You Can Be a Hero In An Age of None

by routinedysfunction

Summary

It's been two years and Jess has his life together. But does Rory?
Chapter 1

He was shelving a new stack of books. Most people wouldn't be, when they owned a third of the joint, but Jess wasn't most people. Half the reason he loved his job was his ability to touch the pages, hold the newest books in his hands, know that he'd taken them from coffee-addled musings to print, some even in hardback.

Even Philadelphia had grown on him, fostering a grudging affection. It felt like home, at least as far as he could tell. The only other place he'd kind of felt that way was strangely enough in Stars Hollow, experiencing an inkling of what he now knew to be comfort. It would happen when he was sitting on the bridge with Faulker, or when Luke was handing off a plate to go to Table Six (he'd grudgingly implemented Lorelai's numerical system after Jess casually pointed out that it had some advantages. Not that he would ever tell Lorelai that- he'd take it to his grave). In those short moments he experienced a stillness. At the time he found being settled so unsettling that he would usually go do something rebellious immediately just to shake up his senses. Now he felt that stillness most days, especially at Truncheon with Matt and Chris.

Perfection, however, was far off. His personal life didn't exist, in spite of Matt and Chris' best attempts ("Jess, you can't turn a girl down just because she isn't familiar with the entire canon of Marquez!"), and his second book was barely any better. For the most part he'd spent the year building business up and searching out new voices. He'd been to New York a couple of times to see Liz and TJ and Doula (not that he'd ever feel really comfortable there, but it appeased them and really Doula seemed like a pretty normal kid). Luke came to visit him every couple of months. It always made Jess nervous in a way he couldn't explain, and he always refused to let Luke stay at a hotel. He had a sleeping bag and he forced (against the goddamned hardest protests) Luke to take his bed and he forced (against the goddamned hardest protests) Luke to take his bed and he slept in the bag, always leaving a paper and coffee when he headed to work. He'd bring him to local restaurants with good, not-too-trendy food and get upset when he paid. If Jess could, he'd slip the waiter his card at the beginning of the meal but most nights Luke beat him to it. He'd only stay the weekend usually, saying he couldn't leave the diner that long, but Jess knew he just didn't like leaving Lorelai back home and the topic of her coming with had never been broached. He couldn't really explain why he got so nervous about the visits, which was odd, because usually words just came to Jess, the perfect ones, for anything he was trying to explain or understand. But Luke was never fussy and never complained and was always appreciative, never expected anything and still something about the whole dynamic made Jess want to have everything be the best it could. It wasn't a pride thing, because Luke had seen him when he was still a fucked up kid, sneaking out windows and stealing beers and gnomes and whatever the hell else they had in Stars Hollow. Still, every time Luke came, Jess had it planned out perfectly and tried to let nothing screw up his plan. He could tell Luke had picked up on this, because now Luke was visiting unannounced, surely to try to combat this impulse and discomfort, but really it was just getting on Jess's nerves. Allow him his quirks, please, he doesn't ask for much anymore. But Luke was always the perfect guest and Jess always managed to put everything together and in truth Jess was always glad that he came and that he was always there, steadily every few months and whenever else he could get away.

One time Jess had asked him about Lorelai and how she felt about it and Luke had shrugged, noncommittally muttering something about having his own things. But Jess knew he wasn't lying to her about it. Surely Lorelai knew, which meant she probably wasn't happy, but then again, it's not like Jess really knew her that well. They hadn't really bonded when he'd lived in their little corner of the world, and even after Jess had gotten his shit together, there hadn't really been a good opportunity for them to try out the second chance scenario. Not that Jess really cared, because it didn't seem to bother Luke. But something nagging in him sometimes wished that she could, you know, just not hate every fiber of his being quite so fervently as she did. Not that he blamed her, but still. A lot of time had passed. This particular day, Jess had been working hard since the crack of dawn. His crack of dawn.
Meaning 10 AM. After about 6 cups of coffee (a nasty habit he'd picked up around Matt and Chris) he was starting to function in his adult form rather than his Rebel Without a Cause glory. It was about 2 PM and he had just finished a meeting with one of the local artists whose works would be on their walls in February. Sex-themed, so of course it was Chris's idea. He met with the artist, Anita, confirming that of course the art was very abstract (it was, he honestly couldn't tell if he was looking at a Metallica album cover or a still life of a fruit bowl) and that her lover and portrait model, Lorraine, didn't object to the display. After learning far too much about how little Lorraine minded, and her avid pursuit, in fact, of such opportunities, Jess excused himself to go stock shelves, handing her off to Matt with a smirk and a "Have fun, you two. Or three?". He knew Matt would want to kick his ass later but sometimes Jess had to get up to his old tricks. It made life fun.

As Jess tried to fit in an extra copy of the stubborn tome (goddamn hardbacks, he always hated the things), he heard a crash. Sighing, he set the book on top of the shelf and started walking over to the other side of the store. "Matt, I swear to God, if that was the fucking Sanders stack…" He stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes were frozen onto the pair of cerulean orbs locked on his.
"Well," he said finally, after a good twenty seconds of silence, "If it isn't the inimitable Rory Gilmore." He walked toward her. She was still silent, her eyes never having left his. "Wanna help me with this?"

"What?" she breathed, "Oh! Yes, absolutely. I'm sorry," she mumbled as she bent down next to him, gathering some of the books in her arms. She quickly stood up, setting the pile neatly where it had been on the table. Jess set down the rest next to them.

"Don't worry about it. Matt does it at least twice a day. Shitty place for a table, but we're kinda cramped for space," Jess smiled reassuringly, resting his hands back across the table as he faced her.

He hadn't seen Rory since his open house, and it wasn't like they'd stayed in touch. For a while he thought they might, him having slipped his business card into her copy of the Subsect. He thought so more when he found out about her breakup with Logan and her rejection of his proposal. But he never heard from her. Luke, once in a while, would mention the important things, like "She's still tailing the Obama campaign" and "Now that he's won, her term was extended again to cover the first year of his presidency. She's based in New York but traveling weekly." Surprisingly she didn't come to Philadelphia on her first trip through, at least, according to Luke, whose "She's not comin' here" didn't really shed a lot of light on the situation.

So this was the first time he'd seen her since that day at Truncheon when they kissed and he was calm until she left and he broke the wall (it'd been a while since he'd thrown a punch so he actually ended up in the hospital having broken a knuckle. Stupidest thing). He knew what had happened in her life and she knew nothing about his, as far as he knew, which he liked. He always felt more comfortable having the upper hand during their surprise meetings. But he had no idea what the hell she would possibly be doing here, today.

"Yeah, I remember," she smiled shyly, meeting his eyes, "But from what I hear Matt's kind of a klutz."

He cocked his eyebrows in supplies. "You've heard about my friends?" he inquired, "Wow, Gilmore, your investigative skills must have improved since you lost your bracelet."

She rolled her eyes, blushing. "Luke mentioned to Mom, and Mom…"

"I'm surprised your mother still remembers my name. Does she still cringe when she says it?"

"I don't know, we communicatate by phone mainly. I haven't been home much," Rory looked down, "But I'm probably boring you."

"Never. Except for when you recommend Objectivist literature," Jess smirked. Rory looked up and grinned at him. That smile. That was the first real smile Jess had seen since she arrived, and it was every bit the mind-blowing phenomenon he remembered it to be.

When Jess first met Rory, he thought it was her eyes that mesmerized him. And they did. But the closer they became the more he realized that her smile, the really uncontrollable one that was mostly reserved for him, was the thing that made it the hardest for him to breathe and the hardest for him to ignore the impulse to grab her and pull her close up against the nearest wall and not care who sees. That smile, that sure, Luke or Lane or Paris or Lorelai could sometimes conjure, but was usually reserved for him. The first time he'd seen it was when she was flipping through Howl. The most
important time was when he handed her the Subsect. And every time she did it, it didn't matter where we were or who was around, he couldn't help reacting the way he did the first time.

Her eyes were there for everyone in the world, something he used to hate. He couldn't stand that everyone could see them, just look into her soul like that, but somehow he felt her smiles were more exclusive. Of course he'd grown out of his teenage possessiveness...mostly.

He snapped out of his reverie. "Why don't we grab a bite to eat? Matt can put away the rest of these and since I don't see a thermos in your hand, I'm guessing you're in need of libations."

"That sounds good," Rory nodded, looking relieved. It wasn't like her to be so clammed up. Jess pushed the thought aside and shot her a quick half-smile.

"Let me just go let Matt and Chris know that I'll be back a little later. And don't you dare start looking while I'm gone or we'll be here for hours."

She smiled that same damn smile and he cast his eyes towards the floor, quickly avoiding his visceral reaction to it. He turned around and walked towards Matt and Chris, who were now lounging not so inconspicuously against the wall staring at Rory.

"Guys, don't start," Jess said immediately, putting up his palm, "And stop staring. Now. You're worse than Penny Lane."

"Beatles?" "Almost Famous."

"Jess, you can't just..." Chris started.

"I'm not just anything. In fact, I'm not anything at all. I'm just going to go out for a couple minutes. I'll be back in time for tonight's reading at the latest, and I'd appreciate it if as long as she's around you'd remain civil and try to block out the things you've learned from questionable sources."

"But you're the only one we've heard about her from!" Matt exclaimed, "And the things you've said..."

"In all fairness, Jess drunk isn't really a source as much as a resurrection of Bukowski with slightly less whores involved."

"And on that note," Jess sighed and turned around, walking back towards Rory, who was trying to pretend like she wasn't watching them. He could tell from the way the corners of her lips were slightly turned up as they always were when she eavesdropped, though her eyes were securely fixed on the piece of art on the adjacent wall.

"I have no idea what that is," Rory mumbled, following Jess towards the door.

"Don't worry about it," Jess smirked, "I don't think Ani DeFranco herself could figure that one out, even with all her inside knowledge."

"Enough said."
"So this is your Luke's," Rory smiled, sliding into the booth.

It looked so wrong and right at the same time, her sliding into a booth. It reminded him of New York, where she was both so perfectly made for the moment, eating the hot dog and finding the Go Gos but also never looked quite right, just a little bit out of place. You could tell she wasn't a New Yorker. Jess strongly suspected that the person who asked her for directions was an even more oblivious tourist than she was, not that he'd ruin her mood with that. Rory had this incredible quality of both being high and low, very laid back but also so pristine that you could set her in the middle of any country club or in his opinion monarchy and she'd fit right in, with the invisible aura of a halo that seemed to constantly surround her. Which was funny, since she was happiest down in the dirt of life, the roughness that seemed so contrary to her nature. God, the reverie had to stop. No wonder he wrote so quickly when she was on his mind.

"Nope," Jess shook his head very slightly, "Definitely not. Only come here once a month, maybe, when work isn't as crazy as right now. The only place I steadily go to, besides home, is the bar that we all hit after work."

"So then what do you eat? You were never big on takeout, which has kind of become my lifeline in the working world."

"Like it wasn't already your lifeline," he rolled his eyes, "Some of us actually cook."

"I didn't know you could cook. Luke usually kept you away from the grill, so I just assumed he thought you'd burn the place down."

"I'm sure he did, but not because he doubted my cooking abilities."

Rory grinned, this time without trying to stop herself, "Well, arson would've really added some color to that dull record of yours."

"Yeah, well if you thought my record was dull before, I can't imagine what you think now," Jess stopped smiling, "How much do you know exactly?"

He'd done it. Violated the unspoken agreement between them not to ask any questions, show any curiosity, the game of who would crack first was over and he'd lost. But he wasn't a kid, and he didn't really care anymore, and it was no longer a power play to act like he didn't care. So he didn't second guess the question as it came out of his mouth, and he didn't break eye contact as her Bambi eyes widened almost unnoticeably.

"Well, it's not like Luke's a chatterbox, but you know my mom. She can Oprah the answers out of anybody. And when he mentioned seeing me in Philadelphia at the opening, she started prying a bit about you, and kind of just tells me things. I didn't ask her too or anything," Rory rushed, flustered, "She's just, well, Mom."

"Very Lorelai," he nodded, not doubting her explanation, "It's okay. I don't mind, just asking. Not that there's much to report here. Speaking of which…"

"Ah, so I'm not the only one doing some covert ops," she gloated.

"Well I did promise that you'd become Christiane Amanpeour, and I have to watch all my bets. Make sure they pay well," he leaned back, stretching his arms across the back of the booth, "Looks
like it is so far. What are you doing now that the campaign's over?"

"Well, I'm reporting mainly from New York and DC for a couple regional publications, still covering Obama, but now the presidency. I'm also covering a lot of his regional travel when I can find cheap ways to do it, because of course there's not a lot of money for those types of publications to send people places, but the more of that stuff we cover the more readership we pick up. Actually, I managed to find an insanely cheap trip to cover the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit, and some of the coverage was picked up by the Chicago Sun-Times. And so I haven't been home much, but things are amazing, even though really I have no idea what I'm doing next year because I feel like I should try to find something more stable and...God, I'm doing it, aren't I?" She buried her face in her hands.

Jess laughed, just the tiniest bit. "Yes, but it's okay. I'm really happy for you. It sounds like things are really good, even if you don't know quite what your path is. Maybe that's good. It seems to be working well for you right now."

"Well, thanks. It's kind of funny how it worked out though, you know? You staying still and having the whole job, life, one-place, seeing-family thing while I've barely been home twice this year, almost missed Christmas and have no idea where I'll be living in four months."

"Yeah well, if I learned anything from all these goddamned books it's that things never are what you expect them to be. And if they are, they generally suck."

"Tolstoy is laughing at your optimism."

"And applauding my realism."

"Touché."

"So, I'm actually just in town for a couple of days. Have to meet with one of my editor's connections at the university tomorrow about a possible lead on a column. I wasn't even really planning to bother you, but I just, well, I was sitting in my hotel room and I just got in a cab and came here. And then I didn't even know if you'd be there so I was just looking around and then I practiced my Vaudeville act and you showed up."

"So I was an incidental occurrence?" Jess said, suppressing his laugh. He loved watching her get all nervous and rambling. It was just refreshing, the fact that even now in her big city job and big city life her enthusiasm was still unimpeded.

"No! Well, actually, yes," she smiled, regaining some composure, "It was a bit of a Roman Holiday kind of moment, except for without the royalty or the Rome or the holiday, since I have work and am a struggling journalist who's in Philadelphia for two days."

"Yes, such an apt reference," Jess nodded sarcastically, "Sure you're not losing your touch? Wasting all your wit on the mediocre minds of the combined populations of D.C. and New York?"

"Like you're any better," she retorted, "Where's the "huh", huh? I haven't heard a huh since, well, huh, I can't remember."

"Funny, funny," Jess teased, "Didn't Ms. Kim warn you that boys don't like funny girls?"

"Mom, actually, but the message was passed. Not that boys are really a priority lately. Or even an option. Not that boys would be. Men, now, of course, that I'm an adult. Well not men, but a man, you know, one man..."

"Have you ever heard that thing about cutting off your nose to spite your face?" She glared at him.
"No, but really, I get you. My line of work, as stable as it may be, isn't necessarily conducive to a personal life. More to that of a hermit."

"I knew you'd become Luke one day!" Rory exclaimed, "Should I buy you a baseball cap? Start calling you Duke? Can you make me some bacon?"

"Oh shit," Jess said, falling out of tune, "We didn't order."

They both looked at each other, and simultaneously started cackling.

"Excuse me, Miss?" Rory called gently to the waitress. She huffed and puffed her way over.

"Are you two finally ready to buy something or are we all watching the Brady Bunch Variety Hour for another 30 minutes or so?"

Rory looked shell-shocked as Jess just smiled.

"No, Tiff, actually, we'd both like a coffee. Hers the size of the Grand Canyon and mine the size of a normal lake. I promise if it takes you less than two minutes it'll become The Artist before your very eyes."

The waitress begrudgingly smiled. Jess' charm was hard to ignore, even though she didn't catch any of the references.

"Coming up," she said, shooting a curious glance at the young-looking girl across from him. Something didn't quite add up, but he still looked pretty damn content.

"Do you know her?" Rory quietly asked, not-so-surreptitiously glancing at the woman's very tight jeans and tee shirt as she grabbed the mugs from a nearby shelf.

"Nope," Jess said, "I just grow on people quickly. You must be an acquired taste."

"Like stinky cheese."

"Exactly, whereas I'm Velveeta."

"Still an acquired taste."

"Not really. You're either born with an obsession or no tolerance at all. Most people choosing the latter."

"Sacrilege! We always melted it on top of our real Mac and Cheese!"

"Explain to me again how you don't look like Rosie O'Donnell."

About an hour, two bacon cheeseburgers and a milkshake later (and pie, of course, can't forget the pie), Jess was hailing Rory a cab.

"It was good seeing you Ror, I'm glad things are going well with you."

"You too, Jess, really. Truncheon looks great, you…I'm so happy for you."

"Take care of yourself," he said as the cab pulled to the curb and he opened the door for her. She stepped inside cautiously, looking as if she had something to say.

Deciding against it, Rory waved and shut the door, and the cab sped away leaving Jess yet again
trying to find another person's words.
Chapter 4

He'd half-expected her to show up again before she left, but sure enough Monday came and went and still no sign of her. It wasn't like he was disappointed really. In fact, he was more relieved. One of his authors had finally finished his manuscript and Jess spent all weekend editing, revising both alone and with the writer, holed up in a dive of a coffee shop for about 36 hours. That was what having Jess Mariano as an editor was like. You finished your shit, he read it within the six hour window he received it, and then you'd enter the Twilight Zone. Jess didn't believe in waiting to process or look through something, he just grabbed as much coffee as he could handle and provided you with that, or liquor, whatever worked for the particular author, and would sit there with you as you both just beat the fuck out of the work until there was nothing left to change. It wasn't a pretty process, and it usually ended in an exhausted, mean, and starving Jess, as well as the writer. But the writers always came back for a reason. When Jess pushed them, and Jess pushed himself, they were guaranteed a better final product, and faster, than the most publishers, where it would take months and months to get a final copy with half the quality. With Jess, he went through it and it was the final copy. He was the publisher anyway, so he could do as he pleased, and Matt and Chris and Jess kind of each worked off a long leash to one another, as long as they didn't screw up. It hadn't happened yet.

This particular author was a second-timer and when Jess was finally finished, he curled up in bed and slept for fourteen hours. He was actually really pleased with the work, a piece on a man nostalgic for the punk era while trying to sift through the current movement to try to find substance. Ironically, the artistic piece was written by a clean-cut man whose day job was as a bank teller. He worked under a pseudonym and was only known as a writer and only resembled one at the coffee shop where he worked with Jess. The one time Jess asked about his reasoning, the man said that he liked having a life to himself, something authentic, outside of survivalism, but that he also liked surviving. It was a line that Jess, with the man's permission, was using in his own next novel.

When he woke, he turned on the coffee maker and heard Matt and Chris arguing downstairs. He sighed, knowing that he'd probably have to talk to them later. He knew they'd want to talk about her and the visit and to know what the hell was going on in his head. The problem before was that he didn't want anyone in his head. Now it was that he didn't know what was in it himself, or if there was anything to even ask about.

It had been nice to see her. He wasn't lying, the experience definitely made him happier than he'd been in a while, but she always had that effect. But it was not a devastating and romantic moment. He was not blown away by her presence and nothing felt otherworldly and he wasn't overcome with the urge to kiss her or proclaim things to her or anything that his teenage hormones and, more so, his addled early mind compelled him to do years ago. It was coffee, lunch really. It was a meeting between old friends. It wasn't life or death, it was just movement.

The only thing that really seemed changed afterward was the progress in his writing. For a while he'd been in a bit of a slump, ever since Truncheon's opening, when things had picked up and he realized he actually liked helping other people write too, and that doing so made him enough money to live with a bedframe for his mattress. Of course he still wrote, but bits here and bits there, nothing cohesive or flowing really, just musings and sections and parts that weren't put together yet. But ever since she left, even while he was helping to edit and his brain stopped independently functioning because of caffeine overload, things just kept coming to him. Not phrases and bits like before but moments and people and the things that really make a story what it is. He decided to work a bit before he went downstairs to deal with his inevitable fate.
A couple hours later, he walked into the store, carefully ignoring the sideways glances from Matt and Chris. He didn't shelve, rather he helped people, keeping them as long as possible to avoid the interrogation. Speaking still not being his strongest suit, it wasn't long before Chris cornered him by the coffee machine.

"Chris, I'm not in the mood. That little brat just asked me if we had anything in the vein of Twilight."

"Really?" Chris inquired, momentarily caught off guard, "She actually asked if we had anything in its vein?"

"I know, threw me too. But after she figured out I was trying not to audibly laugh at her, she stomped off and took down the fucking Sanders display with her."

"Jess..." Chris implored, "Come on."

"What?" Jess retorted, "It was nothing."

"Nothing..." Chris eyed him doubtfully, "That was Rory Gilmore."

"I do remember her name, I'm not suffering from amnesia."

"Rory Gilmore. The North Star, the muse, the heroine..."

"Or we could just call her the girl I dated in high school. Serious ex-girlfriend. Something with a little less gravity might be preferable," Jess casually sighed, walking over to the table and stacking the books yet again, "Goddamnit, when are we gonna just get rid of this table?"

"We can't, Sanders is one of our biggest names," Chris rolled his eyes.

"Yeah well we're not about big names. We're voting tonight," Jess responded, putting the final book on top of the stack.

"Jess, focus, for more than a second, if you can," Chris cut him off, grabbing his shoulders and facing him. "This girl meant something to you. She means something to you."

"Everything means something to me," Jess smirked, "You've often voiced your admiration for that particularly charming feature of my personality."

"Fine, whatever. I'll just go talk to the coffee machine, I'll probably get more of a response," Chris threw his hands in the air and walked away.

A couple hours later, Jess walked into the back office where Chris was editing.

"Look, I'm sorry," he sighed, "It's just not something I talk about well."

"Yeah, because talking's always your go-to," Chris said, not looking up from his computer.

"It's just that there's really nothing to tell. It's not like it was before. I'm not bullshitting you here."

"Really?" Chris blinked disbelievingly, "No Nora Ephron moment?"

"Not in the slightest. It was just a meal. And she left and it wasn't anything."

"So you aren't seeing her again?"

"I don't know," Jess told him honestly, "I don't have any plans to. But it's not like I want to throw her
off a bridge like you and Matt do."

"Jess, she fucking messed you up." "Not the third time."

"You can't just act like she's anybody off the street. She's the only thing you write about that you won't publish. The one who I'm sure inspired the impossible standards that explain your complete lack of a personal life. She's the reason you came here and you did all of this and that you aren't lying in a cardboard box somewhere."

"I'm starting to get confused, Chris, do you love her or do you hate her?" Jess pointed out, his irritation rising. "Actually, why do you give a fuck? It's not like she's around."

"You really don't think she'll come back? That she's not trying to get back into your life?"

"I honestly don't think she had any sort of plan spanning a time period greater than two hours," Jess affirmed, "But either way, you guys don't have to hate her. She's never done anything to you and she's not going to, so can't you guys just be civil about her?"

"You'll have to talk to Matt," Chris said stubbornly, "But I'm not about to act like she's just another customer."

"I'm not asking you to," Jess shot back, "I'm just asking you to work with me here. If she shows up again or you encounter her under some circumstance, can you attempt to treat her with just a modicum of respect? Try to remember that this is someone I fell in love with, Chris, so she can't be a completely worthless piece of crap."

And with that, Jess walked out of the office, slamming the door shut behind him.
Chapter 5

A few weeks later, Jess was actually making decent progress on his current book. Not only did he actually have a protagonist now (or as close as he ever came to one) but he also had flow and some semblance of an idea of where he wanted to go with things. He was spending most nights working and most days at Truncheon, settled into the kind of rhythm he liked best. He'd never talked to Matt, and Matt had never approached him. It was clear that Chris had told him to just let it blow over for a while and that there wasn't a point right now. Relieved, Jess had been able to resume business as usual, ending Tuesdays and Thursdays with nights at the bar with the two of them, laughing at their combined Abbot and Costello/A Beautiful Mind tactics of meeting women. In this sport Jess was mainly a spectator, and though he occasionally indulged one of the many women who would try to catch his eye in a little conversation, he never pursued anything and usually just acted as wingman, when he wasn't busy screwing with their attempts to charm the fairer prospects.

It was a Thursday night, but Jess had decided to stay back. He was exploring the city on his own, something he did on a regular basis just to satisfy that need for solitude inside of him. For the sake of pragmatism and so as not to concern his friends, he'd curbed his desire to be alone over the last few years until he became a reasonably social member of their little society. He actually started to enjoy the regular company of others, but still, sometimes he just needed his space. This was one such night. It was around 9:00 and he had just left one of the lesser-known bookstores in the area and was struggling to balance the two bags of books he was carrying, without breaking the paper, when his phone rang.

He sighed and dropped the bags, pulling off to sit on the outer window ledge of a nearby building. "Jess."


"Only for the people I like. How's life?"

"Same as always. You?" "Same here."

"Really?" Jess rolled his eyes.

"You wanna just ask your question already?" he said, "Or would you rather dance around the subject for hours? Or we could skip. Let's skip."

"Alright, alright," Luke grumbled, but Jess could hear the smile in his voice, "Lorelai told me Rory made an unexpected visit to Truncheon."

"Yep."

"You okay?"

"Me?" Jess asked, confused, "You're asking if I'm okay? Shouldn't you be asking her that?"

"Well, you know Rory. If she wasn't I would've heard from Lorelai. Who isn't quite as interested in your emotional state."

"I don't think she believes I have an emotional state," Jess shrugged, choosing not to correct Luke's assumption about Rory. When things were really wrong with Rory, she actually avoided Lorelai. Not that he thought the encounter had upset her, "Anyways, I'm fine."
"You sure?" Luke pushed on, ignoring the warning in Jess' tone, "You don't have to lie to me Jess, I know how you were before. I'm on your side."

"Well the sentiment's appreciated but honestly I wish everyone would lay off a bit," Jess replied, not unkindly, "I mean, I'm not the same guy I was back then. And she's not the same girl. Of course it mattered but that's not what it is anymore."

It is what it is. You, me.

"Well, okay. If you say so," Luke said doubtfully, "Anyway, that was only part of why I called. I'm wondering if you have a lot going on this weekend."

"Nope," Jess responded, "Need a break from the Twilight Zone?"

"Something like that. Lorelai's out of town and the timing just worked out," Luke continued, "And April's in New Mexico so it was either you or camping, and in this weather, that's not an option."

"Glad to be your last resort. I'll see you at Truncheon whenever you get here."

After hanging up, Jess decided to take a detour on the way home. When Rory had asked if that diner was his Luke's, he hadn't been lying when he said he'd only been once or twice. He didn't really have a Luke's here. But he did have a bridge.

Bladen's Court was a local thing, and even among the locals it was losing steam. The ghastly rumors of its past (murders, etc.) deterred a lot of people from making it their quiet corner in the big city. But Jess was never one to be afraid of old stories.

Finally setting down the bags (a pretty sizable haul, he had at least twenty books), he sat down on the steps of an old brick house. The alley was mainly houses but this one was unoccupied, having been on sale since he moved in. It was red brick and beautiful but Jess had never broken in, in spite of the fact that he certainly remembered how to pick a lock. He just sat on the steps sometimes when he wanted to read or think.

As he started leafing through the pages of the book (an old paperback copy of Franny and Zooey, at this point he probably had about eight different editions and had memorized almost every word), he started thinking about Luke's call. Luke was always the one who called him, even today. Luke was always the one who visited him and the one who put in the effort. Sure, Jess did everything he could from Philadelphia but some part of him refused to take the initiative in that relationship. Even after all this time.

He sighed deeply, inhaling the scent of the old pages. He knew what he needed to do and even though it would have to wait a week or so, he was already dreading it. But he wasn't a kid anymore and Luke was good to him. He'd proven that he wasn't going anywhere, and Jess needed to start treating him like that.

After another twenty minutes or so he stood up and started walking back towards Truncheon and his apartment overhead. Yes, that's right, his apartment. Matt and Chris had moved into an apartment in the outside world like real adults, but Jess decided to just take on the extra rent payments and live there himself. With the privacy, it was actually an ideal situation. For one person the apartment was the perfect size and when living alone Jess was actually pretty neat, save for the endless stacks of books all over the place. He wasn't the type to go crazy and go back to work in the middle of the night like Matt always did or to awkwardly bring girls back to where he met them and have to say he lived there, like Chris. Jess was pretty simple, and the space was perfectly fitted to his current needs. He'd moved out the other two beds, knocked out a wall (not hard, considering the things Luke taught
him a long time back) and had some work done on a couple appliances and fixtures and for the last eight months it had been his very own place. A foreign concept for someone who never really had one, which was probably a contributing factor to his reluctance to move.

Jess walked in the door and up the stairs, quickly unlocking the door and bolting it behind him. A wave of exhaustion overcame him as soon as he saw the stacks of papers strewn across his desk and the unmade bed inviting him to just let go for the day. Sighing, he stripped down to his boxers and switched off the lights, dropping the bags of books haphazardly on the floor by the desk. He climbed into bed, setting his alarm for 6 so that he could handle the preparations in the morning before his shift.
At 6 AM, when the Clash started blaring, Jess rolled out of bed and groggily pulled on his jeans and a black tee shirt. He knew he needed to have everything ready by 9:00, because Luke would be there by noon and he'd need to open by 9 to close in time for them to have dinner. He'd called Chris last night and he was coming at 8:30 bearing coffee, so for now he decided to soldier through it and just head straight to Matt's.

"Thanks for helping me with this," Jess mumbled an hour later as he and Matt lifted the heavy object into the back of the truck, "Where did you even get this thing on such short notice?"

"Buddy of mine owed me a favor," Matt responded casually as he pushed the frame further into the bed and secured the back. He headed over to the driver's seat, Jess walking around the other side, "And it's no problem. Can I ask what inspired you to reclaim furniture at 11 PM last night?"

"Luke's coming to town," Jess replied, fiddling with the keyhole on the glove compartment, "Just figured it was time I stop forcing myself to sleep like a boy scout every time."

"Fair enough," Matt laughed, turning the key in the ignition, "Want to grab breakfast? We have a little time before Chris kicks our asses for being late."

"Hell, why not. It's not like anyone's going to steal a bed frame out of a flatbed."

An hour later the pair walked into Truncheon, carrying a paper bag.

"Where the hell have you guys been? We've been open for half an hour," Chris hissed as he walked over to them, carrying an unwieldy stack of hardcover books..

"We needed food to strengthen our muscles for the taxing job ahead. Here," Jess handed him the bag. Chris sighed.

"Alright, I forgive you, but only because I smell bacon. And if I'm wrong I reserve my right to kick your ass. Let's go get it, I can warm this up later."

They all headed outside and, with a surprising level of ease, lifted the frame out of the truck.

"Go ahead, tell me how much easier it is when I'm helping you two weaklings," Chris teased, grinning. Matt rolled his eyes.

"Alright Rocky, we get the picture. Let's see how you feel after we tackle the stairs."

"I can handle it. It's you two who should be…FUCK!"

Jess smirked, "Thank god we caught that. Or it might have fallen on Balboa's foot here. Tell me, Chris, do you always scream like a girl when startled or is that just for our mocking pleasure?"

"Ass," Chris mumbled, picking up in the middle again and finishing the ascent.

"Let's just set it here," Jess grumbled, leading them to the other side of the room by the dresser, "Where it was before."

"Are you sure you're not doing this because you need another roommate? Because if you're having trouble making rent I'd suggest actually getting some work done on that fabled second book of yours," Matt mocked.
"I'm sure," Jess glared at him, "I definitely don't miss having to share this place with some asshole who can't even clean a plate. My back just can't handle the pain of sleeping on the floor anymore."

"Well I guess now we know you really haven't had a girlfriend in a while," Chris retorted, "Or you'd be sleeping on the floor all the time."

"No, pretty sure that's just you. Not that I even get why Hannah is still putting up with your ass," Jess cracked, starting down the stairs with the two men, "Especially when she could've had Matt."

"I ask myself that every day," Matt shook his head, earning a shove from Chris and a hearty laugh from Jess.


"Luke," Jess smiled, opening his arms and hugging the man. Ever since their bizarre and productive post-self-help conversation years ago, they'd gruffly hugged with a normal frequency, both of them grudgingly and silently acknowledging their appreciation of the ritual. It had almost stopped feeling quite as foreign as it had when they started.

"Jess," Luke grinned, letting go of the young man, "How are you?"

"Not bleeding or anything," Jess smirked, "So it's gonna be a good day. Yourself?"

"Fine, in spite of my smartass of a nephew," Luke retorted. His wit had been catching up lately, probably because of his even more frequent exposure to Lorelai (dirty!). "Thanks for asking. Can I put my stuff upstairs?"

"Let me help you," Jess responded, taking the worn duffel bag from Luke's hand, "God, you really gotta replace that thing."

"I know, Lor's on me about it every time I come here," Luke sighed, walking up the stairs after Jess, "Has been for years."

"You know, Luke, I'm more interested in your personal affairs than I was as a kid, but could you refrain from telling me about how often Lorelai is on you? Not sure my stomach can take it."

"Very funny," Luke deadpanned, reaching the height of the stairwell and walking in the door beside his nephew, "Let me just…what is that?"

"You seriously cannot identify that object?" Jess mocked, "Uncle Luke, I know you and Lorelai haven't yet affirmed your future plans but if that's the case I highly recommend against reproduction."


"But you don't have two beds."

"Optical illusion?"

"Did you get a roommate?"

"Not unless he's a ghost."

"So then…"

"I figured you weren't gonna stop showing up anytime soon. Might as well have it here, it's not like
it's in the way."

"Jess…"

"Not a word, Luke, or I'll put on my old Metallica shirt before we head out."

"Say no more," Luke dropped the duffel on the second bed and followed his nephew out of the room.
"I liked that place," Luke said as they started walking back towards Truncheon, "New?"

"Found it last month," Jess nodded, "Only 8 blocks from work. Worked out nicely."

"Yeah," Luke agreed, "You still happy with the apartment? Living at work?"

"It's convenient," Jess affirmed, "And I don't need much space. As long as I can play my music as I fall asleep. I think as long as I'm living alone I'm good."


"First Matt and Chris, now you, what is with everyone's interest in my personal life?" Jess complained, "No, no girls in closets or under beds or behind bookshelves."

"Behind..."Luke looked confused.

"New York," Jess replied, "Either way, the answer's no. I'm happy living alone. Though I do wish I had more space for my books. They take up more room than Matt and Chris did combined."

"Must've driven them crazy when they lived here." "No idea."

"Well, since I'm here anyway," Luke started awkwardly, "We could find some shelves."

"What?" Jess questioned, facing his uncle. Luke looked at him, a bit of nervousness apparent in his eyes.

