that flew all around school between lunch and now. Some said
Rory and Paris had an actual fist fight. Others said one or the both of them professed their undying but forbidden love for Jess himself. He knew better than to believe every high school rumour that came his way, but Rory, she would tell him the truth. He hadn’t known her all that long, but he was pretty sure he would get an honest answer out of her if he asked for one.

“Doesn’t it bother you that Paris thinks you’re stupid or tells people how awful you are?” asked Rory sadly.

“Why should I care what Paris thinks?” asked Jess with a shrug of his shoulders. “Caring what other people think about you, it’s not worth it. I learnt a long time ago that it only matters what you think about yourself. Follow your inner moonlight; don’t hide the madness.”

Rory smiled at the quote, but she knew Jess was serious, and she also knew he was right. Her mom would go crazy if she knew that Rory was upset by other people’s opinions of her, but on the other hand, she would like that Rory stood up for a friend, because she always taught her to do that. Jess definitely was her friend, Rory couldn’t think of another better word for him, even though they had only known each other maybe three weeks, even if she couldn’t entirely explain how two people like them had enough in common to talk the way they did.

“I’m sorry if you’re getting a hard time for being seen with me,” said Jess then, looking genuinely awkward somehow. “Driving Paris crazy is entertaining as hell, but you... You don’t deserve to get some kind of reputation because of me.”

“Didn’t you just tell me not to care what other people think of me?” she smiled across at him.

“C’mon, Jess, you really think I usually care if a few stuck up people at school think I’m a freak or a loser or whatever it is they’re thinking? If you don’t care, I don’t care,” she said, sticking out her chin.

Jess looked up into those bright blue eyes of hers and found it was hard to give any kind of answer. Rory was like no other girl he ever met, he already knew that, but in this moment, he never wanted her more. If he could get away with kissing her now, Jess absolutely would. When the bus lurched to a halt at the next stop, it very nearly happened by accident more than design. Rory moved away and Jess let her do it.

“Thanks,” he muttered, the second their almost moment was broken.

“For what?” asked Rory curiously.

“For not being like every other person at Chilton?” he tried, since saying ‘for being my friend’ would maybe be the lamest thing ever.

“Well, thank you, for the same thing,” said Rory definitely, turning to watch the world fly by the bus window the moment they were moving again.

Jess watched Rory watching the view and he smiled. For all that being Liz’s son, Paris’ step-brother, and the misfit kid in school got on his nerves, it was worth it all to be here, to know Rory Gilmore, because she really was turning out to be as special as he thought she was.

Rory and Jess spent the rest of the bus journey to Stars Hollow reading in an entirely comfortable silence. The moment the bus stopped moving they disembarked and Rory started heading for home. Jess started to follow.

“I thought you were coming here to see Luke?” she said, looking back the other way.
“The diner’s not this way?” he joked.

“You know it’s not,” she told him, smiling because she just couldn’t help it.

“How do I know?” he shrugged, trying to be the picture of innocence that Rory was pretty sure Jess Mariano could never be. “I only came here once before. I could really use a guide.”

“I could not believe you less,” said Rory definitely, and yet with a sigh she relented and set off walking, pulling him behind her by his jacket. “C’mon. You’re buying the coffee,” she warned him.

Jess tried not to smirk too much as he followed on behind her; “As you wish.”

They got to the diner in no time at all, with Jess opening the door for Rory like a gentleman, complete with bow. She would have thanked him if she didn’t know he was doing it just to make her feel silly. Rory headed straight for the counter and Jess followed her.

“Rory,” Luke greeted her with a smile, the expression growing wider when he spotted her friend. “And Jess, hey.”

“Hi,” he nodded once, looking as awkward as he felt.

Jess didn’t have a problem with Luke, he just didn’t know the guy. All the knowledge he had of his so-called uncle was Liz’s crazy ramblings. When it came to his mother’s opinions, Jess took very little notice, and for good reason. Still, if Luke had been good to Rory and her mom, he had to be pretty decent, and so Jess would be civil at least.


“I could eat a burger,” said Jess stiffly.

“Ooh, me too, and coffee please,” Rory agreed. “But I can pay for mine...”

“Put your money away,” said Luke definitely. “This is my treat,” he told her, though he was smiling more at Jess when he said it.

The moment he went out back to get the food, Jess gestured for Rory to follow him to a table. She picked up her bag and hopped down off the stool to follow, but she was a little confused.

“You don’t like sitting at the counter?” she checked.

“It’s not that,” Jess shook his head. “I just... I don’t know Luke all that well. It’s like he wants to be all happy families and... and I’m not used to that, okay?”

Rory almost felt like she should admonish Jess for being rude or something. It seemed ungrateful of him not to take Luke’s generosity and goodness the way it was intended, but then Rory realised what the real problem was here. Her heart sank to realise that Jess never had this, no family, no real friends. Some of those rumours she heard were probably true, about Jess’ string of step-fathers and all, none of which really cared for him at all. Now he had another and a step-sister too, and whilst Rory couldn’t say what Mr Gellar was really like, having never met him, she was sure that living with Paris couldn’t be fun.

“I’m sorry,” she said out of the blue.

Jess looked up from playing with the ketchup bottles to ask her what for, but Rory never got a chance to reply. The door opened, complete with jangling of the bell, and in walked Dean.
watched as Rory leapt up to greet her boyfriend with a hug and a kiss before inviting him over to join them at the table.

“You remember Jess, Paris’ step-brother?” she prompted. “And Jess, you remember Dean, my boyfriend?”

“Of course,” he nodded once.

Dean didn’t say anything, but the look on his face was one of an unimpressed man. Jess smirked a little but tried to hide the expression behind his hand. He hadn’t seen much of the infamous Dean so far, but what he knew already wasn’t impressive. The guy’s defining feature seemed to be how tall he was, and Jess couldn’t help but think his greatest skill was probably with a football or a plough. Looks could be deceiving. Jess knew better than anyone about judging books by their covers, literally and figuratively, but somehow he just knew Dean was precisely what he appeared from the outside, a dumb jock type, and not at all right for Rory.

“I can’t stay,” said the giant then, eyes back on his girlfriend. “My dad’s waiting for me. I just came in on the off chance you were here, let you know Taylor needs me to work Saturday so we may have to change our plans.”

“Oh, okay,” said Rory, smiling through some obvious disappointment. “Well, let me know your hours when you know and we’ll work around it.”

“I will,” he promised, sparing her one last kiss before he left.

Rory returned to the table and sighed as she dropped into the chair opposite Jess. He didn’t get a chance to say anything as Luke appeared with two plates filled with burgers and fries on one arm and two coffee cups precariously held by the handles in his other hand.

“Thanks, Luke,” said Rory, visibly brightening at the sight of food and her favourite beverage.

“Yeah, thanks,” agreed Jess with a smile he had to force some.

“You’re welcome,” his uncle replied. “So, how’s things at your new school? You settling in okay?”

“It’s fine,” Jess nodded awkwardly.

“Good,” agreed Luke. “Well, you made a good friend right here, so that’s a good start,” he said of Rory and then returned to the counter to serve more customers.

Rory’s face was half lost in her burger as she visibly enjoyed the experience of eating it. Jess smiled at her enthusiasm for the meal and at Luke’s words that were still ringing in his ears. A good friend? Yes, Rory definitely was that. For now at least. Who knew where they could go from here?
“Y’know you can stare as hard as you want, her head’s not gonna explode through your force of will alone,” said Jess as he walked up behind Paris and caught her staring intently at the side of Rory’s head.

He was on his way to lunch when he found his step-sister blocking the door, entirely too focused on her sometimes-friend. Right now, they weren’t really speaking to each other, after the blow-out in the halls yesterday. Jess had gone to Stars Hollow after school to spend some time with Rory and ended up getting to know his uncle Luke a little better too. By the time he got home, Paris had locked herself in her room, so it wasn’t until this morning on the way to school he had the chance to ask her what the hell her outburst at Rory had been all about. Paris grumbled at first, and then ranted some, covering old ground with regards to his social status or lack of same. Jess was barely listening by the end. It was just amusing to him that he bothered her so much.

Now Paris’ attention was all for Rory again, but it couldn’t have anything to do with Jess since he was out here in the hall. The issue seemed to be the group of girls that surrounded Miss Gilmore.

“You do realise who she’s sitting with, right?”

“A bunch of stuck-up princesses who care more about their nails and hair than anything else?” said Jess, a genuine guess rather than sarcasm.

“You’re not entirely wrong,” Paris conceded with a huff. “But it’s more than that. The one opposite Rory right now? That’s Francine Jarvis. She’s the leader of The Puffs.”

“The what now?” asked Jess, clearly confused, and that feeling wasn’t due to go away any time soon apparently.

“A sorority, dumb ass!”

“A sorority in a high school?”

“It’s unofficial, but very real,” said Paris definitely, leaning in closer and speaking in a low voice as she gave her step-brother the low down. “The connections you make with the Puffs, they last the rest of your life. My cousin Maddie got her internship at the Supreme Court because of Sandra Day O’Connor. She was puffed in 1946, became the president in ‘47, and in ‘48 she actually moved the group to that very table! My mother was a Puff, my aunt was a Puff, and so my question is, why Rory? Why not me?”

“You want the list alphabetically or...?” asked Jess with a serious expression that gave way to his patented smirk all too quickly.

“Get out of my way!” said Paris sternly when she realised she was going to get no sense out him anyway.

“See ya later, sis!” he called with a cheery wave, as Paris tore off down the hall.

Jess knew he was making her mad, but he also meant what he said. If a group of girls were choosing a new friend, most would pick Rory over Paris, and for a great many reasons too. The Puffs clearly didn’t have a problem with Rory befriending him, which surprised Jess just a little. The rumours about the ‘disadvantaged’ who were attending Chilton were rife, but then Francie probably considered Rory had good taste. The red-head had quite obviously hit on Jess several times already,
he was just deliberately not biting.

Looking back into the cafeteria, Jess leaned on the door jamb and watched Rory talk and laugh with the so-called secret sorority of Chilton. She looked happy, and as cool as that was in its way, Jess felt an uncomfortableness in seeing it. Selfish was the word he was looking for, to feel like he didn’t want Rory to make more friends than just him. That talk they had about not being social just to suit others, and now here she was sucking up to The Puffs, or maybe they were sucking up to her. Either way, Jess didn’t entirely like the idea of his new friend getting buddy-buddy with chicks like them. If he could do something to stop it, he probably would.

Rory was switching books at her locker before going out to catch the bus home. She wasn’t really paying attention to what anybody else in the hall was doing, until she heard the clang of someone or something hitting the lockers further down the way. She glanced up just in time to see Tristan and Jess in some kind of face off. Nobody was throwing punches, they didn’t have a hold of each other, but they were toe-to-toe like two cowboys in a western. Rory frowned, wondering if she would make matters better or worse by going over and trying to break it up but Ms Clark came out of her classroom the very next moment and spoke sternly to the boys. They soon turned away from each other.

Tristan and his friends went off down the hall in the other direction, whilst Jess headed towards Rory. He was smirking like the smartass cat who got the canary. It made Rory curious as to what just happened, but more than that, it bothered her that Jess was making trouble with someone like Tristan. “You’re playing with fire,” she told Jess as he got close enough to hear her. “And a good afternoon to you too, Miss Gilmore,” he grinned, leaning on the lockers near hers. “It’s not funny, Jess,” she shook her head. “Tristan can be a bonehead sometimes, I know that, but you don’t want to mess with him. He has influence in this school, with the other students, even with some of the teachers...”

“And I care about this, why?” asked Jess with a look. “I mean, maybe I’m remembering this wrong, but didn’t we have a conversation just yesterday about how much we don’t care what other people think about us? Oh, no, wait a second,” he said then, snapping his fingers as if a thought just came to him. “That was before you became the member of a secret sorority. Tell me, do you get a special team sweatshirt when you’re a Puff? Do you all have code names? Hey, is there a secret knock?”

He was mocking her and Rory knew it. He might actually be a little pissed at her too, but mostly he was just making fun. Rory shouldn’t mind because Jess wasn’t wrong to make jokes about the Puffs. The whole secret sorority thing was pretty dumb, she had to agree, but really, it wasn’t his place to make her feel stupid.

“I’m not one of them,” she shook her head. “I just went and sat at a table full of girls, that’s all. Next thing I know, Paris comes rushing up to me in class, having a seizure because I made friends with Francine Jarvis and her clique. It’s insane.”

“Y’know Paris is just jealous?” said Jess, scuffing his toe on the ground. “I honestly don’t get it but she really, really wants to be in with the Puffs. Seeing you get in with the in crowd is driving her crazy, even more than I’ve been able to manage so far.”

“Well, I’ll bet that’s painful for you,” said Rory smartly, with a smile she just couldn’t help. “But seriously folks, I’m not trying to be a Puff and I’m not trying to make Paris mad at me. I just picked a lunch table, that’s all.”
“Because lunch with me was so bad?” asked Jess, sounding just a little defensive.

Rory shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“No, of course not,” she told him. “It’s just, you’re not always around. Several days I have looked for you but you’re not there, and I’m not saying you can’t have other friends or need to be other places, but I need to make other friends too. We’re both old enough to know that we can have more friends than just each other, Jess.”

“Of course,” he nodded once. “Er, you should probably go or you’ll miss your bus,” he gestured towards the doors then.

Rory nodded that he was right and called ‘see you tomorrow’ over her shoulder as she hurried away.

Jess raised a hand in a half-hearted wave and then sighed. The reasons he hadn’t been around at lunch some days were two-fold. Some days he actually had been elsewhere with other people, but most days it was problems with teachers, detentions, being held back late for a good talking to.

Jess had issues with school. It wasn’t that he couldn’t do the work. In fact, he found it all a little too easy at times, which made him not want to bother at all. The books he chose for himself tended to be vastly more interesting than anything the English teacher assigned or whatever. Then there was the other guys, the ones like Tristan who waited until Jess was alone to make comments about his mother, his lack of funds until he got ‘adopted’ by the Gellers, or his getting into trouble. Jess wouldn’t let them get to him most of the time, revenge via the long game was much sweeter than just punching some idiot Chilton goer in the face, and Jess was very good at the long game.

“There you are,” said Paris as she appeared behind him then. “How did I know I’d find you loitering around Rory Gilmore’s locker?”

“Because you’re psychic?” suggested Jess with a look. “No hang on, I think the word I was actually looking for was psycho,” he corrected himself.

Paris rolled her eyes.

“Just come on. I need to get home and since I have to take you with me, we’re leaving, now.”

“Sure thing, Mom,” he dead-panned, following her down the hall.

“If I were your mother you might’ve turned out better,” Paris huffed. “God knows what the women in the Booster Club are going to say when Liz rolls up for their meeting tonight. It’d be car crash viewing if they televised it.”

Jess’ eyes went a little wide when he realised what Paris just said. His mother was joining a parents club to support the school. Well, that was news to him, and Jess couldn’t imagine why Liz would want to do such a heinous thing. Of course, most of the parents of Chilton students, much like their darling sons and daughters, already thought the worst of his mother. Jess couldn’t imagine their opinions getting any worse when they actually met her. Either way, it didn’t really matter to him.

Lorelai approached the school with some hesitation. The Booster Club. She never really thought of herself as that kind of mom, but since her rant at Headmaster Charleston about not making Rory be social if she didn’t want to be fell flat, she suddenly found herself with no choice but to be involved. Of all the clubs and organisations, Booster Club seemed the least painful. It was just a couple of meetings a month, bake sales and silent auctions, no big deal. She could handle this for the sake of her kid, Lorelai was sure she could, she just really didn’t want to have to if she were honest.
“Deep breath, shoulders back, you can do this,” she muttered to herself as she wandered down the hall and found the right room.

Her hand went to the knob and she let herself in with a fake grin plastered on her face. She was greeted by a table with five seated mothers around it. They all looked up when Lorelai walked in, clearly startled by the interruption.

“I’m sorry, um, is this the Booster Club?” she checked, feeling oddly nervous.

“It certainly is,” one of the older women smiled. “And you are...?”

“Lorelai!” gasped a voice that was not her own as she stepped forward. “Oh my God, I had no idea you were joining Booster Club too!” cried Liz as she rushed at her.

Lorelai was more than a little startled to find herself being hugged by a woman she had only ever met once before. Sure, she was Luke’s sister, but even Luke himself didn’t go around hugging Lorelai without warning like this.

“Hey, Liz,” she said, patting her back a little. “Great to see you again.”

“And you!” she enthused as they parted from their hug. “I thought I was going to be the only cool mom here” she added in a low voice that the other mothers wouldn’t hear.

Lorelai laughed awkwardly and moved towards the table with Liz still hanging on her arm like an excited chimp.

“So, as you all know by now, I’m Lorelai Gilmore,” she waved with her free hand.

The other members of the club all introduced themselves as Ava, Ginger, Ivy, and Mena respectively, with Ava offering Lorelai a free chair and asking Liz to retake her seat as well.

“Now, before you came in we were talking about our next fund-raising event,” said Ava then, calling the meeting to order.

Lorelai tried to keep the enthusiastic smile on her face, but it didn’t come easy. This wasn’t exactly her favourite place to be and Liz did keep on grinning at her and talking like they were best buds. It wasn’t that she objected to being friends, but Liz was coming off just a little over the top right now. Plus when they hugged as soon as Lorelai walked in, all she could smell was gin on the new Mrs Gellar’s breath.

“So we would need a suitable venue,” said Ava then, as Lorelai tuned back into the conversation.

“I run an inn,” she piped up without thinking, and somehow, within a minute, she found herself hosting a fashion show!
“Oh, Paris, honey! I’m glad you’re home, could you come here a sec?” asked Liz with the biggest grin on her face.

She had barely allowed her step-daughter the chance to get in through the front door, but such things rarely seemed to bother Liz. In her own words, she was a free spirit and believed in everybody else being just the same. In Paris’ words, she was a nut.

“If this is about your precious son, it is not my fault that Jess is kept behind so much,” she said definitely, following Liz into the living room. “He has some serious discipline issues...”

“Paris, this isn’t about Jess,” she assured her. “I just wanted us to have a little talk, you know, woman to woman?”

Paris winced at the implication and looked away. She didn’t even have these kind of talks with her own mother, she certainly didn’t feel like having them with somebody else’s mom! Liz wasn’t exactly an awful person, but certainly not the type of woman Paris could ever look up to. She was way too hippy chick to be respectable or have any good sense, in Ms Geller’s opinion. At best she was amusing, at worst she was a full-on embarrassment to be around.

“I’ve had the birds and the bees if that’s where this is going,” she said sharply, arms folded across her chest. “A Chilton education is completely well-rounded, I know all the facts.”

“Paris, I wasn’t going to talk to you about sex,” said Liz with a burst of laughter. “Not that I would mind if you wanted to talk about it, honey, so you remember that,” she added seriously, patting Paris on the knee. “But no, I’m actually hoping you can help me out with something. I’m going to this Booster Club fashion show to raise money for your school today,” she explained. “I was just wondering if you have any do’s and don’ts for me? I mean you grew up around these people, and I’m not really...”

“Of the same class?” said Paris bluntly.

“I guess,” Liz shrugged, taking the comment in good homour apparently. “Well, I just think that some of the ladies at the meeting the other night weren’t taking to me, and I don’t want things to be awkward, so any tips for your crazy step-mom?” she asked hopefully.

“Chew with your mouth closed, stick to topics that they bring up, and do not under any circumstances say anything that will lead to the embarrassment of my family,” said Paris then. “Can I go now?”

“Sure, honey. Of course,” Liz nodded. “And thanks for the advice,” she smiled, clearly pleased with the help in spite of the sarcasm and bile with which it was spoken. “I’m so sorry if I’ve kept you from something important,” she called after Paris as she made a hasty exit. “Er, do you know when Jess will be home?”

“Who knows?” she yelled back over her shoulder. “But I will tell you this, his screwing around with Tristan DuGrey is only going to lead to no good!”

She was gone up the stairs before Liz had a chance to ask for an explanation on what that meant, even though she gave chase out into the hallway to ask.

“That girl needs her chakras realigning,” she muttered to herself, heading back to the living room.
She had been sat comfortably for all of ten minutes before the front door flew open and then closed with a bang. Immediately, Jess went hurrying out to find her son in the hallway.

“Jess? What’s wrong, honey?”

“Nothing,” he told her. “Except for the fact Paris Gellar is a whack-job!” he yelled deliberately loud enough for her to hear from the next floor up. “She drove off and left me at school,” he explained to Liz then in barely a more reasonable tone. “I had to stay behind all of five minutes to talk with the teacher, and she knows it. Next thing I know she’s peeling out of the parking lot like Pinky Tuscadero, leaving me to either walk home or try to catch a bus that stops five blocks away from the house,” he complained. “She is seriously unhinged!”

“Aaaw, Jess,” said Liz, moving to hug him. “You have to give her a chance to adjust. We’re all learning to be a family. It’s a big change for everybody,” she said, squeezing him tight.

Jess winced at the contact and extracted himself just as fast as he could.

“Yeah, whatever,” he muttered, heading for his room.

“Jess, you’re not getting into trouble at Chilton, are you?” she checked, stopping him in his tracks at the foot of the stairs. “Paris said there was a boy you were messing with, and I don’t want you getting into anything that’s going to...”

“I’m not doing anything,” Jess said firmly, though he never turned around at all and resumed trudging up the steps, calling over his shoulder to Liz. “You don’t want me to get pissed off at dumb rich kids, don’t send me to a dumb rich kids’ school’

“Well, would it kill you to try and get along with somebody for once!” she yelled after him.

Jess sighed in frustration and refused to answer as he hit the landing. Paris was clearly already in her room with the door bolted, and as much as he would love to tell her exactly what he thought about her childish behaviour today, the fight probably wasn’t worth it.

“You’d think she’d be in a better mood,” he muttered to himself, thinking of how proud his step-sister had looked earlier, sat at The Puffs lunch table. That was all Rory’s doing, it had to be, though Jess hadn’t gotten a chance to ask. He really hadn’t seen much of his friend Miss Gilmore the last couple of days, and refused to believe that was the reason for his own bad mood. It did seem awfully likely though. Jess took himself into his room and slammed the door behind him, just because. Flipping on the stereo, he cranked The Clash to near-deafening levels and grabbed the book from his nightstand. Screw homework, studying, and his crazy family. He didn’t care at all right now.

Lorelai was oddly happy about the fashion show going well. She had no real desire to join Booster Club, she just did it to help Rory out, and to get back at her mother in a weird way too. It backfired a little when she and Emily ended up in matching mother-daughter outfits on the runway. Still, Lorelai had to admit it had been almost fun today, and they had raised a lot of money for the school. Maybe it had been worth all the awkward conversations and mix ups with the Chilton moms. Maybe it was even worth Liz hanging around her like they were BFFs.

It wasn’t that Lorelai didn’t like Liz. She seemed cool in her way, but somewhat over the top, to say the least. The most disturbing comments she made involved drinking in the afternoon and craving a joint like you wouldn’t believe. Lorelai tried to let those kind of things pass without saying anything at all. It wasn’t her place to judge others, but it sure did seem strange that Liz and Luke were siblings.
Lorelai had trouble finding any similarities at all, in fact, she had yet to find one. There was no
doubting that Luke loved his little sister though, and Liz just adored her big brother.

“He’s pretty amazing, huh?” she said even now as she appeared at Lorelai’s shoulder.

She looked up to see Luke chatting with Ava, the Booster Club chairperson. She was a nice enough
lady, but suddenly Lorelai wanted to rip all of her hair out as she realised there was a decidedly flirty
air between Ava and Luke. That wasn’t allowed.

“Luke’s the best,” she said easily, in spite of how annoyed she was. “He’s done a lot for me, and for
my kid.”

“Yeah, he’s great that way,” Liz agreed. “So dependable and just always there when you need him.
He did a great job fixing the runway and all.”

“He did,” Lorelai agreed shortly.

Liz looked from her friend to her brother and back. A smile spread across her lips as she realised just
exactly what was going on here.

“Wow, those daggers shooting out of your eyes look pretty sharp,” she told Lorelai with a smirk.

“What are you talking about?” her friend asked with a laugh. “Daggers? What?”

“Come on, Lorelai! I see what’s going on here,” said Liz with a look. “My brother’s a great guy. I
mean, I’m his sister so I’m not meant to understand the attraction, but I still know he’s a good
looking man, a real sweetheart. Any woman would be lucky to have him.”

“Of course they would,” Lorelai agreed easily. “But I don’t... I mean, I’m not the woman for Luke,
trust me. Not even close. No.”

She literally waved away the suggestion with her hand and shook her head for good measure.

“Pretty sure that’s what they call protesting too much,” said Liz with laughter in her voice. “Look,
it’s not up to me to say anything, and I won’t, I swear, but Lorelai, if you like him, tell him,” she
urged. “I may be on my fifth husband, but honey, I don’t regret a second with any of them, or the
guys in between. At least I know for sure it wasn’t to be, and that’s a whole lot better than
wondering what could’ve been, right?”

With that Liz walked away and Lorelai watched her go a minute before turning back to glance at
Luke. He and Ava were leaning closely together, and she seemed to be whispering something in his
ear. Lorelai hated the white hot anger that ran through her when she saw it. She didn’t want to be
with Luke, so she should be happy if he met a nice lady that liked him. Lorelai was sure she wasn’t
jealous and that Liz was crazy for ever suggesting it. She was absolutely certain. Until suddenly she
wasn’t.

Rory hadn’t been thrilled when her mom got home from the fashion show and told her she was due
to be kidnapped by The Puffs. Whilst it was nice enough to feel like she was a part of something,
and Rory couldn’t deny it kind of did, she was a little put out by Lorelai’s blasé attitude to her being
stolen from her bed in the early hours of Saturday morning. Of course things only got worse after
that.

So much for being taken to breakfast in a blind-fold and her best pyjamas, Rory found that she and
Paris, as well as a couple of other Puff pledges, had been taken to Chilton itself, to make some stupid
promise and ring a stupid bell. All the stupid got added to the process when they were well and truly busted by Headmaster Charleston.

Sat in the hallway of her school, having ranted and raved at the Headmaster for ever making her be social in the first place, Rory was feeling the cold and not at all in a good mood about her situation. She just wanted her mom to get there so they could go home already. Unfortunately, before Lorelai got a chance to arrive, a familiar smirking figure strolled down the hallway towards Rory and Paris.

“What are you doing here?” asked both girls together.

“Nice to see you too,” Jess continued to smirk wickedly. “Wow, Paris, you been taking beauty tips from Frankenstein’s bride?”

“Why are you here?” she repeated, arms folded across her chest defensively. “I didn’t call you.”

“No, you called your nanny, and I, being a gentleman, offered to come pick you up so she didn’t have to drive in the dark and everything,” he explained, feigning innocence and valour. “Your car drives great by the way.”

“Give me those,” she grabbed the keys from his hand the moment he dangled them in front of her. “Asshole,” she muttered as she stormed away.

Jess bit his lip so he didn’t laugh at her, but it didn’t come easy. When he turned around, Rory was similarly afflicted but trying her best to look mad at him.

“That was mean,” she said, even as laughter gurgled in her throat.

“Yeah, well,” he shrugged, not caring at all. “At least I came to pick her up. That good deed ought to balance out everything else. I guess I could’ve given her fair warning she was getting kidnapped tonight...”

“You knew?” asked Rory with wide-eyes.

“I heard a little something about it,” he nodded. “I’m guessing you did too, or do you always look this good at four in the morning?”

Rory wasn’t sure what to say to that. The unexpected compliment sent the blood rushing to her cheeks, as usual, and the way Jess was looking at her right now stuck her to the spot in a really disconcerting but kind of nice way. Before her brain had a chance to process a response, Paris appeared from the far end of the hallway again.

“Jess! Car! Now! Or your sorry ass can stay here all night. I don’t care either way!” she told him crossly before disappearing again.

“I should go before she really blows a fuse,” Jess rolled her eyes. “But I’ll see you later.”


“Liz wants to come visit with Luke today,” explained Jess, even as he backed away down the hall. “I figured I might come along, hang out at the diner, around noon maybe?”

“Then maybe I’ll see you,” said Rory with a smile.

“Cool,” Jess replied with a similar grin and then he was gone, passing Lorelai at the corner without even noticing.
“Hey, honey,” she greeted her daughter. “Was that Jess?” she checked.

“Er, yeah, he came to pick up Paris,” she explained, before conversation turned to what exactly had happened tonight that caused the trouble.

Through it all, Rory couldn’t seem to rid herself of the warm tingly feeling in her stomach, the excited butterflies that seemed to have formed the moment that Jess said he would be in the diner later, around noon. It was only when Lorelai mentioned that Rory should get home and catch some Zs so she looked fresh-faced to meet up with Dean that a much uglier feeling crept into Rory’s insides. She had plans with her boyfriend, and there was no way to cancel. There had been enough days when she and Dean just couldn’t find the time to see each other. Now finally there was a day when they could, and that would mean missing a chance to hang out with Jess.

Rory hated that she felt so conflicted, and it clearly showed on her face. Lorelai just assumed it had to do with getting into trouble with The Puffs tonight rather than anything else. Rory wasn’t crazy about the fact she let her think that without explaining the real reason for her worries. Withholding the truth was barely a step up from lying, but Rory had a feeling that telling her mom she wanted to pick spending time with Luke’s trouble-making nephew who she saw every day, over a day with her loving boyfriend that she hardly saw lately probably wasn’t going to end well, so for now she said nothing at all.
“So you’re meeting Dean in the square, and then what?” asked Lorelai as she and Rory wandered into town on Saturday morning.

“I don’t know, we don’t really have any firm plans,” she shrugged. “I guess we’ll just see what happens.”

Lorelai looked across at her daughter and frowned. Something was wrong, and somehow she didn’t think all of Rory’s trouble was getting busted at Chilton last night. From what she said, she gave as good as she got, and Headmaster Charleston seemed like he was going to let the matter drop in the circumstances. Rory wouldn’t still be mad or upset about that now. She ought to be full of the joys of Spring, ecstatically happy that she was about to spend all day with the boyfriend she loved so much but had hardly seen recently. She should be smiling, instead she looked awfully frustrated and sad.

“Babe, if something was wrong, you’d tell me, right?” asked Lorelai. “I mean, I feel like that’s a dumb question because hey, you always tell me everything, and I tell you everything, it’s what we do.”

“It is what we do,” Rory agreed and yet there was still no smile, not an ounce of joy in her. “Did you have something you wanted to tell me?” she asked her mom then, deflection seeming like a good tactic in the circumstances.

They were outside the diner by now, about to go in for breakfast before Lorelai had to get to the inn and Rory would meet Dean. Lorelai looked in through the plate glass and caught sight of Luke serving his customers with coffee and doughnuts. Her mind flashed back to the day before, seeing him laughing and canoodling with Ava from the Booster Club. Her insides tied in knots, especially when Liz’s words rang in her mind.

‘Look, it’s not up to me to say anything, and I won’t, I swear, but Lorelai, if you like him, tell him... that’s a whole lot better than wondering what could’ve been’

“Mom?”

“It’s fine,” she replied the moment Rory spoke. “I am, I’m... I’m fine,” she smiled more genuinely, moving to open the diner door and usher her daughter inside.

They sat down at the nearest table and without picking up their menus decided on pancakes with eggs and bacon for breakfast. They gave their order without incident and started talking about other things. It was easier for Lorelai not to think about Luke or any feelings she may or may not have. It was certainly easier for Rory to put both Dean and Jess out of her head for a little bit, not that it came easy.

It was wrong to want to spend time with another guy over her boyfriend, Rory was all aware of that. She told herself it was just one of those things. She had been talking to Jess a lot in school and got used to his company. These past couple of days she saw less of him and she missed the book talk, the banter, just being around him. That was normal enough. When she didn’t see Lane much, she missed her too. It was totally expected that friends would miss each other when they weren’t around. The real problem for Rory was realising that she hadn’t missed Dean all that much. A little maybe, sometimes a lot, but right now given the choice she would genuinely rather be at the diner come lunch time than anywhere else, all because Jess would be there.
“Honey?” Lorelai prompted when Rory didn’t answer her question after three attempts. “Seriously now, are you sure you’re okay?”

Rory wanted to tell her. She wanted her mother’s opinion on what she was feeling and what she should do. It wasn’t that she expedited Lorelai to judge, her mom wasn’t really like that. Sure, she approved of Dean these days and maybe wouldn’t think it was a good thing that Rory was liking another guy more, a guy she didn’t know that had recently been making himself known for all the wrong reasons amongst the Chilton faculty and certainly wasn’t being very nice to Paris. Still, Lorelai was always understanding and fair. Rory opened her mouth to tell her what was going on when suddenly she saw someone waving from the street outside.

“There’s Dean,” she said forcing a smile as she waved back. “I should go,” she told her mom, getting up and leaning over to kiss Lorelai’s cheek. “I’ll see you tonight, Mom.”

“Have a great time, sweets.”

Rory left then and Lorelai watched her go. Something was definitely up with that kid, but clearly now wasn’t the time to talk about it. Lorelai would hate to think she and her daughter were getting to a point in their relationship where they simply couldn’t talk about everything anymore. She never wanted that time to come, even though it seemed horribly inevitable as Rory got older.

“She okay?” asked Luke as he appeared too suddenly.

“Geez, wear a bell!” Lorelai exclaimed as she turned back to face him. “And yeah, she’s okay. At least, I hope so,” she considered. “We’ll talk later, she’ll be fine,” she said then with more confidence than she felt.

Luke nodded that she was probably right and asked if Lorelai wanted anything else.

“Er, no, thanks,” she told him as he cleared away the plates and cups from the table.

No sooner had Luke walked away than Lorelai upped and followed him. He returned from the kitchen to find her sat at the counter now, looking oddly pensive.

“You change your mind?” he checked.

“What?”

“Wanting something else? More coffee, maybe?” he prompted, knowing that was usually what Lorelai wanted.

Of course the way she was staring at him right now, like even she didn’t know what she had come over here for, that was kind of worrying. Luke considered asking if she was going to hurl or something, since she did look a little bit like she might, but he never got the chance.

“Luke? Do you...?” she began, before stopping, shaking her head and starting over. “Yesterday, you and Ava, you seemed to get along pretty good,” she said with a smile that didn’t look altogether genuine.

“The woman from your Chilton moms club?” Luke checked, never all that great with names.

“Yes, from the Booster Club,” Lorelai confirmed. “You guys looked... cosy,” she opted for in the end. “Friendly, y’know?”

“She’s a nice lady,” Luke shrugged easily. “Or she seemed to be. You here to warn me that she’s
some kind of witch or something?” he asked with a smirk.

Lorelai rolled her eyes and sighed.

“Of course not,” she told him. “I just... Well, I mean, if you really, really want to date her that’s none of my business, I just think it might be weird, for me, and for you, and for Rory, because, y’know, Ava is a Chilton Mom, chairperson of the Booster Club which I am a part of, and you’re my... my coffee guy,” she explained lamely, and she knew it too. “I was just thinking it might be better if... if you really want to date someone, maybe a Chilton mom is a bad idea, for everybody.”

Luke was trying not to smile, he really was. It shouldn’t be funny at all. He ought to be yelling at Lorelai for poking her nose into his personal life, for trying to tell him what to do. There was no way his dating anybody, be they a Chilton mother or not, should affect Lorelai or Rory. The only explanation he could come up with for this particular ramble outburst from Lorelai was jealousy. He wouldn’t mind at all if that were true, but gambling on being right seemed like crossing a line they weren’t quite ready for. He shook his head.

“Okay, first of all, you don’t get to choose who I date,” he said, pressing one finger into the counter top to impress his point upon her. “And second, your friend Ava was asking me for directions back to Hartford. She was getting a little close about it, trying to flirt, I guess, but me? I was being a decent person and telling her which road to take home, that is all.”

Lorelai stared across the counter at Luke for a few seconds, unsure what to say. It felt silly to be relieved and yet hearing his explanation, seeing how serious and honest he looked (which was normal for Luke), she just felt like a massive weight had been lifted off her shoulders. The breath all rushed out of her body and a smile came to her lips that she knew she could never explain without making a fool out of herself. Liz was wrong, she didn’t like Luke, not that way. Suggesting it was idiotic, it had to be.

“Um, thanks,” she said, shaking her head. “For clarifying, y’know? Er, I should really get to the inn. Bye!” she called as she almost ran for the door.

Luke watched her go, smiled and shook his head. He was never going to entirely understand that woman, but it didn’t matter. Lorelai was still pretty amazing, no matter how crazy she could be, and one day, he should probably tell her that. Today didn’t seem like the right time though. It never did somehow.

Rory was trying to have a good time with Dean. She was almost achieving it actually. They hung out in the book store for a while and then went back to her house to talk a while. The only problem seemed to be that every time she started telling a story from school, it had Jess in it. That wouldn’t be an issue if Rory didn’t already feel like he was too big a part of her life right now, and if Dean wasn’t making a face every time the other guy’s name came up.

“You sure have a lot of Jess stories these days,” he said after the eighth mention.

Rory squirmed.

“Well, he goes to my school,” she shrugged. “When you tell me things about Stars Hollow High you mention the same guys a lot.”

“Yeah, but do you hear me mentioning any other girls specifically? Repeatedly?” he asked her with a pointed look. “Except for Lane, and that is because I know you like me to look out for her.”

“I do,” Rory agreed. “But y’know, men and women can be friends without it being anything
inappropriate. Like my mom and Luke...”

“How are you serious?” asked Dean with a burst of laughter that had no real humour in it. “Lorelai and Luke are your great example of platonic friendship?” he checked.

Rory shook her head.

“Bad example,” she realised, given how much her mom and Luke tended to flirt and all.

It made her wonder if she had been doing that with Jess, however inadvertent it may have been. She didn’t think she encouraged him at all, she wasn’t even sure that he was interested in her that way, but Rory had a feeling maybe he was, and maybe she was as guilty as anyone for playing up to the attention. She was not feeling like a great person right now.

“Dean, you know I love you, right?” she said, turning back to face him on the couch.

“Yes,” he agreed with a nod of his head. “You know I love you too,” he said, fingers in her hair as he leaned in to kiss her lips. “And I’m sorry for making you feel bad, for talking about Jess, I mean. I can’t help it, I just... Well, we haven’t seen much of each other lately. I guess I just feel a little out of the loop on your life.”

“Well, we can fix that. I want you to be in the loop” she insisted, leaning into his touch. “And we have all day to be loopy together,” she grinned.

Dean laughed at her deliberately odd phrasing and kissed her again. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Rory, because of course he did. She was maybe the most trustworthy person he knew, it was other people he had a problem with. This Jess person didn’t seem like a good guy, the kind who would respect the fact Rory had a boyfriend. It shouldn’t matter, not if Dean trusted his girlfriend to be faithful, and he did. At least, he thought he did.

“Hey, how about we go get some lunch?” he suggested then. “I’m kinda hungry.”

“I’m not,” said Rory like a weird reflex that she should never have.

“You’re kidding, right?” he laughed at what had to be a joke. “You are always hungry. I’d be seriously worried if you really didn’t want lunch by noon,” he said as he got up from the couch and held out his hand to pull Rory up too.

She wanted to say no, because she knew Dean would automatically take her to Luke’s. It was noon, as he just stated. That would mean Jess was there to visit his uncle. If Rory and Dean walked into that, it just couldn’t end well at all. Still, there was no way to explain, not without making things worse. Painting on a smile, Rory took her boyfriend’s offered hand and let him pull her to her feet.

“You’re right, I’m starved,” she told him honestly.

“Then let’s go to Luke’s,” he replied, putting his arm around her shoulders to hug her close. “’Cause one thing I know for sure is that a hungry Gilmore is not a happy Gilmore.”

They put on their coats and headed out. Rory didn’t notice the cold and barely reacted when Miss Patty called hello and waved to her and Dean as they passed the studio. Her mind was otherwise occupied, trying to come up with things to say when they came across Jess and Liz at the diner. She could lie and pretend she had no idea they would be there, or just that she forgot she had ever been told. Rory hated to lie and she wasn’t great at it, but it might be a necessary evil, she knew.

As they got within sight of Luke’s, Rory started to feel a little panicked. She almost literally jumped
“Dean, thank goodness!” he exclaimed. “I need you to work, now.”

“Taylor, I don’t have a shift until Monday after school,” Dean disagreed.

“I know that. Don’t you think I know that? Young man, I make up the rostas and I pay your wages. I know precisely when you are scheduled to work,” he explained. “However, I have found myself in quite the pickle today. Of the six people who should be working this afternoon, I have two with the stomach flu, one supposed migraine that I highly suspect is alcohol induced,” he said out of the corner of his mouth before continuing at a regular volume. “Another has handed in their notice and yet refuses to actually work the notice period, which leaves me and just two employees on site. That’s just not enough on a Saturday afternoon.”

Dean could see his boss was in a predicament and though he wanted to help, he was more eager to spend his day with Rory. Of course his girlfriend was so selfless and kind, it came as no surprise when she said he should go into the store and help out.

“I know we had plans together,” she said sadly. “But at least we got to spend the morning, and Taylor obviously really needs you right now.”

“A very astute observation, Rory,” Taylor smiled. “And what a kind and unselfish attitude to take. Dean, please come inside,” he opened the door and ushered him through.

There was apparently no arguing with either his boss nor his girlfriend on this one, as much as Dean would like to. With a huge sigh, he told Taylor he would come inside in just a minute, he needed to talk to Rory first. Taylor rolled his eyes and went back in the store, whilst Dean turned to Rory, taking her hands in his own.

“You sure you don’t mind?” he asked.

“You’re needed,” she told him, evading the question just a little. “Taylor will really appreciate you doing this, might even lead to extra money or more favourable responses to shift changes later,” she smiled. “These are good things.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he smiled down at her. “You gonna be okay getting lunch by yourself?”

“Dean, I go to Luke’s every day,” she rolled her eyes. “I can go today just the same. Besides, I’m pretty sure my mom will be along soon. She was hoping to be out of the inn by now,” she said, checking her watch. “I won’t be lonely.”

He kissed her goodbye then, and Rory waved as Dean went into the store to work. With a sigh of relief that only made her feel guilty, Rory turned and headed for Luke’s by herself, grinning when she opened the door and found Jess sprawled in a chair with a book in his hand. Rory walked over and peered over his shoulder.

“Might’ve known it wouldn’t be a book for school,” she said.

Jess didn’t even flinch, just closed the book and turned to look at her with a smirk on his lips.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” she replied with a smile.

“You came by,” he said, stating the obvious perhaps, but Rory knew why.
“For lunch, yeah,” she nodded. “Oh, right, you told me you were going to be here,” she snapped her fingers as if the thought just came to her. “I forgot about that,” she lied badly and they both knew it.

“Yeah, you’re world-renowned for that bad memory of yours,” he teased her. “I’m amazed you remember who I am.”

“Jack, right?” she teased him right back, making Jess laugh.

It was then that Liz looked over and realised they had company. She had never met Rory Gilmore and yet the moment she saw her she was sure of who she was.

“Oh, you must be Lorelai’s kid!” she gasped as she rushed over to the table where Rory had parked herself opposite Jess. “I’ve heard so much about you!”

“All good, I hope?” she smiled nervously.

“Oh, of course, sweetie” Liz insisted. “Wow, look at you, so much like your mom. Doesn’t she look so much like Lorelai, Luke?” she said to her brother as he came out from behind the counter.

“Liz can you not be quite so loud? There are people here trying to have their own conversations,” he told her in a quiet voice. “But yes, Rory does look a lot like Lorelai, which isn’t so weird for a mother and daughter, I’m sure. What can I get for you, Rory?” he asked her then, jotting down her order as she asked politely for a burger and fries with coffee.

“It’s so cool that you dropped in, Rory,” said Liz as she joined her and a mortified Jess at the table. “I was just tellin’ Luke, he should really come over to our house for dinner. Y’know, he still didn’t meet Ira yet? That can’t be right for brothers-in-law,” she said definitely. “He’s all skittish about comin’ to a big fancy house and being the only one there not used to it, so I was thinking, how about you and your Mom come along too?”

Rory’s eyes widened at the suggestion, but she tried to remain polite and keep the smile on her face, even as she glanced at Jess and saw him shaking his head.

“I, er... I don’t know, Mrs Mariano... Geller, sorry,” she corrected herself, feeling so stupid.

“Oh, honey, please! Call me Liz,” she grinned. “I mean, your mom, my brother, we’re practically family, right? So that’s why I was thinking, we could make this a real dinner party. Me and Ira, Luke and Lorelai, you and Jess, and Paris, of course. I don’t really think she has any friends we could invite, does she?”

“Um, well, probably not,” said Rory awkwardly, knowing she was the closest Paris really had to a friend, unless you counted Madeline and Louise.