"I mean, we don't have to, but I'm good with the whole thing of figuring out if something has a good structure and quality in how it's built, and I'm sure you have exacting standards about what you like in them, so it might work well," Luke rambled, shutting his mouth quickly when done. Jess tried to hold back his laughter. Luke was really picking up some of Lorelai's habits.

Jess paused. "Sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all."

They continued walking back in silence, as they had been earlier. Jess was slightly thrown. Was Luke offering to do this in order to somehow match his gesture with the bed? He didn't need to. With the bed it was just time. Luke had always done enough. But it occurred to Jess that maybe they didn't have to stick to bare minimums and limit interactions or any of that shit and maybe he should stop overthinking it. Luke was here, Luke was sticking around, and Luke wanted to help him with something. There was no logical reason to say no. Jess smiled to himself. Bookshelves. Common ground between the two of them. Who would've thought?

Later that evening, the two men started carrying the boxes back upstairs.

"God, Matt and Chris are gonna die of shock when they aren't tripping over my stacks of books anymore," Jess grimaced, "They'll think I've gone soft."

"I'll know you've gone soft when you get a Kindle. You still have hundreds and hundreds of these damn things around here."

"Luke, advocating for technology? Who are you and what have you done with the hermit who lives
above the diner?" Jess laughed.

"I'm not a fan of most of that crap but really? You probably have an actual ton of books," Luke exclaimed, "And April reads like crazy too but I never have to install extra furnishings for her to stay the night."

"But that kid's a science nerd. As smart as she is I'm betting she doesn't live and breathe Tolstoy."

"What difference does the type of book make?" "Exactly. If you have to ask, you'll never know."


"Not at all, I'll switch to headphones. Unless her punk tolerance has improved at all?"


The next morning, Luke awoke to find an empty bed across the room from his.

"Dear God, it's like living with him at seventeen all over again," Luke grumbled, looking for his cell phone. He dialed Jess's number.

"Jess," the voice on the other end answered.

"Jess? Where are you?" Luke asked.

"Relax," Jess said. Luke could tell he was smirking. "I'm just out for a coffee run."

"It's 5. Where the hell are you getting coffee at 5 AM? Speaking of which, why are you up at 5 AM?"

"Strange hours lately," Jess said, his voice louder, "Been writing a lot and gotta be there when inspiration strikes."

"You? He who must not be awoken until at least 10?" Luke responded disbelieving, "Seriously Jess…"

The door opened.

"I told you to relax," Jess sighed, holding out a coffee to Luke, who grabbed it, "And yes, I've overcome my biological inadequancies. Also, awakened."

"What?"

"It's awakened, not awoken. Common mistake," Jess grinned, "Where did you think I was, anyway?"

"No clue. All night bookstore? I'd say a strip joint but I know how you feel about them," Luke retorted, making Jess' cheeks flush red.

"Hey, I got into a fight in a strip joint. It's not like I was doing everything wrong," Jess replied, earning a hearty laugh from Luke.
"By that reasoning, I really took advantage of the situation as well," Luke nodded, "So I guess we can go with that version. So when did you get this?" Luke gestured to the bed.

"The mattress was still here from when Matt and Chris lived here, since Chris had two," Jess explained, "The bedding is from Target. Bed frame I just picked up from storage."


"Not really. Manual labor is good for my image," Jess stated, "Anyway, what did I say about asking questions?"

Jess smirked and opened a drawer, scrounging through the many lumped up balls of fabric.

"Good to know some things haven't changed," Luke mumbled as shirts went flying across the room, "There's no way you still have that thing. Jess, you aren't seriously going to…"

"Be back in a sec," Jess called as he walked into the restroom. Ten seconds later he emerged in the terrifying spectacle.

"You're seriously willing to look that way and risk the way you present yourself in front of your business just to spite me?" Luke wondered, looking disdainfully at the creature emblazoning the fabric.

"Not entirely. I'm not a teenager anymore," Jess smiled, grabbing a black blazer and pulling it over his shoulders, "See? Completely presentable."

"Why do I even ask," Luke sighed, following his nephew out the door.

"Mr. Danes! So nice to see you again,' Chris walked up and shook Luke's hand.

"For the last time, call me Luke. And I'm good, how are you Chris?"

"Great, especially when we have customers. As long as Jess doesn't scare them away."

"His shirt?" "His face."

"Funny, funny," Jess rolled his eyes, "Can you please try to actually get something done today? I should be in for a while later."

"I will try but I cannot guarantee my success. Enjoy your tourism," Chris smiled, walking over to an attractive young woman browsing the graphic novels.

"His next victim?" "Could be. Let's go."

"So, I was talking to Lorelai last night. Well, you were there," Luke started nervously as they walked back to Truncheon later that day.

"I know, sorry about that. Lacking a wall tends to lend itself to a lack privacy," Jess nodded.

"No, it's fine, it's not like we were talking about anything that…"

"Would make you turn more red than you are now? You look like a schoolgirl," Jess mocked.

"Well then the holding hands and skipping might be slightly less concerning."

"Me skipping with a little schoolgirl? Still pretty disturbing,"
"Anyway," Luke ignored him, "Lorelai and I were just talking, and I think you were plugged into your punk crap or something, but she mentioned that you haven't come out to Star's Hollow in a while. And that...well...if you wanted to...there's a couple stupid town things next weekend and she'd probably usually drag me along but she thought maybe you'd want to come into town. 'Save me from the crazies', I think was how she put it. Either way she made it seem like she wouldn't driven absolutely insane by you coming to town for a couple days, but if you're busy…"

"Luke, you're rambling," Jess smiled, "You want me to come?"

Luke met his eyes. "Yeah, I want you to come."

"Then I'll be there."
A week later, Jess was shoving the last couple of shirts in his duffel bag. And Luke was right, although most of his life was pretty together, his organizational skills were nearly as abysmal as they'd been when he was a teen. At least the shirts weren't as terrifying. He finally finished and zipped up the bag, pulling it over his shoulder and walking out the door.

"I'm out guys. See you on Monday," Jess called to Matt and Chris as they continued closing up behind him.

"See you then. Don't forget to finish processing the rest of Colby's. We want to get it to print next week. Oh, and try calling up Grayson if you can."

"He's your poet!"

"Maybe, but that still doesn't mean I can reason with him. I think he needs a firmer hand."

"I don't know if I'd call on Jess for that. More the brooding artiste…"

"I gotta hit the road before dawn if I don't plan on getting carjacked driving out of here," Jess snarled, "Don't let the place go to shit."

Jess slammed the door behind him and sighed. He knew he was being a dick but he was starting to get a little bit on edge about going back to Star's Hollow. That's not why he had agreed so quickly. He just knew that it was time to put in more of an effort with Luke and that this was a step in the more selfless direction.

He got in the car and dumped his bag behind him and drove off, still thinking through why the hell he was doing this. Although most of it was Luke, he hated to admit that he might have at least some peripheral ulterior motive.

It wasn't Rory. Maybe it would have been if he thought she'd be there, but he knew she wouldn't. There was way too much going on in terms of major events in New York this time of year that he knew she could not possibly be away from work. But just because it was not Rory did not mean he wanted to admit to it.

Almost instinctively he grabbed the bag of Doritos sitting on the ground near the passenger seat. Ironic, he thought, that he would grab junk food when he was trying not to think about Lorelai. Yes, that was the real reason he was going.

He could not really place why it was so important to him that she think well of him. On some level, of course, his younger self wanted to prove her wrong and shove the success in her face. Another more mature side knew that part of the reason Luke had not become more serious about their future was because he was doubtful about the animosity between them, and he knew Luke really wanted and needed to be with Lorelai. Permanently.

But even deeper, some part of him actually wanted her to like him. He remembered back when Rory had told him, if he cared about her at all, to just try to get along with Lorelai. And on a smaller scale, he'd seen a glint of something possible there. In the banter and the understanding, that is, prior to the boyfriend-bracelet-screaming debacle, there had been a short moment where it had almost seemed like she got it. Not just why he was right for Rory, why they made sense, so much more sense than she made with that clown she dated back then. It was more than that, though at the time that was a huge part of it. She seemed to see him, what he was, what he could be, almost like Rory did. She just
got him, if only for a second. At least she seemed like she might be able to, given time.

Jess gripped the wheel more tightly. Two hours to go. He'd thought about a Gilmore girl for hours, but never this one. Jeez. Maybe he was going soft. Why did it matter if she knew who he was now? He knew. Luke knew. Rory knew.

But the most important person to both of them did not, and as much as he still could not stand Star's Hollow, it was about time that she did.

Jess pulled in around 11. He felt around the top of the door until he found the spare key and then opened the door and walked in the diner. He hadn't seen Luke's truck out front, and the explanation was written on a post-it note in pink, with bubbly letters- "At Lorelai's". Below, in a script far more familiar to him, "I'll open. Lore's coming for breakfast at 10 if you want to come down."

Jess crumbled up the note and threw it in the garbage. He grabbed a donut from the display (one left, he knew his uncle well enough to know it wasn't a coincidence) and walked up the stairs. Biting into it, he opened the door and found himself surprised for the first time in his memory.

He was surrounded by books. Hundreds, it looked like. Jess furrowed his eyebrows, completely lost. They were classics, Henry Miller to Machiavelli. And they looked awfully familiar.

Naturally, they were in alphabetical order, and he found what he'd been looking for quickly. He opened it and, upon seeing his own barely legible scrawl, picked up the phone.

"You in?" Luke grumbled, clearly mid-sleep.

"Yeah. In the library," Jess replied, his voice even.

"Oh, sh..." he heard Luke standing up and moving out of the room, "I completely forgot. They've just been there so long..."

"Why?" Jess asked, flipping through the slim volume now on his lap, "Seems unlike her to leave them."

"Well she's traveling so much, and her apartment isn't in the best area, and it's tiny, so she wanted to leave them at home, but Lorelai didn't want them to be around while the painters were doing the remodel, and being Lorelai she hadn't really brought them back yet. When she's in town and wants them she'll usually just come grab a stack. You know how they are about manual labor. But I just completely forgot and..."

"Don't worry about it. Just curious," Jess sighed at his uncle's overreaction, "Saw a book I'd read and figured there was no way you'd have heard of it."

"And on that note, I'll see you at breakfast," Luke retorted, hanging up the phone as Jess smirked on the other end.

Jess grabbed a pen off the cup on the table and exchanged the book in his hand for one on the shelf. What a beautiful night to vandalize art.
The next morning Jess woke up at 8, a late morning. Yawning, he lifted his head only to realize that he had ink on his cheek. Looking down, it dawned on him that he had fallen asleep at the table, pen-in-hand, his face resting on a copy of The Bell Jar. He sighed and re-shelved the book (the rest he'd put away last night as he went). With that, he grabbed a towel and walked over to the bathroom.

Jess walked out half an hour later, towel around his waist, and stood in front of his bag. He groaned, resisting the strong temptation to wear the Metallica he had stuffed in as a rebellious impulse, and instead grabbing a black tee shirt, normal jeans, shoes and a blazer. After pulling on the garments he looked in the mirror, feeling about seventeen years old again. Except he wasn't angry. When he had been staring at this mirror when he was seventeen, using obscene amounts of hair gel and occupying the space for half an hour at a time, he had felt almost consumed by anger. On some deeper level though, even then, he felt shame, and worse in his eyes, fear. Fear that Luke was going to give up, masked by anger at Luke based on the surety that he would. Even though he never did, it took Jess years to get down to that bottom part and understand that he wasn't going to. It used to be a specific anger that Lorelai would never understand him or like him covering the fear that if that were true, maybe she was right and he did not deserve Luke or Rory's care. Standing in front of the mirror this time, he didn't have the anger shielding the other.

He opened the cabinet above the sink and grinned in spite of himself. Hair gel. New. He sighed, opening the packaging and slicking on a tiny bit. Maybe that was the difference. Moderation wasn't in teenage Jess' vocabulary. He sighed deeply. Looking into the mirror one last time, he nodded slightly and walked out of the bathroom.

"The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places." Hemingway resonated in Jess' mind as he walked downstairs and into the diner. Immediately he spotted Lorelai at the counter, grinning at Luke as he smiled and poured her coffee (no doubt her fifth cup in ten minutes). He had to admit, he never saw Luke as happy as he was with her around. Jess remembered that feeling, and it made him even more uneasy. He held onto the railing for a second, trying to steady himself, and at that precise moment Lorelai met his gaze.

Her blue eyes were terrifying. Not that she looked angry, because he remembered that look. But he'd forgotten how much they reminded him of Rory's, how it felt so similar yet so different to look into them. Nearly the same eyes, but while Rory's were always filled with comprehension, Lorelai's were glazed with uncertainty and apprehension, when not actual loathing. Today he was getting uncertainty, which was the better version of what he had been expecting. Resisting the urge to look away, he didn't break contact and instead nodded almost imperceptibly, bowing his head slightly and stepping slowly off the stairwell and onto the floor of the diner.

Lorelai knew something entirely different was going on with Jess the second he refused to look away from her. That he met her equally, rather than trying to intimidate her or ignore her or refute her. Lorelai might not have her daughter's IQ but she was a perceptive person, and when it came to reading people Lorelai Gilmore might well have been Steve Nash. And as much as Luke had been saying it for years now, she never really believed it herself.

Before recently Lorelai had not had a real interest in working things out with Jess. Recently, however, a few factors had changed her mind. She always thought that if she made an effort with him, it would be for Rory's sake. But it wasn't. Rory hadn't even willingly told her about the stop in Philadelphia. Lorelai had found a receipt stuck in a pocket of borrowed jeans while doing laundry from a coffee shop and then casually asked if she'd seen Jess. Rory could never directly lie to her.
Rory dismissed the whole thing as unimportant and just blushed and walked away. She was actually surprised to hear from Luke that Jess seemed calm and civil about the whole affair, suggesting that perhaps the encounter wasn’t about to ruin her daughter's life. But this was just another daily thought process. The main reason behind her change of heart was Luke. Luke, who she'd been dating for about five years. Luke, who wanted to marry her so badly that he had asked her father three years ago and given away the spot where the ring was hidden a year later. But he hadn't proposed and he said he wanted to, but there were a couple things he needed to work out. Only much later did it occur to her that maybe Jess mattered to him more than she thought.

She caught Luke trying to read the book once. Rory had left a copy of Jess' book in the stack, and she found Luke squinting at the pages. When she asked him what he was doing, he sighed and set it down in frustration, saying that he didn't know what the hell any of it meant but he just thought that maybe he should. Lorelai, for the first time, realized that Luke saw himself as Jess' father figure. And all at once a wave of guilt washed over her for not even trying, not even caring with who he saw as his kid when he'd been there for Rory without exception since the first day he met her. Not only did it put the whole fight they had after the car accident in perspective but it also helped to explain why he would be awkward before leaving to go see Jess and awkward upon return, never really talking about it but always getting upset if something prevented his regular trip.

More than anything else, now that Rory was happy, healthy and on an acceptable path, Lorelai just wanted Luke. But all of him and forever. She could not stand the idea that anything would hold them back or keep any part of him from her or vice versa. And since he was the most important thing in her world, she realized that she needed to give Jess a second look. Luke deserved that from her, at the very least.

Jess walked behind the counter, clasping his hand on his uncle's shoulder. "Long time no see," he said. Luke turned in surprise. "Jess! You're early!" Luke replied. For a short second both looked confused but Jess sighed and pulled Luke in for a hug. Luke smiled involuntarily and Jess caught the shocked expression or Lorelai's face. "Yeah well, I was up late reading or I probably would have been down earlier to help. Sorry about that. Hello, Ms. Gilmore." He reached out to shake her hand. Looking at him curiously, Lorelai cautiously half-smiled. "Ya know, at this point I think we can go with Lorelai. How are you, Jess?" She shook his hand quickly and awkwardly, then motioned for Luke to bring her more coffee. Jess grabbed the coffee and poured some more into her cup, and then into his own.

"Thanks." "No problem," Jess nodded, "Things are good. Other than this late onset coffee addiction. I swear my teeth are going to turn black and rot before I hit thirty."

"A natural risk of living such a satisfying life," Lorelai smiled, unable to frown as the coffee touched her lips, "How'd that happen?"

"Got converted at work. My friends Matt and Chris nearly bleed the stuff, and I realized if I was gonna be working the same hours they do I'd need to either take up speed or this and I've never really been one for drugs."

"Plus speed is just so 2007." "2005." "Touche."

"As much as I hate breaking up this little reunion," interrupted Luke, "I feel the need to interject for the sake of my own health and safety. Lorelai, what do you want to eat?"

"Um…the Ro…I mean, sausage wrapped in pancakes tied together with bacon."

"That was a one time deal and it wasn't for you." "But…!" "Lore." "Fine, omelette with bacon and cheddar, double bacon and bacon on the side, more coffee, and don't even think about trying to put
fruit with it like last time!"

Luke sighed, turning to his nephew. "Jess?"

"I can…" "No. You're not working today. Plus Cesar's on my list."

"Well in that case, I'll take three eggs over easy, toast, extra bacon and a dough…fine, and some fruit. God, you're such a killjoy."

"Ha!" Lorelai chortled in spite of herself, earning an exasperated glare from Luke and an amused smile from Jess.

"Remember when you two hated each other? That was fun," Luke sighed, walking into the kitchen and leaving an awkward silence in his wake.

Jess turned to Lorelai, unable to help himself. "I'm sorry, I just want to be clear here. Why are you doing this?"


At that, Jess smiled. "Well who woulda thunk I had something in common with Lorelai Gilmore."

"You know, when you look more carefully there is some common ground. I tried reading Proust once."

"Why? He's a pompous ass."

"I know, so was the guy whose book I borrowed."

Jess laughed. "Yeah, well at least you don't have to worry about that with Luke. Even though he has a hundred books in his legal residence I'm pretty sure he hasn't read any of them."

"He keeps the fishing guides at my house. Sorry about those by the way, I probably should have picked them up," Lorelai said awkwardly, not knowing whether or not to mention her. Jess met her eyes.

"It's okay, really," Jess smiled, "I'm not out to ruin your daughter. Not that I ever was, but you really don't have to worry about anything on that front."

"I heard she came to see you."

"It was nothing."

That alone made Lorelai stop for a second. The way he said nothing used to reek of defensiveness and disdain, but now he was looking directly into her eyes and saying it with such honesty that she could not convince herself he was being anything less than sincere.

"So you didn't call her?"

"No. We hadn't talked since Truncheon," he said, "Not that there's any bad blood. But she's doing great and I'm decent and our paths just haven't really crossed in any significant way."

"I believe you," Lorelai affirmed slowly, "But I'll believe you more if you pour me some more coffee."

"Better yet, I'll put on a new pot."
Chapter 10

A couple hours later, Jess was in Lorelai’s car driving to the Dragonfly Inn. Apparently Luke usually helped with some of the handyman things around the place and some sort of emergency involving a stuck door had occurred and since Luke couldn’t leave the diner and Jess hadn’t seen the inn, Luke offered him up on a platter. Jess almost grimaced at the obviousness of the ploy. Sure, he and Lorelai were getting along but it was plain to see that Luke desperately wanted it to work out.

After a couple minutes of silence, Lorelai turned to Jess awkwardly. "Mind if I?" she gestured at the radio.

"Please"

After flipping back and forth between about twenty stations, she settled on a U2 song. Jess smirked.

"So you’re an 80s child," he said casually, trying not to smile too obviously.

"You could say that. We stalked Bono once," Lorelai replied, her face lighting up at the memory.

"You stalked…"

"He was supposed to be at some hotel in Ireland during our backpacking trip so we took a detour and camped out and waited around for him to show up for days."

"Sounds like a good time," Jess smiled, "You guys find him?"

"No, he never showed," Lorelai sighed, "Completely worthless in the end. You traveled much?"

"Not really," Jess shook his head, "When I was younger it wasn't really an option and now it's not for different reasons. I go between cities a bit for work, spend some time in New York or Chicago once in a while, but I kind of stay in one place for the most part."

"Might be better that way," Lorelai responded, "There's something nice about having a place that feels like yours. Homey."

"I don't know if I'd call Philly homey," Jess cracked, amused by her choice of words, "But it is nice to be settled somewhere. And to have a routine, see the same people, do the same things. There's a lot you can count on."

"And that's pretty damn important."

"So, can I ask you something?" Lorelai continued, struggling to resist the impulse of her curiosity.

"If I say no, will it stop you?" Jess laughed, "Go ahead."

"Do you think that Rory should know about this?"

"You didn't tell her already?" Jess looked shocked, "Now that I can't believe."

"Well, as much as Rory and I are still close, it's not the same as it used to be," Lorelai sighed, "But I'm still a little unclear on the status of your guys' relationship and so I figure your judgment might supersede mine here."

"I'm sorry, can I get that in writing?" Jess teased, earning an amused glare from Lorelai. "Alright,
alright. You want my honest opinion? I don't think she needs to know. The fact that I'm here visiting
my uncle has nothing to do with her and the fact that we're attempting this thing is for him. I wouldn't
want her to get the wrong idea and think that assumptions were made based on the brief meeting we
had."

"Your assumptions or mine?" "Either. She really doesn't like it when people assume things."

"Fair point. Alright, so not yet," Lorelai said, "But maybe at some point?"

"Well I would assume it would come up at some point. That should be at your discretion. Not that I
talk to her, but I'm sure you'll recognize when it makes sense to say something."

"It's really good that you're doing this, Jess," Lorelai said, her eyes meeting his, "It means a lot to
him."

"Hey, it's not easy for you either. And we just both want him to be happy," Jess answered as they
pulled into the drive, "Plus, you're not actually so bad when you don't want to throw a pie at my
face."

"Who says that I don't right now? In fact, I'd be very curious to see how you'd react to that after all of
these years of maturing."

"Probably not that differently than I would have then. Shock, anger, and ultimately amusement."

"Rational response," Lorelai nodded, "Come on. Let's go inside and see if Sookie has ever forgiven
you for not trying her pot roast and mac and cheese. If not, maybe she can make us some pies to
throw at you."

"And to think that you run a highly successful business based on hospitality."
Chapter 11

After touring the inn, Jess had learned a couple of things about the older Lorelai Gilmore.

He'd learned that she had no tolerance for laziness, and demanded efficiency from all who worked with her. Even though her demands were always issued sweetly and often with a flirtatious tongue, he could tell from the way she looked at them and the way they responded that she wasn't screwing around. She drank at least two cups of coffee in the hour they was there, but never asked anyone to get it for her, instead opting to run into the kitchen and pour it herself, rambling on to Sookie as she blew through like a hurricane. Finally, he had realized that Lorelai Gilmore was perfect for her job. Not only was her personality tailor-made to own and operate an inn, but she also seemed to derive a sense of sustenance from it, and would seem more fulfilled and animated in every movement, not unlike Rory when she read or wrote. Or Jess, when he was at Truncheon.

She had showed him the property (cozy without being cheesy) and then reintroduced him to Sookie, who, after giving him the cold shoulder for five minutes when Lorelai left them to go handle a call, immediately welcomed him back into her good graces when he asked to try one of the appetizers on the table. Soon enough he had a plate stacked as high as a Tolstoy novel with various pastries and appetizers, and having promised to make sure that Luke tried them because "change is good, he has to learn that you can't just keep making the same old burgers and fries…". When Lorelai walked back in to see this she seemed infinitely amused, the reason for which alluded Jess until they got back in her Jeep.

"You know you have to eat all of those right now, right?" she said, unable to help herself from cackling like a madwoman. He looked at her in shock. "What? Why the hell would I…" "Luke'll kill you if you bring them into the diner. It's a rivalry thing. Like wearing a Yankees hat to a Red Sox game." "I can't decide whether I'm more confused by your actual knowledge of sports or the fact that you think it's that serious." "I follow general aspects of various sporting endeavors." He looked at her strangely as a smile lit up her face, one that he recognized as being Rory-driven. "But seriously Jess, last time I walked into the diner with one of her cupcakes he wouldn't give me coffee. For TWO DAYS. I nearly died. And when he found out that Sookie had provided for me over those days he wouldn't speak to me!" "Look, there's no way I can…” "Just start shoveling it down your throat. Don't worry, your teammate's a world champion."

As they pulled into the diner, Jess finished the last bite of the second to last cookie, handing the remaining one to Lorelai. "Aww, Jess, you're giving me the last cookie! God, maybe you do have a soul," she smirked. Jess grinned. "Actually, I just figure that we're close enough that Luke could be lurking around somewhere and I'd rather you get in trouble than me." She laughed, then looked around very seriously as she shoved the entire thing in her mouth. Jess couldn't help it. He smiled, genuinely happy to be spending time with Lorelai Gilmore.

They walked in together, and Jess immediately went over to greet Luke. As the older man hugged him, he whispered, "You made it out alive?" Jess smirked. "Somehow."

"So I see you didn't kill my nephew," Luke smiled at Lorelai as he poured her coffee. "Nope. No pie in his hair even. Consider yourself lucky." "Oh, come on," Jess smirked, "I'm pretty sure it just finally occurred to you that when he's not around, I can pour the coffee." "Very true," Lorelai replied, taking another enormous gulp, "Which reminds me, Luke? Why do you not have a 'people sleeping with me can pour their own coffee' clause?" "Because you're still a customer, not an employee. Regardless of our sleeping arrangements you are not an employee." "Dirty!" "And I'm out," Jess cracked, walking towards the door, "I'll be back in an hour or so to help out." "Sounds
The next morning, Jess walked downstairs carrying his bag, a few books lighter than he'd brought it. He walked over to Luke and clasped his shoulder. "Thanks for asking me to come," Jess said, his voice low but clear. Luke turned to him. "Jess, you're always welcome here. And thank you for making the effort with Lorelai." "Believe it or not, it wasn't actually that much effort," Jess admitted, "I thought it would be but I kind of get her now. As much as someone that crazy can be understood." "Speak of the devil," Luke muttered as the door swung open. "Oh Luke! Darling, can I please get a refreshment? The heat out there is just glaring and I feel as if I may faint!" Lorelai sing-songed, dramatically fanning herself as she plopped down on the seat. "Cool your jets," Luke snapped, "Or I'll bring you juice." "You wouldn't dare." "Made with fruit." "Without even adding alcohol to make it palatable? My oh my, what ever could have induced my beau to treat me with such cruelty?" Luke turned his back and walked off towards the refrigerator, ignoring the many cried apologies that followed him. Jess rolled his eyes. "I'll get it," Jess said, grabbing the pot and cutting Lorelai off before she could respond, "If and only if you stop acting like you live in an Edith Wharton novel." "Was going for Austen." "More Wharton." "Fine," she sighed as he poured, "Thank you." Luke returned with the glass of juice, slamming it down in front of her. Seeing the coffee his face became purple. "You guys are conspiring now?" He fumed and walked away, muttering, "What have I gotten myself into…"

Jess smirked and poured himself a mug. Impulsively he turned to Lorelai. "Hey, you know, you're welcome to come with him to Philadelphia if you want sometime. He has his own bed now. And I even have a privacy screen, though I still wouldn't advise anything above the Taylor's Curtain rating system."

Lorelai stared at him in surprise. "Really?" she asked, her eyebrows raised, "You're actually inviting me to stay with you in Philadelphia?" "Can't be worse than you are here," he grinned, refilling her coffee, "And at least there I have reinforcements, both in the form of Chris and Matt and in the form of libation." "You're sure about this?" she asked one more time, "Because if you are I might actually take you up on it. I know it would say a lot to Luke." "How's next weekend?" She started at him in bewilderment. "Jess Mariano, has your body become inhabited by a foreign spirit that has no understanding of the implications of his actions?" "That was actually the former spiritual resident," he retorted, "Look, no joke, no catch, I don't mind spending time with you around. And I think Luke would like it. So, next weekend?" "Okay."

Chapter 12

The next day at work, Jess was trying to help a girl, about thirteen years old, find something to read. She reminded him of Lily and for that reason he had spent far too much time on this one particular task rather than getting the other work done that was waiting. After about ten minutes he noticed Matt waving him over, and reluctantly he left the girl to continue her browsing. "So," Matt said, walking into the office with him and pulling out a couple of coffee cups, "How was the Twilight Zone?" "Could've been worse," Jess replied, gratefully taking the cup and letting Matt fill it, "Though I'm still doubting my sanity about next weekend." "What's next weekend?" Matt asked curiously, raising the mug to his lips. "They're coming here," Jess sighed, setting down his mug and staring absently at the wall. "You mean Luke is," Matt corrected, starting to sort through a stack of papers. "No." Jess met Matt's eyes as realization dawned upon him. "Wait, you invited Lorelai? Here? To stay with you and her boyfriend in the barely one-bedroom apartment you live in that is really a converted part of your place of business?" "Glad to know your thoughts on that decision," Jess mumbled, taking one of the stacks of paper, full of recent manuscripts that needed author calls. "Why? Why would you do something like that?" Matt demanded, "She hates you!" "Kind of," Jess muttered, not meeting Matt's eyes. "Wait…hold on a minute," Matt stared. He walked out of the office without saying a word, returning with Chris. "Doesn't at least one of us have to be out there running this business that we're responsible for?" Jess snarled, knowing exactly where this was going. "You are not going to tell us that it's a coincidence that two weeks after you see Rory for the first time in years, you suddenly decide to go to Star's Hollow to make nice with her mother. So nice, in fact, that he invited her here." Matt looked at Chris meaningfully. "Lorelai? Here? Like to see Truncheon?" "For the entire weekend," Matt replied, earning an eye roll from Jess. "Yes, two whole days, however will I survive? I got work to do." "No," Chris stopped him, "Look, I get that you don't want to talk to us about this, and we've tried giving you your space, but this has gone far enough. We all have work to do now but tonight after closing we're going over to my place and we're going to talk about this. We can't have you ending up with your head in your ass for two months like the last time she showed up and screwed with everything." "And on that note, you better have booze," Jess retorted, pushing past Chris forcefully and walking out onto the main floor.

Walking in the door, having arrived at the exact same moment as the pizza, the men settled into their usual setup. Jess went and grabbed the beers, Chris got plates and napkins, and Matt lazily flopped onto his spot on the couch so no one could take it. Sighing, Jess handed a beer to each of them, sitting down next to Matt and cracking his open. After taking a long gulp, he set it back down on the table and looked straight at Chris. "Look, I see why you're concerned. But this isn't about her! The situation now is absolutely nothing like it was then." "How is it different? How?" Chris demanded, "Jess, it doesn't matter that time has gone by or any of that shit, you two are the same people and just because you're in different places than you were doesn't mean shit. The things she did to you don't just disappear." "Exactly," Matt agreed, grabbing a piece of pizza, "And if it didn't matter to you at all, are you telling us it's all just pure coincidence that you're starting these things now? Seeing Luke more? Giving him a bed? Talking to Lorelai? Lorelai, Jess. This is a woman who basically got you banished from the first place you ever had a stable situation." "That wasn't her fault," Jess replied, his voice low, "I wanted to go anyway. I couldn't stay there after what happened. It would've been harder for everyone." "Everyone. Like Rory, you mean?" Chris implored, "You are so full of shit.
"Listen to me," Jess said, "Because I'm only saying this once. Nothing you said was untrue. But I'm not lying to you either. It really isn't the same anymore. I know exactly how I felt about her and I know exactly how I feel now and it is nothing like what it used to be. I'm not the only one who changed. She changed too." "But how do you know?" Matt prodded, "You've barely seen…" "I just…" Jess sighed, "I know. I know her better than anyone. And I know who she is now and who she used to be and I know too much. Too goddamn much. The reason I'm trying to make things work with Luke is because he's family. My family. My only family. And the reason I'm trying to make it work with Lorelai is because he deserves to be happy more than anybody, and he won't be unless she and I are peaceable. Yes, the timing was coincidental, but her coming here didn't cause those things. They were already in my mind and it's just been a matter of execution."

"You really sure about that?" Matt asked once more. "Yes," Jess said, "Now listen to me. She may come back at some point. She's a professional who travels in addition to being a human being in possession of free will. She could come here. And it didn't upset me when she did, and it won't upset me if she does. It also won't upset me if she doesn't. What will upset me is if you two give her a hard time and hurt her, and make things more dramatic than they need to be. I know you're protective because of how I was before about her, but things really are different now, and although I'm not asking you to bake her a cake, if you could try to treat her with the same respect you'd grant to anyone else I have a positive opinion of, that would be appreciated."

"I won't be purposefully rude to her, but I can't promise I'll be as nice to her as I would in that situation," Chris replied, "I mean, I'll give it my best shot, but if she comes here you have to know that we're not going to be happy." "No, we won't," Matt agreed, "But we'll both do our best to be as cordial as we can, out of respect for you. Does that work?" "For now," Jess nodded seriously, "Plus, it probably won't be an issue. I don't really think she'll come back."

That was the first lie Jess told that night. He knew she'd come back and he knew it'd be soon. But he didn't care and he didn't know if he really wanted her to yet so he just figured he'd let them rest easy for now. Maybe they'd find it easier to act less moronic if she showed up out of the blue and they weren't expecting her to.
"Now, please just try to remember that this is the woman that Luke is in love with," Jess sighed to Matt and Chris on the day Luke and Lorelai were to arrive. "You guys like Luke."

"We love Luke!" Matt exclaimed, "Remember when he helped us move?"

"Or when he called you a dumbass?" Chris smirked.

"All great memories," Jess laughed, "But seriously guys. Just give her a shot, okay?"

"Fine," they assented, and Jess walked toward the front door to open it.

"Jess!" Luke hugged his nephew, smiling widely, "How are ya?"

"Just peachy," Jess smirked, "Hello Lorelai."

"Jess," she smiled, walking up. She reached out to shake his hand and then, thinking again, she leaned forward and tentatively hugged him.

"Well hi to you too," he smirked and she glared, earning a hearty laugh from Luke, "And these are my friends and coworkers here at Truncheon, Matt and Chris."

"So you must be the famous Lorelai," Matt smiled politely, reaching out to shake her hand.

"Famous or infamous?" Lorelai replied, returning the handshake and reaching out to shake Chris' hand as well. The two men looked at each other in amusement.

"That has yet to be determined," Chris smirked, unable to help himself.

"Jess, looks like you found your kind," she grinned, "So where should we put our stuff?"

"I'll show you upstairs, and then give you the grand tour. Matt, Chris, pizza and beer tomorrow?"

"Jess, are you sure that's the best dinner plan when you have... company?" Matt gestured awkwardly at Lorelai, who immediately cracked up.

"Oh Matt, you have no idea what you're in for." She clasped her hand on his shoulder, following Jess up the stairs. Jess turned and smirked at Matt and Chris who were still standing dumbfounded in the wake of Lorelai Gilmore.

"Welcome to my humble abode," Jess announced as he opened the door, "Mi casa es su casa. Your bed is over there. I'm sorry it's a bit small."

"It's not like it's a twin, we'll be fine," Lorelai smiled, "Plus, we sleep really close, right hun?" She winked dramatically at Luke.