It was probably best she didn’t even mention the two girls that Paris had been known to refer to as the Banger Sisters amongst other things. A dinner party with them could only be disastrous. As it was, Rory didn’t love the idea of this whole event, because it could only be awkward and embarrassing for her too. Her eyes moved from Liz’s face, as she spoke animatedly about her plans for the dinner, to Jess who didn’t look at all thrilled with the idea of this event. Rory couldn’t blame him really.

“So, you’ll come, right?” said Liz then, getting her attention back. “You and Lorelai? I’m not taking no for an answer here!”

“Um, then, I guess we probably could...” said Rory awkwardly.
“Great!” Liz exclaimed, jumping up and rushing behind the counter. “Luke! The girls are coming to dinner so now you have no excuse!”

“What do head shaking and throat cutting gestures mean where you come from?” asked Jess with a smirk. “Pretty sure I was giving you enough hints to say no.”

“She wouldn’t let me!” Rory argued. “Your mom is really bad at taking negative answers from people.”

“Tell me about it,” Jess rolled his eyes. “Well, now you and your mom are condemned to dinner at the Geller house. I’d feel sorry for you if I didn’t have to deal with it on a daily basis.”

“You don’t want me to come over?” she asked, almost amused by his attitude. “That’s not awfully friendly of you, Jess.”

“Believe me, it is,” he argued. “You’d have a better time in a Turkish prison.”

“The entertainment wouldn’t be as good.”

“The food would be better.”

“Yeah, but at dinner I get the Jess vs Paris show. That’s always a hoot.”

“I don’t mess with Paris in front of her father. That’s called biting the hand that feeds you.”

“Really?” asked Rory with wide eyes. “You mean I’m going to see Jess Mariano, kind and conscientious step-son?” she teased him. “Now I’m glad I got railroaded into this dinner,” she told him with delight as Luke put her food down in front of her.

Jess watched her tuck into her meal, still grinning like a crazy person. He kind of didn’t want Rory over at the house, seeing him have to be on his best behaviour, having Liz tell embarrassing stories about his childhood or whatever. On the other hand, Rory Gilmore was going to be in his home, and apart from the actual meal itself, there was a chance he would even get some alone time with her, away from Paris and the adults. Maybe it would be worth it after all.
Chapter 9

“I know it feels a little like Friday Night Dinner has come early,” said Lorelai as she fastened her necklace on Wednesday evening. “But I’m actually kind of looking forward to this whole dinner party thing at Liz’s place. I mean, just seeing Luke all dressed up is going to be a thing I wouldn’t trade for anything, and meeting one of the people who spawned Paris Geller? That has got to be an experience in and of itself.”

It took another minute or so of rambling on about the evening ahead before Lorelai realised Rory hadn’t answered her or made any kind of comment for at least ten minutes. She wandered from the living room down the hall, still speaking loud enough to be heard, and headed into Rory’s bedroom. There she found her daughter in front of the mirror, turning this way and that in a completely different dress to the one she had planned to wear tonight, Lorelai knew.

“What’s up, kid?” she checked.

“You think this looks okay?” asked Rory worriedly. “It’s the fourth dress I’ve tried tonight and none of them look right somehow.”

“I love that dress,” said Lorelai, looking at the set of three more abandoned on the bed. “I love all these dresses actually. What’s the problem with any of them?” she asked Rory with a frown. “We don’t have this much debate over a Friday night dress...”

“But this isn’t dinner with Grandma and Grandpa,” Rory insisted. “This is dinner with Paris’ family and her step-family and Luke and... It’s just different,” she said frustratedly as she picked up one of the previously abandoned dresses and compared it to the one she was currently wearing.

Lorelai felt confused. Luke wouldn’t care what Rory wore tonight, and there was no way Liz was in a position to judge either, she wasn’t the type to even try. Other than that, there would only be Paris, her father, and Jess to consider. Lorelai started to get a feeling it was the latter, and that made her just a little nervous.

“So, did you talk to Paris or Jess at all about tonight?” she asked, eyes fixed on the clothes strewn about the bed rather than directly at Rory. “I mean, are they cool with us going over or were they railroaded too?”

“I think it was all Liz’s idea,” said Rory. “Paris doesn’t so much mind you and me being there as she does her new step-mom embarrassing her in front of even more people than usual.”

“And Jess?” Lorelai prompted. “Is he going to be embarrassed to have us at dinner too? I mean, you’re his school friend, but he doesn’t even know me, and... I don’t know, maybe it’ll be awkward for him.”

“He’s okay, I think,” Rory considered. “He said he doesn’t mess with Paris in front of her father because he’s actually a decent guy and pays for everything Liz and Jess would want or need. I don’t know that they spend much time together but they seem to get along okay, and Jess and Luke kinda hit it off. Anyway, I doubt he’s nervous or anything. Jess isn’t really the nervous type.”

Lorelai nodded her understanding as Rory looked her way. It wasn’t the words she said that gave her daughter away, Lorelai thought, it was the look on her face, that almost giddy smile when she talked about Jess. It made Lorelai wonder what had happened or more over what might happen between her little girl and Luke’s rambunctious nephew. Poor Dean, Lorelai thought, but refused to say...
anything yet. First she wanted to see for herself how this Jess acted at the Geller house tonight, both in general and towards Rory, then they would see what happened next.

“Ooh, door!” she exclaimed when there was a sudden knock.

Lorelai dived off the bed and headed for the front door. She got a real surprise when she opened it and found a very smartly dressed Luke on the other side.

“Oh my God!” she gasped as he looked at her. “The hat. It comes off!” she said, pointing at his head where neatly combed hair sat, no longer covered by the usual backwards baseball cap.

“You’re hilarious,” Luke dead-panned. “And to think I came here to offer you and Rory a ride to Hartford to save on taking two vehicles. Maybe I shouldn’t have bothered.”

“Oh no, Luke, I’m sorry,” she grabbed his arm when he moved to turn away, even though they both knew he would never be so mean. “You know I appreciate it and I’m just messing with you,” she promised when he turned back. “Seriously, you look good.”

She said it with a genuine smile and Luke almost felt embarrassed. Lorelai never really had a reason to tell him he looked good, but it was nice to hear on this occasion.

“You look good too. Beautiful, actually,” he admitted, wondering why he suddenly felt like a teenager on a first date.

It was a real relief when Rory appeared next to her mother.

“Luke, hi,” she greeted him with a smile. “I didn’t know you were picking us up,” she said then, looking to her mother for explanation.

“I don’t know either” she admitted. “But hey, looks like we’re riding in style tonight, babe. Grab your purse, our escort has arrived,” she said in an over-the-top upper-crust voice.

“I’ll let the butler know we’re leaving and ask the maid to keep an eye on things while we’re gone,” she joked as she went to find appropriate shoes.

Luke rolled his eyes at the whole wacky scene. Between the Gilmore girls crazy ways, his moody nephew, nutty sister, and the Gellers, tonight was going to be interesting to say the least. Luke had a feeling ‘nightmare’ would yet prove to be a more accurate descriptor, but it seemed he didn’t have any choice but to go and make the best of things.

It was a toss up as to who felt the most awkward when Rory, Lorelai, and Luke arrived at the Geller house for dinner. A maid opened the door and ushered them inside, very much like when the Gilmore girls went to Friday Night Dinner, but that was where the similarities ended. Liz came rushing the moment she realised her guests had arrived, dragging Paris and Jess behind her, both of whom looked mortified to be there. Mr Geller was nowhere to be seen whilst everybody was brought inside, their coats removed and drinks offered around in the nearest sitting room. Liz had her son pouring sodas and mixing martinis too. Rory wasn’t sure how Jess came to know how to make such drinks and didn’t feel like asking right now. Paris hovered nearby in a dress that nobody ever looked so uncomfortable in. Despite that, she did look quite reasonable in the outfit.

“I like your dress,” said Rory politely, thinking she should probably say something at least.

“Thanks,” Paris half-smiled. “I’d like it better if I didn’t have to wear it, or y’know, be here at this charade of a dinner party,” she sighed.
Rory moved closer to her mother and tried to see what the conversation was about over there. Before she had a chance to figure it out the door opened and a tall imposing figure of a man stepped in.

“Ira!” Liz exclaimed, hurrying to grab his hand and bring him further into the room. “Honey, come meet everybody,” she told her husband. “Ira Geller, this is my brother, Lucas Danes,” she introduced.

“It’s just Luke,” he said, offering a hand. “But it’s a pleasure to meet you at last, Ira.”

Rory was mildly surprised to realise that Paris’ father was really a pretty nice guy. He welcomed Luke into his home, and then Lorelai and Rory herself too. He didn’t seem at all stuck up, which Paris had a definite penchant for. Rory supposed she should have realised he wasn’t that way inclined, at least not recently, or he never would’ve married Liz and sent Jess to Chilton the way he had.

Speaking of Jess, Rory couldn’t help but notice how good he looked all dressed up. He made a Chilton uniform look cool somehow, and she never had figured out how. Tonight in charcoal grey slacks and a blue button down shirt, he was just downright sexy. Rory had a hard time keeping the blush from her cheeks when she realised what she had just thought, and the feeling only intensified when she realised Jess was not just staring at her now but also walking towards her.

“Hey,” he said as he reached her.

“Hi,” Rory replied, clearing her throat. “So, this is your house.”

“For now,” he shrugged, leaning in closer and lowering his voice. “With Liz, you never know how long it’s going to last.”

Rory wasn’t sure what to say to that. She had heard rumours about Liz’s reputation with men, and a few comments from Jess himself about her track record. It only hit her now as she stood here in the Geller’s house that Jess’ stay here could be entirely temporary. If Liz decided she liked some other guy better or Ira decided he had made a terrible mistake in marrying her, it’d be all over. Jess would be gone from Rory’s life within a second. She couldn’t explain why that hurt so much to think about, but the pain that hit her square in the chest was so bad in that moment she forgot to breathe.

A maid appeared and let the family and their guests know dinner was ready.

“Shall we?” Ira asked Liz, offering an arm.

She giggled like a teenager as she accepted, not even noticing the way Paris looked daggers at her. Ira must’ve spotted it, because he made a point of then offering his free arm to his daughter who accepted with an almost genuine smile.

“Lorelai?” said Luke, following suit and giving her the chance to be escorted too.

She accepted but her eyes went to Rory showing a worried expression. This kind of left two more people to make a pair and that wasn’t lost on Lorelai. It hadn’t been planned, it couldn’t have been, but Rory looked like a deer in the headlights of a Mack truck when she realised it.

“C’mon,” said Jess and Rory fumbled with her glass before placing it down on the table and taking the arm he offered her.

It felt weird to be that close, to be touching Jess, hanging off him like a date or a girlfriend or something. They talked a lot, sat together at lunch, on the bus, in the diner, but they were never this close. It felt strange. Not in a bad way, but still.
“You okay?” asked Jess as they got to the dining room door where the adults and Paris were already taking their seats.

“Sure, I’m fine,” she smiled, though the expression wasn’t quite genuine. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“No reason,” he said softly as he helped her into her seat like a gentleman. “Personally this whole upper class act makes me nauseous, but maybe that’s just me,” he told her with a smirk before quickly taking his own seat beside her.

Rory bit her lip so she didn’t laugh out loud and concentrated on putting her napkin in her lap whilst the starter was served.

“You okay, hon?” asked Lorelai from across the table.

“I’m fine,” Rory promised, even as her heart hammered in her chest.

Dinner passed without any real incident. Ira kept on talking to ‘Lucas’, in spite of being told multiple times by everybody else that it was ‘just Luke’, and Liz got so animated in talking about her wonderful new life that she flipped a potato right across the room into an antique vase on the sideboard, but other than that it was fine. Conversation flowed amongst the adults and they tried to include the kids when they could. Paris was fine so long as she was spouting facts and figures or giving opinions that nobody cared to argue with. Jess was oddly quiet, Rory thought, but as he had said before, this whole scene made him feel uncomfortable and kind of sick. Rory did understand. As much as she was fine eating dinner at her grandparents’ house, it was a very different thing being here. Mr Geller and Liz were nice enough, but it was just uncomfortable to be sat around the table with them, as well as Paris, not to mention Jess himself.

Finally when dessert was over and even Lorelai couldn’t drink any more coffee, they all returned back to the living room. Luke checked his watch on the way through, saying they could probably get away with leaving within another half hour. That seemed all the more likely when Ira had to excuse himself to take an unexpected business call. Lorelai remarked that it was very late for a business call, being past eight thirty already, but Liz waved it away stating it happened all the time.

Paris tried to excuse herself to her room, but the moment she tried, Liz got the wrong idea and suggested she take Rory and Jess with her.

“You kids don’t want to be stuck with us stuffy grown ups all night,” she said knowingly, even if she was mostly wrong. “Paris, Jess, why don’t you give Rory a tour of the house. I’ll bet she’d like that, right, Rory?”

“Oh, sure,” she replied awkwardly, knowing neither Paris nor Jess were likely to want to show her around.

Still all three got up and exited the room together. The second they were beyond the door, Paris separated herself from the other two, storming towards the stairs.

“I have better things to do than keep up this charade anymore. If my father asks where I’ve gone, tell him I had a headache. I don’t care what anybody else in this dazzling array of strangers thinks,” she huffed, and then she was gone.

“Okay, I’m not going to tell you off when you make fun of her anymore,” said Rory with a sigh. “Seriously, I thought going to school with her was tough, but living with Paris, twenty four seven, without committing physical assault? You deserve a medal, my friend,” she told Jess dramatically, eliciting a laugh from him.
“Mostly we stay out of each other’s way,” he shrugged like it wasn’t such a big deal. “So, you want a tour of this place or what?”

“Oh, um, I guess,” Rory shrugged. “I mean, we can go wherever you want to go, I don’t mind.”

“It’s kinda stuffy in here. You want to take a walk outside?” asked Jess. “I know where the maid hides the coats if you need your jacket back?”

“Oh, okay,” Rory nodded and smiled. “Outside is fine.”

Jess fetched her jacket and helped her into it without a word. Rory thanked him, finding he was much closer than she thought when she turned around. There was this odd moment when she thought he was going to kiss her. Rory felt guilty for the pang of disappointment that occurred when nothing happened.

They headed out through the nearest door. It wasn’t as dark outside as Rory expected. There were lights marking the gravel path that cut through the lawn, and more in the fountains in the garden, plus the moon was out big and bright above their heads. It was all so beautiful, wandering around amongst pretty flowers and trickling fountains. Rory couldn’t help the smile that came over her face as they wandered in companionable silence for a while. She turned to look at Jess when she heard a rustling sound and found him taking a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. Rory didn’t know she was frowning until he called her on it.

“You’re not going to give me the anti-smoking speech, are you?” he checked. “’Cause believe me, I’ve had it enough times already.”

“It’s not my place to tell you not to smoke,” she shrugged. “But I’d appreciate it if you didn’t do it near me. Second hand smoke kills too, y’know?”

Jess nodded slowly and put the cigarettes away. She wasn’t being judgemental, which was cool, or trying to save him like most goody two shoes would. Of course, whilst Rory did have kind of a saintly rep, he knew better than to believe all the rumours. She had her dark side, her wild streak, whatever you wanted to call it. He knew from some of the books she had read, some of the movies she quoted. There was way more to Rory Gilmore than met the eye, and every single thing he found out about her made Jess like her more and more.

“What?” she asked when she glanced at him again then and saw Jess was staring at her.

“Did I tell you that you look beautiful tonight?” he asked, taking her completely by surprise. “Because you do.”

Rory meant to answer him, to say thank you or return the compliment. He did look good tonight, very good in fact, and she meant to let him know. She at least meant to have manners enough to thank him for the compliment, but for once in her life Rory didn’t have any words. She should try, knowing as she did now her time with Jess could be so short, that every day of it might be a gift to make the most of.

“Jess...” she forced out eventually, but no more words would come.

For once in her life, Rory went on instinct alone. She pushed herself forward, her arms slipping around Jess as she pulled him closer and pressed her lips firmly against his own. Not one to miss such an opportunity, Jess grabbed at Rory, kept her close as he kissed her back, but no sooner had they got into the moment than it ended. Rory practically leapt out of his arms, looking shocked by what they had done, even though she had started it.
“Oh God!” she gasped, and then she was gone, off running back into the house before Jess had a chance to react.

She cleared the doors and ran straight towards the living room that they had come from. Jess gave chase but knew there was no point when the door opened, Lorelai and Luke stepping out with Liz right behind them, asking if they really had to leave right now.

“I have an early start in the morning,” said Luke with semi-faked regret. “So does Lorelai. Rory too.”

“Yeah, very early,” Lorelai agreed, surprised to find her daughter standing in front of her suddenly, gasping for breath and very red in the face. “Honey, are you okay?”

“Are we leaving?” asked Rory hopefully. “Good, we need to leave,” she said definitely.

Lorelai looked from her daughter to Jess and back with suspicion.

“And me are so gonna have a little talk when we get home, babe,” she told Rory definitely.

“I really think we should,” her daughter agreed. “Really, really.”
“You’re an idiot,” said Paris from the safety of her bedroom door.

Jess had just got his hand on the doorknob of his own room when she spoke and very nearly jumped because he hadn’t known she was going to pop her head out like that. He thought about just ignoring her but somehow curiosity got the better of him.

“Y’know you tell me that a lot, or variations on the theme at least,” he noted as he tuned to face her. “You wanna explain why specifically I’m an idiot today?” he checked.


“Wow, becoming a spy now, huh, Harriet?” he countered, folding his arms across his chest. “You want me to buy you some binoculars so you can get a better view next time?”

“Like I need help in seeing what’s going on with the two of you,” she rolled her eyes. “You’re so obvious, both of you. She’s just using you and if you think anything else, you’re even more of a fool than I already thought.” Jess bristled at the implication. He didn’t care if Paris thought he had a crush on Rory. It was true enough that he liked her, whether he wanted to go around admitting it or not. She had to like him too. Girls like Rory didn’t go throwing themselves at guys and kissing them the way she had unless they felt something. Still, it stung to think Paris could be right, that Rory could be using him, to get back at her absent boyfriend or whatever. The infamous Dean didn’t seem to be around much when Rory wanted him to hang out or whatever. Jess shook his head.

“That’s interesting, Paris, since I’m pretty sure your theory before was that I was using Rory to get at you,” he countered smartly.

“Maybe you were before, but things change, beatnik,” she told him with a smile that was as nasty as it could be. “You thought you were so smart, using my rival to get at me, but now you’ve fallen, and Gilmore is using that to her advantage. You know she has a boyfriend, she’s just playing you, probably also to get at me, the fool. Like I care if she plays you.”

“You seem awfully interested in that kiss you saw for someone who doesn’t care,” said Jess smirking wickedly. “What’s the matter, sis? Jealous?”

“Please!” she rolled her eyes. “The day the most important thing in my life is who you or Rory swap saliva with is the day Satan skates to work,” she told him crossly, slamming her bedroom door as she disappeared back inside.

Jess shook his head, still smiling as he turned to go into his own room. There were times when he genuinely did wonder if Paris was jealous, sometimes of Rory for getting close to him, sometimes of himself for being so close to Rory. Either way, he couldn’t care much about his step-sister’s issues or her sexual leanings right now. Jess had his own problems.

That kiss Rory laid on him meant something and he knew it, but so did her bolting the first chance she got. It was true enough that she had a boyfriend which meant what they did constituted cheating really. Rory was the type to get all bent out of shape over the simplest things, so this would’ve really thrown her for a loop. In Jess’ defence, he didn’t start what happened, she did. Of course that didn’t mean he hadn’t enjoyed it or was hoping for a repeat performance. There was no way of knowing where things went from here until he saw Rory at school tomorrow. No use worrying about it until then.
“So,” said Lorelai the moment she and Rory got in through the front door. “You wanna tell me what really happened tonight?” “What do you mean?” asked her daughter, feigning innocence.

That was fine in the car with Luke driving them home from Hartford. He didn’t need to know what might’ve occurred at the Geller house when Rory and Jess were left alone. Now he was gone and it was just the Gilmore girls. Now it was time for the truth.

“Rory, come on,” said Lorelai with a look as she joined her on the couch, dumping her purse on the table. “You walked out of that room with Jess and Paris for a tour of the house. The next time I see you, Paris is nowhere to be seen, and you look totally freaked out about something. So, I’m guessing either Paris was attacked by Frankenstein’s monster, or more likely, she immediately skedaddled off to her room and you and Jess got a little familiar.”

Rory’s eyes went wide and her mouth opened to match as she gasped. She wanted to deny everything, because it would make life a whole lot easier if a denial were the truth. Unfortunately, it wasn’t. Something had happened with her and Jess. It was just the shock of her mom knowing that and the guilt that she had cheated on Dean making her feel so sick.

“Sweets, you can tell me the truth,” Lorelai reminded her, patting her hand. “Jess is not unattractive and with the whole rebel attitude thing he has going on... Not to freak you out, but if I was seventeen? Oh man, I would be climbing out of my bedroom window for the guy, no doubt.”

“Mom!” Rory complained loudly, covering her eyes with her hand. “I can’t... I didn’t mean for this to happen!” she said desperately.

Lorelai felt sorry for her. She and Rory were always very much alike, it was why it was easy for her to understand how her baby girl felt. When a new guy came into your life, a guy that was too cool for school, with dark hair, dark eyes, and the ability to turn a girl to mush with just a look, it was hard to resist. Even the nicest, best behaved girl could go weak at the knees and act a little crazy. Lorelai had been there and done that. More than anything, she didn’t want Rory to fall into a situation she couldn’t get out of, the way Lorelai herself had.

“Babe, what exactly did happen?” she asked then. “Did he make a move? Did Jess try to kiss you or...?”

“No,” Rory shook her head, looking equal parts sad and guilty as she studied her own hands in her lap. “No, I... I kissed him.”

Lorelai wasn’t really expecting that at all. If Jess had made a move and Rory had gone with it, that would make sense, but Rory actively cheating on Dean? That was a real surprise. Still, Lorelai was the grown up here and she had to get over herself and be as helpful as she could for her daughter. Rory sure seemed like she needed the assistance right now.

“Okay,” said Lorelai after a long moment of silence. “Well, then, I guess you have to figure out where to go from here. I mean, despite the way it sometimes seems, you can’t actually have your cake and eat it too. If you’re committed to Dean then this Jess thing has to stop, but on the other hand...”

“I am committed to Dean,” Rory cut in. “I am, I just... I really am,” she said, a little less definitely than she meant to as she absently played with the bracelet her dedicated boyfriend had given her in the beginning of their relationship.

“Er, babe? That lip lock you shared with Jess is saying otherwise,” Lorelai pointed out. “Not to make
you feel worse, but if you and Dean were really so in love, do you honestly think you’d be so quick to mack on the new guy?"

“But I didn’t mean to!” she shook her head, sounding desperate and looking much the same. “It’s just so confusing. I mean, when I’m with Dean, I’m so sure I want to be with him. He’s my first and only boyfriend, and he loves me. He’s building me a car and he treats me really, really well.”

“I know that, honey,” Lorelai sympathised. “But clearly when you’re with Jess, you feel differently.”

“It is different” she admitted. “Different to anything else I ever felt somehow. I mean, we’re friends, good friends. We have so much in common, like books and music and movies and all, but when we talk it’s like... like he doesn’t feel as if he has to agree with me just because, and he knows about the stuff I’m talking about and he knows it’s really interesting.”

She was explaining a solid base for a friendship but with the goofiest smile on her face that meant Lorelai knew it was way more than a buddy thing going on with Rory and Jess. As sweet as he was, Dean couldn’t compete with the new guy in intellect, charm, or sex appeal. Poor guy was pretty much toast at this point, but Lorelai had no idea how to get that through to Rory without upsetting her.

“Rory, you know, you’re allowed to like new people,” she explained gently. “You’re allowed to have friends, and if you find that you like one particular friend a little more than that, well, it happens. I know you love Dean and he loves you, but first relationships aren’t forever...”

“Ours is supposed to be,” said Rory, looking almost terrified about the change that might have to occur in her life after what happened tonight. “Me and Dean were supposed to be forever!”

“You don’t think me and your dad thought we were forever in the beginning?” asked Lorelai with a kind smile. “Sweetheart, back when I was sixteen, I couldn’t imagine loving anybody like I loved Christopher, but stuff changes. People change too, especially at your age,” she sighed. “And I know it sucks that somebody has to end up hurt here, but that’s just the way it is. Now, I’m not saying you have to go ahead and break up with Dean and start dating Jess or whatever. Only you can make that kind of decision and I refuse to influence it,” she said, literally holding up her hands in mock surrender. “But it’s something you need to give serious consideration to, babe. If you really do want to be with Dean, than there can be no more close moments with Jess. On the other hand, if you think maybe Jess is the one you wanna be with, well, then Dean deserves the truth and letting down as gently as you can, because he didn’t really do anything wrong.”

With that, she wrapped an arm round Rory’s shoulders, pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. Then Lorelai got up and said she was heading off to bed since tomorrow would be an early start at the inn. Rory barely heard her speak, but snapped out of her trance when Lorelai was barely half way up the stairs.

“Mom?” she called behind her, waiting for Lorelai to turn back and look at her. “You don’t think I’m a horrible person, do you?”

“Never,” she promised her with a smile. “But you do have to make a choice, babe. Hard as it is, you can’t string along either guy. It’s not fair. Goodnight, sweets.”

‘Night, Mom,” said Rory absently as her eyes refocused on nothing much and her mind went into overdrive.

That kiss with Jess, it had been just as good as she imagined, maybe even better than that actually, but it made her feel so guilty too. She was cheating on Dean, and that hurt her heart, the same heart
that had sped up to the point of bursting when Jess kissed her back.

It was so confusing, to feel so much for two guys that were so very different. Rory knew her mom was right, she did have to make a choice and stick with it, but right now, Rory didn’t know how to make such a decision. There was every chance she would be up all night contemplating it, writing maybe the most important pro-con list of her life so far. Still, she took herself off to bed in the hopes of getting at least a little rest. It was all she could do right now.

“Sometimes I wish Paris’ parents had just stayed married!”
“Rory?” Lorelai called, tapping on her daughter’s bedroom door.

It was extremely rare for the elder of the Gilmore girls to be up first which was what had her so worried. Lorelai knocked again and then let herself into the room only to find Rory spark out on the bed with papers lying on her chest. It didn’t take much for Lorelai to figure out they were pro-con lists and the topic was not unexpected.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she sighed as she read through all the good reasons for choosing Dean and then an equally long list of reasons to choose Jess.

After the night she’d had, Lorelai was tempted to let her daughter sleep in, but today was a school day and there just wasn’t time to catch any more Zs.


“What?” Rory woke up gasping. “Oh, Mom. Hi,” she greeted her dopily. “I was... Did I sleep?”

“A little, apparently,” Lorelai confirmed. “Probably not as much as you should’ve. You really went to town on this decision, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Rory sleepily, looking through her papers. “Honestly? For every pro there was a con, to both guys. It’s like the most impossible question I was ever asked.”

“Really?” Lorelai mused. “I think mine was Officer Tom Hanson or Morten Harket. Anyway, yours is clearly a bigger deal,” she sighed, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “But no luck in making a choice here. Yikes!” she gasped as she ran down the lists, getting into the part with marks out of ten on kissing ability.

As close as they were, as much as Lorelai liked Rory to share things with her, she kind of didn’t need to know about the kissing technique of seventeen year old boys, especially when it was her own daughter’s opinion on that topic. Lorelai’s eyes skimmed over the rest of the stats and a sigh escape her lips unbidden. Dean did pretty good on all the areas that made a great boyfriend, all the loyal and upstanding points were there, but to be fair to Jess he hadn’t been given a chance to prove any boyfriend qualities yet. When it came to fun, common interests, and oh yes, the kissing score, the new guy was doing much better. To Lorelai, the choice was obvious, but evidently Rory was still feeling torn.

“What was that sigh?” she asked her mother worriedly. “Did I miss something? Do you not agree with my scoring system? Because I need to know...” she panicked, grabbing at her papers.

“Honey, there’s nothing wrong with your lists, except for the fact that you obsessively made them all night and barely slept, of course,” she told her, running a hand over Rory’s head and messed-up hair. “But babe, don’t you think after all this, you should be able to make an informed decision?”

Rory looked from her papers to her mom’s face and back twice. She knew sticking with Dean was the easier choice, the smart choice. He hadn’t done anything wrong, he loved her, and she loved him too. It made sense to stay in a relationship that worked. Unfortunately, it wasn’t quite that simple. If a current relationship was really so awesome, there wouldn’t be any need for lists or kissing other guys. Rory wasn’t so dumb that she didn’t realise she was clearly more attracted to Jess than Dean right now, it was just that life would be easier if she wasn’t.
“Why can’t it be simple?” she asked her mother hopelessly. “Why can’t I just be with Dean, and love Dean, and not even think about another guy?”

“Well, because, life doesn’t quite work that way, hon,” Lorelai sympathised. “Now, I’m not saying you should dump Dean for Jess today, or at all necessarily. Like I told you before, it’s not my choice to make, that’s all yours, babe, but maybe now isn’t the time to make it. Maybe for now you just go to school, think about something else for a while, and the answer will come to you later.”

“Yeah, school will take my mind off things,” huffed Rory as she got up off the bed and headed for the bathroom. “With Jess right there? I don’t think so.”

“Sorry I can’t help you with that!” Lorelai called after her. “Unless you want me to go over to the Geller house and, I don’t know, introduce him to my little friend?” she suggested in a weird voice that was doubtless supposed to be a De Niro impression.

Rory laughed some and stuck her head back around the door.

“Might be a little drastic in the circumstances,” she considered.

“But it made you smile and that’s what Mommy really wanted.”

“Then good work.”

“Hey, how ‘bout after school you come hang out at the inn for a while?” Lorelai offered then as she went through to the kitchen. “I can take your lists with me, we can go through them together, work on that informed decision with clear heads and fresh eyes. Sound good?”

“Very good,” Rory nodded gratefully. “You’re getting ready early?” she noted then as Lorelai checked the contents of her purse on the kitchen table.

“Yes, Sookie and I have to swing by Weston’s before work this morning,” she grinned. “That property we were looking at for our inn? Turns out sweet old Fran is the owner.”

“Wow, that’s so crazy!” Rory gasped. “But I hope it works out for you.”

“Me too. Thanks, sweets,” she said with a smile. “Er, so I’m driving in with Sookie, means the car’s free if you want to run yourself to school?” she suggested, checking her watch. “Save on racing for that bus?”

Rory grinned and kissed her mother’s cheek.

“Thanks, Mom,” she said, before hurrying off to get ready for school.

Jess half expected the avoidance tactics. He didn’t like it much, but he certainly wasn’t surprised to find that everywhere he went, Rory was nowhere to be found. They had two classes together today, those she couldn’t get out of, or rather she wouldn’t dare to. Still, Rory did a real good impression of being blind to the fact Jess was even in the room for both those periods of time. At lunch, she just seemed to evaporate or something. Jess actually thought she might be hanging out in the girls bathroom the whole time just because it was the only place he couldn’t go looking.

Unfortunately, the only people he could really ask about Rory’s whereabouts were the same girls he refused to look weak in front of, namely Paris and her cronies. It would please his step-sister way too much to have him come begging for information on the whereabouts of Rory Gilmore. Paris already thought Jess was being used, and as much as he didn’t want to believe that, it was hard not to right
Loitering in the halls near Rory’s locker after class wasn’t a good look for him, but Jess figured she had to show eventually, exchange books or whatever before she headed home. She didn’t.

At the end of the day, after a good ten minutes of trying not to look obvious or desperate, he headed around the corner and down the hall for one last sweep of the library before he went home. Jess tried not to smirk when he came across Tristan DuGrey sat right outside the teacher’s lounge, clearly waiting to be torn off a strip by the head of some department or other.

“Doin’ a little overtime there, tough guy?” he said smartly.

“And here was me thinking that was the nickname you were going for,” Tristan smirked right back at him. “At least until you got so whipped by little Mary Gilmore.”

Jess stopped in his tracks, bristling at the insult to both himself and to Rory. He knew very well why some of the students in this school called her Mary, it was one of the oldest and lamest nicknames for the virginal type. Still, what Rory did with or without Jess was none of DuGrey’s business and he wasn’t taking that crap from him.

“What did you say to me?” he asked, turning to face Tristan again.

The blond laughed a little.

“You know she has a boyfriend right? See, the weird thing about Rory is, for all her innocent looks and everything, she has a little fire in her. She may keep her clothes on, but her lips have been known to stray here and there.”

Jess bit down on his lip before he said or did something stupid. It didn’t really matter if Paris had opened her big mouth, told a few people about the kiss Jess and Rory had shared. It certainly didn’t bother Jess himself and with the way she’d been acting today, it was hard to care if it bothered Rory at all either. After all, she had been the one to kiss him first, petty as that sounded. The problem was, Jess wasn’t so sure that was all DuGrey was talking about. The look on his face right now suggested something much worse. Jess wasn’t going to be able to walk away until he knew for sure. Stepping up toe to toe with Tristan, he folded his arms across his chest and met the other guy’s eyes, despite the fact there was a foot between them in height.

“Rory wouldn’t go near you with somebody else’s ten foot pole,” he said smartly.

“You’d love for that to be true, wouldn’t you?” Tristan grinned in such a way that made Jess want to punch him right in the face, even more so than any other expression would. “Truth is, Rory was putting the moves on me long before you got dragged up here from the big city gutter. I remember like it was yesterday. She tasted like strawberries...”

Jess grabbed Tristan by the shirt then and shoved him against the wall. Whether he was making this up or not, Jess couldn’t be absolutely sure, but either way, he didn’t want to hear it. If Rory did make a habit of cheating on her boyfriend with other guys, that only made Jess feel worse about what happened last night. Either way, he figured knocking Tristan into next Thursday might help his mood a lot.

“Mariano!” yelled a voice then, both guys turning to see Paris glaring at them. “What the hell are you trying to achieve?” she asked as she stormed towards them. “Apart from ruining my family’s name, obviously.”

“Always a pleasure, Paris,” Tristan smiled at her as Jess backed off.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t deal if they got into a real fight situation here, and Tristan didn’t doubt...
Mariano had the stones. Still, it was better not to have his face messed up, or give his father one more reason to talk about military school. He was skating on thin ice as it was.

Jess wasn’t happy about backing down from this, but Paris did have a point. If he socked DuGrey in the mouth, it’d make him happy for a little bit, but then it’d be one great round of yelling by Headmaster Charleston, Mr Geller, maybe Liz too. Rory wouldn’t be impressed, and there was every chance Tristan’s parents were the type to file assault charges. Jess knew when he was well off, and he would rather enjoy the comforts of the Geller household for as long as they lasted rather than be locked up in juvie.

“You’re not worth it,” he told Tristan before turning to walk away.

Paris yelled after him, but Jess never turned back. He had more important things to do than fight with her. If she wanted to drive home without him, she would, and Jess didn’t care at all right now. He was on his way to the bus stop, see if he could find Rory. It came as a surprise when she wasn’t there. The bus had only just pulled up so she should be there waiting. He doubled back to the parking lot, thinking maybe she was getting a ride with someone, maybe her mom was picking her up. He saw her putting her bag into the Jeep and hurried over there.

“Rory!” he called.

She looked up at him, clearly startled and wishing she could bolt, but he wasn’t going to let her this time. They needed to talk about what happened, not least now Jess had heard from Tristan that it wasn’t necessarily the first time.

“Jess, I have to go,” she insisted, moving to get into the car, but he closed the door before she had a chance.

“Why have you been avoiding me all day?” he asked her, trying to meet her eyes but she evaded every time.

“I haven’t.”

“Bull. C’mon, Rory, I’m not stupid. I know you’ve been avoiding me. Why?”

“You know why,” she said sharply, aware that she had got the attention of a few students milling around the parking lot and lowering her tone then. “Jess, what happened at your house... It wasn’t supposed to,” she said desperately. “And I’m sorry if I gave you the impression that I... that we were... I have a boyfriend,” she said at last.

“I’m aware of that,” he countered. “I also know that last night you didn’t seem to be thinking too much about good old Dean when you jumped me on the terrace.”

“I did not jump you!” she protested, once again moderating her volume when she realised other people could hear. “Jess, I just had this moment of madness or something, I don’t know.”

“Really? Well, isn’t that flattering?”

“I don’t mean to be unflattering,” she sighed. “I only meant that I don’t make a habit of kissing guys like that.”

“Not what I heard,” he told her, knowing from the way she looked at him then she had to know what he meant. “Seems to me it might just be a habit of yours, at least if a certain blond dick named DuGrey knows what the truth is.”
“You talked to Tristan about me?” Rory squeaked, feeling sick.

“More like he talked to me, smirking all the way as he filled me in on what a fool I am for thinking you’re anything but a user,” said Jess. “Funny but Paris actually tried to warn me too. She may be a crackpot a whole lot of the time, but she seemed to have you pegged from the start.”

“I am not a user!” said Rory crossly. “You know I’m not.”

“Do I?” countered Jess, shrugging his shoulders. “These people have known you a lot longer than I have, and hey, even if I discounted everything they said, I have my own evidence to go on. You’re only interested in hanging around with me when something better isn’t available, like your wonderful boyfriend. You kiss me, and then you run out like a cat with your tail on fire, only to avoid me all day at school, and then when I actually try to talk to you, you tell me that our getting close was a moment of insanity? Wow, Rory, don’t I feel special?”

With that he turned and walked away. Rory yelled after him, but Jess didn’t turn back. Putting a hand to her aching head, Rory let out a long sigh, wishing she knew what to do to fix any of this. Knowing she didn’t, she got in the car and headed over to the inn. Maybe her mom would have some good advice, but quite honestly, after that particular confrontation with Jess, Rory highly doubted that she had to choose between the two guys in her life anymore. The decision had been made for her.

Luke was cleaning down the counter and generally tidying up before the next wave of customers hit. The diner was in it’s usual sporadic pattern of custom that occurred when the kids got out of school and then people started finishing work for the day. Patrons came in bunches and in-between there was enough of a lull Luke could do the odd jobs around the place like refilling salt cellars and cleaning up spills. He certainly wasn’t expecting anybody in particular to come visit until the bell got his attention and he looked up to see his nephew walk in.

“Jess,” he said with some surprise. “Hey, it’s good to see you.”

“Yeah,” he nodded in response as his eyes scanned the whole room on his way over to the counter. “Er, can I get a Coke or something?”

“Sure, whatever you want,” Luke smiled getting Jess his drink. “Er, if you’re hungry...”

“I’m not,” he shook his head. “But thanks,” he added as an afterthought.

Jess wasn’t especially used to being very polite to those around him. He had scant respect for the adults in his life, and for good reason when it came to his mother and her many boyfriends and husbands. Mr Geller was okay, but he hardly spent a whole lot of time in Jess’ company. They were civil, polite, he supposed, but that was about it. Luke was different, he seemed like a decent person and all, it was just that Jess didn’t know him all that well. They had spent no time together when either Liz or Rory wasn’t around. One or the other seemed to command attention in their own ways and therefore Jess and Luke had never really talked.

“So, you just got out of school, huh?” said his uncle, clearly hoping now was going to be when they had their first big conversation.

“Well, it’s not Halloween, so...” he said, gesturing to his uniform, before looking up and seeing Luke’s unimpressed expression. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“It’s fine. I guess I did ask a pretty stupid question,” admitted his uncle, and then the uncomfortable silence returned.
The door opened after a few moments and Jess turned sharply to see who had come in. It was just some little old lady, not at all the person he was looking for. Luke noticed his movement towards the door and the disappointment in his eyes a few moments later when he turned back to his Coke.

“I don’t know if she’s coming in today,” said Luke, getting Jess’ full attention.

“Who?” he asked, feigning innocence, but his uncle wasn’t buying.

“I know you and me don’t know each other all that well yet, Jess, but c’mon. You really think I don’t see that look on your face when you’re with Rory?”

Jess looked away, made a big deal of drinking his soda. He didn’t like being so easily read. On the other hand, he supposed it didn’t matter all that much if Luke knew he liked Rory. Hell, it might even help to get the guy’s perspective. He was supposed to have known the Gilmore’s quite a while.

“How long have you known Rory anyway?” he asked then.

“Geez, I don’t know,” Luke considered, adjusting his hat before leaning his elbows on the counter near to Jess. “Since she was around eleven, I guess? Weird, isn’t it? That I know her better than I know you when you’re the one I’m actually related to.”

“Yeah,” Jess nodded his agreement, watching the bubbles in his Coke rise to the top. “She been dating the boyfriend long?”

“Around a year, off and on,” Luke told him. “They had some misunderstanding last year, broke up for a while, and then got back together. I don’t know all the details, not my place to ask. Personally, I’m not a huge fan of the kid, but hey, it’s none of my business.”

“Apparently it’s none of mine either,” muttered Jess, sipping his drink. “It’s so stupid, me thinking we were friends or whatever. Like you can make friends with a woman. They’re all nuts.”

Luke opened his mouth to argue and then closed it again fast. The kid had a point, and it was never clearer to Luke than right now. That wholespeech he got from Lorelai the other day after the Booster Club fashion show sure came off pretty crazy. Not that Lorelai wasn’t always a little on the cracked side of the line, but she sure went into over-drive when she got jealous. Luke didn’t hate knowing she cared who he spoke to when it came to other women, though she never seemed willing to do anything about it. He knew he couldn’t judge, since he never made a move either. Of course, this was not the right topic for now when Jess was here, talking about Rory, staring into his soda like he hoped to find the answer to all his problems in the bottom of the glass.

“Y’know, Jess, sometimes people are complicated, and it’s not just women either,” he assured him. “And when you’re a teenager...”

“Oh, please! Spare me the hormones and ‘special feelings’ speech,” he urged his uncle. “I’m not stupid. I know how girls are, believe me, but Rory... I thought she was different. Turns out not as different as she seemed.”

Luke didn’t know what to say to that. Rory certainly was different to a lot of girls her age. She was smarter for one thing, somewhat more sensible, in Luke’s opinion, and a lot less likely to screw anybody over. That didn’t mean she and Jess hadn’t got into a fight or that they hadn’t managed to upset each other somehow. Jess liked Rory and whilst she probably liked him too, she was dating Dean. That made for complications, especially when those involved were teenagers.

Right on time, the diner door opened one more time and in came the very girl they had been talking about.

“Hey, look who we brought!” she grinned back at him, stepping aside to reveal a familiar face that Luke hadn’t seen in way too long.

“Mia!” he gasped, hurrying around the counter to greet her with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Lucas!” she greeted him happily, complimenting him on how well he looked and the state of the diner.

Jess was barely paying attention as he looked right past his uncle and the unknown older woman to where Rory and Lorelai were hovering. Both looked as awkward as each other if such a thing were possible. Given how close Rory always said she was to her mother, there was no doubting Lorelai was aware of everything that had happened last night at the Geller house and then today at school. Jess had come here hoping to make some peace, but now he saw her again, he wasn’t so sure that was the best thing for him and Rory. Maybe it was better to let her be, let this friendship of theirs just fade out before it got even more complicated.

“Hey, come meet my nephew,” said Luke then. “Mia, this is Liz’s son, Jess. Jess, this is Mia, she owns the Independence Inn, knew me and your mom when we were growing up.”

“Huh,” Jess nodded once.


Mia seemed unphased, but Jess wasn’t hanging around for any more of this charade. Hopping down from his stool, he threw a couple of bucks on the counter and looked at Luke.

“Thanks for the soda, but I’m out.”

With that he was gone, brushing past Rory before she could say a word. Lorelai looked to her daughter and hated the pain she saw on her face.

“Was it something I said?” asked Mia, a good joke since she hadn’t spoken at all to Jess.

“No, it’s not you, Mia,” said Rory sadly. “It’s me.”

“Well then I think us girls need coffee and cake please, Lucas,” she advised him. “And then Rory can tell me all about it.”

Rory smiled some at the offer and at the way her mom put an arm around her shoulders, kissing the top of the head. Maybe it would do her good to talk about all this some more, get both her mother and Mia’s opinions on what happened. Still, she doubted it would really fix anything. Unless she could go back in time, she couldn’t change the fact she had kissed Jess whilst still dating Dean, or that she had kissed Tristan last year. She couldn’t take back actions taken or words said. There was only the opportunity to move forward. That would be a whole lot easier, Rory thought, if she had a clue in what direction she was headed!
Chapter 12

Dean knew there was something wrong when he realised he was doing more talking in this conversation than Rory was. Sure, they were eating breakfast, but that didn’t usually stop his girlfriend from rambling, which he found adorable. Additionally, she wasn’t exactly eating much either. Something just wasn’t right.

“You’re quiet today,” he said, concern all over his face.