"Oh geez," Luke mumbled, setting the duffel on the bed.

"Jess, the place is really nice," Lorelai said honestly. She could honestly say she found it fascinating to be somewhere that was only Jess's and permanently so.

The apartment unsurprisingly was very masculine, lots of dark wood, nothing particularly expensive in terms of furniture but everything looked to be of decent quality. The navy bedding and couch
upholstery, the miscellaneous punk rock posters on one wall, all of these things were his. The place was both clean and tidy, though not perfectly so. Mostly she noticed the books. At least two of the walls were filled with back to back bookshelves, all brimming, to the top with books stacked on top of one another. Most of the books, she noticed, were paperback, and were organized in some way she couldn't really understand, with Hemingway next to Ayn Rand and Bukowski next to Jane Austen.

"Luke helped me with those last time he was here," Jess offered, gesturing at the shelves, "Before they were all just stacked up everywhere."

"Why do you need so many books?" Lorelai asked, confused, "You have an entire store of them downstairs."

"Yeah, but these are mine. And I like having them around. It still amazes me that I've never lost one considering how much I've traveled with the damn things," Jess said, going up to a shelf and carefully picking up a copy of Daisy Miller, "I had at least half of these when I came from New York to Star's Hollow. Liz sent a lot of my stuff later but I managed to stuff most of the books in my bag I brought with me. I wouldn't really trust her with them. Back then," Jess quickly added, noticing the small change on Luke's face. "Anyway, what do you guys say to burgers? There's a place a couple blocks from here. I'll show you around downstairs and then we'll go."

"Sounds great," Lorelai smiled, "Just let me grab something." She started fishing through her bag. "Where…where…there it is!" she grinned, clutching a piece of fabric, "Just give me one sec. Where's the bathroom?"

"That way," Jess gestured, his eyebrows furrowed in confusion. She grinned and ran in. A few minutes later she walked out, wearing a tee shirt emblazoned. "6 Weeks Till Spring". "Really?" Jess glared, "And just when I thought we might be able to tolerate one another."

"Well I can't make it quite that easy for you," Lorelai cheekily replied, "Come on. Show me this bookstore of yours and then we'll take off."

After showing Lorelai around Truncheon while Luke continued to complain about the structure of the building and insurance premiums and all sorts of things Jess forced Matt to deal with, they finally headed out to go to dinner. As Jess started leading them to the restaurant, Lorelai couldn't help but marvel at the changes. Not only did Jess have a place to live, but it was his place to live, it was a nice place to live, and he was solely responsible for it. He ran a business with two other guys, equally sharing in the work and profits, dutifully putting in the hours to achieve the kind of success he wanted at something he was really good at. He was independent and motivated and had direction. Some very quiet voice inside her head reminded her gently of how similar this all sounded, how a young rebel getting their shit together was a subject with which she was intimately familiar. A jolt of something went through her. Was it possible? Could it be…respect? He was putting Luke's needs and interests before his own, clearly trying to make up for the time he'd lost. At that moment, Jess turned and met her gaze. She stared for a moment before she broke away, feeling more confused than ever. She sighed, putting the troublesome thoughts out of her head and refocusing on her desperate need for fries. The absolutely terrifying idea that Jess was a decent human being was just too much to take on without sustenance.

Jess looked away from Lorelai, having noticed her reverie a few moments before he interrupted it. It was definitely too much to think that she might be able to forgive him for who he'd been and what he'd done. He'd ruined her early relationship with Luke. He'd broken her daughter's heart. He could have killed her. But something in the way Lorelai watched him made clear that she was reluctantly, hesitantly opening her mind to the idea of a different Jess. Someone she didn't know or hadn't tried
to, that she might be able to create some sort of relationship with that wasn't entirely based on suspicion. And for now, that was enough to make Jess allow her to stop for a "walking coffee" on the way to the "sitting down coffee", much to Luke's dismay.
Chapter 14

The next day, Jess had a chance to reflect on his experiences over the last few weeks. He'd seen Rory. Rory Gilmore, muse, town princess, pivotal woman in every story he wrote, and yet he couldn't reconcile himself to her as comfortably as he always had. Something was off.

Furthermore, not only was he making an effort with Lorelai for Luke, but he was beginning to actually not mind being around the woman. He always thought she would be someone who, at the most, he'd have to put up with for Luke or Rory and that she would always be a challenge. The last part was true. In no way was he clamoring to listen to the Bangles or deal with the kind of drama Lorelai Gilmore brings into your life on a regular basis. But as true as those things were, he realized that not only could he deal with Luke's choice, but he was starting to see the good in this woman. Her wit was always entertaining and intelligent, albeit a little dated. She obviously really cared about Luke, as was obvious just in the way they looked at each other. Those types of glances were the things that authors neither of them had heard of or would ever read wrote of and that amazed Jess from the time he could turn a page. And he saw the little bits of Rory here and there. Not just in the coffee or the eating or the repartee but in the insight and kindness and strength and intuition. Understanding Luke's position made it much easier for Jess to handle the crazy. Plus, he had to sympathize with him a bit. There was no hope for any man when it came to falling in love with a Gilmore girl.

He tried to refocus on stacking the rest of the volumes before Lorelai and Luke came downstairs. He had decided to stay at Matt and Chris' place last night after realizing how awkward the whole situation was when it came down to it. He was definitely going to have to just sleep on the downstairs couch in Truncheon when they visited from now on. Getting a bigger place wasn't an option. He had made the decision a long time ago that he wanted to stay still for as long as he could, at least until there was a reason significant enough to make a move. Something like a relationship serious enough to merit a possible need of more space. And there was plenty of space in the apartment for a cozy twosome.

Matt and Chris weren't exaggerated when they mocked his nonexistent dating life. It was pathetic, actually, which was why Jess refused to think about it. It's not that he didn't get attention. He always had, especially when he didn't want it, but he refused to settle, which meant that truthfully he hadn't dated anyone at all in the last few years. He'd gone out once or twice with a few girls, always leaving them in the kindest way possible but never able to become serious with them. Some part of him thought it was time to just realize that there were more options out there and that life wasn't a novel, but that entire thought process was counterintuitive to the major part of his personality. So for now he settled for being the hermit of his family since Luke had abdicated the throne, resting on the idea that he had plenty of time for those things once he felt more stable.

But he was stable. He was ready. He just couldn't reconcile himself with the fact that he was strong and safe and able and wanting to give everything that is a part of a real, serious, possibly lifelong relationship. He couldn't believe it of himself, that he had achieved that. And even though he was ready, he knew in the surest part of himself that maybe he wasn't the only one who needed to get their shit together.
Chapter 15

Of course she knocked over the Sanders stack.

It wasn't enough that it the poet cancelled. Nor was it enough that Matt was out sick so he and Chris were handling it all themselves. The universe still wasn't satisfied even by sending the very girl who he had no time to think about or deal with but had no choice but to anyway. No. On top of all of that, she had to knock over the stack that he had already re-organized three different times that day.

"Fuck it," Jess muttered under his breath, making a mental note to tell Matt to move the table. He saw Rory drop to her knees and begin gathering the books in her arms, quickly and neatly stacking them into perfect piles on the display table.

"Don't even worry about it," Jess said, approaching her calmly, "I'm just gonna tell Matt to scrap it. Doesn't matter how big the guy's name is for us if we grow to slowly hate it, as we are now."

"Seems like a logical idea. I'm sorry for knocking into it again," Rory said, less timidly than last time but still not sounding entirely comfortable with the situation, "And for dropping by unannounced again. You busy?"

"Kind of but I was about to take my break anyway and grab a coffee. Want to walk with me?" Jess asked. Rory nodded. "Alright, let me go tell Chris that I'm taking off. Um…just walk with me. Door's that way anyway."

"You sure?" Rory asked, biting her lower lip self-consciously. God. He'd almost forgotten that.

"Yeah, it's no big deal," Jess replied, "Come on." The pair walked towards the office.

"Hey Matt, I'm stepping out for my 10. And in the sake of full-disclosure, this is Rory Gilmore and she's here." Rory looked at Jess strangely.

"You had to announce I was here? He can see me." "Not when his head is in that goddamned manuscript."

"For you I'll look up," Chris said, his voice strangely level. He turned around in his chair and smiled blankly. "Hello Rory, it's nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you." He held out his hand and Rory tentatively shook it.

"Really, Chris?" Jess glared, "You can't even fake a tiny bit more enthusiasm? Good thing you're paid to correct and sell other people's writing rather than write yourself, because your creative instincts seem severely lacking."

"Jess," Chris responded warningly, "Cordial. Remember?"

"Yes, but I had assumed you had enough common sense to make it believable. My mistake," Jess snarled, "Whatever. We're out. I'll be back in ten."

"Do whatever you want, I don't give a shit," Chris answered tonelessly, before shooting Rory an empty glance and cursory smile, "Have a good time here in Philadelphia."

"Oh, geez," Jess rolled his eyes, opening the door and holding it for Rory. He glared at Matt and slammed it behind him before walking out the front door of Truncheon.
As they started walking outside, Jess tried to reason with himself. Of course he had overreacted. He was testy. It was a day where everything was going wrong, he had virtually no help and a limitless workload, and on top of that he hadn't had any time to write in the two weeks since Luke and Lorelai's visit. Oh, and there was of course the small matter of Rory's newfound tendency towards spontaneity. He almost missed the fucking scheduling.

"Sorry you had to see that," Jess grimaced, "And that he was being such a dick. And that I probably made it worse. He just doesn't get it."

"What's there to get?" Rory sighed, "Everyone in your life sees me as the girl who…well…you know."

"Yeah, I could live without the recap," Jess replied curtly, "But he still didn't have the right to treat you that way."

"It's loyalty to him. He must be a good friend to you," Rory said quietly, kicking a pebble with her shoe. Converse, Jess noticed. Odd. He glanced over at her and slowly took in her appearance.

The last time Rory had shown up at Truncheon she was dressed for work, in black slacks, a cream blouse, dress heels and with her hair done well. Today she was wearing Converse, a pair of faded-wash jeans that looked to have a few years of wear and tear, and a plain olive-green tee shirt. Her hair was straight and pulled back, her bangs the only part that obviously received attention. She looked to be barefaced.

"So I'm guessing you didn't come here from work?" Jess asked, meeting her eyes curiously, "What's today's deal?"

"Took today off," Rory responded slowly, not meeting his eyes, "Just kind of put on clothes, did some errands and came here."

"Any particular reason for playing hookey? Or am I gonna have to come bail you out of your grandmother's spare bedroom again?" Jess smirked.

"It's not like that," Rory adjusted quickly, "I mean, there isn't really a specific reason and I've always been really good about not missing work, but sometimes it just gets really intensive over there. Anyway, what's wrong with skipping out sometimes?"

"Nothing in principle," Jess said casually, noting the defensiveness in her tone and trying to push down the feelings of uneasiness rising within him, "Maybe I'm just a freak or something but as infuriating as my work can be, especially on days like today, I always want to be there. Just to kind of watch over it. But then again, I'm not some fancy-Ivy-League-educated-reporter either."

"It's not that I'm not motivated," Rory started rambling, "I love my job. I love reading and writing and politics and world affairs so naturally being a journalist is really a dream come true. I wanted to be Christiane Amanpeour and I'm about as close as I will probably get. So really, it's amazing. I miss it already."

"Uh huh," Jess said, looking at her doubtfully, "Ror…"

"So where's the coffee?" He sighed. He replied, "Two more doors. I think you'll make it."

A cup of coffee and ten minutes later, they'd established that she was staying for the weekend, at a hotel not far from Truncheon, and that Jess would show her around. They also had discussed the fact that not much had changed in Rory's life since the last time she visited, and that her visit this time was to "see the city". She had been mainly in New York the past few weeks. Jess considered telling
her about his previous weekends but decided that Lorelai probably already had and that he didn't want to bring up an awkward subject in such an already-awkward situation.

As they paid for their coffees (Jess tried to pay for both and so did Rory, so they settled on buying each others, which made no sense since they both had plain black coffee), Jess tried to figure out what was going through his head. Since he had been so conflicted about the first time he visited, he decided to try to pay more attention to his own responses to her and vice versa.

It took less than three seconds for him to focus entirely on Rory's reactions and actions instead. Her smile lit everything up, but not as it always had. She didn't mention a single book. When he asked about work, she became defensive and a bit accusatory. When he asked about personal life, she made a sweeping pronouncement about not having one. Her retorts were still witty but there wasn't the lightness about her that she had at times possessed, that had drawn him to her so strongly. Maybe this weekend would give him some insight into why that was.
"So I'm sorry I can't offer you more time, but unfortunately we're kind of short handed today," Jess said casually as they walked towards Truncheon together, "Matt's out and we've got a ton of shit going on, and being a three man operation works far more effectively when you actually have three men."

"I could help out," Rory offered quietly, "It's not like I have any real plans today."

"So just stopped in Philadelphia for the cheesesteak then?" Jess asked, trying to keep his voice level and his confusion hidden.

"Do I always have to have a plan?"

Jess stopped dead in the middle of the road. "Alright, what the hell is going on?" he snapped, turning to Rory, grabbing her by the arm, and dragging her across to the other side of the street.

"What are you doing?" Rory asked, her voice high and amusingly similar to the way she sounded during the sprinkler incident of the early years.

He pulled her to the side and didn't let go of her arm, boring into her eyes with his. "Rory, you just implied a lack of interest in planning. Now for most people that's common sense, but for you it's a sign of hysteria."

"Oh geez," Rory tried to brush him off and continue, but he didn't let go.

"Don't give me that shit. Something is going on with you," Jess said, "You're spending random weekends in Philadelphia, offered to work at my bookstore, and have given up your interest in lists. Just tell me what's happening."

"Nothing is happening!" Rory turned, finally meeting his gaze. Her eyes were blazing with anger. "Not a goddamn thing. And if there were a goddamned thing, did it ever occur to you that maybe I didn't come here to talk about it? If I wanted to be lectured for my lack of interest in sharing, I would've gone to Star's Hollow."

Jess stood in amazement. "Rory," he said, his voice low, "I'm sorry for getting on your case. I didn't mean to upset you. Look, you wanna work at Truncheon the rest of the day? We can arrange that. I'll yell things at you in a foreign language as you take down the Sanders table." Seeing the uncertainty in her eyes, he continued, "We could really use the help. Seriously. You don't have to talk. But I really wouldn't mind you sticking around this weekend."

"I don't have anywhere to stay," Rory mumbled, not meeting his eye, "I didn't book a hotel. And I have work tomorrow."

"Well it seems to me you're looking a little green," Jess smirked, feeling her forehead, "Feeling okay, Ms. Gilmore? You feel warm. You should rest."

"Again, I lack any sort of lodging," Rory said, starting to regain some composure, "Nowhere to rest."

"You should've started with the pizza," Rory cracked, finally smiling for real.
Chapter 17

When they walked back into Truncheon, Jess pulled Rory aside. Lowering his voice, he said, "Let me talk to Chris first. He can get a little pissed off when things don't go according to plan. Not quite as mellow as I am." At that Rory smiled again, though this time it was obvious she understood what was going on.

"Look, if it's gonna be a big deal, I can just go back home. I really don't want to make things even more stressful," Rory said, looking him in the eye purposefully. He knew she didn't want to make things hard for him. But his desire to figure out what was up with her, or just give her a chance to get away from whatever was obviously bothering her overpowered the fact that he knew exactly how Chris would react.

"It'll be fine. He needs to learn to chill anyway and we could really use another pair of hands," Jess said, meeting her gaze definitively, "So it's decided. You'll stay. I'll go talk to Chris, go get your stuff or whatever you have and head upstairs. It's unlocked, put your stuff on the bed with the navy bedspread and I'll be up in a minute." She nodded and they walked in their separate directions.

Jess sighed as he turned the door to the office open. "Don't you dare tell me that you're taking the night off, because I can't take that shit today," Chris said, not even looking up from his screen.

"Actually, it's worse," Jess replied, sitting down, "I'm working. And I got us another pair of hands." At that, Chris looked up.

"No."

"You don't even know her!" Jess countered in frustration, "Seriously, you've never had a conversation with the girl. And I'm not gonna hash this out with you right now. She's upstairs, she's staying the weekend, in the other bed, in case you were going to pry, and she just needs an out right now. We've all been there. That's why I fucking work with you guys. You get what it's like to have to get away from what you were and are, and she needs that for the weekend. I can't explain why, I don't know what the fuck is going on, but I'm not in love with her and I'm not trying to get back together with her, I just want you to be civil to her tonight while she helps us handle the shitshow that has become our day and either be polite or avoid her the rest of the weekend. I don't ask a lot from you, ever. Can you just do this? Please?"

Chris looked at Jess for what seemed like hours. Finally, he shook his head in resignation. "Fine," Chris assented, "But if it's more than the weekend…"

"Just deal with the weekend. That's all it is," Jess responded, standing up and walking out the door, "Thanks, Chris. I really appreciate this"

"You owe me!" Chris called as Jess started walking towards the stairs.

As Jess reached the door, he paused for a minute. What was he doing? This girl had treated him like shit, for years now. She hadn't done anything for him beyond affirming some of the good things she'd done so long ago. And things were different then. Something was so much different about Rory then than it was now. He couldn't place it. She was clearly driven, with her career success, and was no longer aimlessly ambling around, doing insane things like stealing boats and joining the DAR. She talked to her mother. From what he heard, all was well. But her eyes told a different story. So did the fact that she hadn't been going to Stars Hollow, and that she even wanted to take a day off work. But mainly it was her eyes. Something in the way she looked at him was uncertain and unclear.
and as well as he knew her he knew it meant something was wrong, and he didn't know what. With that thought, he opened the door, realizing that maybe he'd have to save her more than just the once.

"Hey," he said casually, glancing towards Rory, who was sifting through his bookshelves, "Should've known you'd be pilfering."

"I wanted to see if you kept The Holy Barbarians," she responded, not taking her eyes away from the bookcase, "But I can't find it."

"I never owned it," he said, walking towards her and starting to peruse the volumes, "I borrowed yours."

"Oh, yeah," Rory replied awkwardly, "I forgot. Sorry. It's been a while."

"Don't stress about it," Jess quietly answered, "It's been a long time. Anyway, we should head down. I'm gonna be putting you to work today for real. We need a lot of labor, and it might not be fun."

"It'll just be nice to have a change," Rory responded in a voice so quiet he could barely hear her. She walked out the door, him following close behind.

An hour later, Jess was helping customers, Rory was making phone calls, and Chris was handling the events. Rory fell naturally into the business end of things, coming off professional but friendly, and dealing with people effectively.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Jess asked, unable to stop himself, "I didn't think that reporters did a lot of this kind of thing." At that, Rory's face fell slightly, but she quickly composed herself.

"My mom," she said, the smile returning to her face, "She's always been amazing with business. And I worked at the Independence Inn after school once in a while in high school."

"Doesn't surprise me," Jess replied. He quickly adjusted his answer when he saw the shock on Rory's face, "I mean, she owns an inn and when you showed up in New York, you missed her graduation from business school. It seems like common sense to say business is her thing."

"Have you seen Luke lately?" Rory changed the subject as she sent off another email.

"Once in a while," Jess said. For some reason, he decided in that moment not to tell Rory about his peace with Lorelai. It just wasn't time.
Chapter 18

The next morning, Jess awoke at 8:00 AM, expecting to see Rory up and working, coffee in hand, or at least reading the book or a paper. But as he rolled over and rubbed his eyes, he saw that she was still lying in the other bed, completely asleep. To her credit, she'd fallen asleep on a book, one of his actually. The Holy Barbarians. He grinned. She must have found it when he was asleep, realizing that of course he never returned it to her and probably left notes in the margins. Which he had. Torn between pleasant nostalgia and a growing sense of concern, Jess decided that the safest answer either way was to make coffee, both for himself and for the woman who was causing all of this confusion.

A few minutes later, he turned on the radio, the Smiths resonating throughout the apartment. Rory jolted straight up and rubbed her eyes. After a few minutes of moaning and groaning which Jess completely ignored (only way to deal with the Gilmore insanity at times), she turned to him. "Not the Clash? Really?"

"Figured that might be taking us back a bit too far. Don't you agree?" he cocked his eyebrow, and the tiniest hint of a flush rose above her cheekbones.

"Um…do you have…"

"Coffee?" Jess held out the second mug to her, "Teeth-rotting, body-shortening and lethal, just the way you like it."

"Those might be my favorite words, and I've read Adrienne Rich," Rory said, taking the mug gratefully and gulping from it with no air or sense of propriety of any kind.

He had always loved how unaffected she was. Even though a lot of the people around the town saw her as prim and proper, and to some extent she was, he loved how she never put on airs. At least she didn't with him. She never seemed to panic about how she looked or what people thought of the way she carried herself when he was there. She didn't try to impress anybody. She just let it be. Even this much later, it was one of the sexiest things in the world to him. Diverting his mind quickly, he turned back to her. "Alright, well it's another crazy morning, if you're willing to help, but there's not much going on tonight so I'm thinking maybe we take off, grab some food, piss off a waitress and confuse her with some marginally obscure pop culture references. Sound like a plan?"

Rory grinned. "Only if there's three separate instances of coffee inserted into the itinerary, not including the meal location. But yeah, other than the caffeine deprivation that sounds great."

"Addict."

"God." Rory took her mug with her and continued to smile as she went to gather some clothes.

A half an hour later, Rory appeared downstairs to help. "Where's…"

"Gave him the day off," Jess replied, not looking at Rory but rather focusing on balancing a particularly stubborn stack of books, "He looked like he felt like crap still. And the other's off but it's a slow day for us. We should be fine."

Finally looking up, Jess felt a brief jolt. Rory was wearing a black tee shirt, black skinny jeans, and black converse. Her hair was loose and flowing around her face, and her eyes enhanced but otherwise bare of makeup. Struggling for a minute to reconcile his feelings of being worried with those of his visceral reaction to her looking so simple, relaxed, hot…
"Jess?" Rory asked, trying not to smile, "It is okay that I borrowed your shirt, right? I'm sorry, I just left mine at home."

"Are you seeing someone?" Jess asked, unable to stop himself anymore. It was his goddamned shirt. And it didn't matter whether she stayed or left or was or wasn't because she wasn't the same and something was wrong and that was what mattered right now. But some very weak, quiet part of him let out the strange, brave sound of the question he heard leaving his lips. He sighed, and turned away, continuing to stack books.

"No," Rory said, quietly, "I know you know about Logan through Luke. So I thought he would know that I was single."

"Rory, we aren't in high school anymore. There are some things even you don't tell your mother, especially right now, and it doesn't take a genius to see that," Jess responded, snapping a bit. Composing himself, he continued, "I mean, it doesn't matter either way but I just don't really feel like dealing with another Logan Huntzberger who's gonna scream at me for letting you shelve books or something."

"Fair opinion," Rory nodded, "But what about you? Who are you entangled with?"

"I'm not," Jess answered, his eyes not leaving the work, "Seriously. I'm at work all the time, and if I'm not I'm either with Luke or writing. I don't have any time."

"Me either," Rory nodded in agreement, stacking more books, "I am always going somewhere, never staying still, I can barely get a date and still now I actually cannot plan the few dates I get because I'm not around."

"I don't believe for a second that you can 'barely get a date.'" Jess said, looking her up and down slowly. This time she blushed red. His eyes hungering, Jess realized he needed to regain his sense of control.

"You've always been attractive, Ror, and you know that. You don't need to fish for compliments with me, I'm a member of the handout school," Jess joked.

Rory laughed. "Of course you are!" she cracked, "Anyway, let me know what else I can do after I finish these shelves."

"You're going really quickly," Jess said, impressed, "Like twice the speed he does."

"Well, let's just say I've had more practice," Rory smiled cunningly, and carried off another stack of books.
Chapter 19

After a long morning of list-making and phone calls, Jess was ready to take a break. Unsurprisingly, Rory was not.

"But Jess!" she insisted, as he dragged her out of Truncheon, "If you would just itemize the new release inventory according to author name rather than chronology your practical implementation would match your stated mission."

"Coffee. Now." Jess glared daggers at her until she relented, following him out the doors of Truncheon and onto the Philadelphia streets.

"So explain to me why you're suddenly so fascinated with the bookstore," Jess looked at Rory, meeting her eyes purposefully, "And also suddenly willing to take unplanned time off work."

"Jess, it's like you said last night. We're not kids anymore," Rory said, refusing to hold his gaze, but her voice growing stronger, "I don't tell everyone everything and have the same crazy perfectionist need to be working all the time and do everything perfectly. It's a part of maturing to calm down and level out, right?"

Jess looked at her doubtfully. "Rory, you're insisting that I change the way I stock my inventory so it better reflects the character of my business. Trust me, I can say without a doubt in my mind that your obsessive tendencies have not yet been completely obliterated. And you're right that you don't talk to your mom as much, but is that such a good thing? Your thing with her was always an important part to you."

"I don't remember you caring so much about my relationship with her when she was accusing you of being a thief, and worse things," Rory defended harshly, her muscles visibly tensing, "Since when do you care about that?"

"It's not about her," Jess corrected quickly, still determined not to bring up the recent progress in that area, lest Rory get the wrong idea, "It's just that I always liked you and whether or not I liked her, she was a part of the package. You're not just the girl, you're the girl and the mom and the grandparents and you have to either take everything or you end up like Louie."

Rory stared at him blankly. "Jess, I make about 40 pop culture references an hour and I still couldn't follow a word of that. Are you on something? Did you sneak an extra cup of coffee when I wasn't looking?"

"Only two," Jess smirked, earning a laugh from her, "You know what? Never mind. It's good for you to relax. I just hope you know that if you want to talk about anything I'm around."

"Why?" Rory asked quietly, "We aren't really friends. We can't be, after the way I was to you. Can we?"

Jess sighed, slowing down and turning towards her. "Rory, this is kind of a heavy conversation to have on the way to lunch."

"Well then let's head to a bookstore."

"Fair point, but I didn't think we were really going to address it. At least not yet," Jess replied.

"Why not?" Rory inquired, "You don't want to? Or think it's necessary?"
"Honestly, Rory, I don't know shit right now," Jess admitted, closing his eyes in exasperation, "I don't know why you keep coming here. I don't know what's going on with you. I don't know why you waited so long to come see me after everything happened and I don't know why you chose to at all. I am completely fucking lost as to what's going on in your head, and my ability to process those things is not aided by your strange new tendencies towards sleeping in and wearing all black and being relaxed and not giving a shit about some things. Not that there's anything wrong with those changes, but for someone with no actual background or understanding of what the hell is going on in your life or more importantly in your head, it can be a little challenging. So I was kind of planning to go with the flow until an opportunity organically presented itself to address just one of those many issues."

"If it bothers you, I can stop coming," Rory said, quietly, after a moment of silence, "I don't mean to mess with your head or anything. That is not at all what I'm here to do. And I'm sorry that I'm acting differently than you find normal or are comfortable with, but this is just how I am right now. I can't change that. But I can change the hanging out here thing. I don't know really why I'm here either. I just...am."

They walked into a small coffee shop type of place. After ordering their coffees, Jess exhaled and turned to Rory.

"I don't want you to stop coming here," Jess said, knowing that it was the truth and that it was time to be clear about it, "There are challenges. But whatever they are or aren't, on your end or mine, you were an important part of my life. You probably will be." At Rory's questioning look, he added, "Luke. Either way, you're someone who means something to me, and whatever shitty things either of us have done in the past, are done. I'm not saying we can be friends, or that it'll work out, or even that it will be comfortable or happy. You're right about the guys, you know they hate you and I'm not gonna lie and tell you any different. And they, amongst others, might think this is a romantic thing rather than an attempt to reconnect as friends. There is going to be criticism. And not just of me."

"I can take it if you can," Rory said, raising her eyes to meet his, "Jess, there are some things that I don't get and don't know but I keep coming here for a reason, and right now that's enough for me to think it's a good idea to keep doing it. Does that sound crazy?"

"For the girl I knew in Star's Hollow, yes," Jess answered truthfully, "But for me, and for whatever the hell she's become now, not in the slightest."

Rory grinned and he smirked. He knew this choice was going to cost him. He knew a lot of people would be confused and pissed and he himself was a little bit of both. But he meant it when he said that Rory was an important part of his life, even if it wasn't in the same way now. And he could see something wrong with her that apparently the others hadn't yet picked up on. That alone was enough to convince him that she needed to keep coming back, so he could make sure she was okay or at least help her out when she figured out she wasn't and that she'd have to face whatever the hell it was rather than avoiding it. Rory would need somewhere to turn, and for once Jess had a place that wasn't going anywhere.
The next morning Rory left without incident and Jess was grateful. Not for her leaving as much as for the chance to think about the situation in peace.

He wasn't doing this because he was in love with her. Or because she deserved it. Truthfully, she didn't, and she knew it as well as he did, but this wasn't a matter of him doing her a favor out of affection or nostalgia either. He just felt compelled to be there for her. Not indebted because of the times she believed in him when no one else did, when he wasn't mature enough or ready enough to deal with things yet, but because he knew he was the only one with a real shot of seeing what was happening.

No offense intended to Luke or Lorelai, but if Rory had an internal problem (as he expected this was, based on her behavior), they may notice but they might not. And even if they did, would Rory really go to them? One would think she'd go to Lorelai, but since college started, things had been different. Maybe even before. She went to Lorelai with problems she knew Lorelai could solve, and had realized the limitations of her mother's help. It also seemed like maybe she wasn't interested in it for the most part. No one was able to talk Rory out of her grandparent's house except for Jess, as close as Luke and Lorelai came at the party just by their presence. And she didn't want to talk to her mother about most things of real internal importance. Rory had grown out of that instinct, which made sense given her mother's tendency to not understand the way Rory's mind worked. (To no fault of Lorelai's, that girl's brain would have been a mystery to Kafka).

Believe it or not, Jess secretly believed that she probably would have gone to Luke about serious things before Lorelai. She went to Luke when Jess had left town, and during the separation he called Luke rather than her mother, and never really had the same emotional block with him during that time that she did with her mother. Luke was the father that was understanding, soft and kind, as well as being a rock. Jess knew that about him, and he knew Rory was supremely aware of it. But Luke hadn't noticed anything was wrong with Rory, and it seemed pretty damn apparent she wasn't in a talking mood.

No, Jess was the only one who saw that the Rory on the surface wasn't right. Something was going on, but he knew it wasn't something she was just going to tell him immediately. It had probably taken her some time mentally to even get herself to Philadelphia. She had to know that he would see it in her, the off-ness that was so characteristic of her now. It wasn't a difference of maturity, because he could see how maturity had changed her. The relaxation was at least partially a product of that, the ability to sleep and to breathe and to spend ten minutes without making a list. Part of it was strange but some of that was natural and made sense to have changed. The fact that she wasn't constantly calling her mother would be another hallmark of maturity. But the fact that she hadn't visited Star's Hollow in as long as it had been concerned him. The fact that she called Lorelai less often wasn't concerning, but it worried him that she didn't really seem to call at all. She'd called once that weekend, prompted by Jess's question about when they'd last spoken and her admission that she couldn't remember. She sounded peppy, quirky, reference-spouting and bantering as usual, but when he'd looked up, he realized she wasn't smiling. She hadn't once the whole time. There was a flatness in her tone as she said those things, especially when Lorelai was asking questions about her life. She hadn't mentioned being in Philadelphia until the end, at which point Jess was grateful that it appeared Lorelai did not mention his visit to Star's Hollow. After getting off the phone, she'd acted like everything was normal and about dinner. But he'd seen the same uncertainty and, was it exasperation?, that he'd been seeing since she'd come back into his life.

He really didn't have the time to analyze this. Work was crazy and his two business partners were
likely to be highly displeased to find out about Rory's open invitation. He might actually have to work on it a bit with them, especially considering how unsuccessful his previous attempts had been. It was just hard because there really wasn't a good way to justify her behavior. And Rory wasn't used to being disliked. He could see from a mile away what a pain in the ass this was going to be. Sighing, he headed downstairs to talk to Chris.

"Hey," he said, pushing open the office door, "How's it going?"

"Better than expected," Chris admitted, turning to Jess, "You know how much it pains me to say it but that extra body was pretty damn helpful. Annoying OCD tendencies with all the lists and sticky notes though."

"That's actually what I wanted to talk to you about," Jess said.

"Oh no," Chris said, immediately stopping his work and looking at Jess, "You guys didn't…"

"No!" Jess exclaimed, a very slight flush appearing on his cheekbones, "God, no, it's not like that."

"Thank god," Chris said, "I mean, no offense, but that would've been stupid as fuck for you to…"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. Can we move on now?" Jess interrupted in frustration.

"Alright, angsty," Chris smirked, "What's on your precious little mind then?"

"I told Rory she could come back."

"For how long?"

"Open invitation."

"And why the hell would you do something like that?"

"No one else can and she needs someone to."

"Bullshit. Why can't someone else? Unless she's starving or out of work or has a scary boyfriend… wait, is she seeing anyone?"

"Why, you interested?" Jess smirked, unable to help himself, "But no, she isn't. Me included. This is just something I need to do. And I know it's a lot of shit to ask you to put up with, but let's be serious for a second. She was here helping out all weekend and was she once anything less than kind to either of us?"

"That comment about the Beats made me want to roast her over a fire like a pig."

"Well, besides your Lord of the Flies tendencies, which are totally justified in that situation, I'll admit, do you have any rational reasons to be so stubbornly against her after this? It's been years, Chris. All I'm asking is for you to give it a shot."

Chris inhaled deeply and sighed. "Fine," he said grudgingly, "But you know we're all only putting up with this because you put up with our shit, right?"

"And I will continue to," Jess grinned, "In fact, I'll even wingman for you with those twins at the bar tonight."

"Really?" Chris' face perked up and Jess laughed.
"God no, you have no chance in hell. But the redhead might be a possibility." He clasped his arm around Chris' shoulder and they walked out of the office.
About three weeks later, Jess found himself restless. Of course he'd been used to a solitary life for a long time, but for some reason the recent stream of visits had inspired in him a certain desire to have his routine interrupted, to sacrifice a little of himself more often. In the past, when he had on rare occasion suffered this same impulse, he had talked himself out of scratching the itch, either by concerning himself with productiveness or by assuming the same of those he was interested in seeing. However, something about the empty bed sitting in his room every night made him realize that maybe those people wanted to be there too, if only they were asked. Staring at that bed, Jess sighed and picked up the phone.

"Hello?" answered the gruff, familiar voice.

"Hey," Jess said monosyllabically, mentally punching himself for the nerves.

"Jess!" Luke recognized, "How's it going?"

"Alright," Jess said. Add a word, goddamnit. "Actually, pretty well. Work's good, so things are good."


"I see you have company."

"Impressive vision. What's going on, Jess?"

"I just didn't know if you guys were free this weekend. Tell her I say hi by the way, and also that more than two cups of coffee after 8 PM will turn her into something resembling Dr. Frankenfurter by 11."

"Let me check on both counts." Jess heard Lorelai's laughter ringing across, and then her surprised response.

"Um, no, I mean, I don't think so. Even the inn is pretty empty this weekend," Lorelai admitted.

"Apparently we're free," Luke returned to the phone.

"Well, if you feel like it," Jess said slowly, "There's not much going on here either. You could visit. I'd say I could come there but I do have one author meeting on Saturday morning I can't miss."


"Great," Jess said, "I'll see you on Friday then."

"Oh, wait," Luke cut him off, "She wants to talk to you."

"What?" Jess said, but before he could ask why, the phone was being passed.

"Um, hi, Jess." "Lorelai."

"I just wanted to see if, well, what…" Lorelai sighed.
"You talked to Rory," Jess finished.

"Yeah," Lorelai answered quietly, "And it's not that I don't trust you, I just wanted to…"

"I don't know much more than you do about why she came or what the deal is, but as far as I'm concerned she's a platonic friend with an open invitation. And that's about all I can give you. Sorry."

"No, that's actually…helpful. Thanks," Lorelai said, clearly holding herself back from asking more. Impressive. Lorelai trying to develop self-control. Perhaps there was hope for humanity yet.

"Not a problem," Jess said, "So you're cool with this weekend?"

"Definitely," Lorelai replied, "But if you'd rather it just be Luke, that's completely…"

"No," Jess cut her off, "You're always welcome here. Plus, I'm gonna need some help getting him to fix some of the shelves at Truncheon."

"So you're really just having me visit in order to double your powers of persuasion?"

"You're a Gilmore. Quadruple."

"Fair point. I'll bring the big guns."

"And I'll provide the coffee."

"God, who knew you could be this likeable?"

"And how many hours ago did you receive that concussion?"

"Goodnight, Jess."

Hanging up the phone, Jess smiled. A couple years ago, he never would have expected his life to work out this way. Even during the best moments he was always just waiting for the other shoe to drop. When he was with Rory, it was in his mind a question of how long he could live in this Twilight Zone of bliss before something tore it apart, tore her away from him, or more likely, tore him away from her. Even when he and Luke had a good relationship going, Jess half-expected it to fall apart the second something changed, anything changed. Luke's engagement, future marriage, he was certain those types of things would derail whatever the hell is was they had going and that he'd end up like one of his parents before his mid-twenties. He felt the most authentic (though unhappy) when he was living in the worst times. That cramped apartment with the random guys that he was crashing in post-Jimmy, pre-self-help-books. The days in New York with Liz and her myriad boyfriends. The days where he didn't even have one singular place he was sleeping.

Now it felt normal, natural even, to have family and to call on them. To want to. True, he lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment above his workplace and was, in the most colloquial sense of the word, alone, but he felt less lonely than he had in the past. He'd learned pretty early on that having a warm body lying in bed next to you didn't mean you mattered to someone. And now he did.

Maybe one day he'd get the other parts of the program. Someone to share this feeling of contentment with, safety, home, whatever it was that he was experiencing in its totality for the first time in his life. Maybe he'd actually make a home with someone, a real house even, with entire walls dedicated to books. Sharing libraries, now to him, that was marriage. But for now the thought of who wasn't with him was not dominating his mind.

He'd worked hard to build this life, based on the beautiful, pure, self-evident truth revealed to him by
one of the most important characters in the novel of his life. And that lesson had driven him since.
You could see it in the way that he built up Truncheon and in the novels that he advocated for, as
well as in the writing he did on his own. It was the divine simplicity of the revolutionary parts of his
life that dictated his current path. He could do more, he could be more, he was more. Later, stronger,
he had added something of his own, "I deserve more." He would always be grateful to the person
who helped him find this path, find his way, and he hoped to be there for her, strong for her when it
was so clear that something in her had weakened.

But for tonight he would read another one of his books, scrawling in the margins notes that maybe
no one would ever read, but that mattered now. And later he would fall asleep to the sounds of the
city, radiating warmth and life into the small sanctuary he had made for himself in this fucked up
world.
Chapter 22

Later that week, Jess received another call from Lorelai. Lord have mercy.

"Jess? It's Lorelai," the voice on the other side of the phone exclaimed in a slight panic.

"Yeah, I kinda figured it wasn't Luke since it's 2 in the morning. Is everything okay?" he groaned, confused and annoyed.

"No! I mean, maybe, I don't know. Um…"

"Lorelai, if you do not get to the point I am going to burn this bed and make you and Luke sleep on the floor when you get here," Jess growled.

"Clearly you did not become any more cheerful," Lorelai mumbled, "Alright, fine. It's really inappropriate and weird for me to be asking you this but Rory's out of town for work and I haven't heard from her. At all. I mean, it's not like we have a set schedule but it's been about five days and I haven't heard anything and I'm just worried."

"Have you tried calling her?" Jess said, rubbing his eyes and stretching.

"Yes, twice," Lorelai replied, "No answer. I left messages. But it's not unusual for her to get busy and not check them. She does that sometimes. It's not like we…"

"Alright, I'm getting the picture," Jess cut her off before she could get too personal, "Look, you said Rory's out of town on business. I'd assume she's busy. You said she goes on trips like this somewhat regularly, and that she's often too busy to check her messages. And that you guys don't have the constant separation-anxiety level of communication that you used to. All correct?"

"Yes," Lorelai said, her voice slowing down, "But…"

"Then I wouldn't worry," Jess said, "I know why you're calling and I'm sorry, I haven't heard from her either. But it's Rory. She's smart, I'm sure she's safe, and if by the end of the weekend you haven't heard from her I'll be the captain of your rescue party, no questions asked, no complaints issued. But give her some time. It's the weekdays, they have to be crazy for her, and I'm sure things will cool down and you'll hear from her soon. She probably just got caught up. Okay?"

"Alright," Lorelai exhaled deeply. He could hear the worry in her voice subsiding only slightly. "Sorry for bothering you."

"Anytime, really," Jess assured her, "It was nothing. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you then," Lorelai answered.

Jess laid back down in the bed, his head beginning to ache. Dear God, Rory. It wasn't like Jess was unfamiliar with the not-being-interested-in-communicating-with-one's-mother mentality, but this was Rory. To not even send a text or something about the messages? In truth, Jess was worried. Just not in the way Lorelai was.

Jess was one hundred percent certain she was safe. If Rory wasn't safe, he'd know. He couldn't explain it, but he had this sense about her where he knew that if something was really wrong, he'd know and he'd be there. This wasn't like that. She was purposefully ignoring her mother, wanting some room to breathe, some air, some space. But how much space did she need? Why did she need
space from Lorelai and Luke and the people who were a part of her life now, but she felt that she needed less space from Jess, who hadn't been an active part of her life in years? Why him? He knew that she felt understood by him in a way that she didn't by the others but she wasn't coming to him with anything. It seemed almost like she was biding time, skating by, and he didn't get it.

What did Jess know about Rory? At some point he would have said everything. In the literary sense, of course. He knew the bray of her heart, the words that were echoing in her head at most moments, her most shameful hidden parts of herself and her most exalted inner triumphs. Today, he knew what all those things had been, and he knew a lot of what could be. He was lacking in what was. He knew that she was devoured by some sort of uncertainty, because it clouded her eyes at nearly every glance, and that avoidance was her current mechanism of coping. Jess of all people was very familiar with both of those things. But didn't she get better?

He thought back to the scene outside the restaurant, where he yelled at her and looked down on her and scolded her and goddamn rightfully so. He remembered leaving her with a pearl of what had been, what could be, the idea of what she really deserved and needed and wanted, not as told by anyone else but by her own heart and mind. But what had she said to him, all that time? Only "I don't know". And when she had come to Truncheon and kissed him, under the false pretenses that had made him so angry that he worried Matt and Chris out of their skin for the next sixth months with his rage. What type of person would do such a thing? Not Rory Gilmore, not the girl with the iridescent eyes and the achingly kind voice that he had fallen so deeply for in the middle of his own purgatory.

She had said that everything was fixed. He needed her to, before anything could happen. It was the catalyst, because no matter how much he may have loved her she needed to sort herself out, fall back into herself or grow into who she'd be, whatever the case was, in order for them to truly have a shot. He'd known that. And she'd affirmed to him, sweetly, that it was done.

Or was it simpering? Was it true? Was it fixed? Truth be told Jess knew only a small amount of what was wrong with her at the time. He'd known she fought with her mom, left Yale, moved in with her grandparents, dated some jackass, and had basically given up on everything. He still didn't know all the "why" about it, feeling that it wasn't his place to ask. He knew that not long after his visit, she'd gone back to Star's Hollow, made up with her mom, re-enrolled at Yale, and left a lot of her grandparent's lifestyle behind. To most people that would seem like the whole story. But Rory was complicated.

He needed to know, he decided. He had to find out why she'd done everything, what had happened, to fill in the gaps. At least enough to try to figure out what was going on. When did the fall start? How far did it go? How ugly did her life get? Some of it wouldn't be easy. Jess had always seem her as perfection, the muse rather than the flawed counterpart. But they were older and despite uncertainty about what would come of it Jess knew that he needed to be the one to do this, that he was the only one that would, or could.

Of course, he'd start where he always did when he needed to find the answers. Getting out of bed, he walked over to his bookshelves, and pulled out an old, worn copy of Howl.

"The weight of the world is love.

Under the burden of solitude,

under the burden of dissatisfaction

the weight, the weight we carry is love."
Chapter 23

The next day, when Lorelai and Luke arrived, Jess was actually prepared to have them. The room was all set up, he had the dinner place planned, and work was basically covered. He knew that it would be best if things went smoothly, especially considering Lorelai's anticipated stress level (which, of course, would also have a direct bearing on Luke's stress level).

At about 6 PM they pulled up and parked in front of Truncheon, the pearl-colored Jeep sticking out like a sore thumb around all of the black cars filling the street Jess walked outside and grimaced.

"See you brought your car this time," he looked at Lorelai disapprovingly, who grinned.

"Well she just got so lonely at home last time! Isn't that right…"

"Alright, we get it. You can stop talking to your car now," Luke grumbled, "So are you gonna help me bring this junk in or what?"

Jess walked down and quickly grabbed two of the bags from his uncle.

"Geez, how long are you guys staying? I know I said you're always welcome but I was kind of hoping you weren't planning on us being roomies."

"Don't be a smartass," Luke snapped, "Let's just get these upstairs."

"Alright, already, no need to get testy," Jess smirked, trying to quell the tension clearly evident in his uncle's mood. "Lorelai, why don't you go get some coffee while we do this? There's a great place at the corner and if you ask nicely they might even make it for you without water or air."

"No need to tell me twice," Lorelai replied, grabbing her bag and heading down the street, "Oh, um…want anything?"

"Sure," Jess said, not having the mental energy to act awkwardly, "Medium black coffee if you have the hands."

"Tea," Luke grunted, pushing his way through the door, "Chamomille."

"Alright," Lorelai said, looking uneasily at her fiancée and his nephew, "I'll be back to you two cheery men in a bit."

"Take your time," Luke sighed under his breath, and Jess shook his head gently, holding the door open and letting his uncle into Truncheon.

"So, Uncle Luke, maybe it's just that genius quality I get from reading all those fancy books, but something tells me your day isn't resembling a spa retreat," Jess said, as they finished putting all the bags in the room, "Need a sounding board?"

"I need less sounds and more bored," Luke replied, as characteristically oblivious as ever. Jess looked at him pointedly.

"Oh! You meant…aghhh," Luke plopped down on the bed, "I'm sorry. It's been a rough week."

"Lorelai?"

"Rory."
"You've heard from her?" Jess said incredulously, "Why wouldn't you tell Lorelai?"

"No, I haven't heard from her, you dumbass," Luke responded in annoyance, "That's the problem! No one has!"

"Look, calm down," Jess lowered his voice, "I wouldn't worry too much about it. When Rory's ready she'll talk."


"That bad, huh?"

"Worse," Luke affirmed, getting up and straightening things out around the apartment, "Everyone knew it was awful but no one really saw how bad it was for Lorelai. I mean, we were engaged and she couldn't be happy, really happy, for a single day. She thought she was a bad mother."

"Just because Rory dropped out?" Jess asked, confused, "That has nothing to do with Lorelai. She must have been as confused as everyone."

"How many people dropped you on your head as a baby?" Luke answered in frustration, "There was no confusion! Never any confusion. We all knew exactly why she did what she did. She knew, I knew, you knew."

"Knew what?!" Jess thundered, finally unable to keep his voice level anymore, "I have no goddamned idea what you're talking about."

"Wait, she really never told you?" Luke's voice became quiet, "You? Of all people?"

"We hadn't talked in years! Our most recent contact had been an ill-fated attempt to bring about some crazy runaway Fast Car scenario that she promptly rejected. What would possess her to tell me anything?!"


"Regardless of what you think, she didn't. So if you want my help you might as well let me in on what happened."


"You remember that blonde jackass she dated?"

"Yes. Obsessed with length. Go on."

"His father is the Rockefeller of the newspaper world. She got an internship at one of his papers and he told her she didn't have it."

Jess sat silently, processing.

"She and the blonde kid stole a boat right after. Rory dropped out of Yale, and then they made up somehow."

"Somehow."

"But you're caught up. It was months of no Rory, then a Rory I barely recognized, then the triumphant return, but those weeks were some of the worst I've ever seen of Lorelai."
"Wow," Jess exhaled.

"So, based on that information, do you have any freaking idea what she could be doing?"

"A few. But all of them necessitate you and Lorelai giving her space."

"It can't happen again, Jess. Lorelai can't do it. I can't do it. We can't do it. And right now, things are really..."

"They seem it."

"Just...if you..." Luke started hesitantly.

"I will."

"Will what?" Lorelai grinned, bouncing into the room with coffee.

"Why hello, energizer bunny," Jess smirked, taking his, "Thanks for the caffeine. I'm guessing you started yours on the way here?"

"Better. I had a travel coffee and a Truncheon coffee. That place has really good coffee," Lorelai rambled, "You know, I bet Rory would..." Her voice tapered off, her smile faltering. Jess sighed deeply.

"Lorelai, when is she supposed to come home?"

"Tomorrow," Lorelai answered slowly, "But I'm sure it'll all be..."

"It is, I'm sure. Don't worry about it," Jess reassured quietly, "If you don't hear from her by then, I'll try my luck. Happy?"

"Better," Lorelai offered a weak smile. It morphed into a grin. "It could become an actual happy if I get to hear your attempted explanation for the expansive sci-fi section I saw downstairs."

"Well I had to give Uncle Luke something to read, didn't I?" Jess smirked, earning a light smack on the arm from his uncle.

"You should sell the T-shirts. Then it'd be perfect," Lorelai laughed wildly.

"You'd really date a guy in a Star Trek t-shirt?" Jess asked doubtfully, a grin playing at the corners of his mouth.

"No, but I'd accompany him to Comi-Con to find my replacement."

"Seems fair."

"I like to think so."

"And on that note, I need some air," Luke rolled his eyes, and the troublemakers followed him, taking turns mocking his questionable hobbies.
The next day, Jess, Lorelai and Luke decided to get coffee at the corner shop before deciding how to spend the day.

"You know, I had a plan," Jess grumbled.

"Yes, and your plan may be perfectly acceptable," Lorelai retorted, a smile on her face, "But I will not have any appreciation for it until there is caffeine in my system. If you told me right now that the plan included a historical fiction book tour…"


"I'd probably be okay with that," Lorelai finished, "So I'm sure you see why caffeine is necessary."

"Absolutely," Jess rolled his eyes.

"Hey, if I don't get coffee, you don't get coffee," Lorelai warned. Jess turned around and narrowed his eyes.

"I really hate it when you make sense."

"And you love it when I…?"

"Fair point."

They walked into the coffee shop and placed their orders, including breakfast.


"Why'd you finally do it?"


"What a surprise," he grumbled. Turning his attention to Lorelai, who was inhaling her coffee, he said, "You're going to go into cardiac arrest."

"If drinking coffee is a crime…"

"I give up," Luke relented, putting his hands in the air and then picking up his tea. Sipping it, he turned to Jess again. "So anything new at work?"

"Not really," Jess answered casually, "A couple people I'm interested in but we'll see what comes of it."

"He didn't ask about your personal life," Lorelai teased, earning a simultaneous glare from Luke and Jess, "Which…oohkayy, is definitely a sensitive topic. Mental note. Anyway, that sounds like good news."

"Could be," Jess shrugged, "Don't want to get attached in case it falls through."

"You're making it way too easy," Lorelai chortled, and with that Luke and Jess proceeded to ignore
her for the next half hour.

As they walked out, Luke and Jess continued on as though Lorelai weren't still trying to break what they had going.

"So anything new at the diner?"

"New special. The town went into shock. Look on Taylor's face was priceless."

"So…"

"Beer-battered chicken strips."

"You're screwing with me."

"Nope. His eyes almost fell out of the sockets. Best part of the whole damn thing." They walked into Truncheon, continuing the conversation.

Suddenly they noticed Lorelai had stopped speaking. Stopped walking too. They turned to see what she was looking at.

"Rory?" Lorelai finally said, approaching her daughter, who was standing awkwardly next to a bookcase. It was clear from the paperback in her hand that she was browsing.

"Mom?" Rory replied incredulously, "What…wait…why are you here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Lorelai answered, folding her arms across her chest, "Where have you been? I haven't heard from you in a week. Is everything okay? Why aren't you in New York?"

"Everything's fine," Rory mumbled, quickly returning the book to its shelf. Then, turning to her mother, a look of realization and indignance spread across her face. "I cannot believe you came here to look for me, just because I didn't call you for a few days! All the way to Philadelphia! And why Philadelphia? Did you really think that I was running away to see Jess? A guy, mom? I don't check my phone for a couple days while I'm out of town on business, and you assume I ran away to Philadelphia to be with my high school boyfriend. Wow."


"And you're visiting Jess with him?" Rory scoffed, "Come on, Mom. Don't act like I'm still a little kid you can buy off with any stupid white lie you come up with. I know that the stove isn't the devil's hands and I know that you're completely exceeding normal behavior for when your kid is, shockingly, a fully functional adult."

Lorelai looked stricken. Even Jess was a little thrown by Rory's level of anger.

"Ror…" Jess started, stepping towards her.

"No!" Rory said, far too loudly. Matt turned and looked at her in confusion. Immediately she lowered her voice and hissed, "I cannot believe this! If I don't call my mother for five days you form a search party?! What is this, the Kim household? Why don't you find a bible and I'll go look for some drums and we can reenact some of the worst parenting Stars Hollow's ever seen?"

"Rory, it's not like that," Luke said quietly.

"Luke, I'm not mad at you. Please don't get in the middle of this. You either, Jess. This is about
mom," Rory cut him off bitingly, "I don't need to hold your hand all the time. I'm not off stealing a boat or dropping out of school every time I choose not to talk to you! Sometimes, as hard as it may be for you to believe, I just don't want you around."

"And you'd rather come here? To Philadelphia? To see Jess?" Lorelai demanded, tears now stinging her eyes, "Rory, what the hell is going on? I thought we were past you keeping things from me. And even if we weren't, why here?"

"I can breathe here!" Rory exploded again. Noticing the quieting around her, she stormed out of the store. On the street, she continued, "I'm not madly in love with Jess or trying to get back with him or guy obsessed or needy or any of the stupid things I know you'll assume because needing a guy makes you weak. I know you think that, Mom, I learned it from you most of my childhood. And guess what? That's not what I'm here for. I need space and to think and just… to not have you driving me crazy all the time!"

"Rory, this isn't you," Lorelai said, her voice low, following as Rory turned her back and started to walk away.

"You don't know that. You think you know everything about me? How true has that been before, Mom? Did you think your perfect, flawless daughter would ever sleep with a married man? Let's check your past performance in understanding me and realize that maybe you aren't as on point as you think you are. Jess, I'm sorry for coming here unannounced, I had no idea that you entertained my mother, under any circumstances. Given that information, you won't have to worry about it happening again. Luke, sorry you had to see this and everything, and I'm sorry for raising my voice. I'm sure I'll talk to you soon. And Mom?" Rory choked, tears in her eyes by now, pulling away from Lorelai who was trying to put her arm around her daughter, "I love you, but right now, you need to Leave. Me. Alone. I don't want to talk to you or hear from you right now, at all." And with that, Rory walked to the corner and opened the door to her car. She drove away, leaving everyone, especially Jess, frozen from shock in her wake.
"No."

"Jess."

"No. End of discussion."

"But..."

"It's not happening."

Jess walked away from his uncle, leaving the apartment and heading downstairs. Luke followed him.

After Rory's outburst, they'd helped to revive Lorelai to her normal state with some coffee, at which point she said she would really prefer to leave earlier. She and Luke were going to leave in about an hour, and Luke was supposed to be getting their things. But at this point, he was more concerned with his nephew.

"Jess, come on. We both know that if she's like that with Lorelai, you're the only one who has a decent shot at talking to her. Get her to apologize. I haven't seen Lorelai like that in years. She doesn't deserve that."

"Look, I agree that what Rory did was crap," Jess replied, refusing to meet his uncle's eyes, "Especially now that I can tolerate Lorelai. But if you ignore the presentation and focus on the content, she has a point. She wants space and she isn't a child. She's entitled to that. And she's not here to ask for my help."

"But clearly she needs it!" Luke exclaimed, "Jess, something could be wrong with..."

"Something is wrong with her, Luke! God, you two are the most oblivious people in the world sometimes!" Jess yelled in frustration, "But I can't wave my magic wand and make it go away, and even if I could, she doesn't want that. Has that occurred to you? That she doesn't want help right now? She doesn't want to fix it?"

"She can't act like this, it could hurt her relationship with Lorelai," Luke responded, his voice low, "Hell, it could hurt her!"

"Rory's a big girl," Jess answered, his lips forming a tight line, "She's been making big girl decisions for a long time now. Speaking of which, thanks for letting me know about my ex-girlfriend's adultering. Glad I have you to keep me up to speed."

"You said you never wanted to hear his name again."

"Well, thanks for at least confirming the who, though I assumed that there aren't many married guys Rory would have slept with. That explains the divorce," Jess snarled, "But see? That's the difference. That doesn't piss me off because I love her or loved her then or whatever the fucking situation is. It pisses me off because she's clearly been screwed up for a while now and no one bothered to tell me. If you all think that I'm this be-all, end-all, Mr. Fix It for her, why the hell would you not tell me about that?"

"We all know how you get about him. Got," Luke corrected, "I didn't even know for a long time. And how do I bring that up in conversation? It's not something you just tell someone."
Jess ignored him. "Furthermore, it's frankly insulting to her intelligence for you all to assume I'm the only one who could fix her. Or that anyone could. Or that she's broken at all. Rory isn't a kid anymore. She's a capable, adult woman making capable, adult choices, and whether or not I agree with them, or you agree with them, or her mother agrees with them, they are her choices. She doesn't need anyone to save her, not her mommy, not her Luke, and certainly not some guy she was done with a long time ago. Let Rory handle her own shit. She doesn't need anyone, as she made abundantly clear."

"Jess…"

"Whatever," he cut him off, "I told you, this conversation is done. Now, I'll help you bring the bags down. And I'll answer the phone calls later this week that come when Lorelai is crying to you and you're going insane. Hell, I might even call and check on Lorelai myself. That was a harsh thing to deal with and she didn't deserve it. But I will not do anything involving Rory. I will not call her, I will not seek her out, and I will not force myself on her life when she didn't ask me to be a part of it. Are we clear?"

"Alright," Luke exhaled in surrender, "Look, I'm sorry you had to deal with this. And that we're leaving early."

"Not your fault," Jess said tonelessly, his eyes glazing over, "Don't worry about it. You guys'll come back when this town gets a little less dramatic, alright?"

"Sounds like a plan."

They headed downstairs and outside and began to load the bags into the truck. Lorelai appeared next to them, holding four coffee cups.

"Jess, thanks for everything," Lorelai smiled, pained, "Here. Black as the day is long."

"Thanks, Lorelai. You didn't have to…"


"Thanks," Luke said gently, putting his arm around her.

"Look, Lorelai…" Jess started.

"We should really be going. Lots to do at the inn," Lorelai nodded. She walked over to Jess and gave him a hug, not even hesitating. "Thanks for having us. We'll come back soon, okay? And you're welcome in Star's Hollow anytime."

"Thanks, Lorelai," Jess smiled sadly, "I might just take you up on that."

As they drove away, Jess could feel the anger rising in his chest again. He inhaled slowly, trying to gather a sense of calm, but he could still feel it building inside him. He picked up his phone.

"Matt?"

"Jess, what the hell happened earlier? Can you please just explain to me what in the…"

"Raincheck. What do you say we close Truncheon a bit early tonight and head out for some beers?"

"That, coming from you?" Matt said incredulously, "Alright. I'll call Chris and meet you at
O'Malley's in half an hour."

Jess hung up and sighed deeply. This was going to be a long night.

Rory slept with him. That jackass who built her the car. A sentence that could only apply correctly to one man.

What the hell had she been thinking? Had she? Was she drunk? Temporarily insane?

Jess had figured that Rory had been having sex with the blonde asshole, but of all people…

"Jess," Matt sat down, Chris behind him, "It's time to catch us up."

"In that case, you'll need to catch up to me first. I'm on three."

An hour later, Chris and Matt looked stricken.

"So all those things about us having to be nice to her…"

"Still apply. It's for me, not her."

"But she…"

"Was infuriated. Infuriating. Shock, confusion, rage, all things that have passed through my head in the last three hours."

"So you don't have any id…"

"I have plenty of ideas, Chris, but honestly, I couldn't give less of a fuck anymore," Jess said, slamming another empty glass on the table, "She wants space and she doesn't want help. She wants to act like a child and be treated like an adult. She wants to talk to people who love her like the gum on the bottom of her shoe and she feels entitled to do that. And she's right. But that doesn't mean I have to enable it, or that I'm responsible for cleaning up the broken pieces of glass when it comes apart."

The bartender poured another glass, which Jess pushed away from him, towards Chris.

"I'm fine," Jess said shortly. It wasn't that Jess refused to drink or never drank too much. In fact, today he'd done both. But he knew his limits and refused to cross them. If his childhood had taught him one thing, that was pretty damn high on the list.

"That seems…fair," Matt said hesitantly. He looked cautiously at Chris before continuing. "But Jess, if you did…you know…want to fix it or something, we wouldn't hold it against you. We couldn't."

"I appreciate the support," Jess smirked, "But why is it that you guys only support people who are making trouble for me?"

"True friends."

"I see that."
Three days later, just as he was closing up, Jess' phone started to ring. He groaned, turning the key in the lock before answering.

"What?"


"What do you want? Isn't it past your bedtime?"

"Geesh, can't a guy call his nephew without the third degree?"

"Sorry," Jess sunk into a chair next to one of the shelves, "Rough day?"

"Work?"

"Of course. No one seems to understand the concept of a deadline."

"Can I get that in writing? With your signature?"

"Alright, you can go now," Jess warned, forcing himself to get out of the chair and start walking upstairs, "So what's your real reason for calling?"

"Just…wanted to be sure that you were okay."

"Luke, she went insane on your fiancée, not me. And I thought we were done with this topic."

"You're still angry with her, aren't you?"

"Is that a trick question?" Jess slammed the apartment door shut behind him, "Because even you didn't seem very zen about the whole deal."

"Yeah, but I was confused. Concerned. Like you said, she went after Lorelai. I have to be protective," Luke answered, "What do you have to be angry about?"

"She was out of line."

"You agreed with what a lot of she said."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Jess…"

"Fine," he mumbled, laying back on the bed, sighing deeply, "It's really juvenile."

"Like I haven't had to deal with that from you before," Luke grumbled, "Come on."

"She slept with that pathetic jackass. Him, of all people. And when he was married. And given my special aptitude for dates and times, it hasn't taken a lot to make the educated assumption that he was the first."

"Well…"

"And there's my confirmation," Jess snapped, "God, fuck this. It's not even really a jealous type
thing, though I am more than vaguely disgusted that she could do something like that with someone like him. It's more about her. And that I didn't know, and that I still don't."

"You could fix that," Luke offered quietly, "She said she didn't want Lorelai around. She might still talk to you."

"The space thing seemed pretty universal," Jess shook his head, sinking deeper into the mattress, "And plus, it's not my responsibility. I stand by what I said. She's making her own choices, and as stupid as I may think they are, I have no right to impose my opinion or unsolicited assistance. And I'm too angry to even think about it for more than ten minutes without having to fucking destroy a manuscript."

"It's okay for you to be jealous that she slept with…"

"I am, but it's not that. It's that she's gotten so screwed up and I missed it, I don't know shit, and she didn't let me be a part of it. I should have been there, I should have been a part of it."


"Never mind, my skills of articulation are failing me tonight. Thanks for checking in, I'm alright. How's Lorelai?"

"Hasn't heard from Rory, hasn't reached out. I've only had to stop her four times. But she's worried," Luke answered, "And flustered. She ordered purple feathers for a wedding at the inn."

"And?" Jess knew that Lorelai's decorative tastes could be questionable at times, being familiar with the infamous monkey lamp.

"They were supposed to be purple flowers."

"Ah."

"Yeah. Not good."

"Nope."

"And I can't do anything about it!" Luke complained. Jess could hear him pacing. "I just want to help her, but I can't do a goddamned thing. Do you know how much it messed things up last time?"

"Last time what?" Jess asked, confused.

"Last time she and Lorelai weren't speaking. We got engaged but we couldn't set a wedding date until they made up. And the day they did was when I found out about April, and why I didn't tell her, and…"

"Whoa…slow down," Jess sat down, trying to keep up, "Alright, so basically you're implying that the Rory/Lorelai fallout directly screwed over your first engagement with her? That's insane."


"You have a point. But I'm sure there were other issues there that the situation just exacerbated."

"Come again?"

"Ugh," Jess groaned in frustration, "Look, I get why you're worried. But you and Lorelai are stronger now. Way better off. Plus you haven't mentioned a wedding date in ages so at least Rory
can't screw that up."

"Always helpful," Luke retorted, "It's not like we aren't going to do it."

"Then care to explain why you haven't asked her yet?"

"Since when are you so interested in Lorelai and I getting married?"

"Well, since I was seventeen and figured out you were in love with her. But now more so, because I can deal with her for more than twenty minutes at a time."

"How flattering. I'm sure she'd be touched."

"She should be." Jess' phone beeped through.

"Call waiting. Gotta make sure this isn't Matt. Just…do your best with it, okay? And this isn't gonna fuck things up. You guys are fine, better than fine." Jess said quickly.

"Thanks," Luke said, "And if you ever…"

"I will." With that, Jess hung up and connected to the other call.

"Hello?"

"Jess?"

"Rory?"

"Yeah."

"Where are you?"

"New York. Jess…can you…please." Her voice was weak and uncertain. The clear sense of desperation in her tone broke him instantly.

"2 hours. Text me the address."

"Thank you," she choked out. He could tell she'd been crying. He sighed.

"Don't yet. Be there soon." Jess hung up the phone, grabbed his duffel bag and threw in enough clothes for a couple of days, a bag of good coffee, and most importantly three books. He slung the strap over his shoulder and sighed, closing up the apartment and walking out of Truncheon. He would call Matt and Chris from the road.

"Matt?"

"What now, you asshole…" he heard Matt groan, rolling over. Jess sighed. Clearly he'd been asleep.

"Can't handle your liquor anymore?"

"Fuck you. Do you have a reason for bothering me at this ungodly hour?"

"I'm out for the weekend."

"Well that whole prideful not interfering crap didn't last long."

"We can have that argument later," Jess retorted, "Now get your hungover ass back to sleep. I should
be back before Monday but I'll keep you posted.

"Whatever floats your boat," Matt quipped, and Jess rolled his eyes and hung up.

He thought about calling Luke. He thought about it every twenty minutes. But eventually he decided to blast the Clash to drown out those thoughts, refusing to violate Rory's privacy when clearly she was not in the mood to have everyone involved in her life.

Jess forced himself not to think about what he was doing or why he was doing it or what could possibly come of it. None of that mattered. She needed him to go. He was going to go. There was never even a question of it. The second she was ready to have him a part of whatever was getting to her so badly, he was going to be in that hellfire with her, even with no obligation or reason to do so. They both knew that was the case.

Sighing at the insanity of the last twelve hours, Jess turned up the music just as the song was about to change. When it did, he looked incredulously at the radio and bit back laughter at many ways that fate seemed to be screwing with him.

"When they kick out your front door

How you gonna come?

With your hands on your head

Or on the trigger of your gun?"
Chapter 27

Jess looked up at the apartment building in front of him. So this is where Rory lived. Huh.

He should've expected it. The location wasn't far from the New York Times office and the building looked decent but plain. He could already guess that for the most part she just saw her place as a crash pad for whenever she wasn't traveling.

Sighing, he walked up to the door and rang the buzzer. She opened it immediately, not even bothering to check who it was. He stepped through, holding only one of the books that he'd brought with him. He could get everything else later, but for now he needed to just get to Rory.

As he stepped in the elevator, he realized he had absolutely no idea what he was going to find, or say, or do. Pushing the button for the fourth floor, he rolled his eyes to himself. Figures that when push came to shove there was no list or plan to help her. As the elevator creakily ascended, he turned over the volume in his hand. The doors opened and he stepped out, cautiously looking into the hallway.

Everything was grey, which shouldn't have surprised him in an apartment building in New York City. He walked forward, slowly following the numbers in his head. 409, 407…

"405", he said quietly to himself. Inhaling deeply, he knocked on the door.

"It's open," he heard her voice call quietly. Jess pushed against the door and into the room.

"Rory?" he inquired, opening the door.

"Hey," she said quietly. She was curled up on the couch, with a box of Pop Tarts on the coffee table and a stack of books next to them. One fairly heavy volume was on her lap. It seemed to weigh on her.

"Kinda depressing material," he nodded toward the book as he walked over to the couch and sat beside her. She smiled faintly.

"A little. Was that the last time you read it?"

He, catching the reference, nodded. "Marquez has a special place in my heart but I kind of ruined that one for myself. What caused the choice?"

"Me being completely awful," Rory lowered her eyes. He inhaled deeply. She continued, "I can't believe I talked to Mom like that. Or Luke! He didn't even do anything. I mean, I was awful to Mom, but I still think I had a reason to be upset with her. He did nothing wrong and I was just…cruel to him. God, I bet he wouldn't even be able to look at me right now. He's never been anything but wonderful to me."

"Luke gets it," Jess reassured, looking her in the eye calmly, "He knows you didn't mean anything by it. And your mom…well…"

"I was awful. I know you think really well of me but even you can't deny that I was just cruel to her," Rory implored, self-berating. He nodded carefully.