Rory glanced up from pushing her eggs around the plate and realised she had barely been listening at all.

“I am? I’m sorry,” she apologised.

“It’s fine,” Dean assured her. “I was just wondering if you were okay. Not to say you talk too much, because trust me, I enjoy a good Gilmore ramble, but you’re usually a little more Chatty Kathy than Debbie Downer. Is something wrong?”

“No,” said Rory immediately. “Or yes,” she amended just as fast. “I don’t know. School is just... There’s a lot going on lately. My head is busy, I guess, but I should be concentrating on you, on us,” she said definitely, dumping down her fork and reaching to grip Dean’s hand under hers.

“Sounds good,” he smiled, leaning over the table to kiss her briefly. “So, I was thinking about this weekend...”

Despite what she said, Rory still wasn’t listening even now. She hadn’t lied about school, because it was pretty crazy lately. She was busy a lot with studying and the Franklin too. Though this was only Junior year, Rory had to be thinking about college all the time, doing everything she could to be the best candidate for Harvard. Of course, all of this stuff wasn’t really what was on her mind.

It was almost a week now since the dinner at the Geller house, and then the blow out between Rory and Jess the next day in school. Even now, Paris was barely talking to her (again!) and neither was Jess.

Rory couldn’t blame them. Her behaviour had been less than stellar, what with the kissing of another guy when dating Dean, and then acting like it was a big mistake. It was an error in judgement to cheat on her boyfriend, Rory was sure on that, but she never wanted to make Jess feel bad. None of this was really his fault, well, not the kissing anyway. It was his fault he chose to get mean about it. She tried to apologise but all he did was snap and snarl, bringing up Rory’s infamous kiss with Tristan that she hoped nobody ever spoke of again. The truth was, rumours were rife at Chilton these days, and Rory’s name was the one most mentioned. People were talking about her and Jess, speculating on what had happened with them, why they had gone from good friends to barely speaking. Rumours were afoot about that, as well as talk of her Rory’s kiss with Tristan resurfacing. Above all, Rory seemed to be getting a rep for messing around with bad boys.

Jess and Tristan both seemed to be getting into a lot of trouble lately, both separately and together. It hadn’t come to physical fighting, but their less than pleasant verbal sparring had gotten unwanted attention. Jess was just being an ass mostly, talking back to teachers, not bothering with his homework. Tristan was going for the bigger stunts, like taking apart a faculty member’s car and putting it back together around the flag pole. Of the two, he was actually going to end up in more trouble at this point, which seemed weird, but Rory knew it was true. Jess might get into some trouble, but it was easy for him to get out again if he just tried. Besides, the Gellers had pull at
Chilton. So did the DuGrey family, but Tristan’s dad was way more strict. If he kept on getting into trouble, he was going to get pulled out of Chilton Prep and dumped right into military school, at least that’s what Rory overheard Paris saying. If anyone knew what was going on with Tristan it was his biggest fan.

Rory looked at the eggs on her fork and forced herself to eat them. She nodded and smiled at what Dean was saying, hoping the gesture was in the right place in the conversation. Not that it was really a conversation when only one person was talking and the other was barely listening. Rory knew she should pay more attention and be a better girlfriend. As if she hadn’t done enough already, cheating on Dean by kissing Jess, plus kissing Tristan the same day she and Dean briefly broke up last year. He didn’t know about either of those things, and a part of Rory thought he deserved to. The other, larger part was too afraid to mention it and ruin everything.

“So what do you think?” Dean asked then.

“Um, sounds good,” answered Rory, though she had absolutely no clue what she was agreeing to, she was just relieved to realise that was the right answer to the question when her boyfriend grinned big.

“Great, then I’ll get the tickets,” he told her. “Okay, I have to go, but I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said, getting up and leaning over the table to kiss her cheek.

Rory turned to watch him leave, and forced a smile when she saw him pass Lane in the diner doorway. Immediately her best friend knew the expression wasn’t genuine.

“You don’t look so happy,” she noted, taking Dean’s empty seat.

“Very perceptive,” replied Rory, dropping her fork again so it clattered against the plate too loudly. “I don’t know what’s the matter with me,” she lamented, holding her head in her hands a moment. “I just feel like everything is so messed up lately.”

“The whole Jess thing, huh?” said Lane with some sympathy, stealing a piece of pancake from the edge of Rory’s plate.

They had talked about it before, the whole situation with Rory and the guys in her life, specifically how things had gone south with Jess since the kissing incident. Rory had everybody’s opinion at this point - Mia, her mom, Lane - it didn’t really help because there didn’t seem to be any good solution to her predicament. Rory loved Dean but she’d cheated on him once, maybe twice depending on a person’s perspective. She really liked Jess, but he was always in trouble lately and he wasn’t even talking to her right now.

“I think I really messed up, Lane,” she sighed. “Part of me thinks I should make an effort to fix things with Jess, but I don’t want to give him the wrong idea again. Part of me also thinks I should tell Dean what happened, because honesty is important in a relationship, but Mom says there’s really no point if it was a mistake.”

“Maybe she’s right,” Lane considered. “Unless you think it wasn’t a mistake?”

“Lane!”

“I’m just saying!” she declared, hands raised in mock surrender the moment Rory looked scandalised. “You do talk about Jess an awful lot, or you did before things got crazy and he kinda cut you off. That has to mean something, right?”

“He’s my friend,” said Rory defensively. “I also talk about you.”
“Yes, but that’s different,” her friend insisted. “As much as I believe in men and women having the ability to be friends and nothing more if that’s what they want, you and Jess... I don’t know, it just seemed different.”

“Why does everybody seem so fast to think I don’t love Dean anymore?” asked Rory sharply, though the almost-anger faded into sadness within a second.

“Rory, nobody is saying that,” Lane sighed, patting her arm comfortingly. “I know you love Dean, but that doesn’t mean you necessarily want to be with him forever, right?”

“Yes. Or no... I don’t know,” Rory shook her head sadly, wishing she had the right answer here but knowing for sure that she didn’t, that was just about all she was sure about right now. “Can we please talk about something else?”

“Sure,” said Lane with a smile then. “We could go over to your house? Play the new Ash album that I managed to smuggle into the house but didn’t get a chance to listen to yet?” she said with delight in her eyes as she pulled the CD from inside her jacket and waved it in Rory’s face.

It was good to see her best friend smile genuinely back at her as a result.

“Sounds great.”

Paris was on her way back from the kitchen to her room with a snack from Nanny when Liz called to her from the living room. She had one foot on the bottom step of the stairs and Paris really considered pretending she hadn’t heard her step-mother speak and just run up the stairs before she could try a second time to get her attention. Unfortunately, she had flinched when her name was called, making it obvious she had heard. There was no getting away now, and so she turned around to face Liz when she came rushing towards her.

“Paris, honey, I’m glad I caught you,” she grinned all over her face.

“I’m on my way back to my room,” said Paris pointedly. “I have a pile of homework and studying to do, articles to edit for the paper, truly hours of work. I really don’t have time for whatever slumber party topic you want to discuss.”

“It’s nothing like that, Paris,” said Liz, still smiling and apparently unaffected by her step-daughter’s acid tongue. “I just... I wanted you to have this,” she admitted at last, holding out a small item on one hand for Paris to see.

“What is it?” she asked, making a face.

“Well, what does it look like?” Liz laughed lightly. “It’s a bracelet.”

Paris wasn’t sure what to make of the supposed gift. She continued to eye the beaded piece lying there in the older woman’s palm, making no attempt to pick it up or anything. somehow this felt like a trap or a mistake or something. This woman couldn’t really be giving her gift, that would be too strange.

“I don’t wear much in the way of jewellery,” she said, looking sideways at Liz.

“I know,” she agreed with a nod of her head. “That’s why I made it kinda plain... or understated, I guess, would be the word. I thought it’d suit your style,” she explained, “but if you don’t like it, that’s cool.”
Paris chose that moment to take the bracelet from Liz’s hand for a closer look. After all, it was about to be taken away and she at least wanted to chance to inspect the goods so she could make an informed decision before absolutely deciding against.

“It’s not my birthday or anything,” she told Liz, in case she didn’t know.

“Doesn’t have to be a special occasion for a step-mother to make her step-daughter a gift, does it?” she asked in reply, clearly just trying to be nice.

That was weird for Paris to realise. She turned the bracelet over in her hands, made up of varying shades of blue beads, some very pale almost white, others much darker, with all manner of other shades in-between. It really was pretty and almost definitely hand-made, as Liz had just implied.

“And you made this? For me?” she double-checked.

Liz openly laughed at Paris’ terrible confusion and apparent inability to accept a gift.

“Yeah! I always liked designing things, but I’m not all that great with clothes because the whole sewing thing…” she waved away the very thought of it. “That’s not my area of expertise, but jewellery? That seems to work for me. I’m thinking of making a few samples, seeing if I can get them into local stores and all, but for now, well, I thought you’d like this one.”

Paris had wide eyes as she looked between the bracelet and Liz a moment, trying to figure out how this had happened. She really hadn’t been all that nice to her step-mother since she and Jess moved into the house. Paris had her reasons, chief among them was that the Marianos were not in the same social class as the Gellars by a considerable amount. Liz was loud and brash, but she did seem to love Paris’ father, doting on him when he was home, and almost pining for him when he wasn’t around. She was always pretty nice to Paris too, never trying too hard to be a mother, but just doing her best. She drank more than a person should but then so did Paris’ mother. Maybe she should cut Liz some slack, Paris thought, especially now she had made her a gift like this.

“Thanks,” she said eventually with a small smile.

“You’re welcome, sweetie,” replied Liz, patting her shoulder lightly and then heading back to the living room from whence she came.

Paris couldn’t help the smile that was still playing at her lips as she pulled the bracelet on over her hand, moving her arm just enough that the light caught on the pretty beads. She hurried up the stairs then, remembering all the work she should’ve been doing. She ran into Jess as he came out of the bathroom, heading for his own room.

“You look awful,” she said flatly, meaning every syllable.

“Thanks a lot,” he smirked as he often did at her frankness.

He was at his door about to go in before she spoke again.

“Jess?”

“What?” he asked, looking back at her when she didn’t answer for a long time.

“Your mom gave me a bracelet,” she said, as if she didn’t understand the concept she spoke of, even as she showed him the beaded band at her wrist.

“Congratulations,” he dead-panned, turning back to the door, but still not allowed to pass through it
apparently without further discussion.

“You do realise that hiding in your room, slamming doors, and being a pain in the ass to every teacher in school isn’t helping anybody?” said Paris sharply. “Rory isn’t going to magically dump the jolly green giant for you just because you decide to act like an idiot.”

Jess bit his lip a moment, seriously considering just ignoring his step-sister’s pointless ranting. He could just keep walking into his bedroom, slamming the door behind him just to make a point, but somehow fighting back just suited him better.

“Did I ask for your opinion?” he asked, rounding on her angrily. “Because I’m pretty sure I’d remember signing off on the required lobotomy.”

“You’re not the only person ever to have feelings, you know?!” she yelled right back, clearly not meaning to let out that much emotion from the look on her face the second it was done.

Jess knew what her problem was. She had been acting extra wacko since Tristan started getting himself into deeper trouble than usual, and she did say once that Rory was her rival in love as well as academia when they first met. In a calmer tone, he broached that particular subject.

“You got a thing for DuGrey, right?”

“A thing?” she echoed, looking pained by the wording somehow. “No, I do not have a thing. I’ve just... I’ve just been in love with him since he kissed me on a dare in sixth grade, that’s all.”

She seemed to crumple a little when the admission was out there. Jess had to wonder how many people had really ever seen the great Paris Geller falter. Probably not many, but perhaps he ought to have known that living with her would make him one of the privileged few before long. It should feel good, to see her in any way down-trodden, but honestly, Jess wasn’t all that heartless. He liked to make Paris mad because it was funny to see her blow a fuse, but this was different. This was pain, and that Jess understood.

“Guys like Tristan... they’re idiots,” he said, hoping to be comforting and helpful in some way - it didn’t work.

“And what are you? Einstein?” Paris snapped.

“Hey, at least I have some self-respect,” he snapped right back at her. “Rory may have used me, but I didn’t just let it happen. If Tristan snapped his fingers, you’d go running, no matter the cost.”

Paris opened her mouth to call Jess a liar, but his expression was a challenge she couldn’t rise to. He was right and they both knew it.

“Maybe,” she admitted at last. “But can you honestly say you wouldn’t for Rory?”

Jess knew she had a point there and the smirk was back in a second as he leant back against the wall, running a hand through his hair.

“I’m starting to think we have more in common that we thought, sis,” he said with a sigh.

“Doubtful,” she snorted ungracefully, but there was a smile that came with it as she echoed his stance against the opposite wall. “I guess you could say we’re both survivors anyway.”

“Hey, I am not singing Gloria Gaynor with you,” he said, pointing a finger at her.
“Yeah, ‘cause that’s what I was hoping for,” replied Paris, rolling her eyes.

As much as they were still bickering in a way, there was an understanding here now. Neither one of them was exactly doing so good or feeling so great. Normal well-adjusted teens didn’t spend a perfectly good Saturday in their respective bedrooms feeling sorry for themselves, and both had to admit, if only to themselves, that that’s what they were doing.

"You need notes for the biology class you daydreamed through yesterday?” asked Paris, the smallest of olive branches apparently.

“Hey, that wasn’t daydreaming, that was extracurricular study,” Jess countered anyway. “You ever read 'Islands in the Stream’?”

“No.”

Jess ducked into his room and out again in a second, tossing a book into Paris’ hands. She barely caught it since she was already holding a plate with two large sandwiches on it. Awkwardly she opened up the book a little and frowned as she flipped the pages.

“There’s more of your writing in here than Hemingway’s own,” she declared.

Unsurprisingly, Jess was smirking when she looked up then.

“You’re welcome,” he told her, smiling more genuinely when she held out her plate to him so he could take half her snack.

As they went their separate ways at last, at least Paris and Jess were both smiling and not feeling quite so alone.
Chapter 13

The only topic of conversation at Chilton Prep this morning seemed to be Tristan DuGrey. Everywhere Rory went, people were talking about his absence and how it had come to be. Some said he was suspended again, others spoke of expulsion. A few knew the whole truth and quickly spread it around like all good gossip is usually spread.

It was well-known amongst certain circles that if Tristan continued to get into trouble, Headmaster Charleston was not going to need to expel him from the school. Mr DuGrey had warned his son more than once that military school was going to be his future if he didn’t quit pulling pranks and acting out. Last night, he made the ultimate mistake, going way too far when he and his buddies decided to break into Bowman’s father’s safe. That was it, the end of the line. Tristan was caught and removed from Chilton, then Connecticut altogether, before he could blink.

Rory almost felt sorry for the guy in some ways. Tristan wasn’t all bad. Kind of an ass most of the time, but she knew better than most how that behaviour was just a cover for pain and misunderstanding. He was similar to Jess that way, letting out his pain and frustration with the world in bad behaviour that neither could really explain the true reason for, Rory was certain. On the other hand, they both ought to know better than not to heed a warning. Tristan’s father had been threatening him with the military school thing for a while and still he continued to be an idiot. In that respect, he got what he deserved.

Jess was still getting into trouble around school, but nothing so bad that he ought to get suspended or kicked out altogether. Rory could hear Paris talking on and on to her friends about Tristan, only for Louise to ask where the other hottie was at anyway.

“I don’t even want to think about who you mean by that,” said Paris sharply.

“Jess, obviously!” Madeline explained, clearly missing the fact that her friend already knew that and just didn’t want to hear her pain-in-the-ass step-brother described in those terms.

Rory listened all the harder when she heard her friend’s name come up. Not that she and Jess were really friends any more. They hadn’t spoken since their fight in the parking lot last week, and though it had occurred to her to try and heal the breach, Rory always told herself it was Jess’ place to make the first move and so far he hadn’t.

“I couldn’t care less where Jess is at this point in time,” Paris huffed.

Nobody knew that she was putting on an act right now. She didn’t really hate her step-brother as much as she made out. Maybe in the beginning, but not now. His falling out with Rory had changed him, made him worse behaved in school and a whole lot mopier at home. With Paris feeling no small amount of heartbreak over Tristan’s self-destruction and ultimate disappearance, they had kind of been each others friend in need, though nobody at Chilton would ever have guessed. In public, they were all about the barely-concealed animosity. Only behind the closed doors of the Geller house did they allow themselves to get along. Even then, they didn’t talk much, but it was kind of nice to know there was someone just across the hall that knew how Paris was feeling, and she figured Jess felt much the same.

“Settle down, class,” said the teacher, calling order then. “This is English, not a rave!”

Rory set her attention to the front of the room and all that Miss Jones was saying about Shakespeare. Studying Romeo and Juliet was interesting enough, and gave Rory an excuse to watch all possible
movie adaptations with her mother. They had so much fun mocking the traditional costumes of the old Zefferelli version and the over-done acting of Leo DiCaprio and his cast-mates in the more modern take on a classic. It was almost a shame that their time studying one of the Bard’s finest tragedies was almost over.

“And so, to complete our study of Romeo and Juliet, something a little different,” the teacher smiled. “Shakespeare’s plays were not written to be studied or even to be read. He had in mind always that they be performed, experienced in the fullest sense by actors taking on these iconic roles,” she explained. “And so, you will be split into five groups, each taking a different act of the play to perform a week from Sunday. You will nominate the director, you will cast the scene, rehearse the scene, and interpret the scene in your own individual manner.”

She went on to explain all the many and various ways her previous classes had chosen to interpret scenes from Richard III.

“And if the love of the Bard’s language still doesn’t inspire you,” she continued, “remember this will be fifty percent of your final grade. Okay, now let’s see,” said Miss Jones, walking between the rows of desks. “You five here, Act One,” she assigned to the students farthest from Rory. “Act Two, Three, Four,” she continued across the room. “And over here, Act Five,” she declared, encompassing Rory, Paris, Louise, and Madeline in her final gesture.”

“Great,” muttered Rory under breath.

Working with Paris, who was still barely speaking to her, and two girls that Paris herself had once dubbed the Banger Sisters was not going to be fun, especially since they were going to have to perform the death scene from Romeo and Juliet together. Everybody would want to be Juliet and nobody Romeo. Rory was pretty sure there would be a scandal if two of the girls kissed anyway, so she wondered at the teacher’s thought process in making up the groups.

“Oh, of course you’ll need some male input,” she said to the four girls then, apparently having read Rory’s mind or something. “Our absentee, Jess Mariano, will join your group,” she smiled easily.

Rory and Paris shared an awkward look. Now neither of them wanted to be Juliet, not at all!

“We’re not debating this!” said Paris definitely, glaring at every member of the group around the table.

It was the day after they had been given their English assignment, the first meeting in which they were supposed to organise how and what they were going to do. Paris had taken no thoughts from anyone else but showed up to said meeting complete with a figurative director’s hat and literal swords.

“We’re doing traditional Elizabethan, and Rory is playing Juliet,” she said definitely, even as Louise gasped.

“Um, hello?” she said with her hand raised in voluntary fashion.

“Seriously? You as Juliet?” Paris scoffed. “She’s supposed to be chaste, and she has more than three lines,” she added quickly when Madeline opened her mouth to be the next volunteer.

“Point taken,” she muttered, going back to filing her nails.

“So, Louise will be the Friar,” Paris continued in full flow, “and obviously Romeo is going to have to be...”
“I miss anything?” asked Jess in full smirk mode as he appeared behind his step-sister.

“You’re late,” she snapped at him.

“Good thing I can’t be pregnant,” he quipped, pulling up the chair next to Rory and spinning it around so he could straddle the back as he sat down.

“Well, that answers the question ‘Where for art thou, Romeo?’” said Louise with a grin.

“Oh yeah,” Madeline sighed happily as she gazed across the table.

Honestly, as flattering as the attention ought to be, Jess could do without it. He seriously had nowhere to look right now with Laverne and Shirley making eyes at him, Paris glaring, and Rory right there next to him. They really hadn’t talked at all since their blow out in the parking lot last week, both seemingly waiting for the other to go first. It hadn’t happened yet, but being flung together in this English assignment would no doubt make it necessary, especially since Paris told him last night that he was going to be playing Romeo to Rory’s Juliet.

“Oh, okay, Romeo, Juliet.” Paris gestured to one and then the other. “No arguments,” she insisted when Rory opened her mouth to try. “Come on, what is your problem? You’re fine with public speaking, for the most part you just have to lie there and play dead anyway, and we already know you won’t have any problem with the kissing.”

Louise snorted with laughter at that. Paris really had some stones and took no prisoners a not small part of the time. Rumours had been rife about Rory and Jess from the get go, and more so recently. Whether anything had happened or not, nobody seemed to know for sure, but Rory sure was blushing a lot right now for an innocent.

“Did we start the rehearsals early, kids?” Louise asked them, running her tongue along her teeth.

“Shouldn’t you be down at the docks waiting for the fleet to come in?” asked Jess acidly, but Louise just kept on smiling.

“Beats being here doing this.”

“There are no docks in Hartford,” Madeline frowned.

Paris slammed her hand against the table.

“Focus, people!” she insisted, calling the meeting to order. “We have a lot of work to do here, lines to learn, staging to figure out. I am not settling for anything less than an A in this assignment so I need everybody’s full attention and best input.”

“Yes, sir,” Jess saluted her with the pages of script she had tossed in his direction moments before.

“I’m serious, Jess,” she warned him with a look. “This really matters, you cannot screw it up.”

He knew she wasn’t threatening him right now as much as asking for his help. It would be hard for anyone else to see it, maybe Rory could tell if she was paying attention, but Jess had kind of made a study of his step-sister these past couple of months. She came off like a pit bull much of the time, but she did have feelings, he’d seen evidence of that. Honestly, he was getting a little tired of being a wise ass around school anyway. His grades were dropping and detention was getting very boring since the teacher figured out he actually enjoyed being left alone in solitude to read and banned him from having any books in there that weren’t for a class.
“You want me to learn this? I’ll learn it,” he shrugged. “But I’m not an actor, so don’t blame me if it sucks.”

“Best effort is all I ask,” said Paris with a hint of a grateful smile.

“That’s a first,” said Madeline softly and the meeting continued.

It went on for an hour, by which time they had gotten nowhere fast since it mostly consisted of Paris laying down rules and such. When they were finally permitted to leave, Jess was first out the door. Knowing now that she had to be the first to offer an olive branch here, Rory gave chase and called to him before he could disappear from her sight again.

“Wow, you mean I’m not invisible?” said Jess in an overly sarcastic tone as he turned to face her. “Huh. Thought I felt different today.”

“Jess, please,” she urged him. “Don’t be that way. It’s not like you’ve made any real effort to talk to me either.”

His eyes went to the floor at that remark, because he knew she was right and that didn’t sit well with him at all. It hadn’t been easy staying away from Rory but he felt as if he had to. She made him feel stupid, pretty much used him as far as he could tell, and that he wouldn’t stand for. Then there was the fact that any new conversation they had should start with him apologising for yelling at her. That wasn’t cool, even if she had done him wrong. At the same moment they both opened their mouths to speak and apologised in unison, making themselves laugh a little.

“I am sorry, Jess,” Rory repeated then. “For... for making things complicated, I guess? I should never have... What happened with us should not have happened but I really still wanted us to be friends.”

“Yeah, well. I’m sorry I yelled like I did,” he admitted. “I mean, you didn’t exactly make me feel great about myself, but it is what it is, you, me. Friends was working, I guess,” he admitted, even though it hurt inside to say so.

It was worth it for the bright smile that appeared on Rory’s smile then.

“So, Romeo and Juliet, Act Five,” she said, that same smile starting to slip. “A little awkward.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “The boyfriend’s not gonna like it much, assuming the boyfriend is still...”

“He’s still,” she confirmed, nodding her head and looking anywhere but at Jess for a moment. “But it’ll be fine. It’s only acting, right?”

“Right,” Jess agreed, but the intensity of his eyes as he looked at her meant Rory couldn’t bear to meet his gaze.

“I just... Well, I know you probably weren’t planning on it, and there are other people who know anyway, or think they do but... See, my point is, I can make it okay with Dean that you and me are acting together and that’s fine, but if he ever found out that there was a real kiss before the acting kiss...”

“He won’t hear it from me,” said Jess definitely.

Rory looked up so fast she almost made herself dizzy, and almost smacked Jess in the jaw with her forehead since he leaned in so close to speak to her. It wasn’t that she expected him to be a jerk and ruin her relationship, but she had really screwed him around and most people would be looking for at least a little revenge.
“Thank you,” she said with a sigh of relief. “Really, Jess. Thank you for being so cool about this.”

“Hey, I’m Frank at the Sands,” he told her with a smirk. “See you at rehearsals, Juliet,” he said then, turning to walk away.

Rory was still smiling long after Jess disappeared around the corner. This had gone somewhat better than she anticipated, and that was very much a good thing.
Chapter 14

Rory was already sat at a table in Luke’s diner when her mother came bustling in, loud and cheerful as ever. Rory wasn’t feeling either loud or cheerful, she just wanted to eat her burger and pretend the world didn’t exist for twenty minutes. Lorelai probably wouldn’t allow that, because doubtless her first question would be about how rehearsals went. Rory decided against letting that happen.

“How was your date?” she asked before Lorelai’s butt had barely hit the vinyl seat beside her.

“It was... good,” she said awkwardly, trying to steal fries from the edge of Rory’s plate until she got her hand slapped for her trouble. “Rory! You would deny your mother a fry?”

“My mother who already ate dinner with her date whilst I worked hard on Shakespeare and starved? Yes, I would,” she said definitely, taking a bite of her burger.

“Scandalous child!” Lorelai countered. “Luke! Can I get a burger and fries please?” she called across to the counter then, waving her arm for good measure. “Oh, and coffee!”

“Keep your pants on!” he yelled back at her, at which Lorelai poked out her tongue, obviously.

“So, the date was good?” Rory checked with her mom the moment she had her attention back, shooting her a warning look when she tried for another fry.

“Good? Yes,” she confirmed, clasping her hands together so she wouldn’t be tempted to steal food again. “Awesome and fantastic? Nope.”

“So, I’m not going to be calling Paul ‘Daddy’ any time soon?” said Rory with a hint of a smirk.

“That would be a no,” Lorelai confirmed. “And more to the point, neither am I.”

“Eew, eating here!” her daughter complained, dumping down her burger in disgust.

Immediately, Lorelai grabbed for the plate but Rory pulled it back just as fast, glaring at her mother.

“Seriously? That was low. Making me gag with parental sex talk so you could steal my food!”

“If there’s sex talk, take it outside,” Luke warned as he appeared at the table with Lorelai’s order.

“We promise to be good,” whined Lorelai, reaching for her food and moreover her coffee.

Luke narrowed his eyes but then gave in and put her order down on the table in front of her. He shook his head at her impression of a grateful but yappy dog and walked away again. Lorelai took a huge bite out of her burger and made a sound that ought not to be heard outside of a newly-wed couples bedroom.

“So good!” she declared. “Ugh, Paul took me to one of those fancy places where the food looks beautiful but you wonder where the rest of it is after the first bite.”

“He does not know how to feed a Gilmore,” Rory shook her head sadly. “Poor under educated man.”

“Meh, he was nice enough, but we kind of ran out of things to talk about before the salad,” sighed Lorelai, chewing thoughtfully on a fry. “He’s just so... young. I mean, not young like you young, but too young for me. We have nothing in common. I quoted at least four movies from my era and he
didn't get any of the references, and that’s when it hit me, he wasn’t born when those moves came out!”

“Well, neither was I, but I get them,” considered Rory.

“But that’s ‘cause you’re just cool, and also, Momma’s little prodigy,” she grinned, patting Rory on the head until she laughed. “Speaking of educated, as we were thirty seconds ago,” she said then. “How was rehearsals for the Bard’s finest tragedy?”

Rory’s smile slid from her face the moment that question was asked. Honestly, when they were talking about her mom’s date, she could feel happy enough, but now she had to think about her own evening’s activities and that was not at all fun.

“Well, everybody showed up to rehearsal on time,” she smiled. “And that’s about the only positive thing to say.”

“That bad, huh?” Lorelai winced.

Rory sighed heavily.

“Not exactly,” she admitted. “I mean, on the upside, Dean still doesn’t know what happened. Y’know, with me and Jess at the Geller house,” she whispered.

“But does he know that you’re Juliet to Jess’ Romeo?” her mother checked.

“That he does,” Rory nodded.

Lorelai tried her best not to cringe as she asked; “And how did that go?”

Rory considered the question carefully.

“Okay-ish,” she said at length. “I had hoped to avoid it altogether but Jess decided he needed cigarettes and went over to Doose’s before I could stop him. He saw Dean, Dean asked why he was in Stars Hollow, and of course Jess just loved telling him.”

Lorelai wanted to sympathise in all of this, and she genuinely did in so many ways. The trouble was, it was hard not to think that all of this wasn’t at least a little bit Rory’s own fault. She had a chance to make her choice between Dean and Jess, and she chose to stick with her boyfriend, cutting Jess off at the knees. He took it badly, anybody would, and though the friendship had been patched up in its way, there was no doubting Jess was going to be bitter about the way things went down, anybody would be. The chance to mess with Dean was going to be too much to pass up, even if he did hurt Rory in the process. Playground rules always applied, and she hurt him first.

“Oh, babe,” Lorelai sighed, pulling her daughter into a one-armed hug around the table. “At least this big ol’ mess will be over next Sunday, right?”

“Next Sunday, yep,” Rory agreed, nodding her head. “That seems a very long way off right now,” she complained, picking up a fry and dropping it back onto her plate almost immediately after.

She wanted to eat, but at the same time she couldn’t stomach the thought. It hurt her to hurt those she cared about, and that included both Dean and Jess. It was just awful when they were facing off with each other outside Doose’s, and it had been a relief when Jess hadn’t told Dean about the kiss they shared. At the same time, Rory was weirdly disappointed. A part of her wanted the truth to come out, and in a way where she didn’t have to be the one to confess. That was selfish and stupid, and it would ruin everything with Dean, she knew that for sure. Still, the more time went on, the more
Rory realised that she had been that much happier since she and Jess patched things up, and only started stressing again when the two guys in her life came face to face. Maybe that ought to tell her something about where her true feelings lie, but Rory so didn't want have to face up to that right now. She had more important things to think about anyway, like getting through Act 5 of Romeo and Juliet, performing it in front of alumni, parents, and faculty members one week from now. Just one week. Rory took a deep breath and then a large bite of her burger, whilst her mom told her more details of tonight's mostly disastrous date. Just one week.

One Week Later...

It was Saturday again, and that meant last minute rehearsals for the Shakespeare performance on Sunday night. Paris had the whole day planned out for everybody. She paid Miss Patty extra to hire the studio for the full eight hours between nine and five, and everyone was to be in attendance, no arguments. Rory wasn’t thrilled about it but she wanted that A grade so she would do what she must. Madeline and Louise were not happy to have their primping time cut down to the barest minimum. Getting ready for dates was just exactly what a Saturday was for in their world.

“What about Jess? Does he mind giving up his weekend for Bard practice?” asked Lorelai as she and Rory enjoyed a quick coffee at the diner before mother had to get to the inn and daughter was due at rehearsals.

“I don’t know. He seems kind of indifferent to the whole thing,” she shrugged, though the smile on her lips gave her away as far as Lorelai was concerned.

This past week with the kids acting together for their English project, Rory had been happier, apart from those times when rehearsals were in the Hollow and there was a chance that Jess and Dean would run into each other. At those times she stressed some, but there was no doubting that her renewed friendship with Luke’s nephew was bringing Rory joy. Lorelai liked to see the happy, but once again it made her wonder why her baby girl couldn’t see that the obvious decision here was to dump the old guy and take up with the new one.

“So, I was thinking...” she began to say when suddenly they were interrupted.

“Oh my God, Lorelai!” gasped a voice, and both Gilmore girls turned to see who was there.

“Paul?” she checked, feeling totally bowled over by the fact he was in the diner.

Rory was confused. Paul was the guy her mom went out on a date with last week, but this couldn’t be him. He was so young. Way younger than she pictured. With the baseball cap and his parents in tow, he almost looked like he should have a skateboard and an ice cream cone and appear on the cover of an Archie comic or similar.

“You must be Luke!” Paul gasped next, reaching out to shake hands with him.

Rory watched the whole thing with barely concealed amusement, even as her mom looked like she wished the floor would open up and swallow her. After five minutes or so, Paul and his parents left again and Rory excused herself to go to her rehearsal before she got herself into further trouble with her mom.

“You better run!” Lorelai called after her, only half joking, before turning back to the counter and dropping her face into her hands. “Well, that was mortifying.”

“You’re telling me,” muttered Luke and she immediately looked up at him. “C’mon, Lorelai, what
were you trying to prove with that guy?” he asked her as she gazed at him in confusion. “That you can still pull the younger man? I got news, I think he only got out of short pants last Thursday. Jess looks more mature than that!”

“Hey, Paul looked older in Business class,” she argued. “At least I thought he did,” she considered. “Oh, Luke, what is wrong with me?” she cried in desperation, running her hands back through her hair. “Why do I attract all the wrong guys? Why can’t I just be asked out by a nice guy of a suitable age who I can just get along with and have a great time with? Is that so hard?”

Her eyes returned to his and Luke felt as if he was stuck to the spot by her gaze. He could answer those questions for her. He could solve everything if he just opened his mouth and asked her out on a date already. It almost seemed as if that was what she wanted. It was definitely what Luke wanted, and Liz had been fast enough to encourage it. Just when he thought he had gathered the courage, Lorelai glanced away, distracted as she was by the ringing sound emanating from her purse.

“Oh, crap!” she muttered, taking the call and heading outside before Luke yelled at her about his no cell phone policy.

The moment had passed, and Luke had missed it. Again.

Rory walked over to Miss Patty’s from the diner and wasn’t all that surprised to find Jess outside the door. He had to have come over to Stars Hollow with Paris, since she was the one with the car, and was now hanging out on the studio steps. He had a cigarette in one hand and a copy of Slaughter-House Five in the other. Rory tried not to notice how good he looked and instead made herself cough as if to complain about his smoking habit.

“Wow, you’re subtle,” he dead-panned, taking one last drag and then stubbing out his cigarette on the ground.

“Those things will kill you. You know this,” she said with a shrug.

“Or I could get hit by a bus tomorrow,” he countered. “We’re all gonna die some day.”

“Some of us faster than others,”

“Yeah, maybe me by poison, you by dagger?” he smirked.


“Or death by your step-sister. That seems more likely, doesn’t it?” she joked.

“You’re not wrong,” Jess sighed, getting up from the steps and shoving his book into his back pocket.

Rory smiled and followed him inside. Always with the book, even when there were more important words he should be focused on, like the lines they needed to know for tomorrow night. Actually, Jess was pretty good at the Shakespeare thing. Not that Rory doubted he would be really. Acting might not be her strong point or his, but they learnt their lines in good time and did their best with the skills they had.

The kiss hadn’t happened yet. Whether Paris was trying to be nice or prevent a scene or what, Rory couldn’t be sure, but each and every rehearsal so far had focused on all the stuff up to Jess’ line of ‘Thus with a kiss, I die’. He never was given the chance to lay his lips on Rory before Paris yelled cut, at least not until today.
“Okay,” she yelled in her best directors voice. “Now I want to run the whole scene, beginning to end, no breaks. I expect by now that everyone knows exactly where they need to be and what they need to say, but on the off-chance that your brain freezes, I will be your prompt. Okay, let’s go!”

Jess rolled his eyes at his step-sister’s nutty behaviour and Rory tried not to laugh at the expression. They started the scene and everything was going pretty well. Nobody forgot their words or their staging, and Paris didn’t have to yell once. All too soon, Rory found herself laid out on the table with Jess hovering over her. Though her eyes were closed she could very much feel his presence, the words he spoke seeming to pass through her whole body making her shiver. He was going to kiss her. Within the next few seconds it was going to happen, and Rory wasn’t sure how she would handle it. Those five words were about to fall from his lips when suddenly the sound of the studio door being pulled open made everybody jump. Rory sat up fast, almost clocking Jess in the face as she did so, gasping at the sight of her boyfriend.

“Dean? What are you...? Er, why are you here?” she checked.

“I thought I’d surprise you, come see how final rehearsals were going,” he smiled, and yet that expression did not look entirely genuine.

“Somebody doesn’t trust somebody,” Louise sing-songed before returning he attention to the nail filing that had kept her busy this past half hour.

“Do you mind?” Paris snapped at Dean. “We were almost done with the scene and now you ruined the flow.”

“Don’t worry about it, Paris,” Jess told his step-sister, though his eyes were locked on a pissed looking Dean and a smirk was firmly on his lips. “We can go back, do that last part over again.”

Dean moved past Paris and leaned himself against the wall nearby, arms folded over his chest. If he could shoot laser beams from his eyes, Rory was pretty sure there would be a pair of smoky holes in Jess’ head right about now. She felt sick.

“Juliet, lie down!” snapped Paris then and Rory took a deep breath before doing as she was told. “Romeo, go from ‘Come, bitter conduct...’”

“Yes, ma’am,” he agreed, and Rory could just hear the smirk somehow, even though she had her eyes closed and couldn’t see it.

“Here’s to my love!” recited Jess, presumably drinking from the vial in his hand. “Oh, true apothecary, thy drugs are quick. Thus with a kiss, I die.”

He leaned in closer, Rory felt the kiss coming and she just couldn’t handle it. Her eyes opened and she realised that Dean was as close to her as Jess was right now.

“Oh God!” she gasped, sitting up quickly.

“What the hell?” asked Jess as he realised Rory’s boyfriend was in his face, ruining the scene and then some.

“Dean, it’s just acting!” said Rory definitely.

“Maybe for you,” he said, glaring at Jess.

“Or maybe not,” he countered, unable to help himself.
“For God’s sakes, Gilmore!” said Paris crossly. “Could you control your Labrador already?”

“If she can’t, I’ll try”, offered Louise, though nobody was really listening.

“We got a problem here, bag boy?” Jess bated Dean. “I mean, you do know who Shakespeare is right? You understand what acting is?”

“I understand that I’m going to put you through a wall if you ever get that close to my girlfriend again,” said Dean angrily.

That was when Rory lost it.

“Stop it, both of you! Just stop it!” she insisted, one hand on each of their chests as she pushed them back and made room for herself to hop down from the table beside Dean. “What are you doing? This is crazy!” she told her boyfriend. “He’s just trying to make you mad and you’re letting him,” she said, making him look at her. “Dean, it’s just a play. It’s just acting, that’s all. You don’t have to like Jess or trust him or anything, but you ought to trust me.”

Rory felt like such a hypocrite and a terrible person for saying these things. After all, whilst this might be acting, what happened before at the Geller house certainly wasn’t. She felt like she was in a movie with an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, the first saying she should confess already, the second telling her to keep professing innocence and being mad at Dean for his attitude. It turned out she didn’t have to make a choice as her boyfriend sighed and shook his head.

“I do trust you,” he said softly, as Paris grabbed at Jess’ sleeve and moved him away from the couple. “Rory, you know I do, but seeing that? Knowing what he was going to do...”

“Nobody asked you to come and watch the rehearsal,” she reminded him. “Dean, I would love for you to support me at the real performance tomorrow, but there’s no point if you can’t be an adult about something that is fictional, make believe. I... I love you,” she told him, feeling strange saying it, not least because they had an audience right now.

“Love you too,” he replied with a small smile, leaning in to plant a kiss on her forehead. “I’m gonna let you rehearse, and I’ll see you at the big event tomorrow. I’ll even smile and look proud, okay?” he told her bravely.


Dean left then, and Rory let out a long sigh. She felt as if that had gone pretty well, at least until she glanced Jess’ way and saw the look on his face. He wasn’t happy with the way things had gone down, looking all but ashamed of his so-called friend. Rory couldn’t hold his gaze too long. She was pretty ashamed of herself too right now.
Rory had taken to pacing the halls of Chilton before the big performance happened. Paris tried to calm her, so did Lorelai, and then Lane, but it did no good. Rehearsals yesterday at Miss Patty’s had gone well, to a point. After Dean’s visit and the altercation that followed, Rory convinced Paris that they ought to be done for the day. They had proven they knew their lines and places. No good would come from continuing, and Rory must have looked pathetic enough in her pleading because Paris relented and accepted the kiss could wait until the actual performance. Rory was relieved then, but now the nerves were back. Actually, it wasn’t so much nerves as abject panic. She had sort of hoped that Dean would change his mind about coming along to the actual performance, but he hadn’t. He was here, stood alongside Rory’s mom and BFF, plus Luke and Liz, all currently watching Act Four of Romeo and Juliet. Rory swallowed hard. Her turn came next. Her and Jess had to play out the final part of the tragic lovers’ story, and there was going to be a kiss.

“Hey.”

His voice behind her made Rory jump almost completely out of her skin. She turned to face Jess wearing a glare but he just smirked like always. She wasn’t amused.

“Don’t do that,” she grumbled, turning away.

“I’m sorry,” he apologised immediately. “I just came to let you know we’re on in five. Paris is spazzing the way only Paris can. Personally I think she got off light. As Director, she avoids the dumb costume at least,” he complained, pulling at the tunic he was wearing.

“At least you got your way on the tights,” Rory smiled slightly, noting the pants Jess was wearing, the very same that her mother had made along with Rory’s own Juliet costume.

“A man’s gotta draw a line somewhere,” he smiled right back. “Hey, don’t look so freaked out. It’s just acting in front of a few people. What’s the worst that could happen?” he asked.

Rory opened her mouth to answer but then closed it again fast. They both knew what the real problem was here, and it wasn’t performing to an audience. The kiss was a very big deal, mostly because it wouldn’t be the first time their lips had met. Dean was here watching, that made it doubly awkward. Rory hated this situation. Of all things she hated that for all the trouble it was likely to cause, she ached for the moment when Jess had to kiss her, because she actually really wanted that feeling again.

“Mariano! Gilmore!” Paris snapped as she appeared in the hallway. “It’s show time.”

Jess and Rory looked from her to each other and neither could find a word to say.

Rory was holding her breath by the time the moment came around when Jess would have to kiss her. It worked for the part since she was supposed to be dead, but she felt awfully sick in her stomach because of it. Jess spoke his next line, then paused, presumably drinking his ‘poison’. Rory tried to relax but found it impossible.

"Oh, true apothecary, thy drugs are quick,” declared Jess. “Thus with a kiss, I die.”

He leaned in closer, Rory felt the heat of his body and his breath in her face and then suddenly his lips were on hers. She didn’t mean to react. She wasn’t supposed to. After all, Juliet was supposed to be dead and yet the feeling of that kiss was so familiar and so good, she didn’t really want it to end. It
was a terrible disappointment when Jess pulled away, letting his body fall forward into the space beside her. Rory took so long to recover from the kiss that Paris started to prompt her the next line in case she forgot. In a moment she started to stir and continued her performance, trying her best to concentrate on her lines and not what had just happened here. She couldn’t look into the audience for fear of catching Dean’s gaze, it was just too hard.

“Oh happy dagger, this is thy sheath; there rust, and let me die.”

Rory allowed her body to fall back down, accidentally ending up closer to Jess than she ever had been before. It was a relief to find his eyes were closed and to be able to close her own for the sake of the performance, otherwise it would’ve been very like sleeping side by side, and far too easy to sneak another kiss. Rory wondered what was wrong with her brain when that thought tore through it. Thankfully there was little time for any more as Paris recited the epilogue and then the show was over.

The second the lights went up and applause came pouring from the audience, Rory got up, hopped down from the fake slab, and ran. She spotted Dean leaving the hall and gave chase, her mother following on behind her. Jess watched them go but couldn’t follow, not least because Liz was coming at him to hug him tight and tell him how proud she was.

Out in the hallway, Rory caught up with Dean and grabbed his arm.

“What do you want, Rory?” he asked her crossly, folding and unfolding his arms. “I know what you said about acting and I tried my best to accept that was all it was, but what I saw in there... Do you really expect me to believe that was just acting?”

Lorelai stopped at the door and hung back, watching the altercation between her daughter and the boyfriend for a moment. She wanted to check everything was okay and clearly it wasn’t, but her interference couldn’t really help. Backing up, she suddenly stumbled, a strong arm catching her around the waist.

“Woah!” she declared, as Luke spun her around to face him and set her carefully back on her feet. “Luke, hi.”

“Hey. Everything okay?” he checked, removing his arm from her body the moment he realised she might find it strange.

It took Lorelai a moment to get her bearings and answer him. Her mind was too busy wondering at the feeling of disappointment which came with Luke letting go of her so suddenly.

“Er, pretty serious convo in the hall,” she sighed. “Rory and Dean... I think we got trouble in paradise.”