"You were…harsh," he admitted, "But in spite of the means, you had a decent point. There's a certain adult level of privacy that she doesn't understand in relation to you."
"She does it out of love," Rory bit her lip, "And I know that, and usually I just accept it, but lately it's really been getting to me."

"That didn't sound like an impulsive outburst as much as something that's been building, though," Jess replied carefully, "Just my own unsolicited uniformed opinion."

"Something just snapped," Rory said, no longer meeting his gaze, "It's not a big deal. I'll call her and apologize this weekend, I just wanted to let things cool down. I just need to have better self-control."

"Rory, you don't have to apologize for wanting privacy. Especially when you're talking to me. I get it," Jess explained gently, "And you're right to think she's a little invasive. I'm just a little confused as to what she's invading."

"If you think she's being invasive by asking, why are you doing the same thing?" Rory slowly warned. She drew her body back and set the book down on the table. Jess could see what was starting, but his curiosity outweighed his caution.

"I'm not your mom. I'm not going to judge you," he started, trying to catch her eye, "It's okay if things aren't okay. You can talk to me about it. We can talk, figure it out. You don't have to pretend with me."

"Jess, there's nothing to talk about," Rory said shortly, turning her eyes to him briefly. Her eyes were dangerously fiery, he could see the reprehension in her expression. "I'm not pretending anything, and it's not that I'm keeping something from you because we aren't close anymore. Even though we aren't. There's just nothing there."

"I don't believe you," Jess definitively responded, leaning forward and forcing her to return his gaze, "We don't have to be going to bookstores all the time or watching Almost Famous every week for me to be able to tell when something's wrong with you. And something is. It has been for a while."

"Jess, everything's fine," Rory refuted, her eyes blazing up in anger, "Can you just let this go? I didn't call you to psychoanalyze me. I'm not Franny and carrying around a little green book with me all the time."

"As impressed as I am with the Salinger reference," Jess rolled his eyes, "You're trying to distract. Worthy attempt, but not going to work. You called me, Rory. Why did you call me, then, if you didn't want my opinion?"

"I felt bad about how I acted towards my mom and Luke, and I didn't know how to handle it," Rory answered unconvincingly, "And I wasn't exactly kind to you either, so there was that as well."

"So you called me to come here, all the way from Philadelphia, so that you could analyze one afternoon outburst? Rory, come on," Jess replied, "I know you better than that. You can bullshit a lot of people and I know you're capable of lying, but it's me you're talking to. You can't fool me like you fool them."

"Why do you think you know me so well, Jess?" Rory inquired, standing up and walking to the kitchen, and slamming a coffee mug down on the counter. She started filling it as she continued. "We didn't talk for years. We haven't known each other for a long time."

"That's crap, and you know it," Jess walked over to her, "It doesn't matter if we're talking or not. We know each other. Period. I don't need to know what books you've recently added to your shelf to understand the message of the library."

"You're exaggerating," Rory rolled her eyes, gulping her coffee down, refusing to look at him, "And
you're making things up in your head. I don't care what you think you know. You don't know me anymore."

"Why, because you lost it to that jackass?" Jess demanded. Rory went pale.

"How did you…"

"Did you forget you mentioned it in your little outburst?" Jess snarled. He was done playing nice. "Honestly, I don't care who you're sleeping with for my own sake. You're right, that was done a long time ago. But I know you, Rory, and that's not the part of you that you choose to act on, to define yourself with. And the part that stole a boat? And dropped out of Yale? And screamed at her mother today for caring too much? That's not the side of you that you want to be, Rory, and we both know that."

"There is nothing wrong!" Rory exclaimed, slamming down the cup, "Yes, I screwed up, all those times. But most of those things are in the distant past. And I can't believe of all people you'd hold the past against me."

"It's not about that," Jess sighed, "I don't hold any of it against you! Not today, not Yale, not the guys, none of those things. I don't care about any of those things at all, if you really want the truth. What I care about is you. I'm worried about you."

"There's nothing to worry about," Rory denied, meeting his eyes, "There is nothing wrong with me and there hasn't been. I'm doing fine in my life and my job and just because I decided to come to Philadelphia a few times doesn't mean I'm begging you to come into my life, or that I need you. I don't! I just followed a few impulses, made a few mistakes over the last few years. I'm human. And I'm not the girl you knew. I'm a different person now."

"Stop lying to me," Jess begged, trying to control his distress, "I can see it! In your eyes, in your face, in everything! In the fact that you were reading Marquez and the fact that you're making the choices you are, I know you Rory. And it matters to me that something's wrong, so why won't you let me help you?"

"You aren't a part of my life anymore, Jess!" Rory yelled, her voice finally reaching a full expression of anger, "You're not my boyfriend or my friend or anything at all, and you don't have the right or responsibility to take care of me or fix any problems that for some reason you incorrectly believe exist in my life or my mind or whatever the hell it is you think you're diagnosing. There isn't a problem, there aren't any problems! And even if there were, we stopped mattering to each other a long time ago."

Jess took a step back. He met Rory's eyes again. They were the same gorgeous blue he always wrote about and could never stopped seeing everywhere he looked. But something had changed. They were no longer an ocean, calm and brimming with vitality. They were a cool, piercing flame. He could feel the tension brimming in them, the helplessness and fury and confusion and distress and loneliness and fear. The mix was unmistakable to him, though no one else would be able to see anything other than complacent, stunning blue.

"You're broken," he finally said, holding her gaze, "You're broken and you know it, as well as I do, and you know that I see it too. You know that I'm right and you know that there is something deeply wrong. You know you need to fix it and you know you need help, but you're so entrenched in the stubbornness and the uncertainty and the fear that you can't even say it and admit it. You're broken and you won't let anyone near enough to you to fix it, to help, to be there at all. You're broken and you're still breaking and you refuse to change it."
"Get out," Rory demanded, her voice the lowest he'd ever heard from her. "I mean it, now. This is done. We're done."

Jess inhaled deeply, looking into her eyes one last time. The denial and anger stung him. He picked up the book he'd brought with him and, thinking quickly, set it down again.

"Keep it," he said, walking towards the door. He opened it and breathed deeply. He turned around to face her one more time.

"When you're ready." He nodded, shutting the door behind him. It was a good idea to leave the book. She clearly needed it more than he did.

"The hardest thing to explain is the glaringly evident which everybody has decided not to see."

-The Fountainhead
As Jess waited for the elevator, he sighed. Of course leaving her Ayn Rand would further fuck with her, but at this point she needed her mind screwed with. She was clearly in denial and refused to see anything.

At least Jess was finally seeing what was going on. Although there were details unbeknownst to him, a number of things about Rory had become infinitely clear to him during that fight. First, she was in denial of the fact that something was wrong. Second, she was broken. She was actually no longer functioning in any manner consistent with her personality, who she had been or even wanted to be, and she was in survival mode. She was functioning, not living. And she didn't want anyone to know it. Finally, she had probably been broken for a long time now, but in varying stages of gravity. It had occurred to him about halfway through their dialog that maybe Rory wasn't ever just completely fixed after the losing her virginity thing, after stealing the boat. Maybe all of those moments were things that contributed to the mess she was in. Those were moments of acting out, moments of desperation, moments of trying to escape one's own personal hell or whatever life you're trying to inhabit most of the time.

He wasn't enough of a self-centered prick to believe it had much to do with him. His visit to her and proposal to run away to New York did seem like a convenient place for the timeline to begin, but there was nothing else to indicate any impact of his actions since that time on her well-being. Out of the sake of his own curiosity, he decided to re-examine that night and the night of their confrontation outside the restaurant.

When Jess had come to ask Rory to run away with him, he'd had absolutely nothing to convince her to go but love. He knew that she quite possibly still loved him back then, and that not loving him wasn't the reason she said no. He also had never really bought that she wanted to say no. Every time he demanded her answer, he could see in her eyes the desperation and wanting to agree, that was eventually overpowered by her inflated sense of duty, sense of practicality, what she was supposed to be doing, what she should do. She didn't have the capacity at that age to set those things aside and live selfishly. It was quite possible that she feared people's reactions more than the idea of throwing away her life altogether, Yale, the paper, her college friends (which, to be fair, he'd never heard of anyone really but Paris being in the picture).

Sleeping with that moron, though, he couldn't figure out how that would connect with the idea of Rory's fear of what other people think. Obviously people would think terribly of her. The guy was married! Even Lorelai would judge that decision. She was completely acting out in a way that everyone would judge her for, and Jess couldn't even imagine that being something Rory really wanted to do. She always said the guy was safe, and made her feel stable, but that he never could make her blood run hot or even induce a furious flush on her cheek. And Jess knew she wasn't saying that for his benefit. He'd seen her with him and the lack of passion was palpable. Rory might have cared about security but having held her as close as he had, Jess knew she didn't want her first time to lack heat, passion, fire. She had always wanted to feel that. So something must have superceded that choice. He would have to find out when it happened from Luke so that he could figure that out better.

Finally, at the end of the following year, her boat-stealing and fight with her mom, and their separation for a time, completely threw him. Especially when Luke described to him how Rory was about the whole thing. He knew that Rory didn't take rejection well, and probably would have been crushed by the kind of comment that douchebag’s father made to her, but it wasn't like her to give up, change her life so easily. And that's exactly what she'd done. She'd traded in everything from her
wardrobe to her home to the people she surrounded herself with, taking up a different dream. But just because some asshole had told her she wouldn't make it? It didn't matter who it was, that just didn't seem like Rory. The way she'd been so transported upon seeing Jess, so happy, so amazed by his accomplishment and how she'd immediately reverted back into the girl he drove to get ice cream one night, being his personal cheerleader without giving a damn in the world what anyone else thought. Her return to Yale and her life after Jess' intervention.

He still didn't understand really what had transpired between them outside the restaurant. Rory didn't say she was wrong or that she was angry or anything at all really. Any time he really got to the root of something, her answer was "I don't know", that was brimming with a weakness and confusion that even after so many years he could her. It wasn't a surface level uncertainty, it went down leagues and leagues.

But she'd gone back, figured it out, graduated. She'd rejected the guy's proposal and followed her dream, becoming a reporter as she'd always wanted. Her life was what she'd always wanted. So what was happening now?

Jess stepped into his car and started to drive away. He had a lot of thinking to do before he could do anything to help her. But the book was a start.
Chapter 29

After a few hours Jess arrived at his destination. Parking on the street, he smiled at the silence around him. This place had always been so quiet at night. He grabbed his bag from the back and locked up, walking towards the familiar building. He grabbed the key above the door and let himself in.

He left a note on the counter, having noted that Luke's truck wasn't on the street, letting him know that he was there for the week and that he'd be down to help by 7 at the latest. Then without wasting any time he headed up to the apartment, dropping his bag and not even bothering to look at the books before he crashed.

The next morning he woke up at 6:00, and after getting dressed and showered, headed down to help Luke. As he walked down the stairs, he heard the familiar clanging around that was an indication of the morning rush. He smirked at his uncle's expression when he finally reached the end of the stairwell.

"Jess," Luke smiled, walking over and hugging him quickly, "Grab some plates, would you?"

"Of course," Jess nodded, quickly taking up his usual place in handling the crowd. This was one of the things Jess liked best about Stars Hollow, and Luke, of course. Luke wasn't going to face him with an inquisition when he randomly showed up in town and planned to stay for God knows how long, but would give him the time to explain on his own. And he was always welcome. Well, with Luke, that is.

"Jess Mariano!" Taylor Doose exclaimed as Jess approached the table, "What in the world are you doing here?"

"Hi to you too, Taylor," Jess smirked, pouring some coffee, "What can I get you this morning?"

"What you can do for me is tell me why you're insisting on poisoning the atmosphere of our lovely hamlet," Taylor accused, "Luke! Why is this hooligan here? Didn't you kick him out years ago? To the great benefit of the general population, might I add."

"Cut it out, Taylor," Luke groaned, "Jess is my nephew. He's here to visit. Or stay as long as he damn well pleases. Either way, it's none of your concern."

"But he stole…"

"Taylor, either drink your damn coffee or get out!" Luke pointed to the door, the smile quickly evaporating from his face. Taylor huffed and sighed, returning to his mug. Jess exhaled and continued onto another customer.

A couple hours later, during the late-morning lull, Jess stood behind the counter, perched over with one of the books from the storage upstairs.

"Anything good?" Luke asked, looking towards him.

"Not really," Jess answered, returning Daisy Miller to his pocket, "Just some research. Hey, can I ask you something?"

"You can ask," Luke said, emphasizing the last word. Jess grinned.

"Alright. When did Rory sleep with…him?" Jess gestured towards Doose's, not knowing or caring
whether the indicated individual still worked there. Luke sighed.

"Jess…"

"It's not like that. I just…it'll help."

"It was right after she got out of school freshman year," he answered. Jess inhaled deeply, putting the pieces together. Something was starting to connect, though he still needed more time and information to work it all out together.

"Luke, would you…would it be okay if I helped you out here this week? Things are pretty slow at Truncheon and I could use a break," Jess said quietly, refilling the donuts. Luke looked up at him in surprise.

"Have you ever taken a vacation?" Luke asked incredulously, "Because if you have I don't remember it."

"Precisely why it's the right time," he answered, "Look, if it'll freak out Lorelai or something, or you need the space, I can…"

"Of course not," Luke put his hand on his nephew's shoulder, "You're staying. That's all there is to it. Now, help me clean these dishes."

A couple hours later, Jess was serving coffee at the counter when suddenly Lorelai entered in the throes of a caffeine-deprived frenzy.

"Luke!" she beckoned, "I NEED coffee!"

"Here," Jess said quietly, filling a mug instantaneously and handing it to her. She drank it before even registering his presence.

"Thanks," she replied. Then, looking up, her expression changed from gratitude to surprise. "Jess? What are you doing here?"

"Vacation," he answered, "As long as you don't mind me being here…"

"Not at all," Lorelai smiled, "In fact, if you can get me coffee faster than Luke I might have to invent some type of machine that keeps you here."

"Never thought I'd hear that coming from you," Jess smirked, "Oh, by the way, Rory's safe and at home in New York. I don't have much more information than that, but if I hear anything else I'll let you know."

Lorelai looked up at him in astonishment. "Thank you," she said quietly, "Really. You didn't have…"

"I didn't do anything," he nodded, "Don't worry about it. She'll be fine. Just…give it some time. Okay?" Lorelai nodded back.

"Anyway," Lorelai continued, regaining her usually Tazmanian volume and speed, "It's good to have you here. In fact, if you're free, maybe you could join us for dinner at my place?"

Jess looked at her doubtfully. She grinned.

"Well that's a relief," Jess conceded, "You know, I'll check with Luke, but sure, that doesn't sound half bad. Maybe this time I won't have to steal your beer."

"I'll have Luke send a pie with you just in case," Lorelai promised, "Can I get another cup to go?"

"Admitting you have a problem is the first step to recovery," Jess called as he filled the to-go cup.

"Good thing I'm so vehemently opposed to self-improvement then," Lorelai replied as she grabbed the cup and flurried out the door, newly energized.

Luke reappeared from the kitchen.


"Apparently you take too long with the coffee. She threatened to glue me to the counter if you don't improve your efficiency," Jess smirked, "Oh, and she also invited me to join you guys for dinner tonight. Is that okay?"

Luke nodded. "God, I'm screwed now that you guys get along. By the way, I heard you mention Rory. Did you…"

"I don't have any news to report yet, at least nothing you didn't overhear," Jess answered, "But I'll let you know if I find anything out. I was gonna tell you before I told her, but she just looked…"

"Yeah, she's looked like that a lot lately, especially since that fight," Luke nodded, looking worried, "It's taking a toll on her. So how did you…"

"I saw her," Jess answered directly, "She called me, I went to see her, and we had it out, and now I'm here, and you're caught up. But she's safe and fine and I don't know what's wrong but I'm sure it'll be okay."

"Okay," Luke affirmed. He didn't ask anything else or put any pressure on Jess to tell more of what happened. Instead, the two men refilled the salt and pepper shakers until the lunch rush began.
A few days later, Jess hadn't heard anything from Rory. Neither had Luke or Lorelai, and although Lorelai was significantly calmer about the situation now that Jess had spoken with her, she still seemed distressed. Especially after Jess received a call on his cell phone when he was at work from her editor.

"Hello?"

"I'm sorry, who am I speaking with?"

"This is Jess Mariano. And you are…"

"Nathaniel Reed. I'm Rory Gilmore's editor."

"You're…” Jess stepped into the store room, ignoring both Luke and Lorelai's looks of confusion and the hoardes of angry customers, "Rory's editor? Not to be rude, but how did you get my number?"

"She listed you as her emergency contact. Well, changed it to you, about a month ago," he answered. Immediately Jess' heart fell into his chest,

"Is she okay?" Jess asked, breathing quickly

"I was about to ask you that," Nathaniel answered, "She hasn't shown up at work in four days and isn't taking any calls. She's missed two assignments and didn't show up in D.C. like she was called to. All I received was a voice mail last Sunday saying that she needed to take some time off, unexpectedly, and she understood if I needed to let her go or inflict some other kind of consequence."

"So she did warn you," Jess sighed, slowly catching up, "Well, then you should know she's fine and she's probably doing exactly what she said."

"Which is why I hesitated to call you until now," Nathaniel continued, "But it's just so unlike her! Gilmore always hands in her stories early, requests any time off, which is rare, months in advance, and takes over everyone else's work when they're swamped. It just seemed so out of sorts…I wondered if anything were seriously wrong with her. I wouldn't want to punish her if there were something serious going on that she for some reason was hesitant to share with me."

"As far as I understand, she's in fine health and the time she's taking off should be considered personal time," Jess answered, trying to keep his voice even, "And if I were you, I'd take those things into consideration, as well as her past performance, when you decide the consequences. If it were me, I'd probably be a little lenient with her given the unusualness of the situation, at least until she returned and I could demand an explanation, but you're her editor. It's your call."

"And who are you, might I ask?" Nathaniel asked, "I was surprised to see the name changed on the sheet. It had been a Luke Danes since she was hired." Jess smiled in spite of himself.

"Luke's nephew. Just a friend of hers. A little bit more accessible than Luke tends to be, with the generational technology gap."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Mariano. I'm sorry for disturbing you," Nathaniel answered, "Enjoy your week."
"You too," he replied, and hung up the phone. Breathing deeply, he walked back into the diner.


"Shipment problem. Luke, you got a minute? I need you to help me figure out what's going on with this inventory so I can give them the firm kick in the ass they seem to need," Jess answered, looking at his uncle meaningfully. He smiled reassuringly at Lorelai.

"We'll be back in a second and you two can return to your nauseating banter momentarily," Jess mocked, drawing a grin from Lorelai.

"Try to find your nice twin when you're in there and ask him to kill you!" Lorelai called.

"Pretty sure that's not how nice twins work," Jess yelled back, maintaining the smile until he'd dragged Luke out of sight.

"Alright, Jess, what is going on?"

"That was Rory's editor," Jess responded, "Short version is she took a week off work, completely unannounced, and has gone off the grid. She didn't show up in D.C. to cover something and hasn't been answering her phone or turning in assignments. She just told him last Sunday that she needed to take the week off and she'd deal whatever the consequences were."

"Okay, I'm gonna need to know what happened when you went up there," Luke crossed his arms, standing against the door, "And a little more than 'We talked' this time. That's not gonna cut it."

"Look, I agree, but right now Lorelai is sitting out there, and finding out about this before we know what's going on is going to make her even more of a mess than she already is. Why don't you just try to keep it together until she's gone, tell her that you and I need to bond or something tonight, and we'll talk about it then?"

Luke couldn't repress a smirk. "Bond?"

"We'll hold hands and skip," Jess rolled his eyes, walking out of the storage room.

"Hey," Jess said to Lorelai as they walked out. Luke rolled his eyes.

"I gotta check on the burgers," he said, avoiding eye contact with Lorelai as he walked over. The second he was gone, Lorelai leaned over.

"Don't even try to act like I don't know what's going on. Was that Rory?" Lorelai accused, "I heard you say her name when you first walked out of here."

"It wasn't Rory," Jess sighed, "Look, everything's fine. It wasn't Rory, but yes, it was about Rory, and she's fine. She's...gonna be okay. Just give it some time."

"She's my only kid!" Lorelai burst out, ignoring the looks from the other patrons. At that, Jess sighed and put down the coffee mug.


"Look, I know you're upset, and you have a right to be," Jess said quietly, as he and Lorelai walked over to the gazebo, "And confused and worried and all the other things that any functional parent feels when their kid seems to be going off the rails. But you have to keep it together."
"Don't you care about her anymore?" Lorelai demanded. Jess recoiled, confused.

"What?"

"Look, no matter how much I hated you, I always knew how you felt about her. And I didn't think it was a temporary thing. So how can you just stand by and watch this…"

"How did you stand and watch when she slept with a married man?" Jess demanded, "Or when she left Yale? Joined the DAR? Almost got engaged to that prick?"

"I didn't have a choice," Lorelai said quietly, sitting down, "It's her life. Whether or not I like what she's doing with it."

"Did you ever think," Jess sighed, perching beside her, "That maybe she needs to realize that still?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know," Jess muttered, "I'm still trying to figure it out. Look, Rory's gonna be okay. And I'm doing everything I can, and the second she comes to me, and wants my help, I'll be right there. I was and am and will be. But it has to be her choice."

Lorelai looked at him incredulously.

"What now?" Jess said, annoyed, "Surprised that I'm capable of maturity again?"

"Surprised how much you sound like me," she murmured, looking down again, "Look, I'm sorry for getting angry and personal with you. I don't have that right. You've been great about…all of this. Everything, really. I just want her to be okay, you know?"

"And she will be," Jess reassured slowly, "But right now she's not, and she won't be for a while, and we can't help her yet. The best thing that we can do, all of us, is be here when she's ready. No matter how much shit she throws at us in the meantime out of whatever confusion or anger she's going through."

"How did you figure all this out?" Lorelai asked him, looking into his dark but calm eyes, "I've been a parent for twenty something years and it took me ages to get that kind of thing figured out. And I still get confused."

"It's Rory," he said simply, "I might not know women or people or Gilmore, but I definitely know Rory. No matter what she'd like to think."

"She knows you do," Lorelai nodded, a tear rolling down her cheek, "She does."

Jess smiled gently. "Look, I'm not good at all this emotional crap, so why don't we get you back to Luke and he'll take you home? He and I have plans tonight but I can handle the diner until then."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely. Though I might let my evil twin out to wreak some havoc if Taylor comes by again."

"If that happens Taylor probably deserves it," Lorelai replied with a small laugh, and they walked back towards the diner.
Chapter 31

Later that night, Jess was just closing up the diner when Luke arrived, cautiously knocking on the door. Jess laughed before walking over and letting him in.

"Really? You still haven't figured out where he hides the spare key?" Jess mocked, opening the door for his uncle.

"Some of us have this thing called common courtesy," Luke grumbled, walking in, "Would you mind putting on some tea?"

"Already did," Jess nodded, "Let me grab it. And some coffee. This could take a few."

Luke sat down at a table and watched his nephew grab the mugs. It was funny how much people thought he'd changed. And of course, they were right, he had. But on some level Luke had always seen the man in front of him even in that smartass teenager Liz shoved on a bus to their little Fellini town. He'd seen it from the beginning, the fact that he had a sense of honor, caring, depth…things that most people either didn't see or shoved aside. He couldn't imagine how hard it must be for Jess to watch Rory, one of the only two people who had ever really acknowledged those things about him to be true from the beginning, who really knew him, in such a state.

From the time Jess and Rory had met, Luke had seen something change. The way he got up in the morning, the way he walked around, every little movement had a purpose. The books he read with more fervor, the smiles Luke would see when Jess thought no one was around, being around every morning at work. And Rory had changed too. Luke might have been oblivious to some things, but he caught the way she'd look at Jess when he was reading behind the counter, the way that she talked to him with no airs. With Dean, she sometimes seemed to have this floating-on-air quality to her voice that was almost saccharine, fake. A lilt, maybe, it was called. With Jess, it was the most clear he'd ever heard her voice. Her on Thanksgiving, her even when they first starting dating and did the awkward "Hello" dance, she just sounded like Rory. Maybe it was all in his head.

He'd thought about telling Jess about Rory sleeping with the married guy. In fact, he'd thought about having Jess come with him to kick said married guy's ass, as soon as he found out about it. But he couldn't watch that happen to him. He'd watched Jess leave Rory once, and that was more than he could ever stand to see the kid hurt. At least by his decree. Though now it seemed he really should've told Jess. Whether or not he should have to handle it, he seemed like the only one who could really ever figure out what was going on with her.

"She listed you first, by the way," Jess said, handing Luke a mug of chamomile tea.


"She originally had you listed as her emergency contact at work. She only switched it to me about a month ago. It was you before," Jess explained, taking a long gulp of his coffee. Luke furrowed his eyebrows.

"Why would she…"

"She trusts you." Jess said simply, "She knows you would never overreact and you'd handle things better than just about anyone else. She sees you as a father. Are you really surprised?"

"Luke, you've been there since she was a kid, through everything, no matter what was going on," Jess explained quietly, "She sees you as her rock. Someone she can count on. Plus, you're nearly married to her mother. Speaking of which…"

"Really, Jess?"

"Well, what are you waiting for? Aren't you guys engaged? Haven't you been for, what is it now, years? Am I missing something? It's not at all obvious that you love the woman to death or anything."

"It's not that simple."

"Luke."

"It's not."

"It might not have been before, but it is now. What are you waiting for?"

"We'll talk about that more some other time," Luke replied firmly, "Right now, we need to focus on Rory. Tell me what happened when you saw her. From the beginning."

"Fine. But we are talking about it. Soon," Jess answered. Luke nodded in agreement. Jess sighed and continued, "She called me, the night I came here, back when I was still in Philadelphia. She wanted me to come to New York. I did. I went to her apartment. We talked. We fought. She's not okay right now."

"What's wrong with her?"

"I have theories," Jess responded, "But I need to figure it out. She doesn't need to be crowded with people, she needs space. And more than anything, it needs to be her choice. Right now, whatever is going on with her, she doesn't want our help. Any of us, you, me, Lorelai. When she does, she'll ask for it, and any or all of us would be there at the drop of a hat. But just to clear up your initial set of worries, I think we can rule out anything health-related or really tragic."

"Meaning?"

"I don't think she's pregnant or on drugs or that anyone died," Jess summed up. Luke frowned.

"Well that's reassuring," Luke sighed, "How did you…"

"Wine bottle in her recycling bin, plus, she's single, and I know Rory well enough to know that she's having casual unprotected sex. At this, Luke shook his head, mumbling inaudibly. Jess smirked.

"But anyway…since we all know that Rory's not an addled druggie, let's get to the point. Whatever's going on is something that she's having a hard time figuring out in her mind, something upsetting her...I can't give you more than that yet," Jess said, "And I'm sorry that's not a lot to go on, but I'm not going to share my mental guessing games. Once I have concrete information, you'll know what I do, if it's okay with her. That sound fair?"

"Fair enough," Luke nodded, "You know, you don't have to do this."


"Yeah, I know."
An evening three days later, Jess was packing up his things to go home. Lorelai had sent him with road trip candy (apparently a necessary phenomenon he'd been missing out on) and attempted to give him her Bangles CD, which is where he drew the line.

"No," Jess said flatly.

"But it's the Bangles, Jess! The eighties! Don't you have any appreciation…"

"Of good music? Yes. Of eighties music? Only when it's good eighties music," he said, "Look, the Bangles are much better than what's around today, but in the car I listen to the Ramones, ACDC. Highway to Hell. It's called theme."

"How is Blitzkrieg Bop transportation themed?"

"Well, I Want to Be Sedated would be theme right now."

"That's enough, you two," Luke cut in, grumbling. "Jess, we'll see you soon, okay? Don't be a stranger."

"Thanks," Jess answered his uncle, "But I really got to get back to work. Matt and Chris already are waiting to get my ass on a platter for being gone so much."

"Well maybe we'll come see you again," Lorelai smiled, "If that's okay, I mean."

"Always okay," Jess affirmed, "Thanks for the tooth-rotting goodness."

"Thanks for…well…" Jess nodded at her in understanding. He hugged Luke, and awkwardly half-hugged Lorelai (she leaned), and then got in the car. Time for another long drive.

An hour later he was listening to Metallica, feeling reminiscent, and thinking about J.D. Salinger. Franny and Zooey, more specifically. It was one of the two books he had left in his glove compartment, that he'd meant to let Rory borrow before everything fell off the rails. Ironic.

He hoped Rory would come to her senses, but he didn't want to push her. Especially since the more he thought about it, the more he realized that people pushing her was probably a lot of her problem. And her pushing herself was the rest of it.

Maybe Rory wasn't lying when she said she didn't know what was wrong. Maybe all she knew was that she was unhappy, and that she was supposed to be happy. And perfect. And the angel of all the people she'd ever met. That was how she'd been raised to believe it should be, and what she was to everything.

Rory had been and would always be a lot of things to him, but she was never an angel. She was completely, irrevocably, touchingly human. Flawed, just as much as any other person, but more intricately and gorgeously so. Every part of her had stunned him, but it wasn't the halo that everyone else saw that made him fall as hard as he did. It was the doubt.

In his mind, one of the times he remembered her as the most beautiful he'd ever seen was when she was in the car with him on the way back from getting ice cream and she started to doubt her ambition, whether or not she could do it. It wasn't that he liked to see her doubt herself or concerned or anything like that. He just loved the moments that were uncertain with her, when she didn't have
all the answers, when she wasn’t completely together and in line like everyone knew her to be and expected her to be. The moments of free fall.

But there were the moments of free fall and then there were things like this. Actual phases of denial, times when she refused to let herself doubt her choices or what was expected of her or whatever it was that she was doubting, times when she was trying so hard to force herself to meet everyone’s expectations, including her own, that she started to break, become angry, even mean. It wasn’t pretty. All that pressure had to go somewhere and it would weigh on her so strongly that her incomparable smiles became rare. The beauty in the moments of doubt was when she would allow herself to fall, admit that maybe she didn’t know what she was doing or what she wanted. When she came to New York, everything about her that afternoon was effervescent and Jess knew it wasn’t just from the time and distance. It was the fact that she was following only her instinct, didn't have it all planned and worked out and was going from nothing, no list or rules or anything, just floating. A mess, a perfect one, entropy in its purest form.

It was really rare for Rory to let herself get to that place. He'd seen it a few times when they'd first met, when she was still involved with someone else, in the glances they'd stolen at that insane Bracebridge dinner or the candidness of their picnic on the bridge and subsequent evening of unexpected diversion. The way she'd been before the car crashed. Her eyes when he showed up at her grandparent's house with his book. Those moments were the ones he'd call to mind every time he wrote about her, about feeling, about anything really that meant he needed to draw on infinity.

As he pulled toward Truncheon around ten that evening, he smiled gratefully, thinking of Lorelai. The road trip candy would now be an inexorable part of his routine. He'd finished all the Red Vines (something that during his time in California, he'd realized Rory and her mother had always been right about) and the Sour Patch Kids (which of course Lorelai had to make a joke about, for christ sake), though the half of the Snickers left had melted. Still, it was a nice thought, and the rest of the nonperishable candy was stuffed in his glove compartment for the next time he decided to head down there. He'd have to call her and thank her later this week. He grabbed his books and his bag and headed inside the closed building.

Heading up to the apartment, he continued his ruminations. Maybe he'd make some coffee and revisit Franny and Zooey again. It could provide some more insight into what the hell was going on.

He opened the door to his apartment. Well. Maybe he wouldn't need to after all.
"Jess."

"How'd you get in?" Jess asked, dropping his bag on his bed. He hadn't yet made eye contact with the girl that was sitting on the other one.

"I've been crashing up here a couple days. I guessed where you hid the spare key. Matt came up once and I hid in the closet."

"Wow, the place must be rubbing off on you," Jess smirked, setting the books down on his desk. He noticed that The Fountainhead was sitting in the middle, perfectly centered.

"I didn't realize you owned a copy, but I checked and mine's in my apartment," Rory said, her eyes following him as he crossed the room, beginning to unpack his belongings.

"Picked it up in California. Weight lifting phase," he replied, throwing some shirts into a laundry bin.

"So where've you been the last few days?"

"Fellini-ville. The natives say hello," he responded, "I took a week off. Apparently you did too."

"How did you…"

"Nathaniel called me. Apparently I'm your emergency contact," Jess answed, still not meeting her eyes, "Gotta say, as touched as I was that you consider us that close, I was a little thrown considering your perspective on our relationship the last time we spoke. Guess I must've missed something."

"Jess, I'm…"

"No, Rory, I don't want to hear any more explanations or excuses," he stated, turning to face her. His eyes met hers. Cold to watery. Good thing he hadn't looked earlier. "Look, you know me and that I'm gonna be here for you when you're ready, and you're more than welcome to break into my place and crash here any time you like. But you gotta give me something to work with."

"I'm not happy," she answered, finally, softly. Tears started streaming down her face. "I don't…it's not…I thought it would be different."

"What would be?" Jess asked, walking over to the bed and sitting next to her.

"Everything," she choked, dissolving into sobs, "Going to Yale! Graduating Yale! Living in New York! Being a journalist, traveling…nothing's the way I thought it would be and no matter how hard I try to make it that way, it's not coming out like I thought. And I don't know what to do! I just work harder and harder and take more assignments and go new places and eat new takeout and I can't go home because what if Mom knew something was wrong, she wouldn't understand and I don't even want to be home, where it's just mocking me, reminding me of everything I can't stand that's happening in my head right now, and everyone and everything they think I am and want and all of it! I just want to figure out why I'm so selfish and stupid that I can get everything I've wanted since before I was ten and still be miserable. I'm entitled and a brat and never satisfied and completely pathetic."

Jess leaned towards her, putting his arm around her as she continued to sob. They sat that way for a long time, neither one speaking. Finally, Jess looked at her.
"It's not okay," he said quietly, his eyes never leaving hers, "It isn't okay right now but it's not your fault. None of it. You didn't bring this on yourself and you can't fault yourself for any of it. You have every right not to be happy with what you thought you wanted. You're not bound to the choices you've made, the life you picked. All of us...we have more lives. Infinite ones. As many as we need to figure it out. Stop killing yourself over not getting it right on the first try. But you have to admit that you didn't get it right, and that it's not okay. Because from there we can work on it. But you hiding and beating yourself to death over these things in your head and not letting anyone else be around when you decide you want help, that's not gonna get you anywhere."

Rory nodded slowly, her eyes locked on Jess'. He wiped a few tears from her cheek and she smiled, a faint, sad smile, but one that reminded them both that things weren't lost.

"I'm sorry for…"

"Never apologize for that," Jess cut her off, "Ever. You know you don't have to and I never want you to."

"Okay," she affirmed. They sat in silence for another minute. "Jess, can I…"

"Stay as long as you want," he answered, "And I mean that."

"Thank you," she said, her eyes bright, though still wet with teardrops, "For all of it."