Luke only nodded, not willing to make a comment about that situation. Honestly, he knew Jess liked Rory and he wouldn’t mind the idea of those two making a pair. Dean was nice enough, he supposed, but in Luke’s opinion he was never good enough for his Rory. Jess might be yet.

Speak of the devil, Jess chose that moment to follow on out into the hallway, cutting into the Rory and Dean almost-fight.

“You okay, Rory?” he checked.

“Stay out of this, Mariano,” Dean warned him. “Or I swear to God...”

“Jess,” said Paris, pulling on his arm the moment he looked set to wade into a fist fight. “C’mon.
Let’s go.”

He looked back at his step-sister, clearly about to explode until he saw the look on her face. This wasn’t Paris being a pain in the ass or putting on a show for their school-mates. She was pleading him with her eyes to let this go, for his own sake as much as anybody else’s.

“He’s not worth it,” she said in a low voice nobody else would here. “Neither of them are worth the trouble.”

Jess would admit that the punishment he could end up with for flooring Dean wasn’t worth the trouble, but Rory could be worth the fight, if he thought he would win. Right now, Jess wasn’t sure of that at all. He had a horrible feeling if he took a swing at Forester or even yelled in his face to get lost, Rory would side with the boyfriend. For all that she seemed to like him, to feel something more than friendship, Jess had no proof of it. Right now he couldn’t trust that he was worth her attention like that.

“You buying dinner?” he asked Paris, trying for a smirk but it didn’t quite come out.

“Sure. I guess you earned it,” she smiled right back at him. “Go get changed, then we’ll get out of here.”

They left and Rory felt her heart lurch as they walked away. A part of her really wanted to just go with them, but first she had to deal with Dean. It was only now as she heard him insult her two friends that she realised how exactly this situation must be dealt with, once and for all.

“They deserve each other,” he said of Paris and Jess. “They’re both as twisted as each other.”

“Maybe they’re not the only ones,” said Rory sadly, her eyes to the floor. “Dean, we... we really need to talk,” she told him, pulling off her headdress and looking as serious as she ever had about anything. “Come here,” she urged him, pulling him towards the nearest empty classroom and ushering him inside.

“What’s going on, Rory?” asked Dean, perching on the edge of the desk to face her.

There were tears in her eyes as she met his gaze, and Rory bit her lip trying to find the words she had to say. This was not going to be easy, but it had to be done.

“And then I told him. I told him all about me and Jess, the kiss before and... and how I’ve been feeling so torn lately,” explained Rory, trying not to cry any more than she already had as Lorelai nodded her understanding. “He was upset, but I had to end it, I just had to.”

“I know, honey,” her mother sympathised, hugging her close. “I get it, I do, and for what it’s worth, I think you did the right thing.” she said, kissing the top of her head. “I mean, it’s been pretty clear for a while now, things just weren’t right. I’m proud of you for being honest, for dealing with the end of one relationship before you got pulled into another.”

Rory wanted to say that wasn’t what this was about, but that would be a lie. If Jess hadn’t come on the scene, she was almost certain she and Dean would have carried on just the same for a good long while yet. The new guy sure had turned her head, she just couldn’t help it. Dean didn’t deserve to be dumped but more than that he didn’t deserve to continue to be strung along the way Rory had been doing lately. She had held it together for as long as it took to end things, but now at home on the couch with her mother’s arms around her, she felt free to cry out all the pain.

“I hate that I hurt him,” she confessed tearfully. “I didn’t want to.”
“Of course not, because you’re a good person,” Lorelai sympathised, rubbing her arm. “But it had to be done, babe, it just had to.”

That was true enough and they both knew it. Worse than leaving one guy to date another was dating two at once. Rory hadn’t really got that far, but there had been kissing, and feelings that were not in-keeping with monogamy, that was for sure. It took guts to do what she had done today, to face up to the end of a long-term relationship the way she had. Her first boyfriend was no more, and Lorelai felt the pain as keenly as her daughter, such was the way with mother and daughter, especially when two people were as close as Lorelai and Rory.

What came next, neither was sure, but Lorelai couldn’t help the curiosity that made her ask her next question.

“So, you think that you and Jess are gonna get together?”

Rory felt shocked, but that emotion subsided awfully quickly. It was the obvious question given the circumstances. Without all the feelings she had for Jess bouncing around inside her, Rory might never have realised how wrong she and Dean were together these days.

“I don’t know,” she sniffed hard, finally getting some control over her tears. “Yes. No. It seems wrong to bounce from one to the other that way, like I didn’t care for Dean at all,” she shook her head. “I did love him, Mom.”

“I know, sweets,” Lorelai assured her. “It’s not always somebody’s fault when these things happen. Sometimes you just grow apart, or grow towards somebody else, or both.”

“I guess,” sighed Rory, wiping her face with a wad of tissue and leaning back into the couch cushions tiredly. “Like with you and Dad.”

“Kind of, I guess,” her mother shrugged, flopping back beside her. “I mean, I love your father, I always will, but me and Christopher aren’t meant to be together,” she said definitely. “Neither were me and Max, not really.”

“And Luke?” asked Rory, looking seriously at her mom.

Lorelai’s eyes widened in such a way it was almost comical.


“Mom!” her daughter countered in a warning tone.

They both knew just exactly why Rory had brought up their diner-owning friend. Something existed between Luke and Lorelai, something that was definitely a friendship and yet there was more. Just lately it had become more obvious than ever, not least because Liz had been poking both her brother and her new friend about their relationship status and what more they could be. It gave Lorelai food for thought, and after the way he had spoken about her dating Paul from business class, the way Luke had looked at her during their conversation at the school tonight, Lorelai couldn’t help but wonder if he had been thinking about it too.

“I don’t know, Rory,” she said eventually. “Luke is... He’s like my best friend. I mean, there’s you and there’s Sookie, but Luke is this special person in my life. He’s always there for me, and he gets me, even though I’m pretty sure he doesn’t know what I’m talking about half the time,” she admitted. “He just... gets me.”

She shrugged because she didn’t know how else to put it, but the goofy smile on her face was what
held Rory’s attention more than anything.

“Uh-huh,” she said, nodding once.

Lorelai took offence.

“No, no. No uh-huhs,” she said, pointing a mock-stern finger at her daughter. “What? Have you been talking to Liz or something, because she has this crazy whacked-out idea that me and Luke should be a me-and-Luke too.”

“I don’t think that’s so crazy,” Rory shrugged.

“Yeah, well... You’re crazy!” Lorelai declared, though she was smiling when she said it.

Rory knew her mom wasn’t so dumb she didn’t see just exactly what both she and Liz were talking about.

“Maybe I am crazy,” she agreed anyway with a grin of her own. “All I’m saying is, Luke sure didn’t seem happy that you were dating that Paul guy. I’m not sure he ever seems happy when you date anyone, and you really didn’t like him and Rachel being so close.”

Lorelai opened her mouth to give some smart-alec reply to that but no words ever came, so she closed it again. What Rory said was true enough, Lorelai just hadn’t thought about it too much until this last little while, and now there were times when she could think of nothing else. It was kind of scary, considering a possible shift in her relationship with Luke. She wasn’t absolutely sure it was what he would want. Hell, Lorelai wasn’t even completely certain it was what she wanted, but when she thought about it much, the list of reasons not to give it a try seemed to shrink every time.

Rory letting out the world’s biggest yawn brought Lorelai back to reality with a bump. She smiled at her daughter who was looking much less upset now, just exhausted after a long and stressful Sunday.

“So much for the day of rest, huh?” she said, pushing Rory’s hair back over her shoulder.

“I’m going to bed,” her daughter nodded sleepily. “Good night, Mom,” she said, getting up and planting a kiss on Lorelai’s cheek as she slipped past her towards her bedroom.

“Sleep tight, baby girl,” her mother called after her, but didn’t offer to move herself.

Lorelai stayed there on the couch, her mind whirring on the topic of one Luke Danes and all that he meant to her. Best friend, supplier of coffee, Mr Fix It around the house. He did an awful lot for her, picked her up any time she was down, and was just always there whenever she needed him. Lorelai did her share of helping to. She wanted to, even when Luke didn’t necessarily need or ask for it. They were just each other’s other half much of the time, and the realisation of it hit Lorelai right between the eyes.

Surely she would be a fool not to at least talk to Luke about all these thoughts and feelings. Rory had found the inner strength to do what must be done tonight and break up with Dean. Lorelai had to be able to deal with telling Luke she was considering moving their relationship forward, getting his perspective on the whole thing, and yet the very thought of it made her so very nervous. Right now, she had no idea what she was going to do, but she doubted she would be sleeping much with all this going on in her head!
Chapter 16

Rory was in two minds about school on Monday morning. On the one hand, she would almost rather stay at home and not have to deal with people gossiping about her after Sunday’s performance. On the other hand, she would like to see Jess and also Paris, because Rory wanted a chance to explain herself. They both looked pretty pissed when they saw her and Dean talking, and setting the record straight would definitely be a good thing.

Rory was still undecided on Jess as boyfriend material, this much she had told Lorelai who nodded along but said very little on the subject. Honestly, there wasn't much Rory could find in the way of reasons why she shouldn’t be closer to Jess. She was no longer dating Dean, and that had been her choice, not his. She liked Jess a lot, and he clearly liked her too. The only issue was that rebounding from one guy to the other like that probably didn’t look good and may not end so well. Some alone time might be good, or so Rory thought. At the same time, getting together with Jess sure did appeal a lot, rightly or wrongly.

Headed into the halls of Chilton, Rory had a death grip on her bag strap, trying to keep her head up like she had nothing to be ashamed of. The truth was, she really didn’t. So she and Jess shared a kiss that was a little more intense than the play required, that wasn’t a crime, especially since she was free and single a few minutes later, and by her own volition. She was feeling pretty certain that Jess would forgive her for walking away from him after that kiss when he found out why, when he discovered that she was available now. Rory considered maybe she had gotten a little ahead of herself when she suddenly spotted Jess in the hallway, Francine Jarvis practically hanging off him.

Rory stopped walking so suddenly that two other students ran into her back, for which she apologised absently without hardly looking at them. Her eyes were locked on the scene before her. Francie was certainly playing up to Jess, one hand toying with her curls of red hair, the other swatting him in the shoulder as she laughed at some joke or other he seemed to have made. It was all very flirty and Rory felt her knuckles getting white from how much harder her grip had got on her bag strap. So much for thinking Jess was waiting for her or something. Maybe not then.

“You can’t have your cake and eat it, Gilmore,” said a voice behind her.

“Thanks for cliché, Paris,” she said, not turning around at all, just continuing to torture herself by staring at Jess and Francie.

“It’s called a cliché for a reason,” her friend told her, moving around into her view. “You know I’m right. You can’t expect Jess to hang around like a lost puppy whilst you string him along, all the time dating Dean.”

“I’m not dating Dean,” said Rory smartly, sort of wishing she hadn’t the very next moment.

Paris sure did look surprised. Actually, she looked altogether shocked and amazed.

“He dumped you?” she asked eventually, but Rory shook her head.

“I broke up with him,” she confirmed. “It just... Things weren’t feeling how they used to feel and I didn’t want to use him, so it’s over,” she explained, wondering why the tears weren’t coming.

Rory expected to be more upset than this. Sure, she had cried out a lot of the sadness last night, first in her mother’s arms and then later in her bed alone. Still, less than twenty four hours since the break-up, she felt oddly okay about it. There was no denying it sucked that she hurt Dean. He’d done
nothing wrong really. He had some jealousy issues, that was a given, but for the most part, Rory couldn’t blame him for that, especially not where Jess was concerned. He had a right to be jealous of a guy Rory spent so much time with, that she was fast realising she felt an awful lot more for than she probably should.

“Wow,” said Paris then. “I’m almost impressed. I mean, I felt sure that if you really wanted out of your relationship with Forester you’d just behave badly, in a subtle way, until he was forced to drop you. I never really considered for a second that you would have the guts to break the chains yourself.”

Rory sort of felt like she was getting a compliment here, but somehow it was very back-handed, such was the way of Paris Geller, she supposed. Rory had to agree she had been kind of brave in standing up and telling Dean how it was. The fact it had taken her too long to do it, and moreover that she hadn’t told the whole truth about her feelings for Jess even then, those factors made it not so brave.

“I just did what needed to be done,” she said, rubbing her forehead that was starting to ache already and only worse when the bell rang. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to...”

She gestured down the hall and looked in that direction herself, planning to walk there. Rory got a surprise when she realised Jess was already gone from her sight, Francie too.

“Bummer,” said Paris flatly. “Maybe he just got tired of waiting for you,” she suggested, deliberately unhelpful as she swept off down the hall to class.

Now Rory really did want to cry.

“But what are we going to do with all the food?” said Sookie too loudly as Rory came into the diner. “I mean, I know that between us we can eat a lot, but seriously? I’ve got seven courses here! Soup, fish, peacock pie, Baron of Beef, salad, plum pudding and wassail!”

“Well, we can invite other people to help us eat it,” suggested Lorelai. “Rory, for example,” she smiled as her daughter joined them at the table, dumping her school bag onto the ground.

“I’m actually not all that hungry,” she declared sadly, letting everyone within ear-shot know something was definitely wrong.

Lorelai put her arm around Rory’s shoulders, hugging her close and rubbing her arm for good measure.

“Rough day, hon?”

“And how,” sighed Rory. “I just... I don’t know, I thought I did the right thing last night, breaking up with Dean,” she said in a low voice so the whole diner wouldn’t hear. “I know it’s the right thing really, but... I don’t know, today just did not go according to the plan,” she sighed heavily one more time.

“Aaaaw, sweetie,” Sookie sympathised, patting Rory’s hand. “Your mom mentioned a little something about Jess being in the picture,” she said in a whisper, leaning right across the table. “Is that not working out?”

“Well, given that he avoided me all day and didn’t speak one word to me at any point, I’m going with no,” said Rory crossly, softening the moment Sookie looked pained. “I’m sorry, I know you’re trying to be nice. I’m just in a bad mood about the whole thing, and I changed my mind about not being hungry,” she decided suddenly. “You think Luke would break the rules and make me some
chocolate chip pancakes at this time of day?”

“He will when I tell him to!” said Lorelai definitely, kissing Rory’s hair and giving her one more squeeze before getting up to go over to the counter and hassle Luke.

Sookie gave Rory a sympathetic smile, and then changed the subject in the hopes of cheering her up. They talked about the cancelled Bracebridge Dinner and Lorelai’s idea to invite people over to help eat the food that would otherwise go to waste.

Meanwhile, at the counter, Lorelai had just got done asking Luke about the pancakes only for him to refuse to make them, as she was pretty sure he would on the first try.

“They’re not for me, they’re for Rory,” she told him, at which he made a face that proved he didn’t believe her. “Seriously, come ask her if you don’t believe me. She has had the day from hell and she really needs Luke-style choc-chip pancakes. You know they cure all known ills,” she insisted.

“How hellish was this day?” he asked, leaning over the counter towards her.

Lorelai wasn’t sure why she suddenly felt so weird about him being that close. Maybe it was just the extended amount of time she had spent musing on the subject of potentially dating Luke. It took her a minute to remember he had asked her a question and that she should really answer it. Even then she couldn’t speak because there were so many people sat along the counter eavesdropping. Grabbing Luke by the sleeve, she rounded the counter without a care and pulled him behind the curtain that hid the stairs to the apartment. Just when Luke was about to ask what the hell she was doing, Lorelai explained herself.

“Rory broke up with Dean,” she explained. “Last night, after the whole Shakespeare thing, you may have noticed she wasn’t overly chatty? That was why. She was fighting the tears until we got back to the house and then it all came out,” she told him, watching concern fill Luke’s face. “She knew she had to end it, things haven’t been right for a while. You can’t say anything, but I’m pretty sure Jess is a lot to do with it.”


“It’s great?” echoed Lorelai, looking far from happy. “I’m sorry, it’s great that my daughter’s year long relationship with a decent steady boyfriend just ended because of your nephew, who apparently gets into trouble on a semi-regular basis at Chilton, and who, according to your own opinion, won’t be around for long because Liz is bound to screw up another marriage sooner rather than later?!”

Luke backed up a step somewhere in the middle of Lorelai’s tirade. He really hadn’t expected it, though he supposed he should have. There was no part of him that was happy knowing Rory just went through a break up, no matter which side of it she was on. He just couldn’t help being glad at the thought of his nephew and Rory making a couple. Luke was sure they would be good for each other, he just maybe hadn’t thought it all the way through before he spoke to Lorelai.

“I’m sorry,” he apologised immediately, his hands going to Lorelai’s shoulders. “I didn’t mean it the way it came out. Of course it’s not good that Rory is feeling upset. I would never, ever think that was good,” he promised her, though she ought to have already known it. “I’m sorry, I just think Jess and Rory might make a good couple is all.”

“Yeah, well, he’d have to be talking to her first” said Lorelai grumpily. “Poor Rory went into school to speak to the guy and he’s giving her the cold shoulder, which I guess I can’t completely blame him for” she sighed. “It had to be hard on him seeing Rory with Dean when he liked her so much. God, teenage romance never gets any easier, or less twisted.”
“Apparently not,” Luke agreed. “But it’ll work out, you know it will,” he assured her, hands rubbing the tops of her arms without him really thinking about what he was doing.

Lorelai sure did notice the tingling sensation running right through her at the contact. It wasn’t as if Luke never touched her before. They hugged and such at times, but this was different, maybe more so than ever because Lorelai had been thinking so much about the guy, and in new and date-like ways. Sometimes she wondered why nothing had ever happened with them over the years. This was one of those crazy moments when she wanted to make it happen right now.

“What?” asked Luke as she stared up at him.

Lorelai didn’t know what to say and eventually shook her head to snap herself out of the daze.

“Pancakes,” she declared. “Er, for Rory. The pancakes?” she prompted then.

Luke’s hands dropped from her shoulders and he made a big deal of adjusting his hat.

“Pancakes, right. Coming right up,” he promised, rushing out from behind the curtain.

Lorelai took a deep breath before following, painting on a smile as she headed back to the table to join Sookie and Rory. They were both grinning from ear to ear, and though she was happy enough to see it, Lorelai had to wonder what brought on such a miraculous change.

“Did you guys do some drugs while I was gone? ‘Cause that’s not cool,” she said mock-seriously.

“We’ve been building on your idea!” said Sookie, excitedly clapping her hands. “What if we hold the Bracebridge dinner, just exactly as planned, but instead of the people who are paying for it attending, since they’re snowed in, we invite everybody?”

“Everybody?” Lorelai echoed looking between the two.

“Yeah, all our friends, the whole town!” said Rory, practically bouncing in her seat. “We could have Lane and Mrs Kim come along. Babette and Maury, Miss Patty, Taylor…”

“And Luke, obviously,” said Sookie with a pointed look as the man himself came over to the table, Rory’s pancakes piled high on a plate in one hand and a large cup of coffee in the other. “Lorelai, ask him!” she prompted.

“Ask me what?” he checked warily, smiling briefly at Rory when she thanked him for the pancakes and dug right in.

“To dinner,” said Lorelai fast, immediately shaking her head. “Well, to a dinner, at the inn,” she clarified. “Long story short, a big fancy dinner got cancelled by snowed in guests so we have an empty inn and a ton of food. We’re planning to invite all our friends and neighbours to share the meal, maybe even stay over at the Independence, make a real event out of it.”

“And you want me to come?” asked Luke sceptically.

“C’mon, Luke. We would never leave you out of something like this,” said Rory definitely, before taking another big bite of her pancakes.

“Of course not,” Lorelai confirmed smiling up at him. “And hey, we could maybe invite Liz and Ira too, and… um…” she floundered a little then, eyes flitting to Rory a she realised maybe she just screwed up. “Honey…”
“We should invite all of them,” she said, nodding her head. “Liz and Mr Geller are nice. Besides, Paris will love the historical angle and Jess... I guess he would come,” she shrugged as if she didn’t care either way, though everyone present knew that wasn’t true.

Now wasn’t the time to be calling Rory on her crap. She had a rough day and a rough night before as well. If she was okay with the extended Geller family coming along to the Bracebridge Dinner then that was fine with Lorelai. She turned her attention back to Luke and found a renewed smile on her lips.

“So, what do you say, Diner Man?” she asked him. “You in?”

Her smile was as infectious as ever and Luke couldn’t help but return the look, as well as accept the offer.

“Sure, I’m in,” he agreed easily, and if it were possible, Lorelai’s smile only grew wider.

“So, I saw you with Francie today,” said Paris as she pulled the car into the driveway of her home.

“What are you, my mother?” snorted Jess, moving to get out of the car, but Paris engaged the locks before he could.

They hadn’t talked the whole way home, and usually Paris was okay with that, but today was different. She really didn’t like feeling sympathy at all. These feelings were pretty foreign to a person like Paris, but lately she had started to care about her step-brother, mostly when he seemed to care about her. It was almost nice having someone around she could talk to, that seemed to get her and not judge in a nasty way. Sure, Jess liked to push her buttons but Paris found ways to drive him nuts too, and it had all become a game for fun rather than anything nasty. She didn’t want to see him hurting, she just didn’t.

“Unlock the door, Paris,” he snapped at her, but she paid no mind.

“You seemed to spend a lot of time talking to Francie and a whole bunch of other people, none of which were Rory,” she said pointedly.

Jess sighed in defeat and turned to look at Paris.

“What’s to say?” he shrugged like he didn’t care, but his step-sister knew so much better.

“She broke up with him. With Lurch the charisma-starved farm boy,” explained Paris. “You would know that if you bothered to talk to Rory at all today.”

Jess considered what she said for a moment.

“Huh,” he responded after a while.

Paris’ eyes widened.

“That’s it? That’s all you have to say?”

“What else did you expect?” he countered. “Cartwheels? ‘Cause that’d be little tough in such a confined space,” he said pointedly.

A smirk came to Paris’ lips.

“I know you’re happy, Mariano,” she told him. “You wanted them broken up. You still want your
“Maybe,” he admitted, looking away. “Now are you gonna let me out of the damn car already?”

Paris sighed and finally relented, disengaging the locks so Jess could leave. Still, she wasn’t really done with him. The moment he opened the door she spoke again.

“If you give her the cold shoulder now you’re an idiot,” she said definitely. “On the other hand, don’t be the rebound guy. I don’t think that would end well.”

Jess turned back into his seat and stared at her with a confused expression.

“Are you seriously giving me dating advice?” he asked, a hint of a smirk breaking through because he just couldn’t help it.

“No,” Paris confirmed. “I’m giving you Rory Gilmore advice. I’ve known her longer than you, I know how she can be.”

Jess was almost grateful, but only almost. Paris had every reason to hate him and when he and Liz first came here, he knew she did too. Jess took every opportunity to get on her nerves for a while there, but lately bridges had been built. Losing Tristan to military school hit Paris hard, proved she was a human being with all the usual emotions and feelings that came with that. She had been kind of cool about Jess’ situation with Rory too, trying to help him out when he found himself dazed and confused by Miss Gilmore’s behaviour. Last night, Paris took him out for a burger and they talked about everything but Rory. It was nice. Weird, but nice. It was still so odd to have people around who cared about him at all, but the longer he was here, the more Jess found he actually kind of cared about Paris too. He opened his mouth to thank her for trying to be helpful, but wasn’t given the chance. The familiar overly-loud voice of Liz came booming from the front door and then her feet were crashing across the gravel towards them.

“Hey, kids!” she greeted them with an over-the-top wave and Jess smelled the alcohol coming off her long before she reached his side. “Guess what? I just got a call from Lorelai Gilmore, and we’re all invited to this big shindig of a dinner over at the Independence Inn on Friday! Isn’t that exciting?” she asked, with so much enthusiasm it was almost enough to make a person nauseous.

Jess looked at Paris and knew she was by no means pleased to know she would probably be forced to attend this event. It probably wasn’t Jess’ scene either, but quite honestly, he couldn’t help but smile. Lorelai meant Rory, and as mad as he’d like to be at Miss Gilmore for her behaviour lately, the chance to spend some time with her away from school really did appeal still, especially now he knew she and the boyfriend were broken up. Maybe he was an idiot, but he just couldn’t help himself.
Chapter 17

The school week passed fairly uneventfully, but with plenty of studying and such to do. Rory didn’t have too much time to worry that things with her and Jess were fairly undefined. They certainly weren’t back to the way they had been before, but he clearly didn’t hate her. There had been a couple of smiles and passing comments when they saw each other in the halls. Rory would’ve liked more. She looked out for Jess at lunch and tried to find him between classes to really talk. He always seemed to elude her, or when she did see him, Jess would be talking to someone else, sometime girls, sometimes guy friends. Either way, Rory didn’t feel right about walking up to him and demanding a private audience. Jess had his reasons to shut her down and Rory couldn’t deal. She just gave him a little space and time, and found she felt better for giving herself the same actually.

Evenings were spent assisting her mom at the inn. Lorelai needed the extra help with the Bracebridge Dinner to reorganise. Most everything was the same, basically, but there were now different guests to invite, rooms to assign, and still the staff had to be prepped for their roles. The only real issue was that the Dinner fell on a Friday night. Lorelai had already gotten herself out of dinner with the grandparents because of the big event, but Rory was another matter. The only way to ensure that the younger Gilmore was free to enjoy the festivities was to invite her grandparents along also. Lorelai was in two minds whether to be grateful they accepted or panicked that they had. Emily would judge, no doubt, and Richard really hadn’t been all that happy of late anyway. Lorelai could only hope for the best. Rory believed it would all be fine, but then she had that much more faith than her mother when it came to the Gilmore Elders.

The family that was on Rory’s mind were the Gellers, or moreover the one lone Mariano that they were bringing to the party. She just wanted things to be okay with her and Jess. Rory still wasn’t sure about them being more than friends right now, but she definitely wanted the friend thing again. Her mom said these things required time, and Rory could only hope that after the past few days, enough time had passed that she and Jess could get back to being friends, or at least more friendly. She’d take what she could get right now.

As luck would have it, Rory was on welcoming duty when the Geller family arrived at the inn. Lorelai had to slip into the kitchen to rescue Sookie from the sight of a half-dressed Roun, and all hell was apparently breaking lose. Rory held her guest book a little higher in her hands, took a deep breath and walked on over to the latest arrivals.

“Hi. Welcome to The Bracebridge Dinner at the Independence Inn,” she greeted them all politely.

“Rory, honey, you look beautiful!” exclaimed Liz, reaching to hug her.

She was too stunned to stop it from happening, but could hardly hug Liz back with her book and pen in her hands.

“Thank you,” she said awkwardly, trying to smile genuinely even as she saw Paris and Jess smirking at the display. “Um, if you’d like to hand your coats to our helpful assistants,” she gestured. “Mr and Mrs Geller, you’ll be in Room 4, and then Paris in 5, and Jess, we put you with Luke in 6. That’s okay, right?”

“Sure, whatever,” he shrugged easily as all the coats were taken and more guests began to arrive behind them. “I guess I’ll see you later,” he smiled as he headed for the stairs behind Paris and the parents.

“Er, yeah. Later,” said Rory absently.
She didn’t mean to feel so sad that he was walking away from her, again! Honestly, of all the things Rory had been looking forward to about his night, one of them was maybe getting to spend a little time alone with Jess. It seemed if that were to occur it wasn’t going to be right now. More guests needed attending to and Jess had already disappeared up the stairs and out of her view. Rory sighed and continued with her work.

Jess wasn’t exactly enjoying this whole Bracebridge Dinner experience. He had hoped to at least get to spend some time alone with Rory, but so far, that hadn’t happened. First she was busy helping out her mom when they first arrived, then Jess was in the room alone with Luke, which was fine, but not really where he wanted to be, especially when his uncle started making not so subtle references to the fact Jess liked Rory. As usual, he gave nothing away, but Jess really could’ve used not being subjected to the knowing smile and the unsolicited dating advice.

Then came the dinner itself. The food was okay, he supposed, but not anything he would really choose. Luke looked underwhelmed, Paris spent the entire time leaning across the table to point out anachronisms, and Liz was just yelling and laughing about anything and everything, making the usual show of herself as she made merry on the free booze. Even Ira looked a little awkward about it but he didn’t say anything, not in front of company. And what company it was. Every denizen of Stars Hollow seemed to be around the table, and Jess started to feel like he had entered the Twilight Zone.

Now the meal was done, and everybody was just starting to get up and move around. Jess thought about approaching Rory then but she was with her mom and he felt weird about breaking into that. Before he had a chance to make a solid decision, Lorelai stood up, tapping a spoon on her glass until she had everybody’s attention.

“Hey. Hi!” she said with an enthusiastic wave. “So, I’d just like to thank you all for coming along to join us in the crazy adventure that is our Bracebridge Dinner. Special thanks to our own Squire Bracebridge, and all the happy servers and helpers too,” she smiled, starting a round of applause that the whole table joined in with. “Now, the night’s not over yet, not even close. In fact, right now, we have a special treat for you all. Whilst the pages and wenches clear the table and get the coffee and brandy ready to go, we invite you all to join us on a carriage ride through the snow,” she said happily.

There were various oohs and aahs around the table as Lorelai explained there were plenty of horse-drawn sleighs to choose from, that it was two people to a sleigh, and that they were all waiting outside ready to go. People started hurrying to get their coats and head on out, but Jess stayed put. Maybe now everybody else would leave and he would get a chance to talk to Rory. His plan was scuppered the moment he realised Paris and Luke were also staying in their seats.

“You’re not going?” he asked his uncle.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe Rory?” his uncle countered. “Unless you were planning on escorting the fair maiden?” he teased with a smirk that Jess himself would’ve been proud of.

“He’s dumber than I think he is if he doesn’t at least ask her,” said Paris from across the table with a look Jess knew very well by now.
“Fine,” he relented, as if it were a great inconvenience that they were practically forcing him to spend time with Rory.

He got up from his seat and hurried after Rory and Lorelai, with Luke right behind him. They caught up to the girls by the door where they were putting on their coats.

“Wow, didn’t think you manly guy types would be up for a magical sleigh ride,” smiled Lorelai as she looked at them.

“Hey, somebody has to be in that thing with you to make sure you don’t get too excited and fall out or something,” said Luke, rolling his eyes.

“Oh,” she replied, evidently surprised by the suggestion they might share a ride. “Um, well... Rory?”

“I can ride with Jess, if he doesn’t mind,” she said, hardly looking at the young man in question.

“Sure, that’s cool,” he shrugged like it was no big deal.

Luke and Lorelai shared a look the kids didn’t see. Oh, it was a very big deal, no doubt about that. Of course, it was well noticed by the other guests that Luke and Lorelai themselves had chosen to share a sleigh too. As if they didn’t all see that something was occurring between those two and had been for years, these last couple of months things seemed to have intensified. Something was going to happen, sooner rather than later.

“This is nice,” said Lorelai as she and Luke got comfortable in the seat and the driver urged the horses forward. “I mean, I knew it would be, that’s why I ordered the sleighs for tonight, I just... Um, the company is nice,” she smiled then, glancing at Luke.

It was so weird, it was as if she suddenly forgot how to talk to the guy. Things were changing so much lately, what with Liz and Rory both telling Lorelai that she always seemed to like Luke as more than a friend. She genuinely hadn’t realised it before, but the more Lorelai thought on it now, the more the idea of dating Luke really did appeal. He seemed to like her too. Strike that, he did like her, as a friend at least. Knowing if he felt any more, that was almost impossible to tell with a guy like Luke. Feelings and expressing them weren’t exactly his strong point, though quite honestly, when it came to the romantic stuff, Lorelai knew she wasn’t always as forthcoming as she should be either.

“It is nice,” said Luke then, leaning back in the seat. “The company,” he clarified just as she had, returning her smile. “And the idea, it was smart. Something a little different, and in keeping with the period, I guess.”

“That was the thought process,” agreed Lorelai. “Plus any excuse for a sleigh ride. The town looks so beautiful, all lit up like this.”

“Yeah, beautiful,” said Luke, though when Lorelai glanced at him she realised he wasn’t looking at the view but had his eyes locked on her face.

It was moments like this when she knew she wasn’t crazy for thinking maybe more existed here than a friendship. So many times Luke would look at her a certain way and Lorelai would wonder why. Only recently had she realised what it might all mean, with Liz and Rory in her ear, giving her their thoughts on the subject. Maybe now was the time when she should just confront all these feelings she was having, that she thought Luke might be having too.

“Luke...”
“Lorelai...”

They spoke over each other and both laughed because of it.

“Ladies first,” he said, like a gentleman should, but Lorelai shook her head.

“No, please,” she urged him. “You should go.”

“Okay,” he nodded, deciding it had to be now or never. “Er, well, you know me, Lorelai, you know I’m not the guy that comes out and says what he’s feeling or even admits to having feelings most of the time. I guess I’m old-fashioned, like my dad, y’know? You just get on with things, never mind all the emotional crap...”

“Emotional crap?” echoed Lorelai with a smile she couldn’t help.

“You know what I mean,” he sighed, adjusting the hat on his head. “I just... Liz keeps on bugging me about the way things are with you and me. She has this idea...”

“That we’re more than friends,” she finished for him, looking down at her own hands in her lap. “Yeah, I heard that one, and not just from Liz,” she admitted, though she never mentioned Rory’s name or anyone else’s for that matter.

“Huh. So, I was thinking that maybe it’s not just my sister being her usual crazy self,” said Luke then, barely looking at Lorelai now. “And that maybe I’m the crazy one for... for acting like you and me are... Well, that we’re...”


Before Luke could really process what was going to happen, Lorelai’s hand was at his cheek and her lips were on his own.

“So,” said Rory as the sleigh began to move.

“So,” echoed Jess beside her.

They were two people who used to talk about anything and everything, and suddenly neither had a word to say beyond that one. It was kind of silly really. They had been such good friends for a while there and now everything was just screwed up to the extreme. It started to go wrong when Rory kissed Jess and then ran out on him. Sure they got past that and his yelling at her, in order to perform the Shakespeare scene last weekend, but everything had gone askew again after yet another too-intense kiss. If they could just stop laying their lips on each other, Rory and Jess were both convinced this friendship would run a whole lot smoother. Strange then that right here in this moment, all either of them wanted to do was kiss the other!

“I’m sorry,” they said as one, both looking embarrassed and amused when they realised what had happened.

“What are you sorry for?” asked Jess then.

“I don’t know. Just screwing up, I guess?” said Rory with a sigh. “Jess, I made such a mess of everything. We were fine until that night at your house when I... when I...”

“Kissed me and then ran away like I was a leper?” he filled in for her, his expression unreadable.
“Yeah, that,” she agreed awkwardly. “And you had every right to be mad at me for the way I behaved, because it was not cool.”

“Agreed,” he nodded. “But I wasn’t exactly saintly in all of this. I shouldn’t have given you such a hard time when you were clearly confused, and I guess I shouldn’t have wound up your boyfriend so much with the whole Romeo and Juliet thing.”

“Probably not,” she agreed. “But just for the record, Dean’s not my boyfriend anymore.”

“Paris mentioned that,” he nodded once, looking everywhere but at Rory right now.

“I figured she might,” she replied, looking off in the other direction.

This was ridiculous, and they both knew it. Honestly, neither Rory nor Jess were sure where the conversation went from here. They needed to apologise to each other, forgive each other, and that was done. She had told him her news about Dean and he had responded. Now came the difficult part - how to move forward?

“Huh,” said Jess suddenly, getting Rory’s full attention.

“What?”

“That snowman, or snowwoman actually,” he corrected himself as he pointed towards it. “It kind of looks like... Bjork?”

“That’s ours,” Rory grinned wide. “Me and my mom built it for the competition,” she explained as Jess glanced her way.

“I like it,” he smiled. “You should definitely win.”

“Thanks,” she smiled right back, “but everybody thinks that one will win” she gestured to the snowman on the far-side, a perfectly sculpted and power-buffed piece of art.

“Seriously?” snorted Jess. “It’s so over-done!”

“Well, unless it miraculously melts or something whilst all the others stay standing, it’s pretty much a shoo-in,” said Rory with a sigh.

She looked down at her own gloved hands in her lap, completely missing the smirk that had taken over Jess’ face. He couldn’t help musing on ways for Rory and her mom to win the snowman competition by taking out the only real competitor. It wasn’t even like it’d be hard to do...

“Jess?” said Rory suddenly. “Um, we’re okay now, right?” she checked.

She barely looked at him as she asked the question and then eventually made herself meet his gaze. It was a relief to see him smile at her again.

“Sure, we’re okay,” he promised her. “We’re... I don’t know, friends, I guess?”

Rory wasn’t really sure if it was a statement or a question. If it were a question, she was happy to realise she knew the answer.

“Friends is good right now,” she told him with a sigh of relief she hadn’t known needed to escape until it was out there.

Both of them noticeably relaxed into their seats with smiles on their faces then. The hard part was
over, they had found a happy medium. No pressure to make anything serious work but no more animosity either. They were back to a good place, and for now that was all Rory and Jess really wanted.

“So, what have you been reading lately?”
“Fun is really, really tiring,” said Rory definitely as she collapsed onto the couch back at the Crap Shack. “Seriously? The rest of this Winter break is to be spent in boredom so that I actually have some energy left at the end of it!” she insisted.

She had her eyes closed as she relaxed a minute but soon opened them again when she realised her mom was not responding to her semi-sarcastic comments. Rory at least expected laughter. So far all she was getting was a grin and that didn’t seem like the amused kind, more like the deliriously happy type, with a little nerves thrown in.

“What?” she asked curiously as Lorelai perched on the arm of the chair across the way.

“So, past twenty four hours have just been full of surprises, huh?” she said, still grinning madly. “I mean, Grandpa quitting his job, the ringer snowman getting mysteriously smashed and earning us first prize,” she counted off on her fingers. “All big surprises, all the time so far this weekend.”

“Yeah,” replied Rory warily, sitting up some in her seat. “Why do I get the feeling you have another surprise you want to share?”

“Because you’re very, very smart!” declared Lorelai excitedly, moving to sit by Rory with a thud that made her daughter bounce a little without meaning to. “You go to that fancy school and you’re just getting more and more intelligent every single day.”

“Mom,” said Rory sternly. “I think we’re going a little off-topic. Not that I know what the topic is supposed to be but I don’t think it’s my education or the size of my brain.”

Lorelai squirmed some on her end of the couch. This was awkward. She really, really wanted to share with Rory just like she always had before, but this was kind of a big deal and quite honestly, she wasn’t sure about the reaction she might get. It ought to be happy. Based on previous conversations there was no reason for it not to be, and yet, she felt stupidly nervous.

“Okay,” she said at length, taking a deep breath. “Something happened last night, and I wanted to tell you right away, but being at the inn, your grandparents being there and the whole town, I don’t know, I just... I couldn’t do it,” she explained. “But now we’re here, and alone, and I just have to tell you... Rory, honey, I kissed Luke on the sleigh-ride!” she blurted out, eyes closed until the words were all spoken.

Slowly she opened one eye and then the other, only to find Rory flying towards her to hug her tight.

“Oh my God!” Rory gasped as she clung to her mother. “That’s amazing. You finally actually did something about the you and Luke situation, or did Luke make the first move?” she asked then, pulling back to look at Lorelai.

“Um, well, he was sort of alluding to maybe wanting to be more than friends, I guess,” she explained as best she could, mostly feeling relieved that Rory was cool with all this. “And then, I don’t know what happened exactly, I just really, really wanted to kiss him, so I did.”

“Wow,” said Rory, giggling like the teen she was. “That’s... Well, honestly, a little disturbing,” she admitted then. “Not disturbing in a bad way, I just... I just personally wouldn’t want to be kissing Luke like that because, hey, kind of a father figure type for me.”

“For what it’s worth, hon, I am more than okay with you not having the sexy fantasies about my

“So you two are together now? Like dating or whatever?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly. We kissed, and like I said, he was kind in the process of the asking out for the date when that happened, and then there were people and the awkwardness set in, so not very much else has been said yet. He did come find me this morning before everybody left though, and apparently we’re going to have a serious talk sometime soon.”

“Oh, Mom, that’s great! You know I think you guys would be great together. You will be, I just know it.”

“I hope so,” said Lorelai, still smiling and unable to stop. “It’s in the very early stages of whatever it is, so I don’t know for sure how it’ll work, but I think I’m happy about it. I am,” she said more certainly then. “Yes, I am very happy about it.”

“That’s great,” Rory smiled widely. “And, er, just so you know, well, me and Jess talked some. We’re friends again,”

Lorelai looked into her daughter’s face, searching her expression for signs that maybe she was underplaying or that she was disappointed. Mostly her features were pretty neutral, so Lorelai was forced to ask Rory for the details.

“So, friends?” she checked. “Just friends? Friends forever? Or more later?”

“I don’t know,” Rory shook her head then made a big deal of pushing her hair off her face, clearly feeling a little embarrassed. “I honestly don’t know, but for now I’m just happy that we’re talking again. It feels good,” she smiled, and Lorelai smiled too.

“I’m glad, honey,” she enthused. “Seriously, if you’re happy, I’m happy,” she promised, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. “Now, are you hungry? Because I picked up some of that delicious cakey bread stuff that Sookie made...”

Lorelai headed off to the kitchen with the bag she had put the food into and Rory stayed put on the couch, thinking about the ride home. They had gone by the snowmen for the competition and just as soon as she saw the ringer snowman smashed to pieces her brain had gone into over-drive. She didn’t know for sure what had happened, but she had some definite suspicions.

“You okay, sweets?” asked Lorelai when suddenly she noticed her daughter heading into her room.

“Sure, yeah,” Rory promised. “Um, cut me a piece of that, please?” she requested as Lorelai hacked at Sookie’s wonderful bread-cake with a large scary knife. “I’m just going to make a call,” she smiled as she waved the phone around.

She went into her room quickly then, shutting the door behind her. Giving further explanation might be embarrassing, and Lorelai could guess why. Rory was going to call Jess, she had no doubt in her mind about that. It didn’t even bother her that her baby girl didn’t want to tell her. They talked about the important things, and that was fine with Lorelai. A teenage girl had to have a few secrets, or they just wouldn’t be normal.

In her room, Rory sat down on the bed and dialled the Geller house. She felt very silly asking the maid if Jess was available and giving her name, but all at once she was patched through to the phone in his room without any argument or weirdness. She smiled when he spoke to her.

“Hey, Rory.”
“Hi, Jess,” she replied. “Um, how are you?”

“Not much different from when I left the inn a couple of hours ago,” he told her, amusement evident in his voice.

“Right, of course,” she said, face in her hand a moment as she fought for something sensible to segue into. “Um, that’s good.”

“Why’d you call?” asked Jess then, and Rory wished she had an answer to it.

“I just...”

“I’m glad you called,” he told her when she seemed stuck for a reply.

“Really?” she smiled, he could hear the expression in her voice. “Me too, and I did have a reason, kind of,” she admitted then confidence building now she knew he was happy to hear from her. “Y’know me and Mom just got home from the inn, and we took one of those sleighs through the town to our house. Would you believe that one of the snowmen for the competition got smashed overnight?”

“Really?” asked Jess, not missing a beat. “Not yours, I hope?”

“No, not ours,” said Rory. “The really fancy one that had beaten ours to first place.”

“Huh. Guess that means you win now?”

Rory could hear the smirk in Jess’ voice and she just knew she was right in thinking he was the culprit. Somehow it felt wrong to say so, and so much nicer to have a secret that neither of them was even going to mention. It gave her a warm giddy feeling to know that somebody would want to commit such vandalism just for her. It was particularly nice knowing that somebody was Jess.

“I guess it does,” she answered him eventually. “Sucks for the other guy though. Y’know, the one with the power buffer and all.”

“He’ll get over it,” said Jess definitely. “So that’s why you called me? To tell me you won a snowman competition?”

“Pretty much,” replied Rory, deliberately not giving in to his goading.

“That’s cool,” he told her with a more genuine smile that she could just hear. “It’s, er... It’s gonna be weird not seeing you for a couple of weeks. I mean, every day at school and then not at all...”

“It will be weird,” she agreed with a sigh she couldn’t help. “But hey, you have Paris to keep you company over the holiday period, right?”

“Yeah, because she’s a delight all of the time,” he dead-panned. “Seriously though, she’s okay. Sometimes nice even.”

“She can be,” agreed Rory. “It doesn’t always last long but yeah, she can be nice.”

There was an almost awkward silence then, neither sure what else to say. Talking about snowmen and Paris was safe ground. Anything else felt like ‘Danger, Will Robinson’ territory, unless they got into books or movies or something, and they covered a lot of that when they were talking together at the inn.

“Knowing Paris, she’s probably listening into this call just to keep up to date on what’s happening,”
said Jess then.

“Seriously?”

“Nah, I doubt it. Why? Were you planning on saying something scandalous, Miss Gilmore?”