"Do me a favor though," he added slowly, "Let me call Luke and tell him you're okay and that he can pass on the message. When I was there this week there was a lot of worry going around and even though I know you're not ready to deal with all of them yet, they don't need that."

"Of course," Rory agreed, "And tell him I'm sorry, okay? I'll fix it, soon, I promise. I just need…"


"I'll have to have Mom add that to her nickname list."

"She has a list?"

"About six pages."

"You're kidding."

"I never kid about lists."

"So," he said finally, looking towards her one final time, "You're staying."

"I'm staying."
The next day, Jess was downstairs an hour before opening. He'd need to catch Matt and Chris early to prevent any homicides, especially in light of the new plan he'd formed last night while Rory was asleep. He'd still have to clear it all with her, but first priority were Matt and Chris.

"I thought it was the rooster that was up at dawn, not the ass," Chris said as he walked through the front door, "What the hell are you doing up so early?"

"I come bearing gifts, so why don't you stop being a prick for a minute and grab a donut?" Jess offered the box. Chris narrowed his eyes.

"Why do I suddenly have the strange feeling that you are about to tell me something that will greatly piss me off?"

"Would you like to hear the answer to that unarmed or fortify yourself first?"

"Fair point," Chris replied, walking over and grabbing a pink sprinkled donut. Jess smirked.


"Oh god, donuts. What have you done?" Matt cried as he went straight to the box and grabbed a chocolate glazed. Jess rolled his eyes.

"Why hello, Matthew. There's coffee too."

"Then we're really fucked. Why don't you just get on with it?" Matt sighed, handing a coffee to Chris and grabbing his own.

"Alright. There's really no good way to tell you this," Jess exhaled, "Rory's upstairs. She's staying here. We're still not together. She's crashing while she works some things out. And I'd like her to work here during the day, just doing stocking and stuff. Probably for free, though maybe I'll cut her a little of what I get. Or feed her."

"Dear god," Chris breathed slowly, "Well, at least you get to the point."

"Yes, your confrontation style is legendary and effective," Matt agreed, "But for news that dire I'm gonna have to grab a second donut. When did this come about?"

"Last night, mostly," Jess answered, taking a glazed one and a gulp of the one of the remaining coffees, "She's not aware of the working thing yet, but I think she'll want to do something to keep her mind off things. Probably starting tomorrow. I'm taking a half day today. But before you get on me about that, I got Jacobs last week while I was in the boonies, so you should really be saying your hail mary's."

"We can finally demolish the Sanders stack!" Chris exclaimed happily. Matt narrowed his eyes and Chris quickly regained his composure.

"Look, didn't we say our personal lives…"

"Were absolutely, unavoidably going to affect this business and we'd have to deal with it as it came? Yes," Jess answered, "And mine's been the least disruptive of all. But she'll be helpful, no doubt, Chris can attest."
That's true," Chris reluctantly answered, "But it still doesn't make it okay."

"Look, all of us have gone through times that weren't pretty, alright?" Jess implored, "She needs somewhere to ride it out. This is that place for her. Now can you guys please just get on board with this and try to remain civil? I'm not asking you to treat her like a princess. In fact, work her as hard as you work each other, and me. She'll benefit from not being pampered, especially right now. She hates it when people act that way. But if you could try to recall the modicum of respect idea I referenced at one point, that would be very greatly appreciated."

"For how long?" Matt sighed, relenting. Jess looked at him hesitantly.

"Honest answer?" Matt nodded. "Indefinitely."

Exhaling deeply, Matt looked at Jess silently. After a moment he nodded.

"Alright," Matt said, "We'll do that, as best we can, as long as you understand our frustrations and are lenient with us when it's trying."

"Absolutely," Jess agreed, "Thank you, both."

Chris nodded. "We care about you. This is important to you. There really wasn't a question in the first place."

"Then why the hell did I bring donuts?"

"Because whenever you have to pull a dick move you bring donuts. It's tradition."

"Does that mean that you're going to spend the next two days making me your errand slave as well?"

"Progress for progress' sake must be discouraged," Chris mocked, making Jess grin.

"Wow, Harry Potter references," Jess shook his head, "And I thought we were highbrow in our literary tastes"

"We aren't highbrow in anything."

"Bring on the whores and booze."

"Maybe at ten," Jess nodded, "I'll be back by two and I'll close out tonight." He grabbed another glazed donut and a cinnamon sprinkled donut, as well as the other coffee, before walking up the stairs.

"You're damn straight you will!" Matt called up the stairs after him, earning a slight chuckle from Jess as he quietly opened the door to his apartment.

"Hey," Jess said softly, tapping Rory on the shoulder, "I come bearing coffee."

"That is the only appropriate way to wake me before nine," Rory moaned, sitting up and grabbing the mug from his hands. She took a huge gulp and smiled, rubbing her eyes, "You should record that for posterity. What time is it?"

"Early," he admitted, "But I was thinking we could get food. And hang for a while. I'm not going in until 2 but I thought maybe a walk was in order."

"That sounds amazing," she admitted, "Though I'll probably need to find a Laundromat. I'm out of clean clothes."
"For now, wear something of mine. We've already established they suit you better," he offered, and she smiled, walking over to his wardrobe, "How much did you bring?"

"Five outfits."

"You've been here five days? How did you survive?"

"Takeout, long walks, a lot of sleep, endless hours with Ayn Rand."

"And till the end it wasn't sounding half bad."

"You can't pretend not to like her now, you've shown your hand," Rory teased, pulling out a plain white tee shirt and grabbing a few things from her bag before heading to the bathroom, "Ten minutes."

"See you in fifteen."

"Sexist."

"Realist."

"Maybe," she grinned, closing the door behind her.
"So tell me about this plan of yours," Rory grinned, picking up a cheese fry. Jess looked up at her and smirked.

"Plan? What plan? I have no idea what you're talking about," he said innocently as he swirled his own in extra cheese. Rory laughed.

"Jess, I can tell when you're thinking about something and it's been on your face since I woke up," Rory smiled at him before shoveling down four more fries.

"Fair enough," Jess responded, "I have thoughts. If you don't like them, they can be adjusted. But just…ideas."

"With the general purpose of…"

"Giving you time, space, and a bit of distraction."

"Sounds ideal. Proceed."

"Well," he leaned forward, "I was thinking that maybe, if you wanted, you could help out around Truncheon while you stay here. You know, earn your keep."

"Probably the most honorable way to do so," Rory smirked, making Jess choke on his fry, "But seriously, that sounds great."

"Yeah, we could definitely use the help, you enjoy having things to make lists about, and I can't say I mind having you around during the day," Jess continued, noticing the slight flush in Rory's cheeks as he did, "Nothing major, just stacking books, making calls, ordering inventory, organizing things, that kind of stuff. With the major caveat that you cannot swipe any of the books." He looked at her meaningfully.


"You've broken the law before for much less than books," he teased, and she laughed.

"Yeah, like you have a clean reputation. Steal any caution tape lately?"

"I actually owned that already," Jess admitted, grinning, "Brought it with me from New York."

"Can I get you anything else?" asked the waitress as she appeared behind Rory. She nodded enthusiastically.

"More of these, please," Rory gestured to the cheese fries, "And a bacon cheeseburger for me. Jess?"

"Cheese fries," he nodded.

"Just the one or…" she looked at Jess inquisitively. He bit back a smile.

"Definitely two, and we'll let you know if we need more after that," he answered, and Rory grinned.

"You know me so well," she cooed as she took a sip of her coffee.

"I know what I know and I know what I don't," Jess smirked, "And you're on the first, albeit
"Well I'm glad to have made the cut," she said, "Though you aren't quite the mystery you were to me when we met."

"Was I ever, really?" he said lightly, and laughed. After a pause she laughed too.

"Nope," she answered, "I guess we just had each other pinned from day one."

Jess stared at Rory and her cheeks began to burn. "Wow, that was not what…"

"You meant. Fortunate accident," Jess smirked again, "It's okay, Rory, we're all adults here."

"I know," she replied defensively, "It's just…around you…"

"You never had any trouble with that kind of thinking around me before." Jess wiggled his eyebrows and Rory burst out laughing.

"Wow, it's really natural to take you seriously when you do that," she teased, "That's a turn on."

"Then add it to your list," Jess mocked, and Rory blushed furiously, launching a cheese fry at him.

"I do not have a list!"

"Oh my god, you do!" he exclaimed loudly. Rory glared. "Wow, that may be the best thing I've heard in my whole life."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. But if you continue talking about it I'm going to start reciting Dagny until you stop."

"You know, most days, given the possible incentive, I'd take that risk," Jess lowered his voice, meeting Rory's eyes, which burned brightly, "But today I'll let it slide."

Rory looked away quickly. "Cheese fries!" she diverted, as the waitress reapproached. Jess laughed.

"Basket's only been empty for ten seconds but I doubt that one'll make more than fifteen minutes."

"Are you helping?" she inquired.

"Ten."

They returned to Truncheon after lunch, joking around about bands. Jess loved how easy it was to get back into a rhythm with her. The fact that it was comfortable, that they didn't need any sort of transition to fall back into the easy way of being around each other that they always enjoyed. Of course, things were different since the time had passed, but really they weren't.

He was more than happy to give Rory the space and time she needed to figure out what was going on and what she wanted from her life. He'd kind of guessed from the beginning that it was about some general dissatisfaction, some fear of disappointing people by changing her mind, doing something unexpected, or just even considering the possibility. Taking this step, it must've been monumental for her. He was proud. He'd called Luke last night to let him know she was okay and that she was looking toward doing better, and that he couldn't give him any more information until she okayed it. He'd asked to pass the phone to Lorelai and Jess had declined, deciding it better that she hear from Luke, especially while Rory was around. Jess hadn't shared any details, like the fact that she was staying with him and not at work (he'd heard the phone call with her boss that morning, and it wasn't pretty, even though she wasn't fired) but he knew that they were both happy and trusted
Rory to figure it out, and trusted Jess to handle things the best he could. Which meant something, something really incredible, to Jess especially. The fact that both Luke and Lorelai, who saw Rory as their kid, trusted his discretion on this said things to him that Jess had never expected to hear in his lifetime.

Perhaps the next week, or month, or year, or whatever it would be would change things. Old drama could revive, awkwardness over the romantic past rear its ugly head, any number of things could pop up. But even if it did he wouldn't change his choices, the ones he'd made since she'd shown up at Truncheon, the ones he was making now. It felt right, and it was right, and he'd meant what he said to Luke. He had to do this. And it wasn't to avenge some long-lost love or write a fairy tale but because he simply had to, and he'd known it since the first day he met her. No matter what happened, even when he didn't know if anything would, he had to be there for her. There was no choice, there was no if or when. He knew. And she'd do the same for him, in a heartbeat. He never doubted it. She had done it for him. She'd believed in him when no one, save for Luke, had. She wasn't the first, but she was a very close second, and the most attractive by far.

Matt and Chris would deal, Lorelai and Luke would deal when they found out, and things would fall into place, even if it was rocky or cracked or uneven. Because that's the way of life. The chips fall. And no matter how it turned out, Jess knew he was doing the right thing and by the end, at the very least, they'd have had a damn good story.
A week later, Jess felt considerably less optimistic. Matt and Chris had been putting Rory through the ringer. One example:

Matt: Rory, would you please go reassemble the Sanders stack?
Rory: No problem.
(two minutes later)
Matt: Rory, someone knocked over the Sanders stack. Would you be a doll…
Rory: Absolutely
(three minutes later)
Matt: Rory, it happened again.
Rory: On my way
(four minutes later, Jess approaches)
Matt: Rory…
Jess: Matt! For Christ's sake, why do you keep barreling into the Sanders stack like a bull in a china shop?
Matt: I have no idea what you're talking about. Rory, would you mind…
Rory: (wordlessly, walks toward the table)
Jess: (glares at Matt in mad fit of rage)
Matt: (innocently shrugs and walks towards the office)

There had been several similar occurrences regularly. Chris and Matt's distaste for her had become more pronounced once they realized that she was, in fact, planning on staying more than a few days, and most likely for a number of weeks. Their complaints about her were becoming repeatedly more ridiculous.

"She hogs all the coffee!"
"She alphabetized my files."
"She made coffee and put in in cups."
"She turned down the thermostat 2 degrees."
"She was reading during her break." "And?" "Russians, Jess! Godforsaken Russians!"
"Can you two please stop acting like children?" Jess finally exploded, after one particularly trying day, "Jesus, if this is you trying, I'd hate to see what you not giving a shit looked like."
"This is our business. We can't just change things because of a new, supposedly temporary
"Doesn't she have a job somewhere? One that pays money? I'm sure they're less abusive than we are," Matt said hopefully, "Perhaps she should consider returning to a more friendly workplace."

"Lay. Off." Jess' eyes shot daggers at the two of them as Rory entered.

"Hey guys," she said tentatively. Chris nodded noncommittally while Matt rolled his eyes. Matt was being more problematic. At least Chris could appreciate her productivity, whereas Matt seemed completely spiteful, determined to really hate her rather than just be doubtful and wary.

"Hey," Jess responded weakly, "Want to grab a bite? I'm starved."

"Sure," she nodded, "Let me grab my coat."

"Don't let the door hit you in the ass on the way out," Matt muttered under his breath once she exited. Jess stared at him.

"I swear to God, Matt, just..." Jess looked at him with disgust, "Fuck you. Really. You must not give the slightest shit about what matters to me if you can act like this, even once I've talked to you. I'll be back later to close. Don't help."

And with that, Jess walked out the door, leaving Matt staring after him and Chris shaking his head at Matt, a frown on his face.

"I'm sorry about them. Especially Matt," Jess said apologetically when he met Rory outside, "I swear, I'm trying."

"Don't worry about it," she smiled, "Honestly, they have a reason to dislike me."

"You've never done anything to them."

"That's not the only decent reason to dislike someone."

"True. But Matt especially is being unreasonable. I'm sure they'll come around," Jess reassured her, "So, where to?"

"Indian?"

"God, fine. But then tomorrow's Thai and I won't hear a single complaint."

"I can deal with that."

Jess closed Truncheon alone at about ten, after finishing some inventory that he'd been neglecting for a while. Earlier Chris had explained to Jess that Matt had taken the afternoon to meet with one of his writers, and Jess had barely nodded in response. He could not give less of a fuck right now. Matt was crossing lines at this point, and Chris knew what was going through Jess' head.

"Look, I'm sorry about him," Chris had said tentatively, an hour or so earlier, "But try to cut him some slack. He's only being like this because he cares about you."

"Thanks, Dr. Phil," Jess had snarled in return, "God. But really, he acts like she killed someone. It's insane. At least you treat her like a human being."

"You trust her," Chris shrugged, "And she's certainly not lazy. She does her part and she puts up with us and even though I have my reservations and don't like her much either, I'm not out to get her.
Let me try talking to Matt again."

"One more time," Jess threatened, "And after that it's my turn to talk to him. And it won't be pleasant for any of us."

"Alright, cool it," Chris smirked, "This isn't Reservoir Dogs."

"In my head it is," Jess muttered darkly, to Chris' great amusement.

"Never took you for a Tarantino fan."

"He appeals to me at certain moments."

After turning off all the lights, he headed upstairs. "Still up I see," he nodded to Rory, whose head was buried in a book, "What is it this time?"

"The Odyssey."

"What the…"

"I haven't read it since grade school," Rory defended, "It's classic."

"It's Greek. And ancient. And the Odyssey," Jess stressed, his eyes wide.

"So?"

"So, that's…" Jess gave up, "Whatever."

"Why, what are you reading that's so insightful?" Rory challenged. Jess picked up the book on his desk and held it up to her. She sighed loudly.

"Really? Again?"

"The short stories were some of his best work," Jess defended, setting the book down while he walked over to the dresser. He grabbed a pair of boxers from the drawer and a tee. After a brief, only semi-awkward discussion the first day, the two had come to the mutual discovery that they both dressed semi-inappropriately for sleep. Rory in large tee shirts and nothing else, and Jess in boxers. They'd agreed that considering their familiarity it would be stupid to make a big deal about it, especially since they each wanted the other to be comfortable. He grabbed an ACDC shirt and tossed it to Rory, who smiled gratefully. "I'll take the bathroom," she offered, and he nodded. A few minutes later, she reemerged to find him in bed, curled up with Ernest.

Looking from the bathroom doorway at him, she smiled. The way he focused had always blown her mind. He was exactly like her, the world could be moving at the speed of light around him in spirals tap dancing to maracas and he'd still be caught in the words, loath to extract himself from the life he was living in the pages. It was how she'd fallen for him in the first place. Of course, when they'd first met there were the stolen glances that exhilarated her to her core, but she really fell the most when she watched him read. Most of the times Rory would be at Luke's with Lorelai and he'd be slacking off, reading a chapter while Luke slaved away to handle the traffic, and she would just watch him. Whenever her mom would catch her she'd say she was thinking about the book, but usually she was really thinking about what Jess could be thinking about the book, what they might say to each other about the book, the world in the book that they could enter together. It was a little world she could inhabit with him even when she wasn't available without feeling guilty. Now that she was fully free to do so, watching him still made her heart slow a little in her chest, instilling a type of comfort that had seemed very far away for a long time. Jess finally looked up.
"Are you gonna sit there staring all night or read your tenth grade English assignment?" he mocked, and she shot him a mock-glare as she got into her bed and picked up where she left off. After about an hour, Jess called out, "You ready?"

"Yeah," she nodded, and he turned off the lamp.

"Goodnight, Rory," he said slowly, in that lazy, low voice of his reserved for right before he fell asleep. She ignored the flutter.

"Goodnight, Dodger."

She turned onto her side and went to sleep, unable to see the grin on Jess' face.
The following morning Jess had made up his mind. He had to do something. Honestly, she'd been reading The Odyssey. Which is the lost, searching, younger, but equally pathetic equivalent of finishing The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Even though she was looking healthier, happier, he still saw the strain on her face when any reference was made to her normal (prior?) life, the everyday things that at this point were sort of sitting there in an alternate universe, where they couldn't be ignored forever. She still hadn't called Luke or her mother. And she was patently refusing to talk, which was fine with Jess, except for the prior two points. He was fine with her staying, in fact, he'd become accustomed to it almost instantaneously, settling into their routine as easily as he'd settled into his own. Although there was the disadvantage of having to share the coffee, it was nice to have someone else reading in his apartment at night and around when he got up. That beautiful part of quotidian life made sense to him now. He'd have her there as long as she wanted and probably be crushed when she left, even if it was for a good cause, just because he'd miss the company (not company in general, but the specific company). But if she was going to crash and she was going to have time and space to figure it out, Jess was going to intervene when he could and he thought it was in her best interest. And the second she'd told him what she was reading, he'd known it was time.

Careful not to wake Rory, he slipped out the apartment door with his phone. Once he was downstairs, he dialed the number slowly, dreading what was coming.

"Jess?"

"Hi, Lorelai," he sighed, "Sorry to wake you."

"I'm up," she exhaled loudly, "Luke forced me to wake up early since...wait, why the hell did you do this to me again?"

Jess heard something jumbled in the background.

"Apparently I asked him to, but I seriously doubt that. Anyway, is everything okay? Have you…"

"More than heard from her. Sit down, and have Luke bring you some coffee."

Twenty minutes later, Lorelai was essentially caught up.

"So…not that I don't appreciate the information, because I really do, even though I understand why you didn't tell me earlier," Lorelai began, "But why are you telling me now?"

"I think she needs you. I think she's ready," Jess affirmed, "You should come here. Whenever it's convenient."

"I'll be there after work tonight," Lorelai said quickly, "Luke'll handle things here. Anything I should bring? Should say? Shouldn't say? God, I feel weird asking you these questions."

"Clothes," Jess replied, his tone slightly regretful, "And it's okay to feel weird. It's a weird situation. If I were you, I'd stick to neutral things, just being around, and following her lead. Don't pressure her, but be there if she wants you to. And make sure she knows you're okay with this, or that you understand, or something. Just don't give her the impression you disapprove, even if you do."

"Honestly, Jess?" Lorelai sighed deeply, "I don't. I can't. As much I never thought I'd be saying this, I think staying with you right now might be the best thing for her. Taking some time."
"Really?" Jess asked, surprised.

"Yeah," Lorelai affirmed, "Rory's always had her plan, everything figured out. She doesn't respond well sometimes when things unravel or when they don't work out as she thought they would in her head. She coped with those things best when she had you around. You're a calming force in her life, and let's face it, Gilmores need to be calmed."

"Frequently," Jess laughed, "Alright, well, I'll see you tonight. Don't tell her you're coming, I'm not going to mention it, and when you get here, if she's mad, I'll take the blame immediately."

"Sounds like my type of deal," Lorelai smiled, "See you tonight."

Jess hung up. He knew it was time, and even if Rory got mad temporarily, he didn't think she was in the state anymore where she'd take off if he made one wrong move. This was a risk, but a calculated one. Jess could fix a lot of things, but one thing Lorelai was good at was getting Rory to talk, and that might be key at this point in the program. And if not, either way, Rory and Lorelai needed to regain their closeness, at least somewhat. He knew it saddened her, both of them actually, not to have it, at least somewhat regularly. As much as Jess got most of the jokes and the references and had a thing with Rory no one else ever could or would, he had great respect for the mother-daughter craziness that was the Gilmore girls and the place in their hearts that nothing else could fill.

Thinking quickly, he walked upstairs and grabbed his wallet and shoes, leaving Rory a note on the dresser.

Rory,

This feels very backwards, to leave you a note here, but I didn't think about it until I started. Ha. Anyway, went to go pick up some supplies, coffee at 8 at the corner place. And yes, I'm the one who set the alarm on your phone. You can kill me when you see me.

-Jess

With that, he left Truncheon and headed to the grocery store on the corner. He needed a ton of candy and he needed it now.

An hour later, he returned to Truncheon with everything the two of them could possibly need. Chocolate, gummi, unclassified…he'd even found rock candy, a weird specific favorite of Rory's he remembered from an ill-conceived Shirley Temple themed movie marathon. He'd demanded Thai food four weekends for that though, so he still considered it a win. Thinking quickly, he stashed the bags in an unused cabinet in the office before heading out to meet Rory at the coffee shop. Hopefully getting some caffeine in her beforehand would help with what was to come.
Chapter 38

That night, after an extraordinarily long day of work, in spite of the early closing (Matt was out "sick", Chris was in his own little world, and Rory and Jess were mainly alone to handle the mid-week rush), Rory and Jess headed out to go get some food.

"Pizza?" Rory asked.

"When have I ever said no to pizza?" Jess scoffed, and they started walking out of Truncheon. At that moment, Lorelai's Jeep pulled up in front of the store.

"What is…"

"Don't be mad," Jess warned, "Remember that I let you read my books. And make fun of my taste. And my life choices."

"Did you…?"

"Yes," Jess answered honestly, "I'm sorry if it upsets you, but I thought it was the right thing to do."

Slowly, Rory nodded. She smiled at him, a genuine one, and threw her arms around his neck, embracing him.

"Thank you," she whispered, before running over to the driver's side, "Mom!"

"Rory!" Lorelai called bag, and soon they were hugging right in the middle of the street. Once they came back to reality and noticed the honking horns, they hugged their way to the sidewalk, finally breaking apart a few long seconds later.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry," Rory shook her head, burying it in Lorelai's shoulder, "I can't believe I was so awful to you, that I was so terrible, so mean. To you! To my best friend."

"Aww, honey," Lorelai stroked Rory's hair, smiling gently, "It's okay. There was some truth in the midst of all the shouting. But I know you didn't mean to be hurtful. It happens to the best of us."

"I'm a mess," Rory admitted, pulling away, "Can I come home? Just for a few days." She looked at Jess immediately, reassuringly. He smiled back at her, relieved that she'd felt the compulsion to reassure him that she wasn't going anywhere, even if there was no technical reason for it. He was grateful.

"You should go," Jess nodded, "For the weekend. Or the week. Whatever you want. I'll get your stuff."

"I'll come with you," Rory smiled, hugging her mom one more time, "I'm coming home!"

"You're coming home!" Lorelai exclaimed, smiling and waving as her daughter ran back into Truncheon, "Oh, by the way, that was a yes, if you missed my completely unspoken and clearly unimportant answer to your question." Rory turned around and grinned, and Jess momentarily did the same thing. They headed upstairs and Lorelai watched them gratefully. She'd never say it out loud, but thank God for Jess Mariano.

"You sure you'll manage without me? You've been dealing with some lazy employees lately," Rory teased, grabbing her backpack and her cosmetics. Once that was done, she set the backpack on the
bed before walking over to Jess' bookshelf.

"I'll manage somehow," Jess smirked. Then, quickly walking over to Rory, he grabbed the book from her hand. "No."

"But…" Rory pouted.

"No! This book is a warning sign, a symptom of illness. It's…" Jess saw the smile peeking out behind Rory's eyes. "You're completely screwing with me, aren't you?"

"Yup," Rory said cheerfully, tossing the Odyssey back at him, "If I really get the hankering for it I can dig it out of Luke's attic. But can I grab…"

"Anything," he gestured, and quickly she filled up the remainder of the bag with six tomes. She stood up and Jess grabbed the bag from her, heading downstairs.

"Hey, stop in the office for a sec," Jess called to her. Rory looked at him curiously before walking in. "Bottom right cabinet."

"There's nothing in…" she started, stopping when she opened it, "What is this?"

"Candy," he shrugged, noncommittally, "I know how you two get when you're deprived of sugar. Or caffeine, but that doesn't keep as well."

"I can't believe…" Rory began, "Alright, that's a complete lie. I can and do believe but am continuously amazed by the things you do for me."

"It's what I'm here for," Jess smiled at her, "Though I do expect a tip."

"No fries in here, are there?"

"Red vine."

"Seems fair. In fact, you get two."

"I'm a lucky man."

They walked outside and put her backpack in the back seat and all the candy up front. Jess smiled at Lorelai.

"Thanks, Lorelai," Jess said, walking over and giving her a small hug, which she immediately returned. Rory looked on in confusion and bewilderment, to Jess' great amusement when he caught her eye. "Your mom will catch you up later."

"It was my pleasure," Lorelai grinned, "Don't be a stranger, okay? And thanks for…"

"It was nothing," Jess waved it off. He walked over to Rory.

"Don't forget to come back," he said softly as he hugged her. She nodded as she pulled away from him, her eyes and smile equally bright.

"Of course," she promised, "I'll be back soon. And be sure to let Matt know!"

Jess smiled. "I'm sure there'll be banners and balloons when you come back!"

"Welcome home party?" Lorelai inquired.
"She's gone party," Rory laughed, "Goodbye, Jess."

"Goodbye, Rory," he responded, waving as they pulled away before walking back into Truncheon, feeling completely satisfied with his decision but slightly colder than two degrees below the usual temperature of the room.
Chapter 39

The next night, Jess was on the phone with Luke, in a full panic.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" Jess exclaimed, "I feel like I'm going crazy."

"Okay, first slow down and then tell me what the hell you're talking about," Luke sighed, sitting down.

"Well, I'm like you, in that I don't like or need people around. I like my space. You follow?"

"Yes, I know all this," Luke answered, already knowing where this was going.

"And now, suddenly, after one week of having her in my apartment, the place feels like a ghost town! I can't sleep right, I'm being an ass for no apparent reason, drinking twice as much coffee as I usually do," Jess complained, "And it's not like there's anything even romantic going on. I get missing…that. But there's none of that happening."

"Jess," Luke groaned, "Has it ever gotten through that thick skull of yours that maybe companionship is just as intimate as those things?"

"Yes," Jess rolled his eyes, "Luke, I write books. The idea of more than one form of affection isn't lost on me."

"Well," Luke continued, "Even though you aren't in a relationship with Rory, you're getting a lot of the perks. Someone to sleep near, wake up with, make coffee for in the morning. Those are things that attach you to someone and become a part of your daily functioning, and once something's in your routine we both know it's odd without it."

"But I'm not like that in other relationships," Jess replied, "At least, I didn't used to be. I didn't attach like that."


Jess sunk down on his bed and inhaled deeply. "So what am I supposed to do?"

"Here's a crazy thought," Luke rolled his eyes, "Come here. At least be in the same town as her. It'll help."

"But I don't want to infringe on her time with Lorelai," Jess aid apprehensively, "She really needs that."

"Well you'll stay here, and she'll stay there, but you'll see each other periodically. Trust me, she's probably feeling like you right now anyhow. Have you heard from her?"

"No," Jess answered, "But I haven't wanted to…"

"Call her. Now," Luke implored, "Just do it, okay? Don't make it more complicated than it has to be."


"Looking forward to it," Luke replied gruffly, hanging up the phone. Jess quickly dialed Rory's number before he lost his nerve. She answered on the first ring.
"Hey," she breathed quietly. He smiled automatically.

"Bad time?"

"No, Mom just fell asleep after stuffing her face with about 30 Malomars," Rory grinned, walking into her bedroom, "I can't believe you found them!"

"I keep a stash," Jess admitted, "I'm surprised you didn't find it before."

"Well…"

"Really?" Jess walked over to his closet and grabbed the box from the top shelf, "Holy shit."

"I'll help you replenish it," Rory said sheepishly as Jess cracked up.

"Damn right you will," Jess smirked, "So how are things there?"

"Good," Rory said quickly. Too quickly.

"So…"

"No, everything's good with Mom. Really. I'm just not sleeping too well."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Not your fault." Jess smirked again, regaining his composure before continuing. She could sense a smirk even in his tone.

"Well, as it happens Luke needs some help at the diner this weekend. Would it be a complete buzzkill if I came into town tomorrow night? I'm staying at his place so it's not like you'll have to see me much, other than whenever you need coffee."

"So basically on an hourly basis."

"Essentially, yes."

"Actually, that'd work out great," Rory replied, her voice perking up significantly, "Plus, then I actually have a ride home. Hopping in Mom's car seemed like a great idea until I realized that I'd have to Greyhound my way back to Philadelphia."

"Yeah, your experiences with the public bus system left a little to be desired, if I remember correctly."

"Spit. Can. Spit can, Jess."

"And you left the Go-Go's. Really, one would think the exhaust got to your brain."

"So I'll see you tomorrow?"

"If you're around the diner around 9. I can't take off from here until 6 but if you want to make a coffee run for you and your mom, I'm sure I can send you back with a late night movie marathon round."

"God, she wasn't kidding when she said you read her like a book," Rory laughed. Jess grinned.

"She actually said that? God, I'm going to be mocking her mercilessly all weekend."
"I'm sure you would've found your own material even if I hadn't provided it."

"Writers can always benefit from outside sources of inspiration."

"So I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Rory."

Rory smiled widely in spite of herself. "Goodnight, Dodger."

Jess hung up the phone and walked over to the dresser, changing into his boxers and getting into bed. Only one more night of awful sleep, with the promise of improved (though probably still mediocre) sleep just on the horizon. He could handle that. At least for now.

Back in Stars Hollow, Rory was following her own nightly routine. She went to her backpack to grab a book to read in bed, the Subsect, when suddenly her hand came across something soft. She pulled it out of the bag and her entire face lit up. It was Jess' plain black tee shirt, from the day she'd visited ages ago. She immediately changed into it and snuggled into her comforter, about as happy as she could be given the three hours keeping her from a legitimate night of rest.
The next morning, Rory woke up early and walked over to Luke's before her mom woke up. She left a sticky note on Lorelai's forehead with "Lunch at Luke's 12 PM" to allow enough time for the Malomar hangover to wear off. Smiling, she opened the door to Luke's at 7:30 AM, to find not an empty seat in the house.

"Hey, Rory," Luke said quickly, clearly swamped in the rush, "There's nothing open, sorry. I wasn't expecting you guys till later. But if you want to just go hang upstairs, I can send whatever up."

"I'll just bring coffee and a donut if that's alright. Thanks, Luke," she smiled, and he nodded, opening the donut case and handing one to her and quickly pouring a mug of coffee. She grabbed the two and headed upstairs to the quiet apartment.

Opening the door, she felt instantly at home. Her books always made her feel that way, and it had been so long since she'd really been surrounded by them. It was like being in a neighborhood with only people you knew, and liked, for that matter. She was able to select every resident individually, to her taste, without anyone overseeing or criticizing her choices. She slowly walked over to the bookcase and picked up a book of Bukowski's poetry (she'd been in such a Beat phase like never before over the past few months) before flopping onto the bed, stomach first, with the heavy tome in her hand.

Zoning out into the cover, she began to consider the events of her time in Star's Hollow thus far. She'd basically holed up in her house, other than excursions to Luke's, where she smiled and answered questions very basically to everyone but Luke and her mom. It had been so good to see Luke, and she'd apologized to him too, immediately, which he'd of course gruffly said wasn't necessary and that he was there for her. Something she already knew, and had basically forever. The first night she'd crashed right away and the second she and Mom had done a movie marathon with the Brat Pack theme. Tonight was supposed to be Joe Pesci night. A lot of feel good choices, no pressure. Rory could tell Jess had sad something to Lorelai and she appreciated that her mom was giving her some room to feel it out.

Rory was surprised about the newly formed tolerance, and even bond, between Lorelai and Jess, but it made a lot more sense to her than it might to others. She had always known how much they had in common and how those things were what drove them apart, could help them get along incredibly well or fight furiously. She was happy it had changed and more than anything that it was for Luke rather than her. It was more stable that way, and made more sense, and it was so good for Lorelai and Luke's relationship and for Jess and Luke too. Everyone just seemed to be really...good.

Which she had to admit was weighing on her. Because she wasn't good, at all. Rory was still a bit smiley in public, and to be fair she was happier having the support of Jess, Luke and Lorelai than she was when she was still denying everything, but the pressure was still sitting there on her, like a rock. She was miserable. She wasn't happy with her life. She knew some things would have to change for her to be happy, though she was still figuring out what they were. She had finally gotten in touch with her editor, and he'd agreed to let her take her vacation time plus sick days for the following two weeks and then file stories digitally until further notice, for a reduced wage and demotion. Yes, demotion. Rory was no longer covering D.C., only New York.

"I'm sorry, Rory," Nathaniel had said to her on the phone, "But I just can't have you in charge of something that high profile right now. I don't think it's good for you and I know it's not good for me."
"I understand completely," Rory had assured him, and she did. Actually she wasn’t upset about it at all. The lack of money sucked, but she had no expenses right now (she really needed to talk to Jess about paying rent or something) and honestly she was barely motivated to turn in much of anything as it was. She was, as much as it surprised her to admit it, completely fine with having less responsibility there. Which scared her a bit, but thrilled her too. She’d mention it to Jess tomorrow. She hadn’t told her mom, but she didn’t feel the need to. They were fine as they were and Rory was happy with the current level of communication.