Rory blushed at the very implication, despite being alone in her own room where nobody could see her. She bit down on her lip wondering how best to respond, and finally settled on a subject change.

“I guess Christmas is a weird concept in the Geller household. They do Hanukkah instead, right?”

“Apparently,” replied Jess, letting the shift in topic go by unmentioned. “Liz was way too into the whole thing given that she has never, ever been religious before. Now she’s on the Christmas kick too. Ira seems okay with it but Paris is already developing a twitch every time she hears a carol playing or the ringing of sleigh bells.”

Rory giggled at that. “Poor Paris.”

“Poor Jess, actually,” he amended. “She needs to vent, she comes to me now. I’m like her personal agony aunt. I think I liked it better when she hated me.”

“Come on, it must be nice to have company,” argued Rory, at which Jess sighed.

“Maybe,” he conceded. “Honestly? It’s nice to be able to talk to you again.”

“Ditto,” she smiled in reply. “And hey, just because it’s the holidays, we can still talk. You can call, if you want, or come visit.”

“Maybe” he said again. “And I guess you’re coming to Liz’s insane New Year party, right?”

Rory thought she heard hope in his voice when he asked the question and it made her heart skip a little.

“We’re coming. Me and Mom, I mean,” she told him. “I’m guessing we’ll head over with Luke. Y’know they kissed last night?”

“Seriously?” asked Jess. “Huh. Well, that would explain the constant stupid goofy grin on Luke’s face after that sleigh ride they took. Liz will be thrilled to the point of her head exploding.”

“Geez, I hope not,” giggled Rory in reply. “But I do think it’s cool that they’re finally doing something about their relationship. They’ve been friends all this time, it just makes sense.”

“True love is friendship set on fire,” quoted Jess.

Rory felt a shudder run through her that she didn’t mind at all.

“So I hear,” she replied too softly.

The moment was broken fast when suddenly Lorelai yelled her daughter’s name so loud that Jess heard it through the phone.

“I think you’re needed.”

“Sounds like. So, I guess I’ll talk to you again soon.”

“Count on it.” he promised. “Bye, Rory.”
Bye, Jess.”

Lorelai couldn’t believe how hard it was to select clothes to wear to go to the diner. She went there pretty much every day, sometimes more than once in a day. Today was different. It hadn’t been long since she waved Luke off from the inn, and yet she just couldn’t bear to not see him again for hours or days or whatever. No, there had definitely not been enough talking done about this new relationship they may or may not be having. The kiss was beyond great, but the talk needed to be had and quite honestly, even though Lorelai wasn’t sure what it was she wanted to say, she felt the need to have the talk happen now rather than later.

Rory helped her mother select an appropriate outfit and sent her off to the diner by herself. As she quite rightly said, Lorelai and Luke didn’t need a chaperone. The weird part was how Lorelai couldn’t stop shaking as she hopped out of the Jeep and headed to the door of the diner.

“Stop it, you’re being crazy!” she told her quivering fingers as they reached for the handle and pushed.

Heading inside, she looked up to see Luke not behind the counter but over at a table, noting down an order. Lorelai stayed put in the open doorway just staring as Luke looked over and stared back, the pair of them smiling like idiots. The moment was broken when Kirk tried to squeeze past Lorelai in the doorway and only succeeded and in almost knocking her over.

“I did say ‘excuse me’,” said Kirk plainly “Twice actually.”

“It’s fine,” Lorelai assured him. “I’m fine, it’s... fine,” she repeated way too many times, immediately feeling dumb.

Rushing to the counter, Lorelai hopped up on the stool by itself on the far left and waited for Luke to be free to talk. He was with her inside of two minutes, pouring her a large cup of coffee.

“Hi,” he greeted her as he handed it over.

“Hi,” she replied in kind. “So, er... Bracebridge Dinner was fun,” she smiled too wide.

“Yeah,” he agreed with a similarly happy look. “I thought the sleigh ride thing was a really great idea,” he told her with a significant look.

Lorelai glanced down into her coffee, almost embarrassed that Luke was actually referencing their kissing in public. So far the town gossips didn’t seem to know much if anything at all, which was a miracle. They would soon know all if he kept looking at her that way, but Lorelai couldn’t bring herself to ask Luke to stop.

“About that,” she said eventually. “I was wondering if you were available sometime, later today maybe? To talk about... the sleigh ride, and any future sleigh riding that we might be doing together,” she said pointedly.

Luke smirked at the terrible analogy and then put his elbows on the counter, leaning in close to Lorelai.

“Y’know what happened on that sleigh ride... Lorelai, I’m not in this just for the... Well, what I’m trying to say is, I don’t know how you see this going, this you and me thing, but for me? I’m in. I am all in,” he told her almost too seriously, looking into her eyes with such an intensity that Lorelai couldn’t breathe for a minute.
“Um, yeah,” she managed eventually. “I mean, yes, Luke. I’m all in too,” she promised, her hand finding his on the counter. “I don’t think there’s a second choice for us. It’s everything or nothing, so... Everything sounds good, doesn’t it?”

“Everything sounds great,” he smiled, picking up the hand that had been wrapped around his and raising it to his lips to kiss. “You and me, Lorelai.”

“Me and you, Luke,” she replied in kind, giggling like the teen she hadn’t been in years. “Wow, the rumour mill is going to have a field day with this one.”

“You care?” he checked, at which Lorelai shook her head.

“Of course, if they’re going to talk, we could give them something actually worth talking about,” she suggested.

Luke didn’t need telling twice, happily slipping his free hand into her hair and pulling her closer until their lips met. Lorelai suddenly wondered why she had ever worried about coming over here this morning, and she knew for sure that this year she was guaranteed to have a very merry Christmas.
Chapter 19

The holiday season was almost a genuinely happy time in the Geller household. Jess hadn’t really known what to expect. After all, here he was in a great big house with a rich new step-daddy that seemed willing to spend cash more than time when it came to those closest too him. On the other hand, Ira and Paris were Jewish, so Christmas really wasn’t a thing for them, and given that if Liz and Jess ever did have a denomination it would probably be more on the Christian side of things, they weren’t exactly all over the idea of Hanukkah. Thankfully, with none of them being all that strict about their religious beliefs, they were willing to combine holidays and just have a good time. Plenty of food, a whole lot of gifts, and perhaps more booze than was strictly necessary for the adults.

Jess did so hate when his mother got drunk. As if Liz wasn’t embarrassing enough sober, when the alcohol started flowing she got even looser, in the tongue and in her morals. Most days she would end up trying to seduce her husband, whether they were alone or in the presence of their kids. That was the time when Paris and Jess made a sharp exit if they had the misfortune to be around when it happened.

Neither teen minded so much being alone in their rooms. With all the books they could ever want to read, each with their own TV and stereo, they were well occupied with stuff to do. They even spent a little time together. Talking about school or whatever they had been reading was safe enough. They mentioned Rory a few times, it was difficult not to, especially when she was the only other person either of them was in contact with over the break.

Despite the suggestion that Jess might come over to Stars Hollow to visit with Luke, and see Rory at the same time, it hadn’t happened yet. There were a few days when the snow had come, making the roads too dangerous to attempt, and with Liz being drunk more often than not, she certainly wasn’t in a fit state to see her brother. Instead of seeing her, Jess had to make do with talking to Rory on the phone. They certainly never seemed to run out of things to talk about. Today was different, today was New Year’s Eve and there was going to be a party. Apparently, Liz had invited just about everybody they knew. That meant not just Luke, but Lorelai and Rory too.

“Isn’t it a little last minute to be reorganising an event like this?” asked Paris when she found Liz in the middle of rearranging the first floor of the house at eight in the morning.

“Never too late to make the perfect New Year’s party, Paris,” her step-mother assured her.

“Unless it’s past midnight,” said Jess smartly from his place sat on the bottom of the stairs.

He never even looked up from his book when he spoke, but he had a feeling Paris was rolling her eyes at his comment, even as Liz laughed. She wasn’t drunk yet, which was a refreshing change, but something was up with her. Ira laughed. She wasn’t drunk yet, which was a refreshing change, but something was up with her. Ira wasn’t around, which was weird. People didn’t generally work on New Year’s and he had said the week before that he planned to be around the house, spending time with his family until 2003 had dawned. This morning he was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s father?” asked Paris then. “Does he know about your latest ridiculous ideas?”

She had her arms folded across her chest, turning left and right as the help swept by with vases that were being put away safely and furniture that was being pushed to the sides to make more space for guests. Jess looked up at the clattering sound of a maid dropping a pile of silver trays onto the laminate.
Liz’s hand went to the chest as she jumped at the sound.

“Could you be more careful?!?” she snapped.

Jess frowned. No doubt his mother was suffering from a hangover that wasn’t so bad until the loud noise made her head rattle. That meant she would be headed towards the minibar before long, hair of the dog. He hated this part. The drinking getting worse, the fighting with the latest husband or boyfriend. It was usually all downhill from here, and just when Jess was getting comfortable too.

Shaking his head he closed up his book, shoved it in his back pocket and got up to head upstairs. He heard Paris repeat her question to Liz and things got fractious. So much for those two getting along, and they did sometimes. It was hard for anyone to like Liz for too long, and Jess supposed the same could be said for Paris. The whole thing gave him a headache and he was more than grateful to have his own room to hide in. At least that was his plan until Paris came chasing after him.

“She is so infuriating!”

“Pretty sure that comes under the category of ‘preaching to the converted’,” said Jess smartly. “And hey, look who’s talking,” he smirked.

Paris ought to be just as mad at him as she was at Liz, but she wasn’t. There was no malice in what Jess said to her, not these days. They got along with each other because it made life in the house that much easier to bear. When Ira was absent and Liz was passed out drunk, at least the kids had some company, another person around who understood what it was to have parents that just didn’t care enough.

“So, I’ll bet you’re looking forward to this ridiculous party,” said Paris then.

“Yeah, ‘cause I play so well with others,” replied Jess, all sarcasm as always.

“Don’t act dumb,” she shook her head at him. “Rory is invited and you know it. Tell me you won’t be pleased to see her, I dare you.”

Jess loved to rise to a challenge, but he wasn’t much of a liar, especially when there was no point to it anyway. Paris would know it was bull if he said he cared nothing for Rory. He had already confessed before that the reverse was true.

“I don’t mind seeing her,” he said instead. “You shouldn’t have a problem with her being here either, she’s your friend too.”

“Granted,” Paris agreed. “But I’m not the one who wants to date her.”

There was a comment on Jess’ tongue that he bit back, unwilling to share. There were times when he wondered about Paris and her feelings for Rory. Two people didn’t fight like those two did without caring deeply for each other. What form that caring took, on Paris’ side at least, Jess was never entirely sure. He shook his head and let the vague musing fade.

“Me and Rory, we’re just friends,” he said definitely. “That’s what she wants.”

“Maybe, for now,” said Paris, nodding her head. “But we both know that won’t last. I’m not dumb, I know men and women can have platonic relationships. I mean, we’re coping just fine,” she said, quickly moving on before he could pass comment. “But you and Rory are not seeing each other in a brother-sister way. Not unless we suddenly moved to Hicksville.”

Jess smirked at the joke and looked away. As well as he and Paris got along these days, it would still
be weird to come out and say exactly what his feelings were for Rory. He knew that Paris was well aware from what had been said, and from what he hadn’t too. Teenage guys weren’t supposed to go around telling people they were in love or whatever. It just wasn’t how things were done.

Another crashing sound from downstairs made both of them jump. Liz screamed at another staff member and Jess visibly winced. Paris couldn’t help but notice his expression and called him on it.

“Is this what she always does?” she checked, getting her step-brother’s attention. “I mean, you said she had patterns of behaviour, that there had been a lot of men.”

Jess nodded his head but didn’t say a word. Before Paris could question him further, he had disappeared into his room to hide. He had well-learnt patterns of behaviour too, and the habit of them was difficult to break.

“You okay, hon?” asked Lorelai as Luke stood before the Geller house looking awkward as anything.

She figured it was the jacket and tie making him squirm, and maybe being without his baseball cap. As hot as Luke looked all dressed up, Lorelai knew he probably wasn’t comfortable. Fancy and expensive wasn’t his style at all. Being here was not his idea of fun.

“Er, yeah, sure,” he told his girlfriend with a smile. “I’m okay. I’m escorting the two most beautiful women in Stars Hollow to a fancy party. Why would I not be okay?”

“He’s smooth,” Lorelai told Rory happily.

Her daughter giggled at both the compliment and her mother’s response. It was really great to see her two favourite people together at last. They made a great couple, Rory had never doubted that they would. Over Christmas, Luke had been at the house several times and it had been a real family-type occasion. Rory was only disappointed not to have seen Jess at all. They called each other a few times, but the much talked of visiting hadn’t happened yet. It was a happy moment for Rory when she woke up this morning and realised it was the day of Liz's New Year’s party. At last, Rory would be in the same room as Jess again, albeit they were likely to be surrounded by a lot of other people too, including both her mother and his, and Paris to boot.

Luke, Lorelai, and Rory were welcomed to the party by two harassed looking maids who took their coats and directed them towards tables of drinks and food. Servers passed amongst the guests with further treats, and somewhere in the wild hubbub of conversation and music, Rory supposed the hosts were hiding, as well as her friends.

“Wow, this is a real swinging affair!” said Lorelai, loud enough to be heard over too much noise. “Liz really knows how to throw a shindig.”

“Apparently,” replied Luke, getting more uncomfortable by the minute in such an atmosphere.

Lorelai sensed the increased tension in his body and took a hold of his hand, gripping it tightly.

“Hey, how about we make a circuit of the room, try to find sensible drinks on the way to the quietest possible spot?” she offered.

“Sounds like a plan,” he agreed with a grateful smile. “Rory?” he checked with her if she was coming with them.

“Oh, um... I think I might go look for Paris,” she told them. “She’s probably in a corner somewhere,
rocking back and forth, reciting The Raven or something.”

“That Paris sure knows how to party,” Lorelai dead-panned. “Try to find us right after midnight, okay, babe? Luke wants to get back to town before all the real crazy stuff happens.”

“Okay,” agreed Rory before the Gilmore girls headed in their separate directions.

Rory had meant what she said about finding Paris. She knew her friend would be hating this party, but would doubtless have been forced to attend since it was thrown by her step-mother. Of course, if Rory were to run across Jess on her way to finding Paris, she wouldn’t mind that at all.

With all the people present, Rory was starting to wonder if she would ever find anyone she knew. Everybody and anybody seemed to be here, from old to young, from rich to less-rich. Liz sure knew a lot of people, that much Rory was certain of. It occurred to her somewhere in the crush that her grandparents might even be here. After all, the Hartford elite tended to have rules about inviting their peers to all proper functions. Rory had to wonder though if Richard and Emily wouldn’t already have a prior engagement with what they would consider more suitable persons. Certainly they were not the type of people to mix with the Liz Marianos of the world, unless they absolutely had to.

“Feeling lost, Little Red?” asked a voice.

Rory spun around so fast she almost pitched over into Jess’ arms. As it was, his hands shot out to her shoulders to steady her, and she laughed from feeling so stupid.

“Hi,” she greeted him, loudly since he would never hear her otherwise.

“Hey,” he replied, retracting his hands from her body the moment it got awkward, which took all of point five of a second. “You came.”

“Yeah, apparently,” she replied, shifting her feet. “Um, this is a great party.”

“It’s a little loud,” he noted since they were both straining to hear each other over the din of music, conversation, and hearty laughter all around.

Rory nodded her agreement, and then looked a little confused when he gestured for her to follow him. Jess led Rory through the crowd, having to say ‘excuse me’ several times just to make it to the other side of the room. Suddenly a door opened, seemingly out of nowhere, and Rory rushed through it behind Jess. Once it was closed, she took a good look at where they were now and gasped at rows and rows of leather bound books.

“Wow!”

“Yeah, I thought you’d say that.”

Jess was in no way surprised to see Rory looking like a kid in a candy store as she took in the library they were now stood in. He had to have some kind of sanctuary from the party and Liz had absolutely insisted he was not to sneak off to his room at all. The library was on the first floor, and therefore at the very least party adjacent. For all that he had explored the house, he had found this particular cavern of wondrous reading material only recently, and then only because Paris had let him in on the secret of its existence.

“It’s technically my father’s private collection,” she said, suddenly appearing from a large chair in the corner and making Rory jump. “He hardly ever has time to be in here or read any of these anymore,” she sighed. “Makes a good hiding place for me, and for the step-brother,” she said with a hint of a smile as she glanced his way.
“She loves me really,” said Jess with a grin that made Rory giggle.

“This place is amazing!” she enthused.

“It’s more my idea of a party than that animal house out there,” Paris told her. “Although we are lacking in the food and drink department, so one of us will have to make regular trips out into the wild kingdom.”

“We can take turns raiding the buffet table, it’s not a big deal,” said Jess with shrug. “Besides, if we don’t each put in an appearance once in a while, people will get suspicious.”

“We can spend the whole party in here?” asked Rory excitedly. “And your dad won’t mind?” she asked Paris.

“My father won’t even notice,” she confirmed. “His mother will be too drunk to care, and I’m guessing your mother and her new boyfriend will only have eyes for each other.”

“Probably,” Rory confessed. “I mean, I love that Mom and Luke have finally got this far but I was getting a distinct third wheel vibe tonight.”

“Then we make our own fun,” said Jess with a look that made Rory shiver somehow, even from right across the room.

“Third wheel,” Paris muttered to herself, turning her back on the other two. “I know that feeling.”

It was a fairly subdued affair in the Geller family library. There was talking for some of the time, lively book-related debates amongst the three friends in which nobody would give an inch, but for the most part they were happy to dive into reading the wonderful books that surrounded them.

Every half hour or so, one of them took a turn at fighting their way through the party guests for food supplies and soda, making sure to wave at one parent or other adult that might miss them if they weren’t around on a regular basis. It worked out pretty well.

The night drew in fast and it had been pitch black outside for a while. It was only when the clock on the mantle shelf played its quarter hour chimes that Rory looked up and realised there was only fifteen minutes left of the current year.

“It’s so weird, the whole New Year thing,” she mused, closing up her book and staring up at the clock. “I mean, tomorrow is another day, just like today. It shouldn’t be any different, and yet it’s a whole new year and that seems special somehow.”

“If we’d maintained the Julian calendar, this wouldn’t be a new year. Before that, there were all manner of ways to measure time, depending on your culture and belief system.”

“Oh good, a history lesson,” said Jess in full-on deadpan mode.

Paris opened her mouth to snipe back at him but then changed her mind. Rory and Jess were sitting awfully close together at this point. She hadn’t really noticed when that happened but there they were. She supposed they had both moved up closer to the fireplace on purpose because it was getting colder, but they didn’t actually need to be nearer to each other for that. Ten minutes to go until midnight, Paris had a feeling there may be an alternate motive at play, and she really didn’t need to bear witness to that.

Getting up from her seat, she headed for the door. Rory looked startled by her sudden exit.
“You can’t possibly be hungry again,” she said. “Even I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Bathroom break,” said Paris shortly with a half a smile, and then she was gone.

Rory felt herself shaking as she turned back to face Jess, though she barely spared him a glance before her eyes went to the book in her lap again. This was weird. So far she and Jess had only been alone twice this evening when Paris had made food runs. Both times they had talked about nothing more serious than school or TV. Even in all those phone conversations they’d had, they never got into anything real. Now suddenly there seemed to be pressure to do so, as midnight approached and all that might yet entail.

“End of the year,” she said aloud without really meaning to. “New beginnings on the way.”

“So they tell me,” Jess nodded. “Got any New Year’s resolutions?” he asked then, putting the book he had been reading down on the table.

“Um, not really,” said Rory, following suit and putting her book down too. “You?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “I mean, you think there’s something I should be getting resolute about?”

“I don’t know,” she replied just as he had, sure she never had this much trouble just looking at or talking to another person before.

It was crazy because on the phone they could go on for hours just talking about anything. They had been able to do so face to face until the kissing started happening. Rory regretted how screwed up things had gotten, but at the same time, the urge to be close to Jess again was overwhelming her. Now there was no reason to back off, except for the fact that maybe he had changed his mind about her. Rory couldn’t be sure without asking, and she really, really couldn’t bring herself to do that.

“I guess, looking back at the last few months,” she said eventually, “we should both try harder to be better friends.”

“Friends?” echoed Jess. “Yeah, it’s... it’s always good to be a good friend.”

He looked bemused, almost pained by the comment. Rory actually took that as a good sign. Maybe he really didn’t want to be her friend anymore. Maybe he was still looking for more.

“Of course, it’s also important to be direct with people,” she tried, “and honest.”

“Honesty is the best policy,” Jess agreed, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

“I heard that,” she agreed, leaning in a little too.

“Something you feel like you want to be real honest about, Rory?”

“Um, well...” she faltered, eyes dropping to the carpet a moment. “Jess?”

“What?” he asked, catching her gaze the moment she looked up again.

Outside the door, the music had died down as the whole party started to countdown to midnight.

‘Ten, nine, eight, seven...’

“I, um...” said Rory, swallowing hard. “Jess, I... I really hope you were planning on kissing me at midnight,” she rushed out all of a sudden.
‘...six, five, four...’
“Rory?” said Jess, his fingers reaching out to tuck her hair behind her ear.
“What?”
“I was.”
‘...three, two, one...’

Rory barely managed to take in a breath before Jess’ lips were on hers. This time was different to the two previous occasions. This time she was free to enjoy the moment and not worry that she was doing anything wrong. They weren’t acting or pretending in any way. This was Jess kissing Rory and her kissing him back. This was weeks, months even, of repressed feelings coming to a head in a perfect moment that neither wanted to end, and yet it had to eventually. They parted breathless, foreheads still touching, and both of them smiling like idiots.

“You feeling the urge to run at all?” he asked too seriously to be teasing.

Rory continued to smile anyway. “Nope,” she confessed happily. “Quite the opposite actually.”

“Oh yeah?” Jess grinned right back at her, leaning in the same moment she did as they fell into another kiss.

Beyond the door were multiple cheers of ‘Happy New Year’. It sure did feel like one to Rory and Jess, and this was only just the beginning.
Chapter 20

Rory Gilmore had never had a problem with going to school. She loved the concept, the teachers and the learning, not to mention the books. Knowledge was power and she felt all-powerful as she absorbed every morsel of knowledge that she could. Unfortunately, since she transferred to Chilton, school had not always been a happy place to go, despite the wonder of learning. The classes were harder, the travelling time longer, and some of the people were not so nice. Now things were different.

Going back after the Winter break ought to feel like a hardship, but not this year. Rory headed into school with the widest of grins on her face and nobody wondered why when they saw Jess Mariano waiting by her locker, the two of them engaging in what could only be described as a serious lip-lock the moment they laid eyes on each other.

The Chilton gossip factory went into over-drive, and though it might be a little embarrassing, Rory couldn’t really give a damn. She was very happy to finally be dating Jess, and she really didn’t care who knew about it. The miracle for Rory was realising she had Paris’ blessing on the whole thing.

“Seriously? Anything that stops Sir Mopes-A-Lot from bringing down the mood of a room the second he walks in is fine with me,” she had said the moment she realised the couple were finally together.

Rory took it as a good sign, and the smile that Jess and Paris shared proved that she actually was happy for him. It was actually kind of sweet. Rory liked knowing Jess and Paris had each other as well as her. They sure did seem to need a little support given what was going on at home. In the week that followed Winter break, both alluded to some awkwardness between their parents. Rory already knew Liz was a drinker and that Ira didn’t always take kindly to that aspect of her character. Things certainly seemed to have gotten worse sometime during the holidays, and though Jess didn’t talk about it much, Paris had been known to share with Rory quite frankly on the topic. Rory didn’t like to feel too sorry for her boyfriend because he really wasn’t a fan of sympathy, so she tried to act normal even when it was only an hour since Paris had an all-out vent about how ungrateful and awful Liz could be sometimes, and how Ira should get his head out from up his butt already.

“So I guess I’ll see you tomorrow,” said Rory down by the bus stop.

“How about you see a little more of me now?” asked Jess, tugging her closer by her backpack. “You think that bus has room for one more?”

“Of course it does,” she laughed at the silly question. “But why are you coming to Stars Hollow?”

“Um, maybe because my girlfriend lives there?” he countered seriously.

Rory felt a shiver run through her whole body.


“Well, what else am I supposed to call you?” he asked her. “I’m not really ghetto enough to pull off ‘woman’.”

“And I am truly grateful for it,” she giggled, planting a kiss on his lips. “I like girlfriend.”

“Me too,” he assured her. “Now I think we should get on this bus before it leaves without us.”
They did just that but no sooner had they taken their seats than Rory was face-palming and making sounds of frustration.

“Damnit! I forgot. I’m supposed to go straight to the inn after school and help out my mom with this event,” she told Jess, noticing the bus was already moving and cursing herself. “I’m so sorry, Jess.”

“Hey, it’s no big deal,” he promised her, gripping her hand in his own. “I can hang out for a while until you’re free. I kinda wanted to drop in at the diner and see Luke anyway.”

Rory smiled at that.

“Really? That’s great,” she enthused. “I mean, I’m glad that you and Luke are getting to know each other. He’s such a great guy, and you’re a great guy. It’s good that you great guys are getting along great,” she rambled, much to Jess’ amusement.

“Never lose that extensive vocabulary, okay?” he teased her, kissing her cheek.

“Shut up!” she countered, blushing like she always did, but her smile remained.

It really did make her happy to be with Jess, just as she knew it made her mother happy to be with Luke. A cynic would be waiting for something horrible to happen right now, which was perhaps why Rory couldn’t shake the feeling that maybe the whole Liz and Ira fighting thing was a bigger deal than it might seem on the surface. Maybe Paris wasn’t exaggerating, maybe things were really that bad. It made Rory worry because if those two split up, it could only result in Liz going away and taking Jess with her. Rory couldn’t help but grip her boyfriend’s hand tighter the moment she considered such a horrible thing.

“You okay?” he checked, as he turned to look and found her frowning,

“Me? Um, yeah. I’m okay,” she smiled, finding she didn’t really have to fake it when he looked at her that way. “More than okay,” she promised, letting her head drop onto his shoulder then as they watched the world whip past the window, all the way to Stars Hollow.

Luke looked happy when he saw Jess come into the diner after school. Honestly, as much as he appreciated seeing Liz when she came around, his sister could be a little intense. Jess had come along with his mom because he felt he had to in the beginning, but recently he had dropped by a couple of times on his own. Luke wasn’t dumb enough to think that it was all about him. His nephew had an interest in Rory, which had led to them finally getting together at New Years. Of course, Jess couldn’t be here looking for his girlfriend now. They could only have gotten out of school a half hour ago or so.

“Hey,” he greeted his nephew, crossing between tables. “Um, you wanna grab a seat? I’ll be with you in a sec.”

“Sure.” Jess nodded, doing just that.

The place sure was busy, maybe busier than Jess had ever seen it before. He pulled out a book and settled down at the counter to read. He was through four chapters before Luke finally appeared in front of him.

“Sorry, it’s a little crazy in here today,” he apologised. “You want a soda?”

“Hungry?”

“Not really.”

Luke got Jess his soda and then wasn’t sure what to say next. Asking out right why is nephew was here seemed wrong somehow, like he was poking his nose in where it wasn’t wanted. At the same time, it was strange that he was here without either Liz or Rory, and apparently when he wasn’t hungry.

“You’re wondering why I’m here like this,” said Jess then as if he read the thoughts right out of Luke’s head.

“Kind of, yeah,” his uncle confessed with a smile.

“Nothing’s wrong, if that’s what you’re worried about,” said Jess definitely. Actually, I was wondering if I could do you a favour, or if we could do each other a favour,” he explained awkwardly. “I need a job.”

“A job?”

“Y’know where you do a task for number of hours and then get paid for it?”

“I know what a job is, smart mouth.”

“Sorry. It’s just that I figured you might need a hand here. Waiting tables, taking orders, that whole thing”, said Jess, waving his hand in a random gesture. “Say no if you want, I just thought-”

“You could work here,” Luke interrupted. “I mean, if you really want to. I could use the help and somebody I can actually trust.”

Jess looked up sharply at that word. He didn’t get a lot of trust out of people. Given some of the things he got up to in the past, as well as who his mother was, it wasn’t exactly a surprise that he wasn’t top of the reliable list for most people. Rory trusted him, and that meant a lot, but to hear that Luke did too, that was something else.

“I gotta ask,” said Luke then. “Why would you want a job? I mean, you live in the big house with the rich step-father who doesn’t seem to skimp on buying whatever the hell Liz wants, so I can’t think you’re feeling too hard done by.”

Jess squirmed in his seat though he tried his best to hide how awkward he felt. Lying to a guy who just told him how trustworthy he seemed didn’t sit well with Jess, but he couldn’t tell Luke the real reason he was here looking for a source of extra income. Sure, Ira Geller was a generous guy who wanted his family to have everything, but there could easily come a time when Jess and Liz weren’t his family anymore. Jess couldn’t say for sure that that time was imminent, but he felt things could be going south and his survival instinct told him to be prepared.

“There’s something to be said for the dollar you earn over the dollar that’s handed to you,” he shrugged, not a lie but not really the whole truth that Luke was looking for either.

It didn’t matter. When his uncle nodded that he understood, Jess let out a sigh of relief and accepted that he had got away with his bending of the truth. For now it would have to do, because telling Luke that Liz and Ira might be on the rocks was just not an option at this point. It would cause more problems than it solved, he was sure on that.

“Okay,” said Luke. “You can have a job here.”

“Ah well,” his uncle foundered a little, adjusting his hat. “If you wanted to, I guess I could show you the ropes now. There’s not much to the taking orders and the serving, it’s your basic notepad-based system,” he explained. “We can get into the heavier stuff later if you want to know about the stock room and all.”

“Sounds good.” Jess nodded, shrugging out of his blazer and rolling up his shirt sleeves. “How late do you stay open?”

“Usually nine or ten o’clock,” explained Luke. “But actually, er... Well, tonight I’m supposed to be going out with Lorelai. It’s kind of our first official date.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Luke smiled widely. “I’m going to close up early because I can’t leave Caesar here alone-”


“It’s not quite as bad as that,” said Luke, rolling his eyes. “But you hardly even started yet. I mean, the dinner rush would be over before I leave and I’d be back to close up,” he reconsidered then as Jess joined him behind the counter. “The evenings aren’t usually that crazy here, so you could probably cope okay...”

“Hey, Luke. I can do it,” said his nephew firmly. “I want to. I have all afternoon to learn everything I need to know. I learn fast, you know this. Besides, you just said you trust me, right?”

Luke had a feeling something was going on here, he just didn’t know quite what it was. Somehow he knew that asking wouldn’t get him anywhere. It never had with Liz and was unlikely to be any different with Jess. Still, the kid had a point about proving himself trustworthy as well as being a fast learner. It was only for a few hours, Caesar would be around, and Jess was so very eager to do this.

“You’re family, and you’re a good kid,” he said then. “You make Rory happy and that puts you top of my list of good guys, so, yeah, okay,” he smiled. “We’ll see how you do tonight.”

“Thanks,” Jess smiled right back at him. “Y’know Rory says nothing but good stuff about you too.”

Luke was genuinely touched to hear that. “That’s... That’s nice.”

The house was quiet when Jess got home, too quiet for it to be a good thing. Sure, it was kind of late, but not so late that everybody would normally be so silent. It made a cold shiver go through his body that Jess didn’t care for at all. He headed for the stairs and climbed them two at a time as quietly as he could for fear of alerting anyone (namely his mother or step-father) to his presence. It was only when he hit the landing that he heard the music. Wincing at the noise, he crossed to Paris’ room and knocked sharply on the door, opening it before the ‘come in’ was even fully said.

“They stopped yelling, so you can turn the angry girl music down,” he told her, loud enough to be heard over the din.

A sullen looking Paris moved to flip off the stereo then returned to her position sat lotus style on the bed, clutching a pillow tight to her chest. Jess wasn’t certain if she had been actually crying or not, but she didn’t look at all happy. It didn’t take a genius to know that the parents had been fighting
again. Between the music up here and the eerie quiet everywhere else, Jess just knew it.

“I don’t even like it,” said Paris of her music choice. “It’s just something to drown it out.”

Jess sighed and leaned on the door jamb. “I know how that goes,” he sympathised. “You okay?”

Paris nodded even though she looked the complete opposite. Then her nose wrinkled up.

“You smell like fried food.”

“Comes from working in a diner.”


“For my Uncle Luke in Stars Hollow,” explained Jess, looking down at his own hands as he got some non-existent dirt out from under his nail. “Figured it was a good idea to have some cash of my own.”

“But that’s...” Paris began, stopping abruptly when Jess looked up and met her eyes with an expression she didn’t care for. “You don’t think you’ll be here much longer,” she said then, a statement not a question because she was already certain she was right.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Sometimes these things get figured out, other times...” he tailed off, shaking his head. “Let’s just say I’ve seen it all before with Liz. I like to be prepared.”

Paris nodded that she understood but couldn’t quite bear to look at Jess for a few moments. It was weird how they had figured things out and become some kind of friends. Paris never asked for a brother and would say even now that she hated having one, but it would be a lie. Seventeen years as an only child made her a little selfish perhaps, but having Jess to share the rough times with lately had actually been kind of nice. Even Liz treated her nicely most of the time, and Paris had got used to them being in her home. It was almost a family for a while there, and now there was a good chance it was falling apart. It wasn’t fair.

Talking about it would be impossible. Paris and Jess were support and comfort for each other sometimes, but it was a very unspoken thing. They never said they loved each other, or even that they liked each other. If anyone asked (except for Rory who knew the truth) they would speak only of hate and frustration at being forced into the role of siblings. They couldn’t say anything about what they really felt, it would be too strange.

“Rory finally cracked and told me her PSAT score,” said Paris softly, not knowing what else to say.

“Oh yeah?” replied Jess, but he said nothing more.

“You’re still not going to tell me yours, are you?” his step-sister checked, watching the smirk grow wider on his lips.

“Night, Paris,” he said, backing up through the doorway.

“Jess!” she called after him, scrambling from the bed to give chase. “C’mon, what difference does it make?” she asked, but he was at his own door now and about to disappear through it. “Infuriating asshole!” she told him crossly.

“You’ll miss me when I’m gone!” he called back over his shoulder, a second before the bedroom door closed.
Paris hovered in her own doorway a moment, another wave of sadness washing over her.

“Yes,” she said softly. “I actually think I will.”
Chapter 21

Rory suggested a couple of times that maybe she could go over to Jess and Paris’ house sometimes instead of her boyfriend always coming to the Hollow. He insisted he was fine with coming over and alluded to the fact that the atmosphere at home still wasn’t all that great. He always changed the subject pretty fast after that, so Rory didn’t push. It was easier not to talk about what may or may not be going on with Liz and Ira. If they were fighting, if things were getting bad and they were close to breaking up, Rory didn’t want to know. The very thought of losing Jess from her life just when they had finally got close, it made her feel nauseous. She was much happier living in ignorance for now.

Besides, Jess pointed out that he needed to be in Stars Hollow anyway now he was picking up shifts at the diner. That night when he had covered whilst Luke and Lorelai had their first official date was a week ago now, and he had proven himself more than capable. Luke was happy to have him work a couple of days after school each week and a shift on a Saturday too. It worked out well because Jess could simply catch the bus home with Rory the week days, and on that first weekend, Paris had actually volunteered to drive him over.

“What’s the matter, sis?” he teased her. “So worried about me leaving that you have to spend every minute you can with me?”

It was supposed to be a joke but clearly didn’t land so well. Jess hadn’t meant to upset Paris but knew he had, even though she denied it hotly.

“If you must know, I’m writing a piece for the Franklin about the seedy underbelly of the small town,” she explained, arms folded across her chest.

Jess openly laughed at her.

“And you seriously think Stars Hollow is the place to look for that?”

“Just get in the damn car, Mariano!” she snapped.

Though he did as he was told, there was no way Jess could stop laughing. Paris chose to ignore him all the way to Stars Hollow and he didn’t mind at all. It was weird how they were more comfortable around each other now, whether they were sniping, bantering or just in silence. Jess never thought to have a sister, and certainly when he was handed Paris as a potential sibling he was less than happy. Now they were some kind of friends, as weird as that was. If he did end up having to leave this place sooner rather than later, Jess realised there was quite the list of people he would miss, and as unlikely as it seemed, Paris was fairly high up on that list. Not that she was ever going to rank higher than another teenage girl he knew.

Rory was hanging around outside of the diner when Paris pulled the car up to the kerb. Jess was out of the passenger side before his step-sister could even blink, greeting his girlfriend with a kiss.

“Hey,” he said as they parted. “What are you doing out here?”

“Not waiting for you, if that’s what you thought,” said Rory smartly. “My date today is with the one who actually drives the car.”

Jess looked a little green at the implication.

“Please don’t even joke about you and her dating,” he shook his head. “Paris is easily led,” he joked.
“I thought you’d have dug the Wild Things vibe?” his step-sister countered. “After all, you are a guy.”

“I think that constitutes tarring all men with the same brush,” Rory considered.

“I’d be offended if she wasn’t right,” said Jess, smirking wickedly at his girlfriend’s scandalised looks.

A second later he was planting one more kiss on her lips and telling her he’d catch up to her later, before he headed into the diner. “My shift ends at one!” he called over his shoulder.

“I’ll be here!” Rory promised.

Paris only rolled her eyes.

“We have work to do,” she reminded her friend, pulling on her sleeve. “Work that does not involve this much saliva.”

“Eew!” said Rory more to herself than to Paris since she was already stalking off down the street, just expecting Rory to follow. “You lead, Paris. I’ll follow. It’s only my town, after all!”

At one o’clock, Rory had planned to get away from Paris and be at the diner ready to meet Jess. Plans had changed over the course of the morning. Paris seemed way too upset about the fact she could find no signs of crime or filth in the Hollow. Rory had reminded her that she said such a thing was not to be found in her home town, but Paris just seemed so irate about the whole thing. It was beyond her usual annoyance at being proved wrong or whatever, and Rory said as much. That was when the truth came out.

“It’s getting worse,” she admitted, looking away. “Liz and my father. They’re just... The fighting was bad enough, but I got used to that with my parents before. I just turn up the music until the worst of it is over, or get out of the house completely if I can. This is different. This is icy silences, Dad hiding out in his study and not even coming out for dinner, and Liz just drinks...”

Her voice trailed away, her attention on everything but the person she was talking to. Rory felt awful, both for Paris and her herself. The more she thought about the situation between Ira and Liz, the tighter the knot in her stomach became. If they broke up, it meant Liz would leave Hartford and of course she would take Jess with her. Rory felt sick just thinking about it and yet when her eyes drifted to Paris’ sad expression, she felt doubly bad for her friend.

“Okay,” she said at last with a huge and heavy sigh. “I can’t stand you being this pathetically sad, so if you want a story for the Franklin, walk this way.”

Paris was confused but followed as instructed, down one street and across another. She looked up at the sign above the video store, not sure why they were here, until suddenly her eyes focused on an enlarged framed photograph in the window. It was a picture of Rory, and beneath it was an inscription that pretty much named Miss Gilmore as the face of censorship in Stars Hollow.

After that, Paris cheered up considerably. She interviewed Taylor, Kirk, and just about anybody else that stood still long enough. So highly entertained was she by ‘the Rory Curtain’ that there was no more talk of the parents’ fighting or any other depressing topic. As embarrassed as she was by the whole thing initially, Rory was at least glad they had a decent story for this issue of the Franklin, and before she knew it, lunch time was upon them.

“I should go,” said Paris. “You’ll be meeting Jess soon...”
“He doesn’t get off work for another half hour,” said Rory, checking her watch. “We could go and eat at the diner while I wait for him.”

“We could?” asked Paris. “You and me?”

“No, me and the Pope.” Rory rolled her eyes. “Of course, me and you.”

Paris smiled then, a rare occurrence for her when it didn’t result from the pain of another. The girls headed off to Luke’s together and grabbed a table over by the counter. Luke himself took their order and then allowed Jess to finish a few minutes early to eat with his step-sister and his girlfriend. He asked them if they found any scandal and though Paris mentioned the censorship at the video store, she kept Rory’s name out of it, which her friend appreciated. It really was quite embarrassing. After that, they talked about other things - books and movies and school - as they ate their lunch together. They were a happy group, with no talk of the problems Paris and Jess were suffering at home. It was easy enough to forget such issues even existed when they were away from the house. Selfishly, Rory was glad of it. She really didn’t want to think about the possibility of her boyfriend going away any time soon either.

They had taken too long to get this close, and Rory wasn’t ready to not have Jess around. Sure, if he went back to New York some day, that wouldn’t be the end of the world. It was a short drive from the Hollow, but it certainly wouldn’t be the same as seeing him every day like she did now. It made her want to be closer to him, to spend every second she could with him. Her attention was certainly more in Jess’ direction that aimed towards Paris by the time they were done eating. When the kissing started, Paris was quick to excuse herself from the display.

“Oh, Paris, we’re sorry. You don’t have to leave,” insisted Rory.

“No, it’s fine,” she smiled almost genuinely. “Really, I’m not about to be third wheel on this date-like scene. I have better things to do.”

“How will you get home?” Rory asked Jess as Paris gathered up her things to go.

“I’ll catch a bus, it’s fine,” he assured her.

They waved goodbye to Paris who ended up bumping shoulders in Luke’s doorway with another girl coming the other way. Rory looked up to see that it was Lane and smiled, but then immediately frowned as her best friend turned right around as if to leave again.

“Lane!” she called, diving from her seat and Jess’ arms all in one go. “Lane, wait!” she yelled, giving chase. Rory caught up to her on the sidewalk, grabbing her sleeve. “Hey, where are you going?”

“Home, or wherever,” said Lane with a shrug, hugging herself defensively.

“But... Well, why wouldn’t you come in and hang out?” checked Rory, feeling confused by her friend’s attitude.

Lane scoffed. “Because. You’re with Jess, and Paris,” she gestured down the street where said girl had just walked off. “You’re with them. Again,” she said pointedly.

“Well, I was with Paris, but she’s leaving now,” said Rory. “And yes, I am also with Jess, but why is that reason for you to leave? I’d really like for you guys to meet, at last. I’ve told him all about how cool you are.”

Lane looked up from the pavement with a hint of a smile paying at her lips now. “Really?” she
“Of course” Rory confirmed. “Lane, you’re my best friend and Jess is my boyfriend. Of course I want you to meet each other, and maybe be friends too. Why would I not want that?”

“I don’t know,” Lane admitted with a shrug. “I wasn’t feeling very best friendly lately.”

“Lane!” Rory gasped. “You’re always my best friend, you know that,” she insisted, feeling bad that she ever thought anything else was true. “Is something else wrong?” she asked then, when Lane continued to squirm a little.

She looked as if she were going to deny it, even shaking her head to do so. A moment later, Lane reconsidered. She ought to tell the truth, to Rory above all others.

“I... Okay” she sighed eventually. “So I signed up to be a cheerleader,” she admitted.

Rory’s eyes were wider than Lane had ever seen them, but she didn’t laugh, so that was something.

“Wow!” she said with genuine surprise. “I mean... Um, I’m sorry, it just doesn’t sound like you.”

“Well, I’m trying some different stuff,” admitted Lane, just a little defensive still. “It sucks being at Stars Hollow High without you, and even though I don’t blame you for wanting to go to Chilton and being smart enough to go, I need to have friends around for when you’re not around,” she explained. “I don’t mean for that to sound offensive-”


“Good,” Lane nodded once, also smiling now, and everything seemed to be healed in a moment. “So, I get to meet the boyfriend?” she said, peering in through the glass for a better look.

Rory giggled and grabbed her hand to drag her into the diner. “Come on!”

In the end, Rory and Jess didn’t get to spend all that much time alone together. Lane hung out with them for a couple of hours, first at the diner and then out in the square. Eventually, she had to get home, before Mrs Kim had her hide. By that time, Rory was within an hour of needing to get home in time to meet her mom for a movie night. She thought of inviting Jess to join, but soon changed her mind. Rory was wary of alienating her mother like she had Lane by having Jess (or even Paris) be a part of everything. She needed to find a balance, however tempting it was to have her boyfriend with her all of the time, not least because she was afraid of not having him around at all before long.

“So, Lane is cool,” said Jess as Rory walked with him to the bus stop, his arm around her shoulders and hers around his waist.

“She is. Very cool,” she agreed. “You guys sure had a lot of musical taste in common.”

“She knows her rock and punk bands, and she doesn’t think The Bangles are to be revered,” he said with a smirk he couldn’t help.