At least she’d gotten some sleep last night, Rory thought as she stretched across the bed. The first night she’d tossed and turned for hours. She hated not being in the apartment, even though it wasn’t hers, and not being around Jess, even though he wasn’t hers either. And it wasn’t like she was alone. Her mom was there, in the next room. She just didn’t feel comfortable. Rory had been so happy when Jess said he was coming to town, and she could tell immediately that he was experiencing exactly what she was.

Jess. A topic of a great deal of thought, but for right now, leave the thinking to the "artists", Rory mused as she dove into Bukowski headfirst, really agreeing with an earlier statement that Austen probably would’ve liked him.
Chapter 41

After a few hours, Rory sheepishly walked downstairs and handed Luke her coffee mug. He looked at her in amazement.

"I'm sorry!" she exclaimed, "It's just…the books…"

"Not that," Luke said impatiently, "I just can't believe you lasted that long on only one cup of coffee." Rory grinned.

"I remembered where you keep it," she replied and left Luke shaking his head as she headed to the Dragonfly to meet her mom for lunch.

"Sookie!" Rory exclaimed upon entering the dining room. The woman was as gorgeous and happy as ever. She immediately ran to hug her.

"Hi, sweetie!" Sookie cooed, finally letting go and pulling back, "Look at you! Every time I see you it's like you just keep getting prettier."

"Sookie," Rory blushed, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She knew for a fact she must look like a mess given her recent lazy streak. She couldn't even remember where her eyeliner was, and she hadn't seen it in two weeks.

"Stop being humble, you're gorgeous," Sookie gushed. Suddenly, little eyes peeked out from behind the door frame.

"Um…Sookie?"

"Davy! Martha! Come over here and say hi to your Auntie Rory!" Sookie hollered, not even turning around. The two children cautiously approached.

"Hi, Aunt Rory," Davy said tentatively. Martha smiled shyly before ducking to hide behind her mom's legs. Sookie let out a sigh.

"She's been so shy lately, I just don't know what to do with her," she lamented, "Oh, you'll have to see Annie later. She's with Lane right now. I swear, that girl has been a godsend. Looking after twin boys and then my girl four days a week? I have no idea how she does it."

"All the cash probably help," Lorelai teased as she walked up to them, "Plus Kwan and Steve play so well with Annie. You know they'll be fighting over her next year."

"If they aren't already," Sookie added, giggling.

"Hi, hon," Lorelai hugged her daughter, "God, people suck today. Can we get a patent on a destupidifer?"

"Yes," Rory affirmed, "The second you figure out how to make it."

"I'll put that on tomorrow's list." They walked towards the dining room, the tower of food Sookie had prepared waiting on the center table.

Meanwhile, back in Philadelphia, Jess was having a slightly less tranquil day.

"I swear to God, if you do not fucking get your shit together, I will cut you! I am so done with this, Peter!" Matt was screaming into his phone, so loudly that customers were staring at the office door
even though it was shut. Jess groaned, burying his face in his hands.

"Chris, I hate to do this to you man, especially since I'm taking off early, but I have to get Matt under control. You know I'm right."

Chris looked over at the office door and sighed deeply. "Yeah, I know. I've got everything if you can handle Evans later. Just bring your stuff with you and drag him out, the customers are gonna have a field day if he keeps this act up and there's no use in you coming back after you've left." Jess nodded and offered him a weak smile, which Chris faintly returned.

Heading upstairs, Jess tried to stop the rage that was aching his head. Anger wasn't going to work with Matt. It never worked with Matt, because it was his thing. You can't fight fire with fire. But he needed to do something. The last few days especially had been hell, with Matt constantly arguing with his writers. Usually they all had the policy of staying out of each others' relationships with the writers, but it was becoming disruptive to the entire office and honestly, Jess was getting worried about the long term. The Peter whose head had just received a very thorough bashing-in was one of Matthew's three biggest clients. He knew that Matt didn't like Rory but God, why was he making such a goddamn big deal? And moreover, letting it affect his own life. His work. There needed to be a boundary drawn. Jess grabbed the bag on the bed next to his. He'd packed it mere seconds after he'd spoken with Rory, and no, he did not give a fuck. He needed sleep, dammit! Once he'd slung it over his shoulder and tucked a few more paperbacks in, he walked downstairs, refusing to stop until he had grabbed Matt and was out the door.

"Get up," Jess demanded as he opened the office door. Matt narrowed his eyes, turning around in the chair.

"Excuse…"

"Get the hell up. Now. I'm not messing around," Jess warned, his eyes aflame with anger, "This is business. We're taking a walk."

"You can't just stick Chris with…"

"Chris isn't the problem right now. He'll be just fine, and in fact, we voted, so you have to come with me," Jess cut him off again, "Now lift your ass out of that chair and follow me out of this building like the civilized man I know you can pretend to be."

Still glaring, Matt stood up, grabbing his wallet and phone off the desk and following Jess out of Truncheon, slamming every door he could on his way.

As soon as they were outside, Jess grabbed the phone out of his hand. He knew those skills would come in handy again someday.

"What the…"

"No calls until we talk," Jess said, point-blank, as he walked up the street, Matt on his tail, "Chris and I heard you earlier and although we usually have enough respect for one another to give leeway, right now you need to cool off, or we could actually lose important business. So cool off. We're gonna go have a beer, and once we're done, you're off till Monday."

"Since when are you the boss here?"

"That's what's great about this," Jess smirked, keeping up his rapid pace, "Since Truncheon is a three-man operation that's run as a complete democracy, when Chris and I vote, you have to listen to us and can't cry fascist. Convenient, isn't it?"
"Smartass," Matt mumbled, following Jess into the bar on the corner.

When they walked in, Jess gestured to the bartender tiredly, who immediately brought two pints.

"Thank you," Jess exhaled gratefully, and the woman smiled.

"I'll keep 'em coming," she added as she walked away. Matt sighed deeply.

"Look, don't even bring up the Rory thing again. She's not even here."

"Exactly, and still you look like you're trying to play Atlas," Jess responded calmly, taking a gulp of the brew, "Look, I'm not here to accuse you. It hasn't worked. And neither has trying to get you to just do this for me. So I'm at a loss and I'm drinking."

"I'll drink to that." They clinked their glasses sarcastically. Jess motioned for the waitress to bring him some water. After a period of silence, Matt spoke.

"It's not that I don't want to, Jess," he said, his voice low, "You do so much for Chris and I. We all do, for each other. It's part of the deal. So it's not that I just don't give a shit."

"It's that you give too much of a shit," Jess finished for him, quickly drinking the water.

"Exactly," Matt looked into his glass, "I feel like we're just having the same exact conversation again and again."

"Maybe we aren't good with words." At that Matt cracked a legitimate smile.

"Look, I'll try harder. Really. Just...you know what you're doing, don't you? I know you say it's just a friend thing or whatever the hell it is you're playing it to be but I know you, Jess. I just want to be sure that whatever your reasons are for doing this, you know it's the right thing to do."

Jess nodded slowly. "Absofuckinglutely."

"Then I guess I'll just have to pick up day drinking and read some Emily Post."

"Whatever it takes, Matt. Whatever it takes."
Chapter 42

An hour and three glasses of water later (living with Liz had made Jess a bit paranoid about drinking, so he’d rather be safe than sorry), Jess was on the road again.

He was grateful that things with Matt were worked out, at least for now. He understood that Rory needed to be in Philadelphia, as much as she loved Stars Hollow, and that she needed to be surrounded by people who at least didn't openly hate her. Give it some time, he thought, as he drove towards Connecticut. Everything would work itself out.

Rory, however, was in a less calm state. She had only been at the town meeting for ten minutes before Taylor had to mention her. In front of everyone. And ask what brought her to town and how long she'd been here and how was the career in journalism going and why didn't she come in for Thanksgiving to be a pilgrim. At that one even Miss Patty rolled her eyes. Rory had tried to quietly deflect, but Stars Hollow wasn't a town known for its subtlety, so instead she flat out lied. Work is great, only here for a week of vacation to catch up with mom, I was overseas on Thanksgiving and planned to come back but my flight was delayed, and no I did not know that that old hoodlum that I used to date was skulking around here. Her mom turned to her, wide-eyed, after these responses were finished, but Rory just shrugged, her eyes filled with defeat. She couldn't disappoint all of them. It was hard enough to come clean to Jess, who would always respect her, no matter what choices she made. But to tell the people that had known her since she was born that she wasn't the person they thought…it would crush them. And they'd done so much for her. There was no way she was ready to be honest with them, especially since she wasn't even able to fully come to terms with what was going on herself yet.

Her mom had, when they had more privacy, asked about her job, and her friends in New York, and what was going on in her life. Rory had just shrugged and answered that her boss was kind enough to understand she was having a crisis and provide her flexibility, and that she never really had any time to make friends in New York, since she was always traveling or working. And nothing was going on with her life, and absolutely nothing was going on with Jess (she answered the question her mom was clearly trying not to ask). Though yes, she was living with him. Yes, indefinitely. And to all of this Lorelai just nodded, understanding how different it was from the time that her daughter had run away to live in Hartford with her grandparents and how good this all was for her, even though she seemed and clearly felt like a trainwreck.

At about 8:30 PM, she headed from her Mom's house over to the diner, grabbing an overnight bag and saying she'd probably crash on the couch. Lorelai had accepted that too, without question, and had called Luke and told him he could stay. It confused Rory at first how calm and open-minded her mom had been, but then she realized that of course Jess must have spoken with her. Jess, the most calming, stabilizing force in her life, must have cared enough to convince her mother to act rationally while she figured herself out. The thought made Rory's heart pang with a melancholy hope. She knew she was screwed up and still screwing up and would need to actually deal with whatever the problem was eventually, but Jess was there, creating a buffer zone, a sanctuary for her to do so in her own time, whenever she was ready.

Jess pulled up to the diner at 8:50 sharp, expecting to be able to unpack his things before Rory arrived. Of course he should've known better. She was sitting there in the empty diner, at a center table, just staring out the window. The book in front of her was closed and she had a bag on the seat. He smiled at that before grabbing his own bag out of the seat beside him and walking inside.

"How'd you get in? The place is closed," Jess smirked, walking behind the bar and turning on the
coffee pot. She smiled at him.

"I've known where that key was since I was ten and realized Luke kept leftover pie upstairs," Rory explained, her eyes brightening at the memory. Jess raised his eyebrows.

"You stole pie from Luke's apartment?"

"No, mom did," Rory giggled, "I just took notes in case I ever decided to have a rebellious phase."

"Does that mean you want to go steal some pie now?" Jess teased her, and she laughed out loud, a full, cheerful laugh that warmed Jess from head to toe.

"Well it's better than demolishing a snowman," she nodded, and they both walked upstairs, taking their belongings with them. One of the best things about the relationship between them, in Rory's opinion, was that they never had to say a word to be on the same page about those kind of things. He knew she was staying, she knew he wanted her to. It was simple.

"So, quite a coincidence Luke needs you to work this weekend," Rory said casually, setting her bag on the bed.

"And that he wanted to spend tonight at Lorelai's," Jess replied. Rory smirked.

"Jess Mariano, are you implying that you orchestrated this entire scheme to get me to sleep with you?"

Jess looked at her with mock outrage. "Of course not! That's preposterous," he answered, "It was obviously your goal all along and I'm just now catching onto the ways of your womanly wiles."

"What's the matter, Jess? Can't sleep without me?" Rory grinned and Jess blushed furiously. This drew a hearty laugh from Rory. Then suddenly Jess was about four inches away from her.

"Maybe I just don't want to," he breathed. A pink flush crept onto Rory's cheeks, and she couldn't look away from Jess' eyes, which were smiling as clearly as she had been a moment ago.

Suddenly, Rory's phone started to buzz. She turned around immediately and crashed into the table, causing Jess to crack up. She turned to glare at him as she answered the call.

"Hello? Oh, hi Nathaniel. Yes, thank you. No, not next week. I really don't know…" her voice trailed off, "Look, it's late here. Can I call you back tomorrow? Great. Talk to you then."

She hung up and Jess looked at her curiously.

"My boss," she sighed, "It's been an intense few days."

"Really?" he asked, slowly, trying not to push her.

"I was demoted," Rory answered, softly, "And I'm not even upset about it."

Jess looked at her in confusion.

"But…"

"Yeah. I have no idea," she admitted, "In fact, when I heard I just felt…relieved. Like at the end of a Hemingway novel." She smirked as Jess rolled his eyes.

"Funny," he deadpanned, "What does the demotion actually mean for you?"
"My salary's cut. No more frequent travel, and I'm no longer responsible for covering D.C.,” she explained, "The salary cut is frustrating but I've never minded living frugally, I can do it if I need to, and it's not like I have expenses right now. By the way, remind me to start paying you rent."

Jess sighed, "Rory, you're working for Truncheon for free right now. Consider room and board your salary. Now get back to the point."

"Okay," Rory answered, too exhausted emotionally to argue with him about it, "Thanks. But honestly I'm just tired. D.C. was so draining. I'd just sit there, filing story after story, getting edit after edit, fixing the story, sending the same story back, and for what? A byline? On one topic that is, true, interesting and hugely important, but where I have no creative control over what I'm doing. At least before I got to choose what I wrote about, or at least my position on it, but the real world isn't like that. And since these are new projects, they require so much extra time and effort to get them off the ground, which is fine, but….I'm just…I'm tired, Jess. I was happy about being demoted. I love working and being in the newsroom but I just can't do it right now. I wish I could explain it better. I can't go to work, I can't stay in Stars Hollow, I can't be in New York…"

"That's why you have Philadelphia," Jess finished.

"But I can't stay there forever," Rory sighed, and Jess looked down, not meeting her eyes. Yes, she could. They both knew that.

"It sounds like you just need to relax and figure things out," Jess said, "But for this weekend enjoy your time home with your mom and everyone. Have you seen Lane yet?"

"Going over there tomorrow," Rory replied, going over to her bag and picking out a shirt, "She's been really busy this week because Zak's out of town but he gets in tonight so he's taking the kids while we hang out."

"Did I meet Zak?" Jess inquired.

"I think for about ten seconds," Rory responded, "You got along better with Dave?"

"What happened to him?"

"Moved to California. Last time anyone heard he was dating some blonde."

"Lane must've been thrilled."

"Lane couldn't care less. She's gotten a lot better since high school," Rory admitted, "Though I'm not sure how she'll take it when I tell her I'm staying with you."

"I can see it now! 'Lane, Jess and I are living together.' Cue fireworks, explosions and shootings, followed by an immediately enacted plan to catch me with a giant butterfly neck and stick me in a room with Kirk until I go insane."

"Who'd lead the charge?"

"Well now that your mom's out, I'd have to say Taylor. My money's on him never coming around to me."

"You'd be rich then," Rory smirked.

"Yes, and then I could buy myself a mansion and a mail order bride and everything I've ever wanted," Jess replied sarcastically, "Or a Porche."
"I liked your shitty old car better," Rory said quietly, smiling as she walked into the bathroom to change. Jess grinned to himself as he went to his bag, quickly getting ready for bed himself.

A couple minutes later Rory emerged in his old Metallica tee shirt. Jess looked at her and instantaneously began to laugh more loudly than he had in years.

"What's so funny?" Rory crossed her arms across her chest, and Jess grinned broadly.

"It's just…it's like if Pippi Longstocking went to a Marilyn Manson concert," he answered before dissolving into laughter again. And after that comment, Rory couldn't help but crack up as well.

"It's your shirt," Rory replied accusingly as she climbed into bed.

"Yeah, it is," Jess responded, before the realization hit him, "Hey. You're home."

"Yeah…" Rory looked at him questioningly.

"In Stars Hollow. Where you have clothing. Of your own." He looked at her meaningfully. She blushed.

"It's just…comfortable," Rory bit her lower lip, "I can give it back to you tomorrow if you want."

"My closet is your closet," Jess smiled, "I told you, you look better in my clothes than I do. Even the ones that are vaguely horrifying."

"Thank you?" Rory smirked, "Now shut up, stop looking at my clothes and focus on your book."

Jess picked up his book as she did, but started flipping through the pages, not once looking at the book and staring at her, smirking. When Rory noticed she couldn't hide her grin, but quickly shot him a glare of false disgust before returning to her reading.

About an hour later, Rory turned off the light, rolling on her side contentedly. "Goodnight, Dodger."

"Goodnight, Rory," Jess called back, lying back comfortably. And a good night it was.
Chapter 43

The next morning, Jess woke up at 6:00 to open the diner for Luke. He'd called and offered to do it as he was driving to Stars Hollow the night before and Luke had readily agreed, since he'd be staying at Lorelai's and it was more convenient that way. He'd even told Jess to take off early, which was unheard of coming from Luke Danes. But now Jess was kind of regretting it.

It was the first night of full, peaceful, blissful sleep that Jess Mariano had enjoyed in almost a week. It was like going on a long vacation and coming back to your own bed, except for the fact that in reality he was on vacation and it wasn't his bed. But he slept soundly through the night, and judging by the contented sighs and breaths coming from the bed next to him, he wasn't the only one.

The first thing he'd seen when he had opened his eyes was Rory. The sun was rising through the apartment's one window and it was reflecting onto her skin, illuminating the porcelain of her cheeks. It's a cliché for a reason, Jess had thought as gazed at her lazily. Rory had never been a still sleeper, something Jess had realized early on, but today she was splayed out across the bed, half tucked into the blankets and half outside of them, curled around the pillow, the Metallica tee shirt pulled up a little high on her leg from the movement, just barely exposing her thigh. Jess had drawn an involuntarily breath at the visual, forcing himself to think. She's just a friend. You're helping her. It's not like that.

But this was his Rory. It wasn't Star's Hollow's Rory or Lorelai's Rory or even Luke's Rory. This was the Rory that only he ever really saw, totally given over to the type of calm she only enjoyed when he was around. Even Jess couldn't help but admit that she had only ever really been calm in his presence. There was just such a sense of peace within her, an artlessness about the way she was laying and the one she smiled in her sleep, so bright and uncautioned. Jess looked at the scene in front of him in wonder, trying to remember why on earth and how on earth he could have ever left this girl. Hell, how he ever got this girl.

It wasn't that she was divine or perfect or infallible. Ironically enough, that was the common Rory, the one everyone got to see and know. He thought she was sublime in her imperfection, her flaws and complexities writing a story that was too good for others to understand. It was written for him, and he'd known it since he'd first seen her. He had meant that part of his speech, way back when he recklessly begged her to run away with him. He had known since first seeing her that they were meant to be together, and that they would know each other like no one else ever could. This version of Rory was cracked and messy and a hypocritical contradiction of a personality, but it was Rory at her most pure. Jess understood that when no one else could.

Finally, he tore his eyes away from her sleeping form and reluctantly headed downstairs to make some coffee. If she ever had to wake up from that magnificent state, he'd love for her to need him for something.
Chapter 44

When Rory woke up, Jess was already gone. Disappointed without really knowing why, she forced herself out of bed and to go check the time. 10 AM! No wonder he was gone. He was probably downstairs working. Where the coffee was. She needed coffee.

Remembering Lorelai's cautionary tale, she changed out of his Metallica tee shirt and into one of her own tops and a pair of jeans before heading downstairs, surreptitiously looking around the corners on her way out of the stairwell to make sure none of the customers saw her. Jess however caught her eye and smirked, gesturing to an empty stool. She hurried over to it, where he was already in the process of pouring coffee.

"Not bad for an amateur," Jess said casually, "But the shoes were a giveaway. You should really leave questionable behavior to the pros."

Rory grinned. "No one saw me."

"Yes, but…"

"Rory! When did you get here? I didn't see you come in," Miss Patty bellowed, approaching her with an enormous hug. Smirking and turning quickly away, Jess went to go to refill another customer's cup.

"Oh, um, well, you know me. Coffee, need it, only time I'll actually run," Rory stuttered, "Other than for food. Food! Luke?"

"Luke isn't here," Jess replied, casually walking over to her, "But I can take your order." Jess' expression was completely blank, giving away nothing, whereas Rory had turned tomato-red. Miss Patty watched them curiously.

"Um…okay. Yeah, sure," Rory said, "Bacon. And…eggs…and pancakes."

"Coming up," Jess nodded curtly, still keeping a straight face as he went to go call the order. Miss Patty turned to Rory curiously.

"Sweetie, are you alright?" she asked, before lowering her voice, "Did you know he was in town? I can only imagine how surprising that must be for you…devastating, I'm sure. My third husband…"

"Oh, no, I knew he was here," Rory cut her off quickly, "And it's fine. We're fine. Everything's fine. I'm just…late. To meet Lane. So I'm hoping that food comes quickly." Rory shot a glare at Jess. She could see the glint in his eyes even though he appeared to ignore her.

"Oh, well, of course, dear," Miss Patty put her hand on Rory's shoulder and leaned in to whisper, "If you need anything at all, just let me know."

"Thanks Miss Patty," Rory nodded quickly as Jess returned, dropping the plate in front of her, "Oh, thanks Jess."

"Yep," Jess deadpanned, in his signature teenage monosyllabic monotone. It was all Rory could do to keep from grinning. As Miss Patty walked away and Jess went to go get the coffee pot, Rory sighed, beginning to cut into her pancakes. At which point the temptation to smile became overwhelming.
"You put chocolate chips in my pancakes," Rory said softly as Jess approached, pouring more coffee into her mug.

"Technically, Cesar put chocolate chips in your pancakes," Jess responded, before meeting her eyes. For a moment they were frozen in a way that was both new and completely familiar. A feeling crept over her entire self, completely uncertain but intuitively familiar, making it impossible for her to think, or breathe. Suddenly Rory snapped out of the trance.

"Oh, crap!" Rory exclaimed, causing Jess to raise his eyebrows, "Now I'm actually late to meet Lane. Would you mind…"

"Right here," he nodded, pulling a paper bag out from under the counter and packaging her food. He handed her a to-go cup and she quickly poured her elixir of life into it. She smiled at him gratefully.

"You are a god," she purred, grabbing everything, "I should be back in a couple hours for more sustenance."

"I'd like that first part on my tombstone," Jess called after her, smirking, "And I look forward to it."

"The engraving?"

"The providing."

With one final irrepressible grin Rory rushed out the door, leaving Jess unable to tear his eyes away from her until she was completely out of view. Miss Patty shook her head, smiling into her cup of coffee. She'd known for a long time now that she didn't need to keep a picture of Rory in her purse.

"Lane!" Rory exclaimed, hugging her friend tightly as soon as the apartment door opened. The two girls squealed, squeezing the oxygen out of one another for a few moments before finally pulling apart.

"How are you? How's the job? And the travel? And how can you be in town? I'm so happy you're in town! I miss you! And so do Steve and Kwan. Oh, wait, hold on a sec." Lane turned around as she and Rory walked into the house. "Steve! Kwan! Come say hi to Aunt Rory!"

"Hi Aunt Rory!" the two boys shouted, running over. Rory laughed as they immediately hugged her legs. She patted them on the heads. "Hi boys!" Rory smiled brightly, crouching down to hug them both, "How are you two? You look so big! I haven't seen you in such a long time."

"I have a new toy!" Kwan announced. "No, it's my toy! You just stole it!" Steve accused. Rory laughed.

"Well maybe you two can show Rory in a little bit. Right now we're going to go have some adult time, so you can have your hour of TV."

After settling the kids in, Rory and Lane returned to the kitchen. Rory pulled out her food and started eating while Lane folded clothing.

"So…fill me in. What's going on?" Lane smiled at her friend, "It seems like ages since we've even talked."

"Well, it kind of has been," Rory admitted, lowering her eyes, "Lane…I know I've been kind of distant. But it's not just from you. From this town, from my friends, from my family. From everyone."
"Don't worry. Everyone knows that your work keeps you really busy," Lane reassured her, unaware of the growing sadness in Rory's eyes, "And everyone is so…"

"Happy for me? Proud of me?" Rory cut her off, sighing before taking a huge gulp of coffee, "Look, I know that. And I really don't want to be ungrateful. You know me, Lane. I hate people who are selfish and don't appreciate what they have and I have so much."

"But…" Lane urged, beginning to see the real reason Rory was there.

"Do you remember the talk we had the night before I left Stars Hollow to go follow the campaign trail?" Rory asked. Lane nodded. "Well…it's just…things, work, life, everything really…it's not what I thought it would be. And so I'm kind of not sure what I'm doing."

"Alright," Lane replied slowly, "Well…why don't we start with why you're in Stars Hollow?"

"That seems like the right place to start, but it might make more sense to start in Philadelphia," Rory admitted, looking down. Lane's eyes widened.

"Philadelphia?" Lane repeated, disbelieving, "So that means…"

"Jess," Rory nodded.

"Are you two…"

"No," Rory answered, feeling a small twinge as she did, "But I am staying with him there. I'm working at his bookstore-publishing company and filing stories for my normal job via distance. For now. I don't know what's happening long term. I'm here because he thought it was time I came back here. Spent some time with the people who know me and let them know what's going on. Mom, specifically. But I need you too."

"You have me," Lane promised, "For anything, everything you need. I'm here. Even if it involves Madonna."

"Not quite that dire," Rory grinned in spite of herself.

"Wait, did you say Jess wanted you to see your Mom? Don't they hate each other?" Lane asked, confused.

"Not anymore," Rory answered, "A lot has changed. It's funny, it should be weird but it all feels completely normal. Do you know what I mean?"

"I think so," Lane nodded, "Like when I started dating Zack. I thought it would be weird and awkward and feel strange, but it kind of just felt like it had been like that forever."

"Exactly," Rory affirmed, "Except Jess and I aren't involved." Lane looked at her doubtfully. "Really, we're not. Honestly right now he's just been an incredible friend."

"So…you're going to have to take me through the whole story," Lane announced, walking toward the CD shelf, "Which will call for the Elvis Costello."

"Why Elvis Costello?"

Lane just smirked. Rory rolled her eyes before nodding in assent and smiling to herself. She'd missed Lane's prescriptive music selections and the fact that she heard the answers that Rory meant rather than the ones she gave.
Chapter 45

While Rory was at Lane's, Jess thought he'd be having a somewhat relaxing day of work at the diner. He couldn't have been more wrong.

"Jess!" Lorelai demanded, hurdling her way into the diner. That alone wasn't abnormal. Jess was pretty certain that Lorelai had never sought coffee at a normal human speed. But something was different in her tone, something that made him take notice. He turned to her expectantly.

"Take your ten, we need to talk," she said, ignoring the confused glances of the few customers in the diner. Jess nodded and gestured upstairs. Lorelai immediately headed up while he told Cesar he was off.

As soon as Jess walked through the door, he found Lorelai sitting on the bed Rory had been sleeping on, her arms crossed across her chest. She sighed deeply, and Jess slowly approached, sitting on the other bed, facing her.

"Look, I really do trust you. At least, much more now than I did before," Lorelai began slowly, "And I can see that you and everything you're doing for her is really helping. I'm not trying to accuse you, because I honestly don't think you're doing anything wrong. I don't think of you as that kind of guy anymore. In fact, I know you're not like that. That's not why I'm here."

"Then what's your question?" Jess responded slowly, meeting Lorelai's eyes purposefully. She inhaled deeply.

"Jess, why are you doing it? Really, truly, the entire reason. Not just the main reason or the right reason, but the entire reason behind what you're doing. Is there some part of you that is just doing this because you want her back or something? She never really filled me in on how things ended with you guys and the more recent events, but I just…need to understand why you're willing to do all of this for her, even now."

Closing his eyes, Jess took a deep breath. After a moment his eyes found Lorelai's. He gave a grim smile. "You want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but? Alright, I'll give you that, but I can't promise you'll like what I have to say." Lorelai nodded, and Jess continued. "I don't know why I'm helping her. I just know that not helping her didn't even occur to me. The second I knew something was wrong, it wasn't a question of whether or not I was going to do something, it was what I was going to do or how I was going to do it. And it wasn't motivated by some desire to get back together with her or anything like that. I didn't expect…I don't expect that to happen. I don't even really know what to think on that line of reasoning. But that's not the issue right now and it wasn't when this came up. The truth is even if she never looked at me that way another day in her life, she's Rory. I am going to help her, anytime she needs help, that she'll have me. I just will. No matter what I get out of it. Now that could be fueled by some crazy sense of guilt or debt I feel to Luke for what happened here when I was in high school, or even to her for being such a shitty guy at times when we were involved, or maybe I really just care about her that much, in a way that will never go away, that is based in romantic attachment. It could be any one or a combination of them. I don't know which, and though I've tried to figure it out sometimes, I realized something. It doesn't matter why I'm helping her, or if my motivations are pure or not. Because no matter what anyone thinks of that choice, myself included, I know it's what I'm going to do. If your logic said it was a bad idea, I'd still do it. If Luke thought it was a bad idea, I'd still do it, and generally speaking defying Luke is the closest thing in my mind to sacrilege. And even if I reasoned and rationalized in my own mind that helping her wasn't the best decision in some scenario, I would help her anyway. It's not a choice, Lorelai. It never has been and never will be. Yes, I'll admit that I care about Rory. I'll also admit that I care
about her a hell of a lot more than most of my friends, and of course a substantial portion of that was
based on being in love with her. I don't know where I stand on that at this point, and I don't know
where she stands either. But right now, that aspect of everything is irrelevant. I want to help her. I
need to help her get through this. If, once this is settled, she still wants me as a part of her life, there
might be something to consider but at this point you can be assured that I'm helping her and that I'm
not doing so intending to get anything out of it. I just…have to. Do you know what I mean?"

Lorelai sat quietly for a moment. Any other moment Jess would have cracked a joke about Lorelai
and silence being unlikely bedfellows, but he knew the significance this conversation could hold, and
he took it just as seriously as Lorelai did. After a while she looked at Jess carefully.

"Did Luke ever tell you about when I married Rory's dad?"

"Not much," Jess admitted, "He grumbled about it. I got the abridged version."

"Then I'm guessing he didn't tell you about when my dad ended up in the hospital during that time,"
Lorelai exhaled deeply. Jess shook his head, his eyes glued to Lorelai.

"I slept with Rory's dad the night before Luke came over to ask me to elope. I told him what
happened and we broke up. Not long after, I married Christopher. The marriage was a mess and was
falling apart, and Luke and I were barely speaking. Everything was a mess. And one day, Rory was
sitting in her grandfather's class, and suddenly he collapsed. He had a heart attack. Chris and I had a
fight earlier that night, which really isn't relevant to the story…point is, he had left the night before
and I couldn't get a hold of him. For more than a day in the hospital I wasn't able to reach him or find
out where he was. I needed him to show up and he didn't."

Jess looked at Lorelai, imploring her to continue. "I didn't tell Luke what had happened. Chris didn't
like when I talked to Luke and I also thought it would be better for our marriage if I kept my
distance. But someone told him. Which I found out when he showed up at the hospital with food and
a complete willingness to go run all of my mother's crazy trauma errands. Nothing happened while
he was there. I didn't even really act that grateful, because I knew how upset Chris would be if he
saw him there. But I needed him, and even though there was nothing there anymore, and we'd
probably never been in a worse place in our relationship, he came through without question. And I
kind of knew, deep down, that he would. And always would. Which is another reason why I
divorced Chris and that Luke is the love of my life."

"He's everything a man should try to be," Jess said, smiling softly, "I've thought that since I first met
him when I was a kid and I realized that not every guy my mom's age did drugs or beat people up.
And that they could have jobs. And as I got older I realized that if I could become half the man he is,
hell, a tenth of the man he is, I would be incredibly lucky. He just…cares about people, so much.
And he does right by everyone. That's the kind of person I want to be, that I'm trying to be. But in
this situation it's not even a trying type of thing."

"That's because you take after him in that way," Lorelai replied, meeting Jess' eyes, "You care about
some people unconditionally and will be there for them come hell or high water, to the ends of the
earth, no matter how much they fuck up or you fuck up or you both do. It's the way you are with
Luke, which I realized recently. And it's also the way you are about Rory, which I know for sure
now, but probably saw coming a lot earlier than I want to admit." Jess looked at Lorelai curiously
and she smiled at him gently.

"Jess, I don't know what will happen with you and Rory, or if anything will. But if it does you have
my blessing. Not that you need it, but…you know what I mean. And I just want to thank you, for
doing this for her. You're the only one who seems to be able to help her out of these things when
they get like this. None of the rest of us can reach her, even me. We can do some things, but you…"
she needs you. And it's nice being able to count on you being there for her. I'm sorry for questioning your motives. I just wanted to…get it. And I honestly didn't think I would. But I do."

She stood up, as did Jess. He hugged her, without a moment of hesitation.

"Thank you," he responded quietly, "It means a lot. Especially from you. With what you are to Luke…and to her."

"I wouldn't be saying it if I didn't mean it," Lorelai replied honestly, "Unless, of course, you had coffee to bribe me with. Which…"

"I will be fetching immediately," Jess smirked, starting down the stairs, Lorelai on his heels, "Do you take your bribes plain or with a donut on the side?"

"Two, or I go rogue," Lorelai demanded, sitting at the counter as Jess poured her some coffee and went to get the donuts.

Jess couldn't help but grin to himself while getting the donuts. He had Lorelai Gilmore's approval. Somewhere deep down he always had always known that it would by necessity involve pastries and coffee.
Later that evening, Jess found himself closing the diner hours after Rory had gone up. Luke had encountered some sort of Taylor-related emergency that actually necessitated him attending a town meeting. Lorelai had gone with him, but Rory had opted out, not even offering an explanation to Lorelai. Which, to be honest, relieved Jess. At least she wasn't lying and making excuses anymore. Lorelai had looked slightly concerned but not questioned it and just confirmed that they would see them before they left the next day to return to Philadelphia.

After finally finishing everything up downstairs, he walked up, assuming that Rory's head would be buried within a book. What he didn't expect was to find her on her bed with about thirty of her books strewn about, some on top of each other, all of them open. Jess furrowed his eyebrows.

"Look, I know that some people say that books are their friends, but this seems…"

"You're the one who's been talking to them," Rory cut him off, meeting his eyes. She gestured at the books and he leaned over to look. Sure enough she had gathered almost every book he'd been annotating since he started staying here. Sheepishly Jess shrugged.

"Sorry. Habit," he replied, "Hope you're not mad."

"Mad?" Rory stood up. His white tee shirt hung haphazardly off her bare shoulder. She didn't bother to adjust it as she walked straight toward him. "Jess…these aren't notes to yourself."

"Well wouldn't it be selfish of me to write marginalia only pertinent to my own wishes in books that are legally your property?" Jess challenged, unabashedly glancing at the exposed skin. Rory flushed pink. Jess smirked and continued. "And I might be a lot of things, but I can promise you I'm very generous."

Rory glared at him and he laughed. She tried to keep a straight face, and failing, decided to ignore the comment. "Jess, this is serious. These are the kinds of things we…"

"Always wrote? Have always written?" Jess took a step towards her. Rory's eyes didn't leave his, even as they darkened. "Rory, I know time has passed. But you're still you and I'm still me and the way we talk, act, think…when it comes to each other, a lot of things will be the same as they always were. It doesn't matter if you're in crisis and for once I'm responsible. On that deeper level, we're the exact same goddamn people we've known each other to be since we met."