Rory slapped him in the chest for that remark but laughed anyhow. He liked to make fun of her taste in music sometimes, though they often agreed on what was and was not a good song or band most of the time. It was just one of many playful ‘arguments’ they liked to get into. Another famous one was his love of Ernest Hemingway versus her penchant for Ayn Rand. It was never any more than banter and usually ended in one of them kissing the other just to shut them up. Rory kind of loved it actually.
“One thing you’re going to have to explain to me about Lane though,” said Jess as they sat down together on the bench at the bus stop. “If she’s dating Henry Cho, a guy who I have both Chemistry and Gym with, how come I’ve never heard him mention her before?” he asked curiously. “Not that I go around quizzing other guys on their dating lives, but y’know, locker room talk and all.”

“Lane and Henry are... Well, their dating is pretty non-date-like,” admitted Rory. “Given the way Mrs Kim keeps such a tight rein on Lane, it’s kind of tough on her to date, or breathe within six feet of a guy that’s not Mrs Kim approved,” she said sadly.

“Huh,” said Jess, a response Rory was well used to by now.

“But Henry has promised to come to the Bid A Basket auction next weekend,” she said then, her head on Jess’ shoulder where he couldn’t see her face as she dropped an anvil-sized hint on him.

“Excuse me?” he checked. “He’s coming to the what?”

“Bid A Basket auction,” Rory repeated, moving to look at him. “It’s this traditional event in Stars Hollow. All the women in town make up a basket of food, without telling anyone which basket is theirs. Then all the guys bid on the baskets, and they get a picnic lunch-date with the woman who made the basket that they win.”

“Sounds about right for this psych ward you call home,” said Jess with a look.

Rory forced a smile. “It’s just a dumb tradition,” she shrugged, knowing for sure now what she had already suspected - Jess was not going to come to town next weekend and bid on her basket, no chance.

“A dumb tradition that you love,” he said, bumping her shoulder. “C’mon, tell me you don’t?”

Rory couldn’t help the genuine grin that spread across her face then. “Kind of, yeah,” she admitted, feeling a little embarrassed about it all the same.

The bus arrived before another word could be spoken. Jess got to his feet and Rory followed suit, moving in close enough to kiss. Jess wasted no time in pulling her into his arms and letting his lips find hers as they bid each other goodbye for now.

“I’ll call you,” he promised, and then he was gone.

Rory stood and waited for the bus to leave, waving as it pulled away from the stop. Though she was sad to see Jess go, there was no way to keep the smile from her face. She was so happy to be dating him now, and couldn’t really understand why she ever wasted so much time in getting to this happy point.

Turning around to head home, Rory spotted Dean across the way, walking hand in hand with a blonde that she recognised. Lindsay Lester was a nice girl, very nice actually. Rory vividly remembered a time on a fourth grade field trip to Mark Twain’s house when Lindsay bought her a magnet that she couldn’t afford herself. It seemed just a little strange to Rory to see her ex-boyfriend looking so happy with somebody else, but ultimately, she had to smile at the scene. Rory wanted Dean and Lindsay to be as happy, as happy as she and Jess were. Rory re-evaluated that statement and shook her head. Nobody could be as happy as she and Jess were right now, it just wasn’t possible.
“I don’t know why I’m even doing this,” said Rory with a sigh.

“Because it’s tradition!” her mother told her.

They were both in Doose’s Market, sorting through a hundred different sizes and shapes of basket for their Bid-A-Basket entries. Whilst Lorelai was totally into the idea, and for very good reason, since she now had a man to bid on her basket, Rory was less so. Jess had made it very clear on more than one occasion that he found any and all of Stars Hollow’s traditions to be beyond stupid. He didn’t have a shift in the diner today so he had no other reason to be visiting town this afternoon. There was no chance of her boyfriend bidding on any basket she crafted, and Rory just didn’t want to be forced to have lunch with anybody else. She sighed heavily.

“Jess thinks, and I quote, that things like the Bid A Basket event are just ‘insanity pleas by this crack pot town’.”

“I beg your pardon, young lady?!”

Lorelai winced on Rory’s behalf as she looked up from the pile of baskets to see Taylor stood right there, hands on his hips and anger on his features.

“Hey, Taylor,” she smiled sweetly. “Um, we were just... Wow, what an excellent selection of baskets you have this year. I can’t believe there’s still such a choice left even this close to the event.”

He didn’t look impressed, focus still fixed on an ashen-faced Rory. She knew that as much as some of the townsfolk had taken to Jess, there were those that saw him as ‘an element’, and Taylor was one of them. She wasn’t sure why, though she suspected it started last Saturday when he showed up wearing a leather jacket. To Taylor, that kind of clothing seemed to signify devil worship or something.

“Can’t wait for the bidding to begin, Taylor,” said Lorelai, forcing a smile. “I mean, I’m counting the minutes... even though I’m not ready yet... I’m counting the minutes as they’re running out on me,” she grinned overly much and then bolted past Taylor and grabbing Rory's hand to drag her towards the check out.

Taylor watched them go and shook his head. “This town is going to rack and ruin,” he muttered, rearranging the baskets that the Gilmore girls had left all askew. “Rack and ruin!”

“I think we’re in trouble,” said Lorelai as she overheard Taylor’s second more vocal exclamation all the way over at the cashier's station. “Actually, you’re in trouble. You and your unruly boyfriend,” she smirked.

“Jess isn’t unruly. Well, sometimes, I guess,” she reconsidered immediately. “But he has plenty of good qualities too,” she said definitely.

“Oh, I’ll bet he is all kinds of skills,” Lorelai replied with a look that made her daughter gasp.

“Mom! That’s just... Well, to coin one of your own phrases ‘dirty!’” she declared.

“I’m sorry, hon”, her mother apologised. “I’m just messing with you, although it’s true I don’t know Jess very well. We should do something about that sometime, invite him over for dinner or a movie night, maybe?”
“Maybe,” Rory agreed, looking just a little distracted.

“Things with you and Jess are good, right? You’re happy?” Lorelai worried a little.

“I’m happy,” she said, still not entirely looking it, as they paid for their small baskets. “I just... I don’t know, I wish he was round more, especially since...”

“Especially since...?” Lorelai prompted when her words seemed to a desert her, which was not a normal thing for Rory.

She thought about explaining, about telling Lorelai that Ira and Liz were having problems and all, but it seemed like a betrayal somehow. To tell the secrets that Paris and Jess had both entrusted to her, even to her own mom, it couldn’t be right. For one thing, it’d doubtless all get back to Luke and that wasn’t what Jess wanted.

“I don’t know,” she shook her head at last. “I’m just being dumb. I kind of wanted Jess to come around today, maybe bid on my basket,” she said, swinging the so-far empty receptacle in her hand. “It’s silly. He’s really not that guy.”

“Don’t sweat it, honey,” said Lorelai, flinging her free arm around her daughter’s shoulders and giving her a squeeze. “You’ll still get bid on, and hey, try hard for someone who could clean out rain gutters, would ya?”

“Seriously?” asked Rory, shooting her a look.

“Yes, seriously!” Lorelai countered, looking entirely sober in her suggestion. “Obviously Luke is going to win my basket, because nobody wants a grumpy diner man on their hands,” she explained. “But you, you’re up for grabs, babe. So if you can ply some unsuspecting, suitably agile and helpful young man who might clean the gunk from the Crap Shack’s gutters and save Momma a little dough, then that’s what you gotta do. Capiche?”

Rory smiled at the phrasing if nothing else, then very deliberately gave Lorelai the thumbs up. “You got it, dude!”

Rory was trying to enjoy the festivities, but it kind of wasn’t happening. After a morning trying to figure out what to put in her in basket (not an easy task for a girl who doesn’t cook or know how to make anything even remotely edible that isn’t a Pop Tart) she was now stood in the town square with everybody else, watching one basket after another be bought by a loved one.

Lorelai grinned as Luke bid on her, despite his reservations of involving himself in such an event. Lane’s cousin had done his job in winning her basket so she could later make the switcheroo and meet Henry. Sookie’s basket was still to come and Jackson was bound to win that, as was their plan. That just left Rory. A heavy sigh escaped her lips as she waited for the bidding to start and dreaded the humiliation of nobody raising their hand, or worse, somebody she really didn’t like deciding to bid on her.

“Now, here we have a small but doubtless perfectly formed prize,” said Taylor, holding aloft a particular basket that Rory immediately recognised as her own. “Am I bid five dollars?”

“I’ll bid five,” said a voice.

“Make it ten,” said another.

Rory couldn’t see who was bidding, but from the way her mom was grinning, Rory would bet
anything that Lorelai had put those mystery guys up to this. Of course, when the next person raised their hands, she knew exactly who he was.

“I’ll bid fifteen,” said Kirk.

Rory’s eyes went wide. “No, no, no,” she said quietly but definitely, looking to Lorelai for help. “No!” she repeated.

“Twenty,” said someone in the crowd.

“Twenty five,” retorted Kirk with determination.

Rory squeaked with panic.

“Luke, baby, can’t you help us out here,” said Lorelai in a frustrated whisper. “Kirk is about to win Rory!”

“Lorelai, I already won you. I can’t bid on another basket,” he told her what she already must have known after too many years of attending this event.

Rory looked around the crowd for some help. Her gaze met Dean’s for a moment, but he quickly looked away. She noticed then he was holding hands with Lindsay, no doubt waiting for some basket she had entered to be presented for the bidding. Sure, Dean was her ex, but they were friends. He probably would have helped her out if he could, but as things were, he couldn’t.

“Okay, people, we’re at forty dollars with Kirk,” said Taylor then. “Any advance on forty?”

Rory buried her face in Lorelai’s shoulder, unable to stand this. As much as Kirk was a good guy and all, she really did not want to spend time alone with him over a basket of fairly crappy food. This was like a nightmare.

“Forty dollars,” Taylor repeated. “Going once, going twice...”

“How about a hundred bucks?”

The voice came from behind the gathered crowd and every one there turned as one to see. Rory peeked out from around Lorelai and a grin came over her face that was only outdone by the astonishment on her features.

“One hundred dollars!” said Taylor happily accepting the bid, even after he saw who had made it. “Well, I suppose a hoodlum’s money is as good as anybody else’s,” he shrugged, raising his gavel. “The bid is with Jess Mariano. One hundred dollars, going once, going twice. Sold!” he declared at last, banging the gavel onto the podium.

Rory was actually laughing with joy and relief both as she watched Jess walk up through the crowd to pay in his money and retrieve her basket. Rushing towards him, she threw he arms around him and kissed him without a thought in her head. It was only the various ‘aaws’ and wolf whistles from the crowd that reminded her she and Jess were far from alone. Red-faced she pulled back to look at him.

“I can’t believe you did that,” she told him, shaking her head.

“Don’t tell me you were hoping Kirk would out-bid me?” he teased her. Rory laughed like a bell.

“What do you think?”
“I think maybe we should get out of here,” he said softly near her ear. “Maybe somewhere without an audience?”

“Agreed,” said Rory happily, sparing her mom a quick wave and a mouthed ‘see you later’ before she left with her boyfriend’s arm around her.

“Thank you for this,” said Lorelai happily, as she and Luke sat together in the gazebo with burgers and fries. “And I don’t just mean the food. I know you think the whole Bid A Basket thing is dumb, and maybe you’re right, but-”

“But you don’t,” said Luke simply, knowing he shouldn’t interrupt but right now he felt he needed to. “Lorelai, I’m not... I’m not the big romantic gesture type of a guy, you know that.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” she smiled, eyes down on her food. “I mean, that first date of ours was pretty special. The restaurant, the horoscope in your wallet, and then after,” she said with a look in her eye that was unmistakable. “I find you very romantic, Lucas Danes,” she told him, leaning in close and planting a kiss on his lips.

He smiled at the sentiment and the kiss too, but still Luke felt the need to say what he had started to tell her before.

“What I was saying, what I meant was,” he started over. “I’m not... I guess there’s a lot of stuff that I find stupid because I never saw it from anybody else’s point of view. I’ve always been kind of a loner, you know that, and I was okay with that for a long time. Then there was you.”

“Me?” she asked, a hand to her chest as she fluttered her eyelashes. “Boring, inconsequential little me?” she smiled.

“You know what you mean to me, Lorelai,” he told her too seriously, enough to wipe the smile right off her face. “You make me want to do these stupid things, all kinds of things. Anything at all that I think might make you look at me, the way you’re looking at me right now.”

Lorelai lost the ability to not only speak but even think of words to begin to use when her voice finally did return to her. It had been a long time coming, the her and Luke thing that was now pretty official. They’d had the first kiss, the first date, and the first night together. A lot of milestones in a short space of time, but after years of friendship and a distinctly will they/won’t they vibe just recently, if not longer, Lorelai felt like that was okay. She loved Luke, always had and always would, but the form that love could take had surprised even her. It didn’t seem to surprise him at all.

“This from the guy who doesn’t make romantic gestures,” she said at last, her voice too soft to her own ears.

“Sometimes I can’t help myself,” he shrugged, almost embarrassed to realise what he might have admitted.

Lorelai smiled and shifted closer, letting her head drop onto his shoulder. It was good to feel his arm wrap around her, keeping her close as he kissed her hair.

“It’s a beautiful day,” she sighed happily.

“Yes, it is,” Luke agreed as they sat there and drank in the fine weather, the happy atmosphere, and the feeling of just being close like they had always wanted.
“You really shouldn’t have blown all that money on me and my pathetic basket,” said Rory as she and Jess walked hand in hand through the trees.

“Hey, I would’ve spent three times as much to win you, with or without the pathetic basket,” said Jess in a moment of real sweetness.

Rory didn’t doubt he could be so romantic, it had happened before, he just wasn’t much for public displays. Sure, he would kiss her when people were watching because he didn’t care about that, but saying anything really sweet to her only really happened when they were alone, or when just Paris was present. Rory leaned in to kiss Jess’ cheek as they reached the bridge and walked out to the centre of it.

“This is your perfect spot for a picnic?” he asked as she sat down right where they were.

“Yup,” she replied, popping her P. “I love this place. It's peaceful and beautiful. Whenever life gets a little too much, I know I can always come here and it'll be okay.”

Jess watched her a moment as she waxed lyrical about her happy place here on the bridge. It wasn’t as if he didn’t already know Rory was beautiful and amazing, because he did, but of all things this proved they had a real understanding, a real connection.

“Oh,” he said as he shifted to sit down close beside her, placing the basket behind them. “You know there was a bridge in New York, nothing like this obviously, much bigger, way more concrete and steel, but it was a bridge,” he told her. “That was my place to go when life at home was... Well, less than good,” he said with an awkward smile. “For me, it wasn’t the peace and quiet. New York is a city that never sleeps, after all. Honestly, the noise was comforting, knowing there were thousands of people all going on with their lives, surviving, living, no matter what crap life threw at them. If they could keep on going, then so could I.”

Rory watched Jess just staring out across the water as he spoke of his painful past. She wanted to make it better, she wished she knew how, but she didn’t. All Rory could think was that she had to do her very best to make the most of what she and Jess had for as long as they had it. If he should have to go away soon, back to New York or wherever else, she wanted to know they had the best time, that there was nothing more she could have done.

“Well, I don’t have the city lights and traffic noise to offer you,” she said very seriously, trying not to smile. “But, this one time only offer of Pop Tarts and Slim Jims is open to takers.”

Jess smiled at her joke.

“You can’t sell me something I already bought,” he reminded her, taking the basket from her hands and settling it on his lap to open it up. “Huh. You weren’t kidding,” he said then with only mild surprise as he realised Rory’s description of the contents was exactly what he was looking at, plus a couple of sodas and a half-eaten box of mallomars.

“We Gilmores never kid about food,” she said. “You’re feeling like you overpaid now, huh?”

“For this?” he gestured into the basket. “Sure. But for the pleasure of your company? Not a chance,” he shook his head, smiling as he leaned in to kiss her lips.

“Good answer,” Rory grinned between kisses as the pair of them just got lost in each other for a while.

For all that Rory had kind of been dreading today, it had turned out so well in the end.
“All I request is no wedding-related movies. No My Best Friend’s Wedding. No The Wedding Planner. I don’t even want to face The Bride of Chucky right now,” said Lorelai definitely, as she carried two large bowls of popcorn from the kitchen to the living room. “I swear to God, I love Sookie so much and I could not be more thrilled for her, but all week long, all I have heard is weddings and brides, and I think my head might actually explode!” she declared, sitting down heavily on the couch.

Rory tried not to smile too much. It wasn’t funny that her mom had suffered constant all-out wedding talk. Sookie could get kind of over-excited about things, and certainly her engagement to Jackson that had occurred the Saturday before was a good reason to go overboard. Still, it was probably a little wearing to hear about twenty-four-seven.

“Okay, nothing bridal or wedding related,” she said, looking through the video tapes scattered on the carpet. “Not that I really think Jess would be into that kind of thing anyway.”

“Probably not,” Lorelai agreed, absently popping several kernels of popcorn into her mouth. “What is his movie taste anyway?”

“Varied, like ours,” said Rory thoughtfully. “We’ve had several fairly lengthy discussions on books and music, sometimes movies come up but not so much as the other two topics actually. Ooh, he did tell me he really, really liked Almost Famous.”


“The rest of the movie is okay,” shrugged Rory. “Not that we have that one. I could go get it from the video store?” she suggested, checking her watch. “I still have a few minutes until Jess gets here.”

She couldn’t keep the grin off her face just mentioning his name and Lorelai sure noticed. It was cool though, that her kid was so happy, and with a guy that seemed to be fairly well-adjusted. There had been some trouble at Chilton from what she heard, some acting out that probably wasn’t a good thing, but Lorelai recalled her own days of high school, some of the trouble she had gotten into, and that was long before the pregnant thing happened. She would be a real hypocrite to pre-judge Jess. Besides, she knew from what Luke told her that he’d had it pretty rough growing up so far. Liz seemed like a nice person and all, but it was common knowledge amongst those closest to her, Jess, or the Gellars that there was a drinking problem, and sometimes a commitment problem. That could not have been easy on her son over the years, or even now actually.

“I’ll be back as fast as I can!” said Rory as she threw on her coat and ran out the door.

Lorelai shook her head as she realised she had missed whatever her daughter said in the last minute or two. It was probably only about movie choices, and quite honestly Lorelai didn’t mind what they ended up watching. They were making an early start, four o’clock no less, to ensure they could get in a real marathon of movies and still have Jess home at a reasonable hour, but the movies were not the primary point of the night.

Rory pretty much gushed about the wonder that was Jess, and Luke spoke well of his nephew too, but Lorelai knew very little first-hand. She wanted to better know the guy that was squiring her daughter around recently. It mattered to her, a lot. Dean was pretty much the perfect first boyfriend, all good manners and smiles. Jess sure seemed to be different, but that didn’t necessarily mean he
was any less good for Rory than Dean had had. Jess and Rory certainly had more in common than she ever had with Dean, and from both the particular looks and the kissing Lorelai had born witness to, Jess and Rory had chemistry going on in spades.

“At least she wants me to meet him,” she muttered to herself, staring up at the mantle shelf where so many pictures of Rory sat in a row.

The smile those photographs brought on faded as Lorelai thought of Lane and Mrs Kim. That was not a good relationship. Sure, they loved each other just as much as Lorelai and Rory loved each other, but they really couldn’t talk. Lane had gone to such lengths to hide her dating a boy from Chilton (a highly suitable and intelligent Korean guy, no less) that Henry had dumped her before they ever really got to have an official date. Mrs Kim had her all but chained in her room ever since the whole debacle. Lorelai shook her head. Even if she and Jess didn’t get along so well, Lorelai was determined not to treat Rory with anything less than the love and respect she had always shown her. She would be civil to Jess as a minimum. Hopefully they would get along and there wouldn’t be a problem. Lorelai really hoped so.

A knock on the door had her diving from the couch and almost knocking the popcorn flying. She righted herself in the hallway, calling to Rory that she was such a scatterbrain for forgetting her key. She got a real surprise when she pulled the door open and found Jess there.

“Hey,” she greeted him with a smile. “I’m sorry, Rory ran out for movies and I thought she was back, but no, it’s you being early. Which is fine, I don’t want you to think I’m anti-early or anything,” she smiled, waving her hand in some random gesture.

Jess smirked. “I see now where Rory gets the nervous rambling thing from.”

“Guilty as charged,” said Lorelai, raising her hand. “Not that I have any idea why I’m nervous. Isn’t the boyfriend supposed to be more worried about meeting the girlfriend’s parent? Not that I assume you’re nervous, and hey, we have met before.” Lorelai stopped herself before another full-on ramble began. “And you should come inside already,” she said, moving aside and gesturing for Jess to enter the house.

“Thanks,” he replied as he stepped over the threshold and proceeded to shift awkwardly in the hallway.

He had expected Rory to be here, to answer the door when he knocked and be like the buffer between him and her mom. Jess was cool about spending a little time hanging out in front of movies, making a good impression on the parent. True enough they had met before, at dinner at the Gellar house, in the diner a couple of times, and The Bracebridge Dinner. Of course, this was the first time since Jess and Rory started dating that he and Lorelai had been in the same space for more than five minutes. It felt very weird to the guy who never really had a girlfriend before; more dates than he could count, but never a girlfriend that meant anything real.

“Um, you can hang your coat up right here,” said Lorelai, perhaps just for something to say. “Good drive over from Hartford? Oh, no. You don’t have a car, right?”

“Paris finally agreed to lend me hers,” said Jess, taking off his coat and putting it on the hook that Lorelai had indicated. “I had to leave a spleen on deposit.”

Lorelai smiled at the joke.

“You two are getting on better now, I hear.”
“Mostly.”

“That’s nice.”

“I guess.”

It had to be the most stilted conversation in the history of the world, and neither party was enjoying trying to make small talk when it really wasn’t their strong point, especially not with people they didn’t know.

“What movies did Rory go out for?” asked Jess then, trying to make some kind of polite conversation.

“Um, she said something about your liking *Almost Famous*?” said Lorelai, trying to recall the conversation. “I think she may have said something about a triple feature, but honestly, I missed the other titles.”

Jess smiled at the thought of Rory deliberately renting one of his favourite movies for tonight. He didn’t say anything, but to Lorelai the expression said it all. When a guy thought of a girl and looked like that, it meant something, whether they wanted to admit it or not.

“So, come through, sit down,” she said, leading Jess through to the couch and gesturing for him to sit. “We have popcorn, as you can see. Also, gummy bears, potato chips, and we were going to order pizza but we figured we’d wait for you and check topping preferences.”

“I’m easy,” he shrugged as he took his seat on the couch. “Just nothing like spinach or pineapple or anything,” he said shaking his head. “Anything you might typically find in a salad, be it regular or fruit, does not belong on a pizza.”

“Amen, mon frere!” Lorelai nodded firmly, offering Jess a high five that he accepted after only a moment’s hesitation.

He knew from Rory that Lorelai was not like a regular mom. The same could be said of Liz, but not necessarily in a good way. A mother who favoured junk food over healthy snacks and offered you a high five over a pizza choice wasn’t exactly ‘normal’, but Lorelai seemed cool so far. She hadn’t immediately launched into the ‘lay a hand on my daughter and I’ll castrate you’ speech the moment they were left alone together, so that was pretty good too.

“I’m back!” called Rory as she practically fell in through the front door. “They had *Almost Famous*, but not *Detroit Rock City*. I ended up taking the rock music theme in a slightly different direction...” she was explaining, stopping short when she realised Lorelai was no longer alone. “Jess, hey. You’re early.”

“Second person to tell me that,” he replied with a smile. “Traffic was non-existent and Paris’ car really drives well over a hundred miles an hour.”

Lorelai gasped.

“Joke,” Jess confirmed. “Sorry,” he muttered, looking away and making a big deal of picking at the gummy bears.

“He was joking, mom,” Rory repeated when Lorelai continued to look affronted.

“I heard the man,” she told her daughter, putting the smile back in place. “So, the rock music theme led to...?”
“Spinal Tap,” said Rory, holding up one tape. “And, for ultimate mocking purposes, *Rock ‘n’ Roll High School.*”

“Ooh, awesome!” Lorelai enthused, grabbing the VHS from Rory’s hand with glee. “The combination of the awesomeness of The Ramones with the crazy, possibly LSD-induced elements of a giant lab rat and the kids literally blowing up Vince Lombardi High? This is gold! You ever seen it Jess?”

“Once, yeah,” he told her, trying not to smile at her over-enthusiastic behaviour. “*Spinal Tap* is legendary. Total classic.”

“I like this guy,” said Lorelai, calling over her shoulder to Rory as she hung up her jacket.

“He has his good qualities,” her daughter agreed, smiling at Jess as she moved to sit beside her boyfriend. “Still ironing out the wrinkles though,” she smirked wickedly.

“Really?” said Jess, returning the look. “I haven’t heard these complaints before.”

“You know there aren’t any,” she replied, as they shared a quick kiss whilst Lorelai put the first tape in the machine. She bit back a comment about the two of them being cute. Jess had seemed uncomfortable enough when he arrived, she didn’t want to set him on edge again right when he was getting relaxed. He did seem cool. He knew his movies, and he’d been nothing but polite so far. Lorelai grabbed the phone and dialled for pizza before the movie really started. She looked over at the couple on the couch then. Both were smiling, Jess’ arm along the back of the couch behind Rory and her curled into his side, automatically comfortable apparently, with a bowl of popcorn balanced on their knees. Lorelai couldn’t help but smile to herself. She had a feeling tonight was going to go just fine.

Nobody was entirely sure how it had taken seven hours to watch three movies of fairly regular length. If they thought about it, Lorelai, Rory, and Jess would all have realised it was not just the bathroom breaks and extra food breaks that had taken the time. *Almost Famous* seemed to require colour commentary from all three of them. *Spinal Tap* was just a myriad jokes that had to be enjoyed at least twice and dialogue that all three felt the need to quote over and over in their own terrible British accents. A discussion followed about how epic the whole concept had been and then finally they got onto *Rock ‘n’ Roll High School.* Much singing along had ensued to every Ramones track performed, mostly by the girls who had no qualms about really belting it out. Lorelai was pretty sure Jess was going to stay out of the karaoke-fest, but she had noticed his foot tapping along and swore she saw his lips move a couple of times. He dug The Ramones apparently, and Lorelai was more than okay with that. When it came out that he was a big fan of The Clash too, that had sparked a discussion that required pausing of the video for at least fifteen minutes.

By the time all the movies were done, and the last of the food consumed, it was fast approaching eleven o’clock and Rory was yawning her head off against Jess shoulder.

“I should really go,” he said, smiling at her. “Sugar crash?” he guessed.

“Oh, yeah,” she sighed. “But I can probably make it to the door to say goodnight”

“I’ll bet you can,” said Lorelai with a look, since they all knew it wasn’t the saying goodnight that Rory was thinking of. “Well, Jess, I can honestly say it was a pleasure to have you here.”

“Thanks. This was fun,” he admitted.
“That it was.” Lorelai nodded once. “So, do I pass the cool mom test?”

“I guess so,” he told her, feeling just a little weird about the question. “Do I pass the daughter’s boyfriend test?” he replied in kind.

“I’d give you a solid eight out of ten,” she nodded, trying to keep her expression natural even as she teased him mercilessly. “I mean, no flowers and chocolates on arrival, had to dock one point for that, and then, of course, you said you liked Guns of Brixton more than White Man In Hammersmith Palais, so... What can you do?” she shrugged, weighing the options in her hands.

“You’re a bad person,” said Rory when Jess almost started to look concerned.

“Yeah, but I’m cute so it balances out.” Lorelai winked before disappearing into the kitchen with the empty bowls.

Rory got up when Jess did and followed him into the hall then out onto the porch as he put on his coat and zipped it up against the chilly night air.

“I think you did great tonight,” she smiled. “Mom really seems to like you. Not that there’s a reason why she shouldn’t, but... Thank you, for being your charming self,” she said eventually, putting her arms up around his neck and pulling him closer.

“No problem,” he shrugged, hands at her waist as he met her eyes. “Your mom is pretty cool, non-judgemental, and she really knows her rock music.”

“She does that.” Rory smiled. “I’m really glad you guys get along. I mean, she’s not just my mom, she’s pretty much my best friend, and you’re my boyfriend, so... Well, it would makes things pretty tough if you hated each other.”

“No hate, at least not on my side,” Jess promised her.

“On hers either, from what I can tell.”

“Good to know.”

All words ceased then as the couple found themselves so close it would just be ludicrous not to kiss. It was a perfect end to a night that had been, if not perfect, then pretty damn successful, at the very least. Rory had been just a little nervous about spending many hours alone with her mother and her boyfriend, both of which had a habit of being defensive, sarcastic, and passive-aggressive at different times. Thankfully, tonight they had both been on their best behaviour and genuinely got along.

“I’ll call you,” said Jess as he and Rory finally parted.

“You better,” she told him, waving as he walked down to the car to leave.

The second Rory got back inside, her mom was in her face.

“Geez, wear a bell!” she exclaimed in genuine shock.

“Sorry” Lorelai giggled like a kid on a sugar high, which was at least half accurate in her current state. “So, that was the boyfriend. I like him.”

“Really?”

“Really. He seems intelligent, pop culture aware, and he’s just head-over-heels for you, baby girl!”
“I don’t know about that last part,” said Rory, blushing furiously and looking away. “We care a lot about each other, but we’ve only been dating a month or so...”

“I can tell, babe,” said Lorelai knowingly. “You and Jess, it’s a pretty serious thing you have going.”

“I think, maybe, yeah,” she admitted shyly, but she couldn’t keep the smile off her face.

Tonight had definitely gone very well.
Chapter 24

“How can you be this upset about a spa weekend?” asked Luke, trying to stop Lorelai from repeatedly hitting her head on the counter. “You love all that stuff.”

“Sure, yeah, love it when it’s just me, or me and Rory, or me and Sookie,” she told him, peering up at him through her mussed up hair. “The whole idea of the nice relaxing spa kind of goes south when Emily Gilmore walks in. How could you possibly expect me to be looking forward to an entire weekend locked in any place with my mother?!” she asked with all the emphasis possible.

Luke tried not to smile. It wasn’t that he was laughing at her exactly, it was only that Lorelai could be so damn dramatic sometimes and it was hard not to be at least a little amused. This reaction might be suitable if the world were about to end. It seemed like overkill somehow when all she was being asked to do was spend forty eight hours with her mother.

“Hey, I’m sure you can arrange things so you guys aren’t together all of the time, right?” he said kindly, moving her hair back off her face and encouraging her to smile. “You never know, you might even enjoy it.”

“But seriously folks,” she replied with a huff.

It wasn’t that she didn’t appreciate Luke trying to cheer her up or see the bright side, it was only that Lorelai had a very tough time ever finding the good points of time spent alone with her mom. It just never worked out somehow, even if they would be at a fabulous spa getting pampered. It did occur to Lorelai, as Luke refilled her coffee cup, that maybe he did have a point about them not having to spend every minute together. If she could call the spa, get the appointments for her own treatments at varying times with Emily’s own so they hardly ran into each other at all...

“So, what’s happening with Rory while you’re gone?”

“Oh, she’ll be home alone,” said Lorelai, shaking her semi-evil plan out of her head for the time being. “She’s fine with it though.”

Luke frowned at that. “Want me to keep an eye on her?”

“She should be fine,” Lorelai shrugged. “Still, if you could just make sure she’s fed or whatever, I guess that’d be cool. I actually might tell her to call you in case of emergency, if that’s okay?”


“I do know that,” Lorelai nodded, leaning over the counter to plant a kiss on his lips. “Best boyfriend ever,” she told him.

Luke smiled and turned away a moment. He really did get awfully embarrassed by her compliments and public displays of affection sometimes. Lorelai didn’t mind, she actually thought it was cute. Besides, they did exactly what they wanted behind closed doors and all of that made Lorelai very happy. She really did have the best boyfriend ever, she thought, as she sipped her coffee, watching Luke serve his customers. She was damn lucky, but then Rory was too. Jess seemed cool and he sure cared for Rory a lot.

Lorelai’s smiled faded some as she considered her relationship with Luke versus Rory and Jess’ romance. If she was going away for the weekend, that would mean Rory alone in the house, potentially with Jess there. That made her less lonely, but Lorelai knew only too well what couples
alone in a house got up to, especially young couples. It was that kind of thing that had resulted in Rory’s conception.

Lorelai took a long drink of her coffee and then tried to breathe. Rory was a good girl. She knew better than to leap into bed with a boyfriend she had been seeing for barely a month. Worse came to worst, she would at least be careful and sensible. Lorelai winced at the idea of her daughter being deflowered or whatever the polite word for it was these days. As nice as Jess seemed, as smart as Rory was, things just happened sometimes. It started with kissing and then a guy got handsy. It felt good, you forget that you were supposed to stop or at least remember protection. Next thing you know you’re the high school dropout raising a baby alone.

Lorelai got a hold of herself and took a couple more deep breaths. She was being ridiculous. Just because she and Luke got up to certain antics when alone, that was different. They were adults and they had known each other a very long time. Rory and Jess were not going to do anything stupid, Lorelai was sure on that. She trusted her daughter, and even the boyfriend a little bit... a very little bit. He was a teenage boy after all, a.k.a. a hormone bomb.

“It’ll be fine,” she muttered to herself, taking another sip of coffee.

“You say something?” asked Luke as he passed by her stool.

Lorelai shook her head. “I’m fine,” she told him.

Luke frowned a little at the expression he recognised as being forced.

“Lorelai?” he prompted her for a real answer.

With a sigh, she explained.

Rory had the biggest grin on her face as she piled her first load of laundry into the washer. She was already wearing her pajamas, even though it was barely five o’clock, and had plans to call Sandeep’s in the next few minutes to order her food. She never got to have Indian when her mom was around since Lorelai couldn’t stand the smell, and certainly sorting her laundry how Rory wanted was not possible without a serious amount of sarcasm. Throw in a couple of her favourite books and she had the perfect staying-in evening planned. Rory honestly couldn’t be happier.

The knock on the door threatened to ruin everything.

“Not now,” she sighed heavily. “I just want to be alone,” she muttered, hurrying to see who was there.

Hiding most of her body behind the door as she opened it, Rory got a real surprise when she found her boyfriend on the porch.

“Jess,” she sighed. “Not that I don’t love seeing you, but I did say I wanted to spend tonight alone...”

“It wasn’t his idea to come,” said another voice, and Paris appeared as if from nowhere. “Sorry, Gilmore, we kind of had nowhere else to go.”

Rory frowned at those words, her eyes shifting to Jess who only looked more and more awkward.

“Um, I guess you should come in,” she said, opening the door wider and ushering them into the house.
Paris all but barged in and Jess followed with less enthusiasm. He felt bad being here, knowing just like Rory said that she had planned a night in alone. It wasn’t as if he was offended to be thrown over for laundry and Indian food. Of all people, he well understood the need for freedom and to do one’s own thing sometimes. Of course, circumstances had overtaken his noble act of staying away when asked without being sulky about it.

“What happened?” asked Rory of the step-siblings stood in her hallway.

She became highly aware of her state of undress when Paris stared at her as if she were a freak show, and Jess actually tried not to look at her too much.

“Well, Slumber Party Barbie,” said Paris, sarcastic as ever. “Maybe if you braid my hair and feed me marshmallows I’ll tell you.”

“You’re hilarious,” Rory dead-panned, turning around to go to her room. “I’ll be back!” she called over her shoulder as she went to change. “Make yourselves at home!”

Jess allowed himself to stare at the back of Rory until she disappeared from view. Paris cuffed him upside his head and rolled her eyes when he glared at her.

“I know you’re dating, but seriously?” she checked. “They’re just pajamas.”

“Shut up,” he grumbled, pushing past Paris to go take a seat on the couch.

By the time Rory returned from her room, suitably attired to face her public, she found Jess and Paris both sat in the living room amongst semi-sorted laundry. Rory rushed to move piles off the furniture onto the floor, out of sight behind the couch. Then she focused her attention on her guests and asked again what was going on.

“We had to get out of the house,” said Jess awkwardly rubbing the back of his neck. “I said we should go somewhere else, but Paris was driving and she doesn’t take direction well.”

“Where exactly where we going to go if not here, genius?” his step-sister asked him sharply.

“Neither of us has an over-abundance of friends to be able to crash at any house in Hartford. Sure, we could hit a restaurant or diner for dinner, but then what? Besides, if you pined any harder for your girlfriend the sheer focus of power would blow a hole in the wall!”

“You’re cracked,” Jess muttered darkly.

Rory smiled and leaned across the couch towards him. “I think it’s sweet when you pine for me,” she teased him lightly, planting a brief kiss on his lips. “But I still don’t get why you needed to get out of your house so badly. Your parents aren’t fighting again are they? Because I thought things were improving?”

“Oh, the fighting is over,” explained Paris easily, though her arms were folded tight across her chest as if she were entirely put-out by something anyway.

“Liz’s drinking slowed down to a dull roar lately,” said Jess, deciding just a little detail wouldn’t go amiss rather than Paris own cryptic rants. “You remember I told you that Liz got her jewellery in a couple of stores in Hartford?” he said to Rory who nodded her head. “Well, it’s focused her mind some, means she’s leaving the bottle alone. She and Ira, they’ve been talking more, instead of yelling, and now they seem to be making up a lot,” he said awkwardly.

“Which is actually worse than the fighting.” Paris shuddered.
It took Rory all of a moment before she caught on. Her face contorted as her brain threw pictures at her unbidden, disturbing images of Liz and Ira horizontal on the couch or similar. It was strange enough knowing her mom and Luke got up to whatever they got up to. Other people’s parents getting their naughty on was a leap too far for Miss Gilmore’s mind. She certainly wouldn’t want a live show of her parents or anyone else’s in such compromising positions, which was obviously what Jess and Paris had come here to avoid.

“Well, for all that I planned an alone night, I’m glad you guys showed up,” she smiled brightly then. “It’s nice to know I can offer sanctuary to those in need.”

“I’m starving,” said Paris then, no hint of gratitude, as she reached for the take-out menu on the table and leafed through it. “Indian food? Really?”

“Well, I didn’t actually order yet,” said Rory. “I guess we could get something else, if you want? Maybe Chinese from Al’s, or...”

A rapping on the door stopped her mid-sentence and a frown came over her face all over again. So much for her alone night. Apparently it wasn’t just Jess and Paris who wanted to come visit, though Rory couldn’t imagine who else would be here,

“If you guys knocked over a bank on your way over here, Bonnie and Clyde, I’m not being your alibi,” she joked with her friends, straight faced as ever as she went for the door.

“Well, you do drive the car,” she heard Jess tell Paris.

“You’re my brother not my lover, Brainiac,” she replied.

Rory smiled at the amusing exchange as she opened up the door. “Luke. Wow, um... I wasn’t expecting you,” she told him in evident surprise.

“Luke?” said Jess as he heard and came out from the living room.

“Rory, and Jess” said Luke stiffly. “Huh. I thought... Well, your mom asked me to make sure you were fed while she was away, so I brought over a care package,” Luke explained to Rory.

“Oh, Luke. You old softie,” she grinned wide as she reached to take the box from his hands but he kept a firm hold.

“I don’t know if there’s enough for two people. I was only expecting to find you here,” he said, looking sideways at his nephew.

“There’s so much food here, I’m pretty sure it’ll feed at least three,” said Rory, completely missing what was really happening here apparently. “Which is useful,” she considered before turning towards the living room and yelling; “Paris! You like mac and cheese, right?”

“I’m not supposed to eat it,” said Paris as she appeared in the hallway. “But yeah, I love it.”

Jess bit his lip, watching Luke visibly deflate and relax into a more normal stance.
“You guys are all hanging out together, huh?”

“Yeah,” Rory nodded, finding Luke now seemed willing to hand over the box of food. “You want to come join us for dinner or...?”

“Oh, no. No, no,” he said, shaking his head. “Um, I have to get back to the diner, but you kids enjoy, okay?” he smiled widely and then he was gone.

Rory watched his back disappearing down the path before looking back to the box in her hands which Paris was pouring over. “That was weird.”

“No, that was the chaperoning service,” said Jess with a smirk that would no longer be denied.

“Why would we need...?” began Rory before her eyes went very wide and a blush rose in her cheeks. “Oh, right.”

“Ugh!” Paris made a sound of disgust as she took the box from Rory’s hands and backed away from the googly-eyed expressions of her brother and her friend. “I’ll be in the kitchen,” she said, heading that way.

“Jess, I didn’t... I mean, I just...”

“Rory,” he urged her the moment the rambling began, moving to take both her hands in both of his own. “I came here tonight with Paris, which proves I was not expecting anything to happen.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But when I told you I was going to be alone and I didn’t invite you to come be with me... I don’t want you to think that was some kind of rejection, or that I haven’t thought about-”

“Rory,” he cut her off one more time, kissing her softly on the lips and dropping his voice to whisper when he continued speaking so Paris couldn’t eavesdrop. “We’ve been dating for a month. I’m not expecting anything right now. Although, I’m going to be disappointed if I don’t at least get a decent share of all that food in there.”

“I think you’ll have to fight Paris for the mac and cheese,” she smirked the way he often did himself. “Other than that, whatever you want if yours,” she promised, giving him a kiss.

“Sounds good.”

Such was the beginning of a very enjoyable evening. As much as it had occurred to Jess the fun he and Rory might have had alone, he knew she wasn’t ready for all of that yet. Besides, there were different kinds of fun, and actually, the evening he went on to spend with Rory and Paris was actually pretty decent. They shared out all the food that Luke had brought, and despite their combined appetites could barely finish everything contained in the box.

As they ate, they talked about all kinds of things, though the primary topic seemed to be books. Jess supported the beatniks against Paris’ scathing commentary. Rory watched them go back and forth like a ping-pong match, happy to stay out of that particular debate. Of course, when Jess pointed out that he had got Paris on side about Hemingway, Rory was forced to fight back and found she had an ally in Paris too when she needed to fire her good opinion of Ayn Rand at Jess.

It was a happy kind of debate. No real harsh words or nastiness at all, just good old-fashioned friendly banter. They ate, laughed and talked until they all had full stomachs, sore sides, and no literature left to debate anymore. Jess glanced at his watch and his eyes widened at the late hour. Paris saw his reaction and glanced at her own wrist.
“It’s almost midnight?” she gasped.

“Apparently,” her step-brother confirmed. “I guess we should head home. I don’t know that anybody even noticed we left, but if they did…”

“The search party will be out soon if we’re not home,” she sighed. “Rory, where’s the bathroom?” she asked and was duly given directions.

Alone at last, Jess wasted no time in grabbing his girlfriend and kissing her deeply. Rory made a token protest and then fell into the moment a second later. When they finally broke for air, she was smiling widely.

“Hmm, I think the lack of that was the one down-side to Paris being here.”

“Maybe,” Jess agreed. “But it’s probably best there was something stopping me from being... ungentlemanly,” he said carefully. “I meant what I said before, I would never, ever pressure you into anything, Rory, but you have to know how much I want you, and more than that, how much I...” he faltered over words he had never spoken before and couldn’t quite manage now either. “Honestly? We could’ve gone anywhere tonight. I kind of wanted to be here. Truth be told, I just really needed to see you.”

“I’m glad you came over,” she assured him, trying not to blush like an idiot at his sweet words. “Really glad,” she promised, going in for another kiss whilst they had the chance.

Too soon they heard Paris yelling from the foot of the stairs that she was headed back to the kitchen. The early warning was naturally deliberate and necessary since she knew what Rory and Jess would be doing the moment she left the room.

“Seriously, couldn’t be more pleased that you two are happy, but if you could prove your feelings with a little less saliva, that’d be great,” she grumbled, pulling her jacket back on ready to leave.

For once Jess didn’t give a smart alec reply. Paris thought she was so tough, but he knew different. Underneath all the harsh words and scathing looks, she was just a marshmallow. They had really been there for each other the last few weeks and months. Far from the hate and bile they had shared in the beginning, they really were friends now. Jess had to think this was probably what it was like to really have a sister, and it wasn’t half bad. Certainly having Rory as his girlfriend was no bad thing. To think that when he first moved to Hartford, Jess hated every aspect of situation. Now he couldn’t imagine wanting to be anywhere but here. He seemed to have found a home at last, at least for now.
Jess let out a heavy sigh as he rode the bus to Stars Hollow. Just when things seemed to be on the up and up, something always went wrong. He ought to have known it would, that was the way of the world after all. Not that this particular death in the family had a huge effect on him, but that wasn’t the point. Liz was making a very big deal about the loss of her Uncle Louie, in spite of the fact she didn’t seem to have had anything much in the way of contact with him for at least ten years. Jess was damn sure he had never met the guy himself. Still, death was never a pleasant thing to deal with, and Luke was supposed to be kind of cut up over the whole thing from what Rory said. Jess was due at the diner for his shift, but honestly, he would’ve gone over anyway in the circumstances. It sounded as if help was needed, and given how Luke and the Gilmore girls had been there for him, Jess felt the need to pay back the favour.

Hopping off the bus, he hurried down the street. Jess found a pretty wacky scene before him as he arrived at the diner. Lorelai was behind the counter, calling out old-fashioned diner terms for food, some of which Jess was pretty sure she invented on the spot - Caesar sure did seem confused! Rory was running around like a crazy person, bussing tables and pouring coffee. She looked good doing it, but then in Jess’ opinion, Rory looked good doing just about everything. Luke was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey,” said Jess as he approached Rory and moved to take the coffee pot from her hand. “You trying to steal my job?” he joked.

She didn’t laugh, didn’t even smile, just threw her arms around him and held on tight. With the coffee pot in his hand, Jess couldn’t really hug her back properly and was so shocked by the sudden moment of affection that he might not have reacted anyway.

“What was that for?” he checked. “I mean, I’m not objecting or anything, but...”

Rory shook her head, looking oddly tearful. “It’s just so sad, about your great uncle.”

“Well, yeah, I guess,” said Jess with a shrug. “But like I told you before, I never met the guy, as far as I know. It doesn’t really affect me.”

“It affects Luke,” said Rory sadly, looking towards the stairs.

Jess had to assume that his uncle was up there, presumably making funeral arrangements or whatever. That would explain why the Gilmore girls were running the diner on this particular Saturday. Shaking his head, Jess told Rory she should take a break before she fell down. She looked pretty harassed.

“I want to help,” she insisted.

“And you will, you are,” he insisted. “But I’m here now, and I actually get paid to do this. So, I’ll serve the coffee” he said, leading her to a stool and pouring plenty of java into a large mug for her. “You take five, okay?” he said with a smile, planting a quick kiss on Rory’s lips whilst Lorelai’s back was turned.

“Okay,” she agreed, smiling widely. “Y’know you’re a much nicer person than you want people to think?”

“Don’t say that kind of thing so loud,” he told her mock-seriously. “I got a rep to protect.”
“Whatever you say, Kenickie,” she teased him, glad to laugh a while as Jess got to working.

It was pretty sad in the diner with Luke all upset over his uncle. He was grumpy at the best of times but the stress of having to deal with the death of a relative all by himself was definitely taking its toll. It only happened yesterday, at least that was when Luke found out about it. Barely twenty four hours later and it felt like longer. Rory worried for Luke, and then when she thought about it, she started worrying for Liz too.

“Hey, how’s your mom doing?” she asked Jess as he passed by with the now almost empty coffee pot.

“Still alternating between mostly fake tears and very real booze,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I swear, she was doing better until this happened. Her and Ira had patched things up, it was almost looking positive.”

“And now not so much?”

“Gotta expect her to be upset,” said Lorelai, having caught the tail end of the conversation. “I mean, Louie was Liz’s uncle too, right?”

“From what I can tell, she hasn’t seen him in years. Probably couldn’t even tell you what he looked like,” said Jess sharply. “I’m sorry, but if you never see a person, what’s the difference when they die?”

“Well, there’s a lot of difference” said Lorelai definitely. “I mean... Well, um, I guess in a way you do have a point. It is pretty easy to imagine that somebody is still there even when they’re gone if you never really see them anyway.”

“If you’re close enough to a person, you see them all the time, then when something happens to them, you feel it,” said Jess definitely. “Liz knew her uncle about as well as I know the pool boy at the Geller house, that is to say she knew his name and she could maybe pick him out of a line up... when she was sober,” he added after a moment’s thought. “Not exactly a reason for all this wailing and drinking.”

Slamming the coffee pot back into place, Jess stalked away to serve more customers. Rory shared a look with her mom but didn’t say a word.

“Wow. That was intense,” said Lorelai softly. “He gets awful upset for a guy explaining why nobody needs to be crying.”

“It’s not about the death,” said Rory, shaking her head and leaning over the counter closer to her mom. “I think it’s more about Liz. If her and Ira fall apart, which is more likely if she’s drinking again, well, they could break up and then...”

“And then?” Lorelai prompted before the light bulb went off in her head. “Oh, and then she leaves and Jess goes with her. Hon, I’m sorry, I never even thought about it,” she apologised sincerely, her hand over Rory’s on the counter.

“It’s fine” said Rory bravely, forcing a smile and sipping her coffee. “Everything will work out, most probably. Besides, Luke is the one who needs our sympathy and support right now. It’s why we’re here.”

“Yes, it is,” said Lorelai, with a definite nod. “So, let’s get back to it!”
Paris tapped on the bedroom door and waited for Liz to tell her she could come in. It still felt strange to approach her parents room like this and find Liz in the bed. Honestly, Paris couldn’t ever remember even being welcome near her parents room when they actually shared it, and that had been years ago. Her father barely had time for her, her mother even less so. Liz might be a crazy drunk much of the time, but she had been nice to Paris over the last few months, and right now she needed support. It was hard when people died, that much Paris did understand. You had to be nice to the relatives and friends of the departed, whether you liked it or not.

“Hi,” she said as she moved into the room, trying not to make a face at the sight of Liz hunched down under the duvet, used tissue piled up around her and a glass in her hand. “I, er... I brought you some lunch” she said of the tray in her hands. “I didn’t make it or anything, I mean, that’s not what I do, but I brought it,” she explained, putting the tray on the bed by Liz. “I just thought... Well, in your state, I wouldn’t want anybody to see me, at least, not the staff.”

Liz smiled through a veil of tears and reached for Paris' hand which she reluctantly let her hold a moment.

“You’re a good girl, Paris,” she told her. “I don’t always get where you’re coming from, but you’re a good girl,” she repeated.

“Thanks,” said Paris stiffly, retracting her hand just as soon as she could. “I can’t say that I know exactly what it is to lose a loved one. I’m not really close to any of my surviving grandparents so if they should die, I don’t know that it would really have a fundamental effect on me. My mother isn’t around, but then she never cared all that much for me when she was. Obviously I’d prefer she doesn’t die. That kind of thing shouldn’t be wished on anyone, though it is tempting with some of the evil in the world-”

“Paris,” Liz interrupted what had become a completely non-relevant ramble by now. “Thank you for the lunch, honey,” she told her then. “It means a lot, you tryin’ to help me out. Is Jess doin’ okay? I haven’t seen him.”

“He’s fine,” said Paris, nodding her head. “I think. It’s sometimes hard to tell with him. He says he doesn’t even remember meeting Louie.”

“Y’know he probably didn’t... and now he never will,” said Liz, starting to cry all over again, pouring another shot down her throat in-between sobs.

Paris was not at all comfortable with this. She couldn’t help but think that maybe Jess had a point when he told her that Liz was using this death in the family as an excuse to get attention and drink herself into oblivion.

“Jess went to Stars Hollow, to help out at the diner,” she said, loud enough to be heard over Liz’s sniffling and wailing. “Your brother is supposedly pretty shaken up by the passing, and he has all of the arrangements to make. If you wanted to go and help, I could drive you,” she suggested.

“Oh, I’m... I’m not good at arrangements like that.” Liz shook her head. “Luke will handle it. Luke always handles it,” she insisted, pouring herself another drink.

“You seem to be handling the bottle just fine,” muttered Paris.

She slammed from the room before Liz had a chance to react. Honestly, Paris wanted to be nice to Liz because she had been nice to her, but right now she just felt angry. Liz was ruining everything and Paris hated her for that. She was being weak and pathetic, using the loss of an uncle she barely knew as an excuse for her behaviour. If she was a decent person she would be assisting what family
she had left.

Paris made a snap decision, grabbed her jacket and purse, and headed downstairs. Her car keys were in her hand long before she reached the vehicle, and the moment she was in her car she had her foot down hard on the pedal, headed for Stars Hollow.

“Okay,” said Lorelai, checking her watch. “I hate to do this but I’m going to have to go grab Luke.”

“Why? We’re coping,” said Rory as she hurried to clear another table and put another pot of coffee on the machine.

“Yeah, we are, but I really have to head over to the inn,” she said, looking pained. “Normally Michel and Sookie would have most everything covered but things have been so crazy lately. We’re fully booked right now, and okay, maybe they could handle that without me, but I also promised Sookie I would drop off those material samples for her dress. Oh, and you need your book for school, which I left under the Reception desk, again!” she literally face-palmed as she recalled one more problem. “But I can’t leave you kids to run things alone.”

“There must be somebody who could help cover so we don’t disturb Luke right now,” said Rory, trying to think.

“Lorelai, can you ask Caesar to move his ass?” said Jess as he joined them. “If the woman in the corner doesn’t get her food soon, I think she’s going to eat me instead.”

“I’m on it,” she said, rushing into the kitchen.

Rory moved to assist with serving again as another rush came upon them.

“Must be lunch time,” she said to herself, not even looking up when the bell over the door clanged loudly. “Take a seat, we’ll be right with you,” she said as she passed by the new arrival.

“Actually, I was planning on being more useful than that.”

“Paris?” said Rory with surprise as she looked at her friend properly. “Er, you came to help us out? In the diner?”

“I can’t cook or anything,” she admitted, “but then I know that’s not your strong suit either.”


“I can change my mind pretty fast, Mariano!” she snapped at him, though she was smiling the whole time. “Family sticks together in a crisis, right? Your mother certainly won’t pull her weight. I figured maybe I should.”

Jess wasn’t sure he ever saw Paris look genuinely nervous before, but right now she really did. They didn’t have time for too many niceties. As it was, Paris was buffeted by three more people trying to get in the door within a second, and Rory and Jess couldn’t afford to hang around either.


The grin on her face grew tenfold as she walked up to the counter and was welcomed by Lorelai too. Waiting on the denizens of Stars Hollow didn’t thrill Paris Geller, not at all, but being here to help
out, feeling like part of a real family, that was pretty cool. She certainly had never expected this to happen when her father remarried, but she couldn’t be happier about it right now.
Once Paris was up to speed with taking orders and waiting tables at Luke’s, Jess offered to drive over to the inn on Lorelai’s behalf to take the material samples to Sookie and pick up Rory’s forgotten book. It made more sense for him to go, leaving a responsible adult in charge at the diner without disturbing Luke. As it was, Jess knew he could cope alone in the diner because he had done it before, but that was for one evening and right now they were trying to cover a whole day. He would rather be running errands for a little bit, get away from the women and their sympathy. They all meant well, and no-one more than Rory, but honestly, she seemed more cut up about Great Uncle Louie’s death than Jess could manage to be, and neither of them had ever met the guy at all. Luke might need a little TLC, but that was why it was best that Lorelai stayed at the diner, just in case she was needed in her girlfriend capacity as well as managing the business.

Jess was happy enough to drive over to the inn. Paris’ car handled well, and he hadn’t been all that surprised when she gave up the keys so easily. Rory had looked shocked, both by the frivolous tossing of the car keys into Jess’ hands and the fact that Paris had on an apron and a smile to serve the patrons of Luke’s diner. Sure, she had lost it with Kirk, but that was understandable. She had no time for Taylor either, and that amused Jess to no end.

It was weird having a family around, especially when the people Jess had spent most of today with weren’t even really related to him. Paris was his step-sister, Rory was his girlfriend, and Lorelai was dating his uncle, but there was no blood connection or anything permanent. Despite that fact, Jess had a feeling these were people he could rely upon, way more than his actual mother, his mostly absent step-father, and his entirely absent biological father.

Pulling up outside the Independence Inn, Jess hopped out of the car, grabbed the bag from the passenger seat and locked the vehicle. Heading inside, he braced himself to face the guy on the desk. He had met Michel a couple of times and neither occasion had gone well. It was clear Michel didn’t like him, but to be fair, he really didn’t seem to like anyone. Jess didn’t appreciate anybody looking down their nose at him either, but on this occasion he was just going to have to suck it up, he supposed.

Approaching the desk, Jess put on a smile and tried not to let it turn into a scowl, even when Michel glared at him.

“What are you doing here? Where is Lorelai?” asked the French guy snottily - Jess was pretty sure he didn’t have any other way of speaking.

“She’s still at the diner helping out,” he explained. “She sent me here to drop material off with Sookie and pick up Rory’s school book.”

He moved to step around the desk but Michel got in his way immediately. The guys were practically toe to toe and Jess was quite ready to get mad about it when Michel’s hand slipped under the counter and produced Rory’s book.

“Here is the book,” he said smartly. “And I will take the bag for Sookie. We do not want the kitchen to become contaminated,” he said, smiling too much.

Jess bit back a half dozen smart ass comments and tried to keep his hands from clenching into fists. He really didn’t like this guy at all. Good thing his business at the inn was concluded quickly.

Switching the bag in his hand for the book in Michel’s own, the French guy headed for the kitchen, presumably to give Sookie the material samples immediately. Jess took a breath and turned to leave,
just as the phone rang on the Reception desk. He should ignore it, he knew, or just go grab Michel to come answer it. Of course it would be easier just to take a message. He could easily walk out and no-one would know, but with Lorelai helping out at the diner, Rory too, Jess had a strange crisis of conscience and felt the need to do the right thing.

“You’re going soft, Mariano,” he muttered to himself, moving to pick up the phone

“Hello? Er, Independence Inn,” he said absently. “I don’t have that information,” he told the caller when they asked about the availability of rooms. “But, er, I can take your name and number and get somebody to call you right back,” he said fast, scrabbling for a piece of paper and a pen.

Jess had just got done taking the message and hanging up the phone when he felt a presence on the other side of the desk.

“Who on Earth are you?” asked a snooty female voice. “Where is my daughter?”

It took Jess a second to realise who she was, but it all clicked into place when she said ‘my daughter’. This was Emily Gilmore. Now Jess really wished he was anywhere but here.

“I’m Jess. Jess Mariano... ma’am,” he added as an after-thought. “Lorelai is in Stars Hollow, helping out at Luke’s diner. His uncle died,” he explained, getting out from behind the desk before Michel came back and made a big deal.

“Oh. Well, I’m sorry for his loss, I’m sure,” said Emily of Luke, her expression thoughtful then. “Jess Mariano? We’ve met before.”

“At the big dinner here last Christmas.” He nodded his agreement. “Also, you were probably at Liz’s New Years party. At the Geller house,” he added the last part because he suddenly realised that the name Liz would probably mean nothing to Emily.

“And you’re courting my granddaughter,” she said with a twisted smile.

“Yes, I’m dating Rory,” confirmed Jess, just as Michel returned from the kitchen.

He smiled widely at Emily and greeted her with warmth and affection that made Jess want to vomit. He wasted no time in heading for the door, only to be yelled at from across the foyer by Emily.

“Young man!”

Jess stopped walking, rolled his eyes and sighed, and then turned around to face her with a big fake smile painted on his lips.

“I assume you’re going back to this diner where my daughter is working today?” Emily checked, barely waiting for a nod of reply before she continued. “I would appreciate if you could let Lorelai know to check her answering machine just as soon as she gets home. I’ve left her several messages about next week’s dinner arrangements.”

“No problem,” said Jess, nodding once, and then he made a hasty exit.

“Jess, I am so, so sorry!” said Lorelai with her hand over her heart and great dramatic flair. “If I had known for a second that Emily would be at the inn, I would never, ever have let you go alone!”

“It was fine,” he assured her, smirking at the theatrics. “I don’t know that she exactly loves me like part of the family or anything, but I still have all four limbs and everything, so it's fine.”
“Well, thank you for running the errands. You’re a good kid.” She smiled, turning away to deal with more customers.

“I’m never going to get used to that,” said Jess, shaking his head. “The compliments. People actually appreciating when I do stuff. It’s weird.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you’re so sweet and kind,” said Rory, putting her arms up around his neck and planting a kiss on his cheek.

“You do know guys never want to be called sweet, right?”

“I only speak the truth, sweetheart” she teased him, kissing him on the lips this time and then practically running away before he could argue.

Jess looked around at the scene before him. Things had calmed down in the diner. Paris was cleaning off some empty tables, Rory was refilling salt and pepper shakers, and Lorelai had allowed Caesar to take his break since there wouldn’t be another rush for at least an hour or more. Jess considered heading upstairs to check on Luke. Lorelai must have noticed him staring at the curtain, contemplating going up there, because she came and stood in his eye line.

“He’s not up there. Luke, he went out a little after you did. He had stuff to deal with that couldn’t be done by phone. I offered to go with, but he said it was better we all stayed on diner duty.”

“I get it.” Jess nodded. “The loner thing he has going on, I get it.”

“I know that you do.” Lorelai smiled. “But neither of you is really alone, you know that, right? I mean, I keep on telling Luke and I think maybe it’s sinking in now. It should with you too. I mean, it’s not my place to say, but Rory cares a lot for you, and apparently Paris is really into the whole sister thing. I never thought I’d see the day she was up to her elbows in bacon grease and dirty dishes for any reason that wasn’t Harvard application related. She’s doing this for you.”

“She’s cracked,” said Jess, though he couldn’t look at Lorelai when he spoke.

“She was kind of a loner too.” Lorelai shrugged. “Seems to me you and she were the best thing for each other. Can’t escape now, you’re a part of something here, and it’s not just Paris or Rory. Stars Hollow is taking you in as one of their own, piece by piece. You kind of belong here.” She grinned, nudging his shoulder with her own.

“God help me,” Jess dead-panned, but a smile broke through and ruined it all.

Before another word was spoken the diner door swung open, the bell jangling loudly as the door itself hit the wall with a clang. Luke stood framed in the gap, red-faced and practically spitting.

“Babe?” said Lorelai worriedly, rushing to him. “What happened?”

“What happened?! he snapped at her. “This stupid town, that’s what happened! The crack-pot idiots in this place that have no respect, no idea of the proper way to behave when one of their own just wants a little dignity when the end comes!”


“I don’t want to breathe! I don’t want to deal with this crap anymore! And as for those loons out there, I could... I almost...”

Luke was pounding his fist into his hand with frustration and anger. Lorelai looked around at the few
patrons left in the diner, and then her eyes fell on Jess. He tilted his head towards the curtain, encouraging Lorelai to do as she wanted to and take Luke upstairs to calm him down. The kids could cope for a little while by themselves, especially now things were so quiet.

“C’mon, I’m going to make you some tea and we’re going to figure this out,” said Lorelai to Luke, urging him to go with her.

With a great heaving sigh, he gave in, letting his girlfriend take his hand and lead him to the stairs. Lorelai patted Jess on the shoulder with her free hand a she went by, and then Rory wandered over to him.

“That was intense,” she said sadly. “I hope Luke is going to be okay.”

“Me too,” he agreed, pulling Rory into his arms. “Grief does weird stuff to people, I guess.”

“I could take a stab at what got him so riled up,” said Paris as she joined them. “I heard some old guys talking about the great Uncle Louie earlier. Apparently, he wasn’t so great. That Doose guy from the market? He was saying all kinds of things about Louie being opinionated, a little violent, not into all the town craziness.”

“Sounds like you two would’ve got on like a house on fire.” Jess smirked.

“Actually, they were making comparisons between him and Luke,” Paris explained. “Personally, I wouldn’t mind the description, but from what you’ve told me, your uncle isn’t exactly going to love being told he’s a miserable old man.”

Jess tried to pull out of Rory’s arms and head for the door, but she stopped him going so much as a step away. “Let me go, Rory.”

“Why?” she asked, sure she already knew the answer.

“Because I want to go have a nice little talk with the guy who runs the market,” he told her, practically growling.

“Then no, I’m not letting you go,” she said definitely. “You’re not going to go take a swing at the Town Selectman, Jess. Luke wouldn’t want you to. Okay, so maybe he would right now, but when he calms down he won’t,” she amended off Jess incredulous look. “On top of everything, do you really think you getting arrested for assault will help?”

Jess met her eyes a moment and then looked at Paris. They were right. Hitting Taylor would make him feel better for a minute but it would only make things worse in the end. He took a deep breath, let the anger dissipate some.

“That guy is a jerk,” he muttered.

“Maybe, but you’re not,” said Rory, proud of him for being the bigger person. “Luke will be glad you didn’t do anything dumb.”

“He has you to thank for that,” said Jess, pulling her closer and kissing the top of her head. “C’mon, let’s get this place set for the dinner rush.”

The funeral for Louie took place a few days later. Jess didn’t really want to go, but he knew he had to, for Luke’s sake. Lorelai and Rory were going to be there, and Liz was insisting she was finally strong enough to leave the house on the day of the actual burial. Paris surprised Jess one more time
when she came out of her room in a long black coat with her car keys in her hand.

“You’re seriously going to do this?” he asked, staring at her. “You’re coming to the funeral of a man you never met, that I never met,” he clarified. “Because...?”

“Just because,” said Paris in reply, but the slight smile that showed on her face spoke volumes.

Jess shoved his hands in his pockets and shook his head in disbelief, and yet he smiled too. “Thanks, Paris,” he said softly as they headed down the stairs together.

“You’re welcome.”

Paris drove to Stars Hollow with Jess in the passenger seat, and Liz in the back sniffing the whole way. It was easier not to talk, not to let the radio play above a murmur. Maybe this man that was about to be buried had been a bad person, maybe he wasn’t exactly well known to those who were about to see him laid to rest, but none of that mattered. This was a family thing, a time when people needed to come together for each other’s sake, not necessarily for the person whose funeral it actually was.

Luke and Lorelai were outside the diner when Paris pulled the car up to the kerb. Rory appeared from behind them, hugging Jess and thanking Paris for coming along. Luke was comforting Liz who had started bawling again, until at last Lorelai offered to accompany her to the funeral ceremony. Luke hung back wanting to talk to the kids.

“You’re all... I mean, you didn’t have to be here,” he tried to tell them. “You’ve all... You’ve got better things to do with your time than attend my uncle's funeral.”

“You’ve always been there for me, Luke,” said Rory definitely, her arm around her boyfriend and his around her still. “And Jess is your family.”

Paris shifted awkwardly behind them until Jess reached for her hand and pulled her forward.

“And as nutty as it sounds, Paris is my family. So here we all are,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Let’s get this thing done.”

Luke smiled and nodded his head. Maybe today wasn’t going to be quite the disaster he had feared.
Rory was hanging out in the hallway waiting on Jess when he got out of his last class of the day. He was due at the diner today so he planned on riding the bus to the Hollow with his girlfriend. She looked up from her book when the door to the Chem lab opened and a stream of students filed out. Somewhere at the back was Jess, talking to a friend that Rory recognised.

“That’s cool. I’ll catch up with you tomorrow,” he was saying as Henry Cho walked away. “Hey,” he greeted Rory then. “This isn’t a problem for you, right?”

“Problem?” she echoed, apparently confused by the question, but Jess didn’t quite believe it.

“Rory, c’mon,” he said, rolling his eyes. “You know what I mean. Henry was sort of dating Lane, in a not actually dating way,” he recalled. “You’re not going to tell me I can’t talk to one of the few guys in this place that’s actually not a dick just because he broke up with your friend, who he hadn’t actually been on a date with anyway, are you?”

“Of course not,” Rory assured him, looping her arm through his own as they headed down the hall towards the exit. “I like Henry, he’s a nice guy. If he talked to me, I’d answer, it’s just that I don’t see him all that much from one day to the next. Honestly, as bad as I feel for Lane with the whole break up thing, I can’t really blame Henry. It was tough on him too.”

“Had to be,” Jess agreed, nodding his head. “Nothing worse than really wanting to be with somebody and knowing that you can’t.”

Rory looked up at his words but Jess wouldn’t meet her eyes. There was no way what he just said wasn’t significant to their own situation, how things had been when Rory was still with Dean. Leaning in closer, she planted a kiss on Jess’ cheek and then continued on as if nothing had happened.

“Lane’s doing better now anyway,” she told Jess. “It’s been a few weeks, Mrs Kim is over the trauma, and Lane may have discovered a new love.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Not a person this time, but still nothing Mrs Kim approved,” she explained, smiling slightly. “She has it in her head that she really needs to play drums.”

“Wow.” Jess considered that concept. “I can see it, but like you said, with her mom as strict as she is, she’s never going to get that parental approval.”

“Lane knows that better than anyone,” said Rory definitely as they reached the bus stop and turned into each other’s arms. “But she’s making plans. Of all the people in my life, nobody is as smart and sneaky as Lane.”

“Is that right?” asked Jess, an eyebrow raised.

“Well, you come a close second,” Rory told him with a smirk Jess himself would have been proud of.

He didn’t bother to say anything smart back, he just kissed her. They were kind of lost in each other for a while there, at least until Louise and Madeline drove by, the former letting out a wolf whistle that startled Rory and Jess from their kiss. The bus arrived within a minute and the couple boarded,
“So, you think Lorelai will be up for this project mentoring thing?” asked Jess, picking up Rory’s hand in his just because.

“I don’t know. She’s been crazy busy lately, with the inn and business class and helping Sookie with the wedding,” she said with a sigh. “Throw in the fact she was already kind of behind with stuff after taking time out to help with the diner and Luke’s uncle’s funeral...”

“That’s one frazzled mom you have,” said Jess, nodding his understanding. “Well, Liz is no business woman, and I’m with Paris on her dad - he’s just not the type to give up his actual work commitments to help out at a school, not even for his only daughter.”

“Kinda sad,” Rory noted.

“Kinda is,” Jess agreed. “I guess we could ask Luke, but a diner is not exactly the same as a business in the sense the teacher was talking.”

“No, it’s really not.” Rory shook her head. “The only other business type person that I know is my grandpa.”

“Can’t you ask him?” suggested Jess. “I mean, he’s retired now, right? Probably so bored he would love the opportunity to help out his favourite little princess.” He smiled too much and Rory knew he was teasing her.

“If anyone was supposed to be the princess type, it was my mom,” she told him. “And look how well that turned out. Still, I guess I could ask Grandpa if he has the time. The worst he’s going to say is no, right?”

“Right.”

Jess was surprised when he finished his shift to find Rory parked outside the diner in Lorelai’s Jeep. The question must have showed on his face because she started explaining the moment he got over to the car.

“Mom came home early to work on her bridesmaid’s dress and paperwork for the inn and stuff. She said I could borrow the car to head back to Hartford and ask my grandpa about the business fair. I figured I could take you home at the same time.”

“I don’t know,” said Jess too seriously. “I mean, if I let you drive me home, you might expect things from me. I’m just not that kind of boy, Rory.”

She laughed at his joke and rolled her eyes for good measure.

“Get in the car, Jerry Seinfeld. I got places to be!”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, moving around to the passenger side and hopping in.

Jess immediately turned the radio to a rock station and hiked up the volume. He and Rory belted out all the classics on their way back to Hartford, laughing at each other when they screwed up the lyrics, though that didn’t happen too often. By the time Rory dropped Jess off at the Geller house, they were both grinning like idiots. They just had the best time when they were together.

“Thanks for the ride,” he said, leaning in through the driver’s side window to kiss Rory goodbye for
now. “I’ll see you tomorrow, and good luck with your grandfather.”

She thanked him for that and waved before pulling back onto the road and heading off. Jess’ smile remained as he headed into the house. He stopped just shy of the front door when he heard a strange sound around the side of the house somewhere. It sounded like laughter, his mother’s if he wasn’t mistaken. Lately she had mostly been getting upset about stupid things, like the death of an uncle she barely knew, and Ira not giving her attention every second of the day. It was childish and pathetic, Jess hated it and was half-convinced that Liz wasn’t just drinking but back to smoking pot too. It sure would explain her mood swings, but that didn’t make sense of what she was doing out back of the house, giggling like a school girl.

Jess considered just going inside and ignoring whatever Liz was doing, but curiousity got the better of him in the end. Taking a deep breath, steeling himself against whatever sight he was about to discover, Jess went around the side of the house to the back. The laughter grew louder as he approached and it wasn’t just a woman he could hear but a guy too. Whispered words were impossible to make out, but this mystery man had an accent that was not at all Ira’s own. Jess found himself by the pool then, though there was nobody in it or around it. A skimmer had been abandoned by the steps and a towel was draped over a sun lounger on the other side of the pool itself. Jess winced when he heard his mother’s laughter again.

“You have got to be kidding me,” he muttered.

Just as he decided to turn back and not get involved in another of Liz’s messes, she gave him no choice.

“Jess?” she called, clearly having either heard or seen him.

Appearing from the pool house in a robe and presumably little else, Liz was followed by a young Hispanic guy, similarly attired. Jess bit his lip and shook his head.

“Wow,” he said eventually. “I mean, you’ve pulled some crap, Liz, but this? This might just be the biggest cliché of all time!” he said too loudly.

Liz whispered in the pool boy’s ear, apparently dismissing him, then she came closer to Jess. He backed up on instinct just as soon as she got close.

“Baby, please,” she urged him. “You gotta understand, Javier has been so good to me. I can’t... Me and Ira, it’s just not working out. I thought he loved me, but... Well, you’ve seen how it is lately.”

“I’ve seen you tearing your own marriage apart piece by piece, just like you always do when the guy you choose might actually not be a complete waste of space,” said Jess crossly, mindful of his volume with so many windows open and Paris home even if Ira wasn’t. “You always do this, whenever you get a guy that’s actually half-decent, you just have to screw it up.”

“It’s not like that, Jess,” she argued, but her son had seen this too many times to be easily fooled, and Liz ought to have known it too.

“It’s not like that!” he insisted. “It’s exactly like that. You either pick a loser or you drive a half-decent guy away. Every. Single. Time,” he emphasised.

It always hurt when she screwed up another situation, but this time maybe more than ever Jess was feeling the pain. Liz was having an affair with the pool boy, the biggest cliché in the world, just like he told her. Ira would find out, one way or the other, and then they would be thrown out. Jess didn’t care about losing the big house and the luxuries of a rich man’s life. It’d suck, but he could deal. The
problem wasn’t what he would be leaving, it was who. It was Rory and Paris and Luke. It was a family of sorts that he had actually come to care about, and a life that had just now started to suit him. Liz was ruining it all over again through her own dumb, selfish behaviour. He hated that.

“Jess, I’m sorry,” said Liz, running a hand back through her damp hair. “I didn’t want it to end like this. I don’t want it to end at all. If you could just...”

“If I could just what?” he asked, pulling his arm out of her way the moment she reached for him. “Not tell anyone your dirty little secret? Pretend to everybody else in the house that you’re still the perfect little wife and hostess? Wouldn’t be the first time I lied for you,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “I won’t say a word,” he confirmed then. “But then I probably won’t have to.”

With that, he turned and walked away. There was nothing else left to say and even if there were, Jess didn’t have the energy. To think he had been so happy on his drive home with Rory, actually loving his life as it stood right now. Jess had known from the start he was probably on borrowed time here in Connecticut, but now more than ever he felt the pressure of the deadline weighing down on his head. He would keep his silence about Liz and her affair, just like he told her he would, but it was for his own sake that Jess was keeping his mouth shut. He didn’t want Rory, or even Paris, worrying about when the end of this situation was going to come. Jess would be leaving Hartford before too much longer and he knew it. Better that only he knew until that time came. He wouldn’t have those he had come to care so much for suffer because of Liz. Life would go on as normal for as long as it could. From here, Jess doubted he had more than a week before it was all over.
Chapter 28

The week passed quickly. With the kids so caught up in their project for Chilton’s Annual Business Fair, there wasn’t time to think about anything else. That was true for Rory and Paris, even Madeline and Louise, to a certain degree. For Jess, it was different. Though he actually did try to focus on the stylish first aid kit idea that his step-sister had come up with, and engage with Richard Gilmore when he tried to be of help, it was tough to concentrate. Jess knew his mother’s secret, the truth of her clichéd affair with the pool boy, and it was killing him just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Liz had pulled her son aside the day after he discovered her and Javier getting familiar. She urged him once again to keep his silence, warning him in a none too friendly way what he would destroy by opening his mouth. Jess said very little in response, but he did confirm his promise not to spill his mother’s secrets. She was right; it would ruin everything if and when the truth came out. He wouldn’t tell, but Ira Geller was not stupid, and neither was Paris.

Liz got lucky not to be caught by one of them last week instead of her son. She figured they were out of the house and the staff were too busy to notice anything. As it turned out, Paris was there the whole time, though with her room being at the front of the house and the pool at the back, it was unlikely she saw or heard anything of note. The most she would have reckoned on was Liz actually going swimming. Jess sighed just thinking about it. He hated to lie to her and to Rory, and a lie by omission was still a lie, but he didn’t have a choice, not if he wanted his last few days in Hartford to bear any resemblance to the previous happiness he had found here. The girls certainly looked happy enough now, all four of them actually. Winning did that for a person, or a group of people, as was the case today.

“I’m sure no team of young people ever deserved a first prize more than this particular group of hard-working students,” said Richard as he watched the girls hug each other and bounce around like crazy people. “And yet, you do not look all that thrilled by your achievements, Jess,” he said, looking seriously at the young man beside him.

“I’m not really the jumping and screaming type,” he said, smirking as he watched the girls get over-excited.

“Well, no. It would hardly be appropriate for a young man to... be so elated,” said Richard diplomatically. “But somehow it feels as if this whole experience has been underwhelming for you. I don’t presume to know your character that well, Jess, but it doesn’t take an expert in psychology to see that something is on your mind. Clearly it’s not school. You’re very intelligent from what Rory has told me, and from what I’ve observed myself.”

“No, it’s not school,” he assured Rory’s grandfather, shaking his head. “And thank you for the compliment,” he added politely before continuing on. “I’m just... You ever look at your life and wonder where it all went wrong?” he asked eventually, almost wishing the very next moment that he had said nothing at all.

Richard continued to look very seriously at him, apparently giving the question a great deal of consideration before he answered it. “Not often,” he admitted. “Although I have to say, I can probably guess what that feeling must be like. But Jess, you’re young, you’re healthy, you’re intelligent, and you’re courting one of the very best young women in the country.” He smiled warmly as he mentioned Rory in the usual glowing terms that Jess would never argue with. “What on Earth can you have to regret?”

Jess opened his mouth and closed it again fast. He rubbed his forehead, trying to stave off a headache
that was not being helped by the happy cheering and giggling of his team-mates.

“It’d be tough to explain to you,” he told Richard eventually.

Jess moved as if to walk away, but Richard stepped into his path and met his gaze once again.

“If you ever do need to talk, man to man, Jess, you would be quite welcome to come to me.”

That brought a genuine smile to Jess’ face, even if he was surprised by the offer.

“Thank you... sir,” he added as an afterthought.

Richard waved the term away in a moment. “As I said before, Jess, ‘Mr Gilmore’ is just fine,” he smiled amiably. “You know you quite shocked Emily, she was not at all impressed with you, but I am. You’re a very intelligent and respectful young man. Much better than the last boy Rory introduced to me as her boyfriend.”

“Thank you, again,” said Jess, smiling some more because he really couldn’t help loving that Rory’s grandpa just dissed Dean like that, “and not just for the compliment. You made Rory really happy when you said you’d help us out with this project, and I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t’ve won without you, not even with Paris and all her... enthusiasm,” he said, choosing the word carefully.

Richard chuckled at the way that word was said, knowing very well what Jess meant.

“I’m sure you would have done well enough,” he said thoughtfully, “but I suppose I did help rather a lot, didn’t I? Quite honestly, I enjoyed myself immensely. Perhaps I gave up work too soon, too easily.”

He was deep in thought as he wandered away a couple of steps, only to be instantly accosted by Principal Charleston. Jess was staring after the two older men when suddenly Rory was in front of him, throwing herself into his personal space with the biggest grin on her face.

“We won!” she enthused.

“Yes, we did,” Jess agreed, though the smile he raised for the occasion didn’t really cut it and they both knew it.

“You’re not happy,” said Rory, her own happy looks fading into sad as she stared at him.

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” she insisted, her hands on his shoulders, leaving him no choice but to look at her, try as he might to squirm out of it. “You haven’t been since we started this project. You didn’t enjoy it?”

“It was fine, Rory,” he insisted, meeting her eyes. “I’m fine. I am,” he said again, kissing her quickly, changing the subject even faster. “You want to go out and celebrate our victory tonight?”

“All of us?” she checked.

“I was thinking maybe just you and me, but if you want Paris and the Banger Sisters to come along...”

“Just us might be nice,” she considered with a smile, before a thought hit her. “Oh, but not tonight. Sorry, I just remembered, it’s Movie in the Square Night and Mom is picking the movie. I don’t really wanna miss it...”
“That’s fine,” said Jess, trying to hide his disappointment and clearly doing a good job since Rory never questioned him further. “Maybe tomorrow?”

“Definitely tomorrow,“ she grinned, planting another kiss on his lips before rushing over to Paris the moment her friend called for her attention.

Jess watched her go and let out a long sigh.

“Tomorrow,” he echoed. “Better hope I’m still around by then.”


“Hey, you try choosing a decent movie from the dumb folder full of crap that Taylor has!” his girlfriend argued, as they crossed the street towards the town square.

“It really was a horrible list,” agreed Rory, having gone through the process with her mom.

“And you only had to go through a few pages,” her mother reminded her. “Your school project came just at the right time to keep you away from the dreaded folder!”

“But aren’t you glad for all the work I put into that?” her daughter countered. “We did get first place at the business fair.”


“Because I didn’t get around to telling you yet, and you haven’t seen Jess today?” Rory guessed.

“Well, now you know, we won. Principal Charleston thought our funky stylish first aid kits for the locker were the best invention he had seen in a long time, plus we had all the financials figured out, pie charts and spreadsheets galore. Paris was amazing, but Grandpa was a real help too.”

“And also in the good news column,” said Lorelai fast, “Dad is now talking about going back to work, thus getting him out from under Emily’s feet, leading to less complaining to me about said feet being under!” she explained as only a Gilmore girl could. “This is what we call a win-win-win, people!”

“And yet there is still The Yearling,” said Luke, as they took their seats.

“Au contraire, mon frère!” said Lorelai, at which Rory frowned.


“Eew!” Lorelai frowned. “Okay, well, yes, The Yearling, but first, drum roll please!” she said in a half-whisper as the screen came to life before them. “Right on time,” she grinned.

Words immediately appeared in white on a black background proclaiming ‘a film by kirk’.


Lorelai giggled like a teen, looping her arm through her boyfriend’s own and resting her head on his shoulder. Beside her, Rory was smiling as she contemplated the beginning of Kirk’s short film and all it might yet entail. The smile faded as she checked her phone and realised Jess still hadn’t replied to her text. It had been more than a half hour and he usually answered faster, especially when she was asking a direct question. She had hoped he might come over for Movie in the Square Night. He gave her a maybe when she asked in person at the end of the school day but when she text a while back to check if he had decided, he didn’t reply. She typed out another message, hoping he would
answer, and then just to be sure nothing was wrong she text Paris and asked if she was okay. Ten minutes later, neither of them had answered, and Rory started to worry.

“You okay, sweets?” asked Lorelai, noting Rory’s worried expression even in the half light of the ‘movie theatre’ atmosphere.

“Jess and Paris aren’t answering. Neither of them. That’s weird.”

“Maybe they’re having a little brother-sister bonding time, watching a movie of their own or studying together or something,” suggested Lorelai. “I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

“You’re probably right,” Rory agreed, nodding her head, but she couldn’t quite shake the feeling that something was wrong.

“What do you expect, Ira?! A woman like me has needs!”

“A woman like you should’ve had her rear tanned when she was a girl, then maybe you would’ve turned out better!”

“You asshole!”

The loud sound of flesh smacking flesh echoed through the house, the only thing more openly violent than the yelling that had been going on for an hour. This was the one, the final fight. Jess recognised the sound of it, the harsher words, the finality of the statements being made. It was all inevitable, it had just come somewhat sooner than he had hoped.

Ira knew about the affair. Jess hadn’t said a word and couldn’t imagine Liz was so dumb, not after all the fuss she made about her son keeping his silence. The longer he sat and listened, the more Jess suspected it was Javier himself who had come clean. Jess wouldn’t be at all surprised to hear Ira say he had paid the guy to try his luck, just to see if Liz would go for it. Jess could’ve saved him a few hundred bucks - he knew his mother well enough to know it didn’t take much to turn her head.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?” said Paris from further along the top step of the stairs.

Usually she would be in her room when one of these fights broke out, headphones in and music blasting. Jess would use similar avoidance tactics on any normal day, but this was different. This definitely was as bad as Paris thought. This was the end of the line, but Jess didn’t have the heart to actually say so.

“I should go pack,” he said instead, getting up from the step and moving down the hall towards his room.

Paris stayed put, wincing as something smashed against the wall and fell to the tile in pieces. It could be anything from a regular dish or an antique vase. To Paris, it made no difference. Nothing was as loud as her own blood pumping in her ears. Nothing hurt as much as trying so hard not to cry.

Her parents’ divorce never broke her. To the world, Paris Geller was indestructible and most of the time she lived up to the legend. Her family had never really been a happy one. Her mom lived in one corner of the house, her dad in another, and Paris somewhere in the space in between. She had a Portuguese nanny who cared well enough, but that was all. It was only since Jess Mariano came into her life, starting out as a pain in the ass but soon genuinely becoming like a brother, Paris started to feel like she really was a part of something. Now all of that was going away, and she hated it.

“You don’t even care what you’ve done, do you?” her father shouted at Liz. “To my family, to my
reputation. I was a fool to think you were worth the rumours and the laughter behind my back. You’re nothing but a drug-addled whore!”

“You don’t know anything about me! Not the real me! You could never understand!”

“I don’t care to! Not anymore! Why don’t you take your drugs, your dirty drinking habit, and your son, and get out of my house?!”

“I wouldn’t stay here if you paid me!”

Paris winced at the final exchange before doors slammed and Liz began yelling for Jess to get his ass in gear. Panicked by the sudden motion in proceedings, Paris scrambled to her feet and headed down the hall. She met Jess as he came out of his room, already wearing his leather jacket and toting a couple of bags, the very ones he had arrived with back in September.

Everything had changed so much in the last seven months, and yet to look at Jess now, you would never know. He wore a scowl and yelled back to Liz that he was already packed and ready to go. Paris swallowed hard. She couldn’t find the words. She wasn’t built to cope with stuff like this.

“You don’t have to leave,” she said at last, a crack in her voice that she couldn’t control. “Not like this.”

“Pretty sure your dad feels differently,” said Jess, barely looking at her, knowing what he would see if he did - sadness, hurt, pity - he couldn’t handle it.

“He’s mad at Liz, not you,” Paris insisted. “I could talk him around. You could stay, even if she has to go. I’m not saying I’m a spoiled princess that always gets her way with Daddy, far from it, but I’m pretty sure-”

“Paris!” Jess cut in, his tone perhaps too harsh in the circumstances, but he couldn’t help it. He made himself meet her eyes then, shaking his head to let her know there was no point.

She looked broken somehow. The great Paris Geller with all her strength and bitchiness was suddenly a five year old child who just heard her dog had bought the farm. Jess felt sick. He knew Rory would be hurt by his going and assumed maybe Paris would too, but this was something else. Perhaps the biggest surprise was the knife twisting in his own gut as he realised he could easily never see either his girlfriend or his step-sister ever again.

In what had to be a moment of madness, he threw an arm around Paris and drew her close for all of a few seconds. One tear streaked down her cheek as they parted, and Jess had to clear his throat twice before he could speak again.

“I need you to give this to Rory,” he said, pulling an envelope from his inside pocket and pushing it towards her. “Paris, c’mon, say you’ll do it,” he urged when she didn’t take it from him immediately.

Liz was calling for Jess again. Ira was angrily questioning why they were still on his property.

“You know I will,” said Paris, dragging her hand across her face so her sadness didn’t show so much - she failed at covering any of the emotion she was feeling.

“Thanks, sis,” said Jess deliberately, managing half a smile as he hiked his bag higher on his shoulder and then walked away. “Maybe I’ll see you around,” he called over his shoulder, somehow not feeling able to look back even for a second.

“I doubt it,” muttered Paris as she watched Jess disappear down the stairs.
More tears fell down from her eyes the moment she was alone, and that was very much how Paris felt right now; alone.
Rory,

I know you’ll get the full story from Paris and I’m on limited time here, so I’m skipping to the important stuff. Truth is, I never knew I could feel this way about anyone until I met you. I hate that I have to leave, but I don’t see a second choice right now. All I can say is that I’m sorry we’re not getting a real goodbye and I promise that I’ll call you when I can.

Yours always,

Jess

Rory read the note over again and felt no better for it. Her finger traced the scribbled paraphrased quote underneath the main message and she bit her lip.

Whatever our souls are made of, yours and mine are the same.

He was right. For all the differences in their lives, their upbringing, their circumstances, they definitely had the same kind of souls. That was what hurt so much. Rory hadn’t thought about having a soul-mate. She and Jess, they never said that they loved each other, but now he was gone, and it just hurt so much.

The assumption was that Jess and Liz had gone back to New York. That wasn’t so very far away, but Rory had no idea exactly where they were. No forwarding address had turned up, no call had come. Ten days since Paris came into school with a face even more like thunder than usual, and a note in her hand that she had promised to hand to Rory the moment she asked where Jess was.

Luke had tried to find them. Both Liz and Jess had left their cell phones behind since they had been bought and paid for by Ira Geller. Luke started with previous addresses, a couple of old friends, but to no avail. Each day when Rory went into the diner with her mom, she looked expectantly at Luke, hoping that today he would tell her he heard from his sister, but that day never came. Rory didn’t get her promised call from Jess, and Paris heard nothing either. Ten days. It was too long and hurt too much.

Rory tried to talk to Paris about Jess. She knew that her friend missed him too, though she tried her best to hide it. In front of other people, like Madeline and Louise, Paris claimed to be happy to have her house returned to normal, no more interlopers there or in the halls of Chilton. She could concentrate on her studies again, maintain her grade point average with greater ease. They bought it. Everybody bought it, except Rory. Only she knew how close Paris and Jess had really gotten, how much like siblings they really were by the end.

The end sounded terrible, like somebody had died. Lorelai told her daughter that such circumstances certainly had similarities to mourning a loss. Jess was gone somewhere unknown, possibly never coming back, and Rory couldn’t explain it or deal with it properly. It hurt, even though Jess was still living somewhere in the world. It was no use denying that not having him around was hard. Rory missed him every day and only wished he’d would call like he said he would.

She worried about him. Sure, he was used to the noise and disruption of New York. Jess had often told Rory how he missed his life there. More than once he admitted that Connecticut did have its perks, whilst smiling that smirky smile at her and going in for a kiss that she would never deny him. He had his home back, but Rory wondered if it would still feel like that anymore, without her,
without Paris. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe once he got back to where he came from, Jess realised he had been kidding himself, just playing pretend in Stars Hollow and Hartford. Maybe he had forgotten about them already. Rory didn’t want to believe that, but it was hard not to after more than a week of silence.

“Rory? You okay, babe?” Lorelai called from the kitchen, tapping on her daughter’s bedroom door.

Rory shook her head, coming out of a daze and got up from her bed. Looking around, she realised she had stopped short of putting her books in her bag when she noticed Jess’ note in amongst them and felt the need to re-read it one more time. Checking her watch, she saw she had been sat there more than ten minutes just lost in thought.

“I’m coming!” she called to Lorelai, grabbing her stuff and rushing out. “I should’ve left by now!”

“Well, where’s the fire, baby girl?” asked her mother, grabbing her by the shoulders as she tried to tear past. “Have you been crying again?”

“No, and there is no fire, I just need to go. I wanted to get the early bus today.”

Rory squirmed out of her mother’s grip and bolted for the front door. A second later she doubled back, rushed at Lorelai to hug her and plant a kiss on her cheek. Forcing a smile she assured her mom she was fine.

“And again, so proud of my little graduate!” she told her definitely, and then she was gone.

Lorelai shook her head and sighed. She was all for Rory being proud of her, and all for the getting to school early for whatever study-type reason, but she was worried too. Jess leaving had hit Rory hard, and Lorelai wasn’t exactly shocked by that. It hurt Luke too, losing two members of his family that he had gotten used to having around again. As much as he loved Liz, he had told Lorelai the truth of what she was really like and didn’t seem suprised when she messed up. Lorelai wasn’t so sure that his sister’s loss was the problem. Luke missed his nephew more. Everybody was missing the kid, but there was no way to bring him back when they didn’t even know exactly where he was.

“Focus,” said Lorelai to herself then, returning her attention to the things spread across the kitchen table.

She had a to do list as long as her arm, work to get to in the next few minutes, Sookie’s wedding to help out with, and a graduation coming up fast. That last one at least made her smile genuinely. Rory and Luke were both going to be there when Lorelai finally got handed her diploma, having completed all her credits for business class. As dumb as she might end up looking in a black gown and mortar board, she was actually really looking forward to it.

Later that day, Rory and Luke were alone at the kitchen table eating dinner whilst Lorelai took a frantic call from Sookie. It seemed the closer she got to her wedding with Jackson, the more Sookie panicked that something would go wrong. Lorelai was constantly talking her around, assuring her everything would be fine. Rory could hear her in the next room now, convincing Sookie to think about something else for a little bit, going on to talk about her own graduation ceremony tomorrow, to which Sookie and Jackson were most definitely invited.

“So, how’d it go with your grandparents this morning?” asked Luke in a low voice, mindful of Lorelai hearing.

“It went fine,” said Rory, nodding her head. “I don’t know if they’ll be there tomorrow or not, but they have the tickets and they know they’re welcome. For all that mom says about not caring one
way or the other, I think she’d like it if they were there.”

“I think so too,” he agreed, smiling at Rory but finding her own happy expression was forced in response. “I miss him too,” he said then, getting her attention in a second.

Rory sighed in some kind of releif at hearing that. She knew that Luke must be missing Jess, and that he had been trying to track down him and Liz this whole time. Still, it was nice to hear him say it, to not feel like it was just her, and a very in denial Paris.

“Grandma was a little too happy that Jess is gone,” she said sadly. “I love her a lot, but mom is not entirely wrong about Emily Gilmore being a little on the snob side of things.”

“Really? Because I hadn’t noticed that,” said Luke in total dead-pan, sounding just a little too much like his nephew in that moment.

“At least Grandpa was nice about him.” Rory smiled then. “He said Jess seemed like a very determined young man, that once he set his mind on something, there would be no stopping him. Of course, even if that were true, I don’t know for sure that Jess’ mind was set on me,” she said sadly, surprised to find Luke’s hand suddenly on hers across the table, albeit very awkwardly and briefly.

“It was,” he said definitely as they looked at each other. “It is. He will call, Rory. If he said he would, then he will.”

She smiled because she hoped Luke was right, and because even if he wasn’t, she appreciated his confidence and comfort both. Nodding her head, Rory got up from the table and excused herself.

“If Mom asks, I have stuff to do for the Franklin and then I’ll probably go to bed early,” she said as she disappeared into her room.

Luke watched her go, resting his chin on his hands as he got lost in thought. He hated this. Hated that people he cared about were hurting. Rory missed Jess a lot, and Luke did too. Liz was always coming and going from his life and Luke had adjusted to that, but his nephew really made an impact on him, on Rory, on Paris too. Besides, Chilton and Stars Hollow both seemed to have made a difference to Jess too. It was so wrong that he had been pulled out of such a good situation.

Shaking his head, knowing there was little or nothing he could do to fix any of this right now, Luke set about clearing the table. Lorelai continued talking Sookie down from a great height on the phone in the living room, and in her bedroom, Rory tried her hardest to concentrate on the latest article she was writing for the school paper. Just when she had managed to focus, her cell rang on the desk. She frowned at the ‘unknown number’ written on the screen, but accepted the call anyway, hardly daring to hope that it might be the one she had been waiting for.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Rory,” said a familiar voice.

“Jess!” she exclaimed, moderating her tone immedialtley she realised she might be overheard. “Oh my... It’s been more than a week!”

“I’m sorry,” he told her. “Things were a little crazy when we left the Gellers place. Liz was... Well, that’s not important. I’m just sorry about the way I had to leave, and... and I miss you, Ror.”

“I miss you too,” she told him, feeling stupidly emotional, happy to hear from him and hurting knowing how far away he had to be at the same time. “Where are you?”
“Right now, at a payphone outside an apartment building in New York,” he told her. “I’d give you the address but this is not a neighbourhood I would ever want you to visit.”

“Jess...”

“I’m fine,” he told her the moment he heard concern in her voice. “Not the first scummy dive I’ve lived in, probably won’t be the last. Kind of a come down after Chez Geller but hey, I’ll survive.”

Rory didn’t know what to say. She had a hundred and one things going around in her head that she really wanted to tell Jess the moment she heard from him. Now here he was on the end of the phone and she had forgotten every single one of them.

“I can’t... I don’t know what to say except that I miss you. I wish you were still here,” she told him sadly.

“I know,” he replied softly. “Look, I can’t talk long. This thing is eating change and I didn’t have much to begin with.”

“Okay,” Rory nodded her understanding, even though he couldn’t see it. “But you’re doing okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he promised. “New York is home. The city always suited me. I’ve been hanging out in the park with a book a lot, staying out of Liz’s way.”

“Central Park?”

“Washington Square Park. It’s cooler.”

Rory smiled even as tears welled in her eyes.

“I can picture you there.”

Jess could picture her too, sat in her room with books on the desk and a smile on her face, blue eyes shining. He missed her more than he even expected to. Hearing her voice should have helped but somehow it made the pain of being too far from her even worse.

“Rory...” he began, a certain L word fizzing on his tongue, but he backed out at the last. “Er, is Paris okay?” he asked instead, wincing at his own question and glad Rory couldn’t see him.

“She’s dealing,” Rory confirmed, “but I know she misses you too.”

“Yeah. Well, tell her I said ‘hi’. Life sure is quiet without her around,” he joked, though the humour didn’t really land in the circumstances, if it was ever meant to. “I’m sorry, Rory, I gotta go, my cash is about to run out.”

“But there’s so much I wanna say.” she began “Jess?”

“Rory, I’m sorry. I-”

The beeping sound and then the line went dead. Rory sat for a moment just staring at the phone in her hand. It was only when the screen grew blurry that she realised she was crying again.

“He seems okay, I guess,” said Rory, explaining to Paris about Jess’ call. “I mean, it wasn’t the world’s longest call. Honestly, I was just glad to hear his voice. I get the impression he would rather be here than there but...”
“But he’s okay?” asked Paris, holding her books tighter against her chest, as if hugging them helped.

Rory nodded. “I think so.”

“That’s good.”

A short silence followed. In some ways it seemed to both girls that it was easier before Jess called. The not knowing was tough, but having heard from Jess but not having him back almost brought more pain, it made the loss worse all over again.

“I told him how much we miss him,” said Rory, looking down at her own feet as they shuffled towards the school building. “He misses us too, both of us.”

“Sure he does.”

“He does, Paris,” Rory insisted off the back of those scoffed words. “This is hard on him too. I just wish he was here, or we were there, or something.” Rory stopped talking and walking both when she realised her friend was no long next to her. “Paris?” she said with a frown, looking back.

“How much do you wish you were there?” she asked, her eyes flicking back towards the parking lot and her car in particular.

Rory’s eyes went wide at the idea Paris seemed to be having. She looked from her friend to the car to the school building and back around, feeling giddy for more than one reason.

“Are you serious?” she asked, moving towards Paris so she didn’t have to yell and draw attention.

“We have class—”

“Oh, come on!” Paris interrupted. “We’re smarter than any other person in there. We’ll catch up in no time,” she insisted, a desperate sort of look in her eyes that Rory well understood.

Maybe it was crazy, or maybe this was the most sane idea she had heard in two weeks.

“You’re right,” she said at last, grinning at the very idea of their adventure as she decided to just go with it. “Let’s go!”
“I can’t believe we did this!” said Rory and not for the first time since she and Paris left Stars Hollow. “Principal Charleston is going to go crazy!”

“I can handle Charleston,” her friend told her, looking up to check the sign before they crossed the street towards Washington Square Park. “If Jess taught me anything it’s that there’s very little teenage rebellion you can’t talk your way out of if you’re smart enough.”

Rory smiled at that comment, knowing how very true it was. She also kind of loved that Paris had learnt anything at all from her step-brother. They really had become so close and been so good for each other.

“He is pretty good at the fast talking,” she said eventually.

Paris stopped walking and glared at her. “If you elaborate on anything else he was good at, I will vomit,” she said firmly.

Rory rolled her eyes. As if she would tell Paris about anything she and Jess ever got up to in private. Just thinking about that right now made her blush. Thinking of seeing Jess again at all gave her goosebumps and butterflies all at once, but she couldn’t wait.

“This way,” she pointed, leading the way with Paris right on her heels.

“And you’re sure he’ll be here?”

“It’s where he said he comes to read, to get out of Liz’s way,” explained Rory as they headed in through the gates of the park and began looking around.

There were various spots where people sat on benches or under trees. Parents with small children, people walking dogs, couples making out. Suddenly, Rory spotted the familiar figure she was looking for. Jess had his back to the entrance, slumped on a bench a hundred yards away, his nose deep in a book, just like always. Rory grinned as she tapped Paris shoulder and pointed, watching the same smile spread over her friends face when she realised that their target had been acquired.

Jess had no idea he had company, so engrossed was he in his reading material. Though he called Rory and told her where he was, he never for a second expected a visit. First a shadow fell over the pages of his book, then hands covered his eyes as a familiar voice asked; “Guess who?”

“David Lee Roth?” he dead-panned.

Rory couldn’t answer, she was laughing too much at his stupid reply and at the joy of seeing Jess again after too long. He was up off the bench in a second, amazed to find not just Rory there but Paris too, both dressed in their Chilton uniforms and during school hours too.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, wasting no time in pulling Rory into his arms.

She went willingly, hugging him tight and planting a kiss on his lips for good measure.

“We came to see you, moron,” said Paris, rolling her eyes at how dumb his question really had been.

“Missed you too, Paris,” said Jess from over Rory’s shoulder.

Though they were bickering already, the step-siblings shared a smile that proved that not only were
his words true but she felt exactly the same way.

“You two skipped school?” he asked, looking from Paris to Rory as she pulled out of his arms to look at him. “That’s... It’s not you. Either of you,” he said definitely.

“We’ll talk our way out of trouble later,” said Paris easily, shrugging her shoulders like it was no big deal.

“It’s your fault,” Rory accused, poking Jess in the shoulder playfully. “You’re a corrupting influence, Mariano.”

“Well, I try,” he told her with a smirk she had missed more than anything. “So, how long before you have to get back?”

“Few hours, I guess,” she said, glancing at Paris who gave her agreement.

“How hungry?” Jess asked them both.

“I could eat,” replied Paris, and Rory nodded that she felt the same.

“I know a place,” said Jess, his arm around Rory’s shoulders and his free hand directing Paris to come with as they headed off out of the park together.

The hot dog stand would be their first stop. After that, Jess was already making a plan for where to take the girls next.

“This place is amazing!” Rory enthused as she placed another book onto the growing pile she already planned to buy. “Everything about New York is amazing!”

“Can’t argue with that,” said Jess, sat further along the shelving, leafing through one volume after another. “Of course, I never saw anybody get quite so excited by a hotdog stand or freaked out by the subway as you,” he added, smirking wickedly.

“I’m not used to your big city world!” she defended herself, unable to keep from smiling since she knew he was only meaning to playfully tease her anyway. “I’m just a small town girl.”

“Living in a lonely world?”

“Since you left, yes.”

He had been messing around, just quoting the lyrics that came to mind, but Rory’s looks were all serious when she replied to the mostly rhetorical question. Jess hated that. This day was great, having her here, Paris too actually. He had missed them both, in very different ways, but he had missed them. Today they were here but before long they’d been gone, back to their lives in Harford and Stars Hollow. Jess would be here alone again and he hated that. New York was home in so many ways, and yet since his return, Jess couldn’t quite feel comfortable amongst the high rises and the noise. He missed the people, the family he had made in Connecticut, however unconventional and strange. He almost wished Rory and Paris hadn’t come to visit because it was going to mean one more goodbye. On the other hand, he wouldn’t trade the few hours he was getting with them for the world.

“They have an entire shelf of Asher Flemings books!” said Paris loudly as she appeared at the end of the aisle. “Professor Asher Fleming! Every one of his books! You know he’s a genius, right?”
“I guess,” replied Rory, not entirely sure who this person even was. “If he’s so great, don’t you already have all of his books?”

“Having the same book twice in different editions is not crazy,” she said, arms folded across her chest defensively, despite the fact no-one had tried to argue with her yet.

“She has a point,” Jess considered.


“Way ahead of you!” Paris called as she ran off to do just that.

“And here I thought she came to New York to see me,” said Jess with just a hint of a smirk.

“She did,” Rory assured him. “We both did. We miss you, and I’m not saying that to make you feel guilty because I know it’s not your fault you had to come back here, it’s just... Well, it’s just true, I guess.”

“So, you figure out which books you’re buying yet?” asked Jess, deliberately avoiding the emotional moment. “I mean, I know Paris’ car has plenty of space but if you buy everything you have on that pile and she gets all her dusty old professor books, I think the suspension is going to give out halfway home.” “Jess,” said Rory, fixing him with a stare until he gave in and met her eyes.

“What?” he asked, as if he didn’t know. “You’re telling me you have a better topic to talk about than books?”

“I didn’t say that,” she countered smartly. “What do you think to this one?” she asked, pulling one book from the shelf and handing it to him.

Jess smiled slightly as he saw what it was. “You noticed that, huh?”

“That you paraphrased one of the most romantic quotes from Wuthering Heights on your goodbye note? Yes, I noticed that,” said Rory without pause, watching Jess flip unseeing through the pages of Emily Bronte’s finest work. “Did you mean it?”

Rory wasn’t entirely sure what she was asking here, and Jess wasn’t sure what he was answering. Did he mean it when he said they had the same soul? Maybe he did, but what did that really prove anyway? What was the meaning of having the same kind of soul? Perhaps both Rory and Jess knew exactly what it meant and that was exactly why she asked the question and why he struggled so much to give an answer. Truthfully, she was asking if he loved her. Honestly, he knew the reply to that could only be one thing.

“I did,” he said after a long pause, brown eyes meeting blue over a sea of books in a perfect moment.

“Oh, I narrowed it down to six!” exclaimed Paris as she came rushing into the scene with a stack of books in her arms. “Did you two figure out what you want yet?”

Rory and Jess said nothing, only continued to stare at each other and smile.

“And as much as I’d love to stay longer, I just can’t miss mom’s graduation. She’d be so upset if I wasn’t there-”

“It’s fine,” Jess assured Rory before she hit new levels of panicked ramble. “I get it.”

They were stood by Paris’ car in the multi-storey lot, the moment having come when the girls must
leave Jess behind. Today had been great, all three had fun and it was great to see each other. The problem was the parting now it was over. As much as Rory had wished for a goodbye when Jess left before, now she only wanted to avoid having one at all.

“So, it’s been... I’m glad we came,” said Paris awkwardly, unsure how this meeting was supposed to end.

“Hey, don’t go gettin’ sentimental on me, Geller. That’s not our style,” said Jess with a smirk that didn’t quite come off.

“Right,” she agreed, nodding once. She shifted her feet a moment and then out of nowhere she bodily threw herself at Jess, hugging him tightly.

Rory might have expected Jess to react badly if she wasn’t suffering shock from seeing Paris show any kind of affection for another person. Jess’ eyes closed a second as he patted his step-sister on the back. He really did not need any more excuses to get emotional about this goodbye with Paris and Rory.

“Your mom may have screwed up her marriage to my dad, but you’re not getting rid of me so easy, mister,” said Paris definitely as she pulled out of her hug with Jess, looking as if she wasn’t at all comfortable about what she just did. “When I set my mind to something, that’s that. You’re my brother, okay?”

“You got it, sis,” he promised her, no hint of humour in the term for once.

Paris swallowed hard, gave an odd little wave and turned away. She got in the car, presumably to give the couple some alone time for their own goodbye. Rory didn’t object to the lack of audience, though now she had come to this moment, she hardly knew where to begin.

“So,” she said in the silence.

“So,” echoed Jess, inching closer.

Rory gave in within a second, letting herself fall into his arms, kissing him like it was going out of style. She could come visit again, she supposed, or Jess could come and see her, but Rory didn’t want their relationship to be just this, just a few hours in each others company, achieved by cutting school and sneaking around. She wanted Jess home in Connecticut. She wanted him there to eat lunch with her at school, to help Luke out at the diner, to hang out on the bridge in the Hollow just reading to each other and making out where nobody could see. It couldn’t be that way and she knew it, but that didn’t stop Rory wishing.

“I really have to go” she said sadly, pulling away from Jess just a little.

“I know,” he replied, sounding no more thrilled by the concept.

“I wish you were coming with us,” said Rory with a sigh, meeting his eyes.

“Yeah, well. That’s not going to happen,” he told her what she already knew. “Makes me think we never should’ve started this,” he continued, tucking Rory’s hair behind her ear and leaning in closer until their foreheads touched. “I always knew Liz and Ira were doomed to end this way and then it’d all be over. If we hadn’t got so close it would’ve been easier, I know, but honestly? I wouldn’t trade those three and a half months being with you for anything.”

“Me either,” Rory agreed, a wobble in her voice that she couldn’t bear as she went in for one last kiss. “Whatever our souls are made of...” she started to quote as she finally backed away.
Jess only nodded as she moved to get into the passenger side of Paris’ car. The engine started and Jess moved aside so they could back out and leave. He made some kind of motion that might’ve been wave and thought he saw Rory do the same. Paris kept both hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead because it might just make it easier. When they were gone from sight, Jess still stood their staring. He didn’t know what else to do.
Chapter 31

Neither Paris nor Rory could bear to talk for the first few miles of their journey home. Only when Rory’s cell phone buzzed with a text message from Lorelai asking where she was did she bother to say a word, and that was only to ask Paris to put her foot down. The shock came when she actually did as asked, speeding like a crazy person to get them to Hartford Community College on time. They never said anything about Jess or their trip today, especially not about the tearful goodbyes they each shared with the guy they had gone out of their way to see, skipping school to do so.

At the college, Rory got out of the car, offering Paris the chance to come inside and join in the family celebration. Her friend refused, saying she really should get home. She offered to keep a hold of Rory’s purchased books for now, agreeing that she could come over and pick them up from Paris’ house at a later time. Rory agreed, half convinced that Paris was just looking for an excuse to have some company. She was definitely missing having a human person in the house that actually wanted to talk to her. Rory decided then and there to be a much better friend to Paris than she had ever been before. They were going to need each other to get Through this. More and more Rory was understanding her mom’s ‘grieving for a death’ analogy when it came to Jess being gone. She swallowed down a whole lot of emotion the moment Paris was gone and bolted into the building.

Running down this hall and that, Rory finally came crashing into the hall, only to find Luke right by the door waiting for her. He grabbed her arms to keep her from stumbling, apparently somewhat concerned by her rushed entrance and all.

“Am I late?” she asked in a panic, looking to the stage and relieved to find no students up there yet - maybe she was earlier than she thought.

“You just made it,” Luke told her. “But your mom has been going crazy!”

“I’m so sorry,” said Rory sincerely, her breath just now coming back to her. “It’s been kind of a weird day.”

Luke noticed that she wasn’t looking directly at him and seemed generally out of sorts. Rory was a very together girl, more organised than any other seventeen year old Luke had ever met in his life. It wasn’t like her to be late, not unless Lorelai caused it somehow. Rory didn’t lie either, which made it all the more strange that she wouldn’t meet his eyes right now.

“Hey, is anything wrong?” he checked, clearly concerned. “Do you need me to take you to Lorelai or-?”

“We went to see Jess,” Rory blurted out suddenly, cutting off not just the rest of Luke’s sentence but his entire train of thought too. “Me and Paris, we went to see him, today.”

“In New York?” asked Luke, sure that was where his nephew and sister had to be, though he had not managed to find any trace of them yet.

Rory nodded that he was right and continued to explain. “I missed him. Paris too. I don’t know if Mom told you, but he finally called me last night, from a payphone, and he sounded... Well, like Jess, obviously, but also sad and lonely. One minute I’m headed into school with Paris and the next... I just had to go. We couldn’t help it, Luke. We just had to go,” she explained, becoming a little more frantic as what she had done hit her full force, the cutting school and almost being late for her mom’s graduation, she ought to be in so much trouble!
“Hey, it’s okay,” said Luke, trying his best to calm her down whilst still processing all Rory had said about Jess and what happened today. “We’ll just, well, we’ll break it to your mother later, about the whole cutting class thing, since I’m pretty sure she’s going to be required to have a conversation with your principal,” he considered aloud. “But for now, let’s go take our seats, and maybe don’t mention the road trip to your grandparents?” he suggested.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” said Rory definitely, allowing herself to be led by Luke to a seat in the front row where Emily and Richard already waited.

Thankfully they didn’t get much of a chance to ask why Rory was late. The graduates started to come into the hall and the ceremony proper seemed to be upon them. Rory really had gotten there just in time. When Lorelai took her seat and spotted Rory, she certainly seemed relieved and waved to her baby girl. Rory waved back with a smile that she hoped was genuine enough. She truly was happy to be here, but there was a niggling worry about what all the reactions would be to her day of teenage rebellion.

It had been easy to presume that Rory and Paris could talk their way out of trouble with the Chilton faculty, in particular Headmaster Charleston, but quite honestly, Rory wasn’t so sure she believed that anymore. Maybe they would be in trouble. Her mom might understand, but Rory wasn’t so sure her grandparents or her teachers would, even her friends. It didn’t matter. Whatever trouble she might find herself in, however hard it had been to say goodbye to Jess when they left NYC today, she had no regrets. Rory wanted so badly to see Jess and she had. It was worth it. Whatever happened, it was definitely worth it.

“Congratulations, Mom!” said Rory with a smile, clinking her cup of soda against Lorelai’s margarita glass. “I am so, so proud of you.”

“Thanks, kid,” she replied, grinning herself as she downed the last of her celebratory drink. “I’m glad you made it today. It would’ve sucked big time not to have you there for that moment.”

“I was pretty worried I was going to be late for a while there,” her daughter admitted. “I’m so sorry I cut it that close. We really didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“I know, you said that already. At least eight times,” said Lorelai with a smile. “I think short of taking yourself into the corner and openly flogging yourself for the next half hour, you could not have punished yourself any more than you already have.”

Rory smiled wryly at her mother’s attempt at wit and sipped her soda.

“I’m still sorry,” she said quietly. “For the almost being late, but I can’t be sorry for going, even if it did mean cutting school.”

“Hey, kid, I am the last one to give lectures on skipping out on classes,” said Lorelai, hands raised in mock surrender as she got up to put their now empty glasses into the sink. “I mean, I’m not thrilled you did it, and obviously it’s not a smart thing to do, but you had good reason.”

“I think so,” Rory agreed, nodding her head. “I just, after Jess called yesterday, it should have made it better, hearing from him.”

“But it actually made it worse,” said Lorelai knowingly as Rory turned in her seat to look at her. “Oh, babe, believe me, I know. Y’know when me and your dad first called it quits, it was tough for me. Back then, I was still in love with him and... and every time he would call or visit, I thought it would be better, but the minute Christopher drove away from me, my heart broke a little more.”
“Oh, I get how that feels,” said Rory with a sigh. “But it was good to see Jess. I can’t regret it, Mom, no matter how hard it was to say goodbye.”

Lorelai moved to hug her daughter then, knowing there was nothing she could say to make it better. If only Jess hadn’t had to go away. Things were so good for a while, but life just had a habit of tearing things apart right when they were at their best.

“How’d Paris handle it all?” asked Lorelai eventually.

“She’s okay, I guess,” said Rory thoughtfully. “It’s weird. I always thought there were no emotions going on in there at all, that Paris was essentially a robot, but with Jess... Y’know when we left she told him that no matter what happens, he’ll always be her brother.”

“That’s nice.” Lorelai smiled. “Honestly? I think they could both stand to know they had one more piece of family somewhere out there.”

“They’ve both been pretty lonely. I mean, I miss Jess so much, but at least I have you and Luke, Grandma and Grandpa, Lane.”

“You’re a lucky girl, babe,” her mom agreed, running her hand over Rory’s hair. “I just wish I could make it so you had it all, that you didn’t have to lose a guy you care so much about.”

“Me too,” said Rory, forcing a brave smile on her lips. “But all stuff happens for a reason, right? It could work out in the end, somehow.”

“Here’s hoping,” replied Lorelai, nodding her head.

Rory got up from her seat with a yawn and said she was heading to bed then. Lorelai watched her go and then let out a long sigh of her own. Her hand went to her forehead, rubbing between her eyes to stave off a headache. A couple of margaritas usually loosened her up, but right now she felt tense. It wasn’t the worry of dealing with Rory’s principal in the morning or the rest of Sookie’s wedding plans she needed to help finalise. All she had to be concerned about was her little girl’s happiness, the one thing that it was pretty much impossible for Lorelai to mend.

Turning her attention back to the table, Lorelai put the trash left over from chips and dip into a bag. She startled when a light tapping came on the back door, spinning around to find Luke beyond the glass. He gestured for her to come outside and Lorelai was frowning as she did what he asked, hugging herself against the cool night air the moment she stepped out onto the porch.

“What’s going on?” she asked her boyfriend. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine, or I’m hoping it could be,” said Luke cryptically.

Lorelai was frowning as well as shivering now. “Yeah, could you vague that up for me?” she asked.

Sighing, Luke grabbed her hand and pulled her around to the porch swing. They sat down together and he pulled the blanket there over Lorelai so she would be warm enough. Still, he didn’t even begin to give any explanation until his girlfriend prompted him to do so.

“Luke, seriously,” said Lorelai, trying to meet his eyes even when he evaded her. “You’re kinda scaring me. I mean, you’re not here to break up with me, are you?” she asked nervously, trying to make it sound like a joke but there was very real worry in Lorelai’s voice as she posed the question.

Luke looked up very quickly then, stunned that she would even ask such a thing. Without a word, his hand went to her face and hair, slipping behind her head to pull her close and kiss her deeply.
Lorelai fell into the moment, definitely no longer feeling the cold by the time they pulled away from each other again.

“So, not breaking up,” she said then, fairly certain in her assumption.

“Definitely not,” he promised her. “This has nothing to do with our relationship, which personally, I think is going pretty well.”

“Pretty well, yeah,” Lorelai agreed, nodding her head, grinning like an idiot. “So, if it’s not about us, why the late night secretive visit?” she asked again.

“Well, I was hoping you could help me out with a little information, about Chilton,” said Luke eventually.

Lorelai was back to frowning again in a second. “You want info on Rory’s school?” she checked. “Okay, that’s not at all what I was expecting. Luke, if this is about Rory skipping today, we’re gonna figure that out. It won’t be a problem. She’ll get maybe a slap on the wrist or whatever, but I doubt it’s such a big deal that you’ll need to get involved, not that I don’t love that you’d want to-”

“It’s not about Rory,” he cut in, “or it is, but not... I mean, I’m worried about her, Lorelai. Her and her friend Paris, them running off to New York, it’s not the kind of thing girls like them would usually do.”

“Well, they had a pretty good reason for the teenage rampage,” Lorelai reminded him. “Rory and Jess is no fly-by-night thing, Luke. I think this is real for them, and even if I’m wrong, you remember what it’s like to be seventeen, right? Everything is so intense. If it’s not love, then I’m damn sure it feels that way to them.”

“I don’t doubt for a second that Rory and Jess care for each other a lot. It was pretty clear how close they had gotten. Jess and Paris too, in some weird hybrid family way that I couldn’t begin to explain,” he went on, making vague gestures with his hands because he was just feeling a little too much right now, and Luke Danes never coped well with that. “The truth is, I’m worried for Jess too. Liz is not... Well, you met her, she’s not exactly a terrible person, but she’s not really a great mother either. I hate to say that about my own sister but it is what it is.”

“She seemed okay to start off with, when she first came here, I mean,” Lorelai said carefully. “And then, well, from what Rory told me, the drinking became a problem.”

“It always does,” agreed Luke. “The booze or the pot and the... the not being able to pick a decent guy, or going after one when she’s still with another. She screws up, Lorelai. It’s what Liz does, and every time I try to fix things for her, to make it better. This time I can’t. This time she went too far, but that doesn’t mean I can’t help Jess, and by helping him, I might just help Rory, and Paris too.”

“Okay,” said Lorelai, not entirely sure she was following all this and it showed on her face.

“Now I know from Rory where Jess is living, I have this plan,” Luke told her, turning on the swing seat to better face her. “It might be crazy. I might be crazy, but I think it could work. I need your advice, Lorelai, and probably your help too if we decide to go ahead and do this.”

Lorelai smiled at the way he said ‘if we decide’. She was a real part of his process in making whatever this plan was come to fruition. That smile on her lips grew ten-fold as Luke explained all that he had in mind. It was a very, very good plan.
Paris called for the fourth time whilst Rory was getting into her bridesmaid’s dress. She really had become obsessive about the whole Student Body President thing, and Rory would’ve called her on her behaviour if she wasn’t quite so glad of the distraction herself. As much as Paris wanted to be large and in charge, Rory had a feeling that some of her over-enthusiastic approach to student council was born out of a need to throw all her focus at something that wasn’t the loss of her brother.

Rory didn’t take quite as much convincing to run as Paris’ vice president as she usually might have. She wanted the distraction too. Though Sookie’s wedding took up a lot of the bride’s time and Lorelai’s too, Rory had very little to do except for offer the occasional second opinion and show up on the day looking pretty. Here was the day and the dress sure was helping with the pretty. Rory smiled at her reflection in the mirror even as she accepted Paris’ call.

“I actually think it’s going to happen,” said her friend the moment she realised Rory was there. “There’s an awfully good chance of us actually winning, Rory, and I genuinely feel happy about it.”

“Well, I would hope so after all the effort you put in, or we put in,” she amended. “Though honestly, it was mostly you.”

“As soap opera as it may sound, I was actually starting to wonder if I was ever going to feel genuinely happy again,” said Paris then. “It’s so weird, when Jess first came here I just wanted him gone as fast as possible. Now that he’s not around...”

“You miss him like he was always there from the beginning,” Rory supplied when Paris seemed to run out of words, proving above all else that she was still out of sorts.

“Something like that,” she agreed with a sigh. “We should be better than this. I should, anyway.”

“You have to stop believing that caring for people is a sign of weakness, Paris,” Rory told her definitely. “It’s really not. If anything, it makes you stronger, learning to bear the pain of loss, no matter what form it takes. Being tough enough to keep on loving someone even when the world seems determined that you’re not going to have them around.”

Paris didn’t answer for a long moment. Rory almost asked if she was still there, but then suddenly she spoke.

“He doesn’t even call. I thought maybe he would, after we visited, but he hasn’t.”

“I know,” said Rory sadly. “I kinda hoped so too, but I guess this is as hard on Jess as it is on us. Hearing our voices, knowing we’re so far away. It’d hurt more.”

“I guess,” said Paris eventually. “Anyway, I should go. I’ll keep you posted on the results.”

“Well, just know I might not answer if you call around three. That’s the time of the ceremony. I’ll be doing the aisle-walking, flower holding thing,” explained Rory. “Y’know the offer still stands. You could come over for the Reception, I know Sookie wouldn’t mind. Since I don’t have a date, there’ll be enough food and everything.”

“Depends how things go here,” said Paris, almost a little too sharply, then she softened some. “But thanks, Rory. I do appreciate it,” she added with a smile that Rory could almost hear.

“You’re welcome, Paris.”
They ended their call then and Rory got back to getting ready for the big event of the day. She had her dress fastened and her shoes on when a tapping came on the door and Lorelai appeared in a somewhat sexier version of Rory’s own dress. She had made both and was rightfully proud of how good they looked.

“I don’t think we’ll shame the bride any,” she told Rory, joining her in front of the full-length mirror.

“Hope not,” her daughter smiled. “Is Sookie okay?”

“All butterflies and goosebumps but I figure that’s how a bride is supposed to be,” she explained, directing Rory to sit down at the vanity so she could do something with her hair. “I left her in the capable hands of Miss Patty. I mean, who better to give wedding advice than a woman who’s hand three of them.”

“Four,” Rory corrected.

“Right, four,” said Lorelai as she counted over again and realised her daughter was absolutely right. “Jackson is already outside with his brother, and in a half hour we are all systems go!”

Lorelai pulled strands of Rory’s hair back and began braiding them around the top of her head. Rory seemed to stare at herself and her mom in the mirror, and yet she saw nothing at all. Perhaps that wasn’t strictly true. She was seeing pictures in her minds eye, mostly of Jess. He probably would hate the idea of having to wear a tux and spend time with such a large group of people that he mostly didn’t know or care for, but Rory still wished he were here.

“You’re so lucky.” she said aloud.

“I know this,” Lorelai agreed. “But why specifically today?”

“You have Luke,” Rory told her, meeting her mother’s eyes in the mirror but only for a second before Lorelai looked away. “Mom? You do still have Luke, right?” she asked worriedly.

“Honey, of course I still have Luke,” her mother confirmed with a smile. “I mean, in the sense that we’re still dating and everything, yes, I very much have Luke. I just don’t have him here, at the inn, at this very moment in time, that’s all.”

“Well, where is he?” asked Rory, trying to turn on the stool but Lorelai refused to let her whilst she was still fixing her hair. “Mom!”

“Rory, it’s fine. Luke had an errand to run, he’ll be here just as soon as he can, okay? I’m not worried so you don’t need to worry.”

“What errand? For the wedding?”

“No, not for the wedding, just an errand. Now, how do you like your hair?” she asked, finally finishing what she was doing and stepping back to admire her handiwork.

Rory turned left and right, trying to get a good look in the mirror. She smiled.

“Looks good. Thanks, mom”

“No problem, kid. Now, I have to get back to Sookie before she suddenly decides that the cake needs to be re-iced. Again! You wanna come with?”

“Sure,” Rory agreed easily and got up to go.
Just as they were headed out, Rory doubled back and grabbed her cell phone shoving it into her fancy little purse. She would turn it off for the ceremony itself but other than that she would like to have it on. As much as it might make her as crazy as Paris, she kind of wanted to know how the Student Council elections went today. At the very least it meant a nice distracting Summer in Washington if they won. That couldn’t be a bad thing.

It was all of ten minutes before the ceremony was about to start that Luke came hurrying across the inn’s back lawn towards Lorelai and Rory. He greeted his girlfriend with a hug and a kiss, and she laughed as she tried her best to flatten out his hair that was going crazy in the breeze. Rory still found it weird to see the guy without a baseball cap.

“You get your errand done?” asked Lorelai with some kind of significant look that her daughter couldn’t ever have understood.

“Oh, yeah,” said Luke with the biggest of grins. “But, er, I seem to have left that thing you wanted in the truck,” he told Lorelai then.

“Oh, that thing? Well, we can’t deal with that now. I... Well, we have to get you tidied up before the ceremony,” she said quickly. “Babe, could you maybe go get the thing Luke forgot from the truck?” she asked her daughter.

Rory looked beyond confused. Not surprising since none of this made any kind of sense. She tilted her head and stared at the odd couple her mom and Luke were making right now.

“This errand didn’t involve a big bag of drugs did it?” she joked, wondering what the real explanation for this odd behaviour could possibly be.

“Honey, we’re on a clock here!” Lorelai insisted. “Now, go, go go!” she encouraged Rory, forcibly pushing her towards the parking lot.

As she looked back at them, Rory found Lorelai and Luke still grinning and laughing as she walked away. Not that she understood why she was going to the truck in the first place. If she was supposed to be fetching something, it might’ve helped to know what the thing was. It also would have made sense to give her the keys.

“People are extra crazy today,” she said to herself as she neared the truck.

“I hear this is the right place for crazy.”

Rory stopped walking, turned slowly, mouth dropping open with shock when she realised that her ears were not at all playing tricks on her. From the other side of the truck, Jess had appeared, large as life and twice as welcome.

“Hey, Rory,” he said with a half a smile. “Miss me?”

She couldn’t have spoken if her life depended on it. Instead Rory just ran at Jess, throwing herself into his arms for the world’s biggest hug, planting a kiss on his lips in the next second. They were lost in each other for a good five minutes before it occurred to either of them to come up for air. It was just such a thrill to be together again.

“I can’t believe this!” said Rory, gasping as she and Jess parted from their kiss, arms still around each other. “How are you here? Why are you?”

“Luke came to New York,” explained Jess, though the words were absentely spoken, all his attention
on drinking in every ounce of Rory being back in his arms. “He offered me a chance to come back, so here I am.”

“To come back... for good?” she asked, hardly daring to hope that was what he meant.

“Apparently,” Jess confirmed, nodding his head. “Luke squared it all with Chilton. Got Principal Charleston to agree to let me back in for Senior Year. I didn’t ask how he has that kinda money, but I’m going to work in the diner, help pay my way a little.”

Rory was laughing and crying at the same time, hardly hearing the words Jess was saying by now. She was thrilled to have him back, to know he was staying. Her lips were on his again in a heartbeat, cutting off whatever words he might have said yet. Jess had no complaints as he kissed her back with all the passion he felt for her.

“Oh!” she suddenly exclaimed, pulling back. “I have to go. Sookie and Jackson, the wedding,” she started to ramble. “I’m a bridesmaid!”

“I never would’ve guessed,” Jess dead-panned, before a smile broke through. “You look beautiful.”

“So do you, or something a little more appropriate for a guy to be,” she laughed at herself, knowing she was turning red as she took Jess’ face in her hands. “I can’t believe you’re here. That you’re going to be here. Paris is going to go crazy.”

“Paris is already crazy,” Jess noted. “But I guess I won’t hate having her around sometimes.”

“So, you’re going to live with Luke, go to Chilton, work in the diner...”

“All the fun stuff,” agreed Jess with a smirk he couldn’t help. “And you and me...”

“You and me?” Rory echoed when he fell silent. “We pick up where we left off, right? If we ever really left off. Jess, I kept on hoping you’d be back.”

“Me too,” he admitted, pulling her closer one more time. “I... I love you, Rory.”

Her eyes went wide at the sound of those words. Only one other guy had ever said that to her, and in the moment, Rory couldn’t allow herself to say it back. This time was so different, Jess was so different. She didn’t hesitate for a second in replying.

“I love you, Jess,” she told him definitely, their words sealed with a final kiss before they were interrupted, as they might have guessed they eventually would be.

“Rory!” Lorelai yelled from a few yards away. “Put the boy toy down. Time for this shindig to get started!” she told her daughter with a grin that wouldn’t shift.

“You heard the woman,” said Jess, gripping tight to Rory’s hand. “I mean, I’m not really dressed for a wedding, but...”

“I don’t care,” she said definitely, pulling him with her as she started to run as best she could in her heels. “After everything, I’m not letting you out of my sight again. Not today!”

When the ceremony was over, the reunion intensified. For every person who wanted to wish Sookie and Jackson all the best, there was equally as many who wanted to welcome Jess back to the Hollow. He looked uncomfortable at best as all the people told Luke he had done a good thing in bringing Jess home, telling Jess himself he was very welcome and all, but it was Rory who couldn’t
have been happier. It was perhaps a little too long before she remembered that she was supposed to turn her cell back on in case Paris called. Honestly, she expected to find a message from her when she did put it on again, but there was none.

“I kind of thought they’d have finished counting the votes by now,” she said, staring hard at the cell that showed no messages at all.

“Votes for what?” asked Jess, close by her side still, not willing to let go for a second.

“Oh, Paris is running for Student Body President and I’m her Vice President, at least I will be if we get in,” Rory explained. “I thought she would’ve called with the result by now but...”

“I thought I’d bring the good news in person,” said Paris herself as she suddenly appeared behind them, shocked in her own right when Rory and Jess both turned to look at her. “Mariano?”

“Geller,” he greeted her in kind. “President Geller, I’m guessing from the way you walked in?”

“Oh, yeah,” she told him, floundering because he was just the last person she expected to see.

Paris couldn’t deal. She had no idea how to handle this situation and it showed all over her face.

“He’s back, for good,” said Rory since it seemed Jess wasn’t going to. “Luke went over to New York and brought Jess home. He’s going to live over the diner, and he’s going to be at Chilton with us again next year. Isn’t that great?”

She got no direct answer out of Paris and Jess never spoke either. For a long minute they just stood staring at each other, both significantly emotionally stunted that neither knew where to begin.

“Well, that’s great, I guess,” said Paris at last. “I mean, somebody has to help us keep up the curve, right, Gilmore?” she added, looking past Jess at Rory with a smile she couldn’t help.

“Only reason I’m glad he’s back,” she dead-panned in true Jess style, but could only keep it up for a few seconds before the grin was back on her face.

Paris laughed too, Jess as well, as brother and sister gave in to showing they were as happy as they could be in this moment, their arms briefly around each other before both recovered admirably.

“Of course, you picked a hell of a time to come back,” Paris was saying as Rory turned away from the scene a moment, filling three glasses with punch. “Now we won the election, myself and Rory will be in Washington for most of the Summer. Timing really is a bitch.”

“I’ll still be here when you get back,” said Jess easily, shrugging his shoulders. “What’s six more weeks, right?”

“Right,” Paris smiled, secretly even more pleased to have him back than she would ever willingly admit.

Rory stepped in closer to them again, presenting two glasses of punch to Jess and Paris and then picking up the third as her own.


“To the most sickeningly cute couple in Connecticut,” countered Paris, clinking her glass with Rory’s own.

“To coming home,” said Jess, more seriously than he meant to, as his glass joined the other two.
They drank, and at last, the world felt as it should again.

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