"You have a point," Rory breathed, suddenly aware of how close Jess was to her. "I wasn't complaining about it. I was just…"

"Asking?" he ventured. She nodded cautiously. Jess smirked. "Look, I know how much you like the control and to know what the plan is. But there isn't one. I know you're having a hard time figuring out what's going on with you or how to cope with it, but let me give you some advice. Start here, with this. Let go of the fact that you don't know what's going to happen or if anything will, and that I don't either, and just let the chips fall as they may. Let things happen organically, or not happen. Accept that it's beyond us, either of us, and be okay with that. Can't you see that sometimes that's better?" Jess leaned in closer, until his lips were barely three inches from Rory's own. He softly continued, "The not knowing, the letting it happen, the fate, not knowing how the book ends before you pick it up. Stop trying to manipulate and control the story just because you're afraid of the bad parts. Just let it play out."
Everything had frozen again and Jess was so enraptured that he was tempted to…but he couldn't. No. It was more important that this be about her getting better. Figuring her shit out. Rory inhaled shakily and Jess repressed a smile, leaning back. He saw the quick flash of disappointment in Rory's eyes, though her expression quickly cleared.

"Look. Right now, you need to focus on you," Jess told her, his voice low. "There's no rush and you can take all the time you need, but you need to focus your energy on figuring things out, or at least getting to your next step."

"Jess," Rory said quietly, coming close to him again, "I know. I am. And I do. I want to figure it out, to understand, and I promise you I will and I'll fix things as best as I can. But I can completely promise you that I'll be doing it as myself. No more airs or excuses or any of it. If I'm finally going to do this, I'm going to do it right. Otherwise it's a waste of not only everything I'm going to do but of all the things you've already done for me."


"What?" Rory questioned, "Stay where? Here?"

"No. In Philadelphia," Jess replied, his voice soft but definitive, "At Truncheon. With me. No more time limits or discussions of when the visit ends. From now on, you're there. As long as you still want to be."

"Honestly, Jess?" Rory admitted, "I don't think I'd feel right anywhere else. Thank you, really. For all of this. You didn't have…"

"Doesn't matter," Jess responded, his eyes full of determination, and Rory smiled, giving him an appreciative nod. Sometimes with Jess it was better if you didn't push.

"Now, if you could just explain why in the hell you thought that of all the books of mine that are here for you to deface, you had to choose Jane Austen," Rory grumbled, beginning to gather the books and re-shelve them. Jess grabbed a stack and began to help, smirking again.

"Read the Buikowski concurrently and everything will make more sense, I promise."
The next morning, Jess woke up and turned over to find Rory, still asleep, in the adjacent bed. At that very moment she began rubbing her eyes and lifting herself up. She turned her head toward him and jumped in shock. Jess grinned.

"Well good morning to you too," he smirked at her surprised expression, "You look like you've just seen a criminal in your bedroom. Oh wait, you are the criminal…"

"Do you just gawk at me like this every time you wake up first?" Rory retorted, unable to keep the grin off her face, "And I have no idea what you're talking about. You can check my record, I am nothing but an upright, moral citizen."

"And the grand theft naval…"

"Must be a figment of your imagination, because I have no idea what you're referring to," Rory shrugged innocently, getting out of bed, "God, I need coffee. Especially since we're about to embark upon a three hour drive."

"Think you can stand three hours alone in a car with me?" Jess raised an eyebrow. Rory looked at him mischievously.

"Good point. Maybe I should call Paris, ask her to chaperone."

"You'd need mac and cheese to bribe her with."

"Didn't you say you cook?"

"Not to my own detriment."

"Damn. My lack of domestic prowess is once again ruining my plans."

"Stepford's an efficient place. They get shit done there." Jess gallantly handed Rory a mug of coffee and she looked up at him in surprise.

"How..."

"You don't realize how much time passes during these Before Sunset conversations of ours," Jess grinned before taking a huge gulp of his own coffee, "I could probably have made a four course meal by now."

"And you didn't because..." Rory questioned, smiling.

"Because I'm a cruel, cruel man."

"I'll say," she retorted, grabbing a pair of jeans and a shirt before heading to the bathroom, "You didn't even provide me with bacon. How do you expect me to be conscious and functioning without bacon?"

"Since when am I your provider?" Jess called, struggling not to laugh, "I thought you Gilmore women were all self-sufficient. Isn't independence your claim to fame?"

"Not when it comes to food," Rory answered through the door, "And you should know that by now. You've had about seven years of proof to draw that conclusion. Wasn't intelligence supposed to be
"So the wit comes with the coffee," Jess responded as Rory emerged, just as he'd finished getting dressed. "I'm pretty sure you're wrong about that. If I had any intelligence whatsoever I have no idea what I'd be doing standing within five feet of you before your third cup of coffee."

"Well now that you've acknowledged your intellectual failings, maybe you should try to fix that in order to avoid my pre-coffee, pre-bacon induced homicidal tendencies," she suggested as she walked downstairs, with Jess quickly following behind.

They were both surprised to see the diner was nearly empty. Cesar was in back, and said that Luke had called him to open and said that he'd be in around ten. There were two people at the counter and two occupied tables, but otherwise the place was clear and nearly silent. Rory smiled contentedly.

"All the more energy you can focus on making me bacon," she grinned, sitting down at the counter. Jess shook his head, smiling.

"Coming up," he said, heading toward the back.

"Wait! Aren't you going to take my order? I don't want only bacon," Rory called, "That's unusual even for me."

"Really? Because I just put five pounds of it on here," Jess answered back. Rory rolled her eyes.

"Jess…"

"Relax. I'm bringing food, that you'll like, and that you'll eat so voraciously that you would make football players look like they're dieting," Jess continued. She could hear the bacon frying. "Alright?"

"Okay," Rory surrendered, opening the book she'd brought down with her. She knew Jess was trying to force her to stop thinking. And at this point, she realized how nice it was even just to try.

Ten minutes later, two plates landed in front of Rory. She inspected them curiously.

"Is that…"

"Omelette. With cheese, bacon, ham, and no vegetables of any kind," Jess began, "French toast with powdered sugar, extra on the side, syrup on the side, since you oddly enough never really seemed to be much of a syrup person. And of course, all of which is accompanied by about a half pound of bacon."

"How did you…"

"I told you I could cook," Jess shrugged, "And I know what you like." He grabbed another plate and set it down in front of himself, with an identical omelette and about half the bacon. Then he refilled both coffee mugs.

"Well…thank you," Rory smiled at him, before attacking her meal, "God, I never would have thought of this. And it's perfect."

"You know that usually that would be three separate meals, right?" Jess smirked as she tore through her breakfast, happily gulping down coffee like she were dying of thirst in the Nevada desert.

"Well if I were usual would you find me even remotely interesting?" Rory inquired, finishing off the
rest of the bacon, "Hey, is there more of this?"

Jess laughed out loud, heading back into the kitchen and bringing out the rest of it. "I made the package, just in case. God, you're a medical marvel. And it's so hard to conceive of a world in which you're normal that I can't really answer that, though it's also hard to imagine a scenario in which I don't find you interesting."

Rory blushed. They continued eating in silence for a moment. It was nice, Rory thought, to wake up like this, and have a morning like this. To not have everything planned and to just let things carry her along. More specifically, to just let Jess do so. She wouldn't trust most people with decisions that affected her, even trivial ones. She always thought she liked to be in control. But with Jess around, she could breathe, laugh, let go, not worrying about what anyone thought or what she was going to do. Here she knew who she was. She already had the answers she was looking for. It was just a matter of reaching them, when she was ready. There was no rush, no pressure. All was still.
Chapter 48

Four hours, eight cups of coffee and three different boxes of candy later, Rory and Jess arrived home. Home, really, to both of them now. It was the first time they'd come to Truncheon together, both expecting to stay indefinitely. Rory turned and met Jess' eyes as they parked, and she saw the content from her own eyes reflected in his. This was indeed home.

It had been harder to say goodbye to Lorelai that Rory had expected, if only because she realized how little time she'd really spent with her once Jess arrived. She'd have to apologize later, even though Lorelai hadn't said anything. She'd just smiled and hugged her, telling her that she loved her and knew where to find her. She'd seen Lorelai shoot a knowing glance at Jess and Jess nod in acknowledgment. It seemed as though Rory had missed something but she was trying not to worry about it. She trusted Jess, and she needed to make a real effort to let things go, to not add to her own stress levels by getting involved in things she didn't need to. Luke had been even harder since she'd barely seen him, and truth be told, Rory always missed him more than she let on. Luke had been a father figure to her since she was about ten and she always felt a little sad and lost to leave him. She knew Jess felt the same way about Luke, and had for an even longer time. It was clear from his eyes when he said goodbye to Luke, and the few moments of silence that followed that goodbyes. Rory intuitively knew to give him space afterwards, seeing that it was hard for him. Jess might act independent, and no one would argue against the fact that he could live that way and had for most of his life. But Rory knew the part of him that probably only Luke and herself were aware of, the part that desperately ached for something strong and stable to hold onto. She was happy to see he had a rock, and understood the fact that Jess was still acclimating to the relationship itself.

As they walked in, Jess carrying the bags, Rory noticed Chris' car on the side. She sighed, and Jess turned. When he saw it, he looked at Rory.

"I'm sorry, I told him to take today off. I didn't think he'd be here," Jess apologized.

"It's fine. He actually works here, it's not really my place to get annoyed having him around," Rory replied, looking at her feet. She understood why Matt and Chris had such an issue with her, but she was in fact starting to crack under the pressure of their constant omnipresent disapproval. She didn't need everyone to like her. It wasn't like high school Rory who couldn't take the heat of a few guys messing with her or screwing around. It just really upset her that two people so close to Jess and so important to him thought poorly of her, and to such an extent that they expressed it publicly and with great enthusiasm. She knew that their opinions meant something to him and it killed her that they refused to see her as anything other than the worst-case scenario based on the worst parts of her past with Jess. It wasn't the whole story, but she understood why they'd gotten there. She just wished she could do something to change their minds.

"I know, I just thought it might be nice if you got a break from the peanut gallery," Jess continued, rolling his eyes at the thought, "I swear, they said they were going to be better. And they'll come around eventually. Don't let it get to you."

"I'm not," Rory answered defensively. Jess looked at her disbelievingly and she sighed. "Alright, fine. I'll try not to," she conceded, "I just…wish I could start over with them."

"You can't," Jess said simply, holding the door open for her. "In life you can never start over. Sad but true. The best you can do, in this situation or anything like it, is to accept the complexity as your base and build off of it, trying to find something to appreciate in the mess. You can't change most things and you can't change most people, so you have to be willing to look deeper and work harder, rather than just getting a nice clean chalkboard to write on every time something doesn't work out."
Jess opened the door to the apartment and they walked in. He set the bags down. "Just think about it."

Rory nodded. He had a point. If she could just start him and Lorelai over from the beginning she wouldn’t. Even with the bad, the complexity helped to build something even more strong and better than what would have been if it were easy. Organic, authentic, real. It occurred to Rory that maybe words like that should take the place of perfect and fixed in her mind. It might make things easier on her, and maybe even for Jess as he attempted to deal with her.

"Hey, can you toss me one of my black shirts? I think you stole them all," Jess accused, grinning over his shoulder at Rory. She smirked.

"I plea the fifth," she replied as she threw a tee at him. He caught it and walked toward the bathroom.

"I'm just gonna change and then I was thinking we could go downstairs and sort the new inventory. Exciting, I know," Jess added, somewhat sheepishly, "It's just we're a little…"

"Jess," Rory cut him off, walking over to him. Without even thinking she placed her hand on his wrist with a smile. "I don't mind. I like working here. What you just told me is that I'm going to be spending the rest of the day sorting books. That's kind of like telling Luke he gets to watch baseball all day or Lorelai that there's a shoe sale."

Jess laughed, keeping his hand in hers. He ignored the beat thumping in his chest as he returned her gaze. "If you insist," Jess shrugged his shoulders, "God, we really need to find a way to pay you."

"I'm good with room and board, if that works for you," Rory offered, "Honestly, I should be paying you rent though or something." She pulled her hand away and walked across the room over towards her purse and Jess immediately walked over and stopped her.

Jess put his hand on her shoulder. "Rory," he said, his voice low, "Let me make one thing clear. If you ever try to pay me to live here, I'll make reading Dickens look like a comparatively pleasant experience. Get the picture?"

"But…"

"No," Jess shook his head, "No compromises. The closest I'll get is that you work at Truncheon for now. But even that's just as long as you'd like to. You're always welcome here, and you know I don't mean that as a guest. My home is not your home for all intents and purposes. It is actually, truly, your home. Look at it that way. I insist."

Rory blushed, looking at Jess' darkened, determined eyes. "Thank you," she finally accepted, "I think I'm gonna like it here."

"Well, I'm not Daddy Warbucks or anything…" he called as he started walking down the door, "You coming?"

"Right behind you," she answered, walking down the stairs and closing the apartment door behind her. Now if only she could find a way to charm Chris into tolerating her. If not, she could always bash his head in repeatedly with a copy of Anna Karenina until he assented to give her a fair shot. Smiling at the idea, Rory headed downstairs to attempt peace negotiations.
Chapter 49

Immediately Rory spotted Chris, walking towards the office door looking irritated. Jess sighed deeply and Rory put her hand on his shoulder reassuringly. Suddenly Chris turned and saw them. He scowled.

"I see you're back," he said pointedly, "I'll just be in the office."

"Chris…" Jess rolled his eyes, about to go after him. Rory pulled him aside.

"Can I try?" she asked quietly. Jess looked at her doubtfully.

"Rory, I don't mean to seem rude, but he really…"

"Dislikes me? I know," she sighed, "But I can't have you fighting all my battles for me. Even when you're more likely to win them. Just let me give it a shot, okay?"

"Your funeral," Jess shrugged, gesturing to the door, "But don't be surprised if he's harsh. I'm out here if you need me."

"I'll be back soon," she promised, knocking on the door before peeking in.

"Hey, Chris?" Rory walked in, shutting the door quickly behind her. He remained facing his computer.

"Not a good time," he replied, staring stonily at the screen, "I'm sure Jess can help you with whatever it is."

"It's not a question about Truncheon," she said, taking a seat in the chair opposite him. Chris sighed, turning around to face her.

"Then what is it?" he retorted, "Look, I'm kind of busy here. In case you forgot, this is actually a business. Ours, in fact. Not just your boyfriend's."

"You know we're not together. But that's not the point," Rory replied, "I didn't ask him to let me work here. But I did ask him to let me stay. And I get why you're angry with him, but I think you're being really unfair."

"To him or to you?" Chris inquired, glaring at her, "Because I have to admit, as bad as I feel about potentially mistreating Jess, I'm pretty damn sure you deserve whatever you're getting here, or definitely what you're getting from me. Look, I'm cordial most of the time, if not warm. But you can't expect that of me, after what you did to him. You screwed him over. And just because he seems to have conveniently forgotten it doesn't mean we did."

"He didn't forget anything. And I don't expect you to either," Rory looked at him directly, "You're right. I was terrible to him. Really, truly awful. And now I'm here begging more favors off of him. I see how it looks to you, and rightfully so."

"Don't even try to give me that whole skewed perspective bullshit," Chris spat, "Or your holier-than-thou condescension. It's not that complicated. He's our friend, you treated him like dog crap stuck to the bottom of your shoe, and then you come back expecting him to revere you and of course, he does. I'm sure you can see why that's frustrating."
"I do. I'm not trying to make excuses," Rory answered, "I don't want to fight. That's not why I'm here. But you're wrong about me expecting him to revere me. That's not why I'm here. I'm here because he's the only person I really depend on. You know what it's like to have Jess in your life. That being the case, you know damn well you can't begrudge me wanting to keep it that way."

"If you wanted to keep him in your life, you couldn't have been that cruel to him," Chris responded definitively, "I don't care if it's romantic or not, if you love someone, you can't hurt them that way."

"That's incredibly naïve," Rory said flatly. Chris looked shocked. "No, I'm not going to apologize, because I'm right here. As any person who really loves art, of any kind, is aware, love is the most painful thing on earth. One of the cruelest. And people treat those they love more terribly than anyone else. It's not pretty or right, but the people who matter the most hurt you the worst. Because they matter."

"And you think that since it's literary it makes it okay for you to act that way?" Chris asked disbeliefingly, "In that case, we really shouldn't let you near Truman Capote."

"You're not listening," Rory replied, frustrated, "Of course it's not okay! It's awful! It's so incredibly terrible and cruel and unforgivable that I sobbed the entire way back to Connecticut, and turned around at least four different times. And even worse, I never drove all the way back. There is absolutely nothing okay about it. I'm not justifying it. I'm telling you that as destructive as it was for him, it destroyed me too. I hated doing that to him! I thought that I could be that kind of person, that I didn't care anymore, that it was Jess, even if it blew up, he could handle it. But I was lying to myself the entire time. I knew exactly how it would hurt him and I did it anyway and there is no excuse or reason I could ever give that would make it okay. Ever."

Chris inhaled deeply as Rory sunk into the chair, her cheeks flushed with hurt.

"Look, not that I don't appreciate your self-flagellation. My arms could really use the break. But what exactly are you trying to accomplish?" Chris asked, looking at her carefully, "If you think that just telling me that you understand how wrong it was and why we hate you is going to change it, that seems a little naïve in and of itself, wouldn't you think?"

"I don't expect you to forgive me and act like you like me and nothing ever happened. I'm not looking for a clean slate," Rory explained, meeting Chris' eye, "But Jess…things are…well, I don't know what things are, but I know they're good. And that I'm happy. And that I think he really is, too. But it hurts him that we can't get along, and that there's such tension there. I don't want a get-out-of-jail-free card, and I'm not asking you to speak for Matt too. I'm just saying that given how much you care about Jess, do you think there's any chance you could at least give me the opportunity to try to earn your respect, instead of just shutting me out completely? I'm willing to work for that. In fact, I think it's the only real way to remedy the situation. I don't want you to forgive me, I want to earn your forgiveness. I don't want you to trust me, I want to earn that trust. If you just gave me the answers I want, I'd know you didn't mean them. But I can't make any progress with you until you give me a shot to change your mind, and Jess will continue to suffer the negative consequences of it until we make some kind of progress. So I guess that's what I'm asking for."

"And if I say no?" Chris cocked his eyebrow and Rory sighed.

"That's your choice. Honestly, if you say no, I'll still stick around, and things will keep going as they are for a while before somehow we get into an either-or situation. And he'd probably choose you, and I'd leave, and you'd be stuck once again with a sullen, Rory-destroyed Jess. Or worse, he surprises us all and picks me, and then you're short a Jess in your life, and I speak from experience when I say it's a devastating loss. Either way, Jess loses. Which isn't fair, since it seems like the biggest thing we all have in common is thinking he deserves to win."
"You make a damn good point there," Chris admitted, sighing, "He didn't do anything wrong here. And he does like you, which speaks to something good in your character."

"So…"

"I'll try. For real this time," Chris agreed, giving Rory a nod and holding her gaze, "I think you've earned the right to at least that. We'll both try. No promises, but I'll do my best."

"I really appreciate it," Rory smiled at him, and stood up to leave.

"You really care about him, don't you?" Chris called as Rory walked towards the door. She stopped and turned to him slowly. She smiled softly.

"Yeah, I do." She shut the door behind her, leaving Chris to his thoughts.
Chapter 50

Over the next few weeks, things continued on an upswing. True, no one, including Rory, had figured out what was going on with her. But she and Jess had fallen into a comfortable, natural rhythm that seemed pretty damn close to perfect. Going to sleep and waking up in the same room, sharing mealtimes, and even working together, it all felt right. It didn't seem to matter that Rory was spending her days as an un-glorified stock girl, working for no money (Jess wanted to pay her but had lost that fight every time, though she hadn't tried to pay any of the expenses again, so they were at a draw). It didn't matter much either that Matt still hadn't warmed up to her. Chris had come around a fair deal since his talk with Rory. They were cordial, even close to friendly at times, and he could appreciate her productivity. They treated each other with a cautious respect, Chris always slightly wary but allowing and Rory tentative but determined. Jess wasn't really surprised, when he thought about it. Chris had always been a bit more moderate, open to the idea. But Matt hadn't budged. He just stonily ignored Rory as much as possible now. He was never outright rude to her and he had stopped putting her through the ringer. Clearly Jess' discussion with him had an impact. But he wasn't going to go out of his way to make the effort like Chris did. Chris had tried to talk Matt into being a bit more forgiving and it had been almost as spectacular a failure as the time Truncheon attempted to sell zines. The two of them had barely spoken for almost a week and it ended with a grudging agreement to keep off the topic, though Rory had thanked Chris when she found out about the attempt. There was only so much that could be done.

Regardless, both Rory and Jess were, to put it simply, happy. Happier than either of them had been in a very long time. Those issues didn't seem to bother them much, and Rory was starting to regain a sense of pride and self-worth that she'd thought was permanently lost. She couldn't explain why that was. The work she was doing was no more stimulating than helping her mom out with the inn when she was in high school. But something about the atmosphere had allowed her to relax into herself, lose inhibition, and simply live. The change looked good on her, as Jess often thought. He'd catch himself watching her lazily curled up watching reruns or the way she'd carelessly shove six fries in her mouth at once when they had lunch, or how she stretched in the mornings when she woke up, whatever shirt of his falling off her porcelain shoulder as she arched her back and sighed deeply. He thought about the last one more than he probably should, but who could blame him? It was a tantalizing visual. Seeing Rory in such an artless form was making Jess melt into a similarly unrehearsed calm. He'd never really put on an act for people. Walls had been more his thing. But now, he was smiling and laughing more than he ever remembered, and he wondered why he'd resisted that for so long. Sure, he was working, hard. Truncheon had become swamped with business and it was actually a godsend to have the extra hands. But he was writing too. He had been writing more frequently since that day she showed up, but since Rory moved in, Jess had been writing almost every day, unable to keep the words in, the way it had been with his first. Not that he ever talked about it with Rory. Things were kept pretty light between them still, discussions limited to life and the universe and junk food and movies and punk bands and of course the books, always the books. They didn't delve into each other's psychology or criticize or question. Jess didn't pressure Rory about her path and she didn't offer anything, and he didn't explain the choices he was making either. They just floated along next to each other, Jess teaching Rory how to let go and Rory keeping Jess from being alone.

That was another interesting thing. It hadn't really occurred to Jess how alone he'd been, because truthfully, he hadn't been lonely. It wasn't a self-delusion or anything of the sort. Jess had really just been dedicated to his work for the last few years, and Luke's occasional visits combined with the camaraderie of Matt and Chris had been enough to keep him satisfied. But after Rory became a regular fixture in the landscape of Truncheon, Jess realized how long it had been since he'd been that intimately close with someone. True, they were still completely platonic, even with all the flirtatious
banter that characterized most of their conversations. But the intimacy of feeling so connected to someone, not wanting them to leave, never getting sick of them...those were emotions Jess hadn't experienced in a long time. And he didn't realize how much he wanted to again, how much it satisfied him to have that type of companionship. He could tell Rory felt similarly, just from the comfort that she displayed in her own skin.

Jess knew at some point something would have to crack, one way or the other. Maybe it would be a romantic thing, maybe an anger thing, but he knew that this status quo wasn't going to be able to last indefinitely. But that thought didn't deter him in the slightest from just coasting through the bliss that they were enjoying now. Whatever happened would happen. It was what it was, her, him. He'd known that from the beginning and so had she. And they were both ready to face whatever would come. But for the time being, they'd come to an unspoken agreement not to rush, to just exhale in the security of their current situation, and they'd face whatever would come. And truth be told, both of them, without the knowledge of the other, felt very courageous here. There was very little they couldn't take as long as they came home to that shared room every night and woke up in it every morning.
Chapter 51

Life certainly wasn't the way Rory had expected it to turn out. True, she had a job working as a journalist in New York. But she wasn't really doing it. She was getting in her assignments on time, sure, but her day-to-day life was that of Truncheon's stockgirl, not even the prize stockgirl, just another person helping to keep the place up and running. Just as lowly as anyone else who spent her days shelving books and sorting inventory. And it was nothing like the lazy break she'd spent working at the bookshop in Star's Hollow for Andrew, where she'd haphazardly picked out more books to read than actually focused on doing work. Sure, she found things she wanted to read here, but she never had time to set anything much aside, and she didn't really mind. She was absorbed in what she was doing, fully caught up in the craze of what Truncheon was, the independent press part and the bookstore itself. She did a lot more with the store, though, whereas Jess was now more focused on the publishing aspect. She handled a lot of the day-to-day things in the shop while Jess handled authors and editing and publishing things. It was a nice balance, and she was more than happy with the chaos. She felt secure in what she was doing, and even though she wasn't actively pursuing answers, they had a perfect way of finding her at the smallest, most seemingly unimportant moments.

For instance, take last Wednesday. Rory had been demolishing the Sanders stack, once and for all (Jess' orders, she was to ignore Matt if he protested) and she had caught a glimpse of Jess in a heated argument with an author who had come in to discuss his latest piece of work. Jess felt it needed a lot more editing, whereas the author felt that changing it would take away from the integrity of it and the message he was trying to convey. Of course, Jess would usually be sensitive to such a situation but this was ridiculous.

"It's a French fry, Cole! A goddamned French fry!" Jess exclaimed, refusing to back down, "I will not stake your entire success on the inclusion of a French fry!"

"Aren't you an author yourself?" the man demanded, looking incensed, "How can you refute the flawless symbolism of the fry as an icon of the poor, the disenfranchised, the unblessed?" With that Jess glared at the man.

"I'm willing to bet you know about as much about being 'unblessed' as you do about symbolism," Jess snarled, staring pointedly at the man's expensive shirt. The man narrowed his eyes.

"Funny, I didn't take you for the judgmental sort. Or the kind to make assumptions."

"Assumptions, no. Observations? Absofuckinglutely," Jess responded, his tone dripping with disgust, "But since we don't seem to be communicating very well, let me refer you to one of my colleagues. Maybe he'll be able to understand the depth of your message, because I'm clearly out of mine." He called Matt over, who rushed immediately upon seeing Jess' expression, and then walked over to the office, still fuming.

Rory stood, still processing. It fascinated her how some of the small things she remembered about Jess so vividly from their time together would just slip through in little moments like that. His impatience, his anger, his refusal to tolerate any level of bullshit. It was funny, even the negatives drew her to him. And in this small instance of reverie, it became apparent to Rory that things weren't finished.

There was no dramatic realization or reaction or even internal argument against herself. It was simply a fact that occurred to her, much as any other would. She was in Philadelphia. They were out of post-its. She still had feelings for Jess, and they'd never really gone anywhere.
She continued on with her day, essentially unaffected by this finding. After all, if it was something that had been residing inside her all this time, unchanged, how could she really be surprised or affected? It was just another part of her she hadn't understood, the way she still didn't understand why she had been so broken or why this place was fixing it. Mysteries would uncover themselves in time if she simply took them as they came. Jess' lessons had a purpose, one that he'd been teaching her far before he consciously tried.

Rory kept working, kept stocking, kept avoiding Matt, doing her best and succeeding with Chris. No difference from the way things had been. Even with Jess, nothing changed. Not one thing. She still wore his shirts and laughed at his jokes and stole his fries and felt at peace, but now she just understood why. And it was okay with her. She didn't worry about how he felt or try to decode it or figure out if there was anything to decode. If there was, there was. If not, she probably couldn't change it. So instead she just chose to ride it out, letting whatever come as it may.

Jess noticed the change in Rory. It was invisible to anyone else. Hell, there wasn't really a change. Not in the way she acted or spoke or treated anyone, but that Wednesday he noticed something in her eyes change. He'd spent enough time staring into them to know what every tiny spark meant, not even the expressions she gave willingly but the involuntary reflections that shone in them. Today, however, there was something new.

This was new to the point that he didn't recognize it even from when they were dating. It was most similar to that, the look she'd share with him when they were talking about a book or eating takeout and watching movies, but there was something different there. He felt a confidence in her that was unshakeable, independent, free. Beyond all that, it was peaceful. There was no sense of urgency in her anymore, no neediness or uncomfortable type of uncertainty. It was true that she was still a mess. He knew very well that she was only turning in pieces to her technical job in a perfunctory way, and that she always hated when things like that interrupted what she had here now. He also knew that she wasn't making any concentrated effort to fix those things, though honestly he agreed with her approach. Better to let the answers come to you when seeking them out too desperately is what screwed you over in the first place. But in spite of all this chaos and the many things that would make her life look like a disaster on paper, he saw how calm she felt, how safe. She was home and she damn well knew it. And that particular day, something intensified in that part of her expression. He saw a greater sense of understanding and acceptance, and he wasn't sure to what it corresponded exactly, but he knew that she was certain of something, something important, and that she was letting things come to her, following the path as it appeared.

Jess had always found Rory to be irrefutably compelling but something in that look made him feel absolutely helpless to his need for her. There was no fight left in him and no more need for it. That was all he understood from the look and all he intended to.
A week later, life was the same. It would almost be boring if it didn't feel so perfect, and if both Rory and Jess weren't so afraid of it crumbling. They both knew the chips would have to fall eventually but for now they were so enjoying this break. Which is what made it all the harsher when something had to come and interrupt their quiet corner of the world.

"Hello?" Jess answered his phone rapidly, not even bothering to look at the caller ID. They'd been swamped all day at Truncheon and he was waiting on calls from several writers and Jess was desperate to handle those things quickly so he could get back to the chaos in his living room, so to speak. Usually, he might have been more careful, but today was just one of those days.

"Liz?" his face curled up into an expression of pure disgust. Rory spun around rapidly, just in time to see Jess' expression before he turned on his heel and rushed up the stairs. "Hold on, I'm at work, just a minute…"

"What do you want?" he spat as soon as the door was shut, "I'm busy."

"You're busy, you're busy, you're always busy, Jess!" Liz complained into the phone. He could hear TJ mumbling something in the background and rolled his eyes. "Every time I try to talk to you you're working or out or something else. Can't you make time to talk? Don't you run the place or something?"

"Not that you'd know, never having held down an actual job yourself," Jess snarled, "But real work actually takes work. Which I'm missing right now, and the money I get from working pays my rent. So unless you'd like me to be homeless…"

"God, always so dramatic," Liz cut him off, "And I don't like your tone. I have worked! I have a job now, the same one for three years."

"Yeah, playing arts and crafts at summer camp for adult schizophrenics," Jess retorted, "Pretty sure you don't have to punch in a time card with the guy who sells the turkey legs. Listen, is there something you needed or did you just call to place your bi-yearly guilt trip?"

"Honestly Jess, I have no idea why you act like this!" Liz pleaded, "I know that I didn't do everything right as a mom…"

Jess scoffed audibly. He was starting to shake with anger and his whole body felt covered in ice. It was a familiar feeling.

"…But all that stuff is in the past. I'm doing really good now! Me and TJ and Doula…you haven't seen Doula since she was a baby, Jess! And she's getting so big! Don't you want to know your sister?"

"When she's old enough to visit me, I'll send her a train ticket," Jess responded, "Not her fault she was born into her family. But if she takes after TJ I can't be held responsible for her accidentally getting shipped off to Wisconsin."

"TJ has never been anything but wonderful to you!" Liz argued, "He is really a great guy, which you'd know if you ever gave anyone a second chance."

"Did all the years of abusing your brain cells take a toll on your ability to count?" Jess said, his voice dangerously low, "Because if you think you're at chance two, you've either undergone some sort of..."
amnesia or are back to your old tricks."

"I've been clean for years, since way before Doula was born," Liz responded, clearly hurt, "I haven't even picked up a joint in the last six months! And I meant about TJ, anyway."

"Well, then, guess I was wrong. You're a sterling example of sober living. Amnesia it is," Jess snapped, "Also, I have no problem with TJ other than the fact that he was clearly dropped on his head a few too times as a baby, which makes him your perfect match."

"God, you can be so cruel!" Liz said. He could hear her choking back sobs, but he didn't feel anything. He hadn't for years. It was just another way for her to try to get to him that he'd learned to ignore years ago. "And arrogant. Just because not everyone is born a genius like you and reads a thousand books a year…"

"Again with the counting. You should really get that tested," Jess cut her off again, "And if you think I'm arrogant, you know me even less than I thought you did. Which I didn't think was possible, so congratulations. You've exceeded my expectations. Look, did you have a point here or are you just calling to get into the same damn fight we have every time you make the mistake of picking up a phone?"

"I was going to invite you to Doula's fourth birthday party," Liz answered hysterically, "But then you act like this and do these things and now…"

"What?"

"You can't come. TJ doesn't want you to, and I don't want her around such a destructive influence."

"DESTRUCTIVE INFLUENCE?" Jess exploded. Suddenly Rory appeared behind him, grabbed the phone from his hand and hung up the call.

"Look, I'm sorry," she began, as Jess turned around and she saw the anger in his eyes, "I know that was out of line. But the customers were starting to hear, and in addition to that, it seemed like you were about to say something you'd regret."

"I don't need a babysitter or a PR person, but if either of those are the eventual occupations you decide to pursue after stockgirl I'll happily provide a reference," Jess snapped, "Lovely girl, eyes made of seaglass, gets involved in everyone else's business where they don't ask her to and where she isn't wanted."

"Well, at least the superficial ones will want me," Rory shrugged, unaffected, "I don't really care what you say to me right now. I truly am sorry if I upset you. But it was the right call, and even though I have no authority to tell you this, you might want to go cool off for a while and then come back, because I really doubt you're going to be working effectively like this."

Jess sighed deeply and sunk onto his bed. Rory perched next to him. Tentatively she reached out for his hand and immediately he pulled away. Stricken, she stood up and immediately he got up to face her, watching her carefully.

"I'm sorry," he apologized, trying to get her to meet his eyes, "I just…need some space. To cool off. You're right. It's not you. Just…"

"I get it," Rory nodded, avoiding his gaze, "Go. I'll cover things and see you in a bit."

He rolled his eyes, walking towards her. When he was a couple inches away, she dared to meet his eyes and found that they were startlingly close to her own. Suddenly she felt his hands on her wrists,
then joined with his.

"Rory," he said quietly, "It's really not you. Trust me."

"I do," she promised, unable to look away from the arresting sense of understanding that was so clear to her in his eyes. And without warning, Jess leaned in and softly, purposefully pressed his lips to hers.
Chapter 53

It was breathless. There was no hesitation in extending the moment that Jess had so impulsively begun. Rory immediately brought her hand to his cheek and pressed herself to him, feeling a need that had been waiting, aching for some long, unknown amount of time slowly starting to be filled. Jess' hands found the familiar place on her hips that seemed to be made for them to rest, and they just stood, together. If anyone had seen they would have believed the two had no intention of ever parting.

This was what Rory had always loved the most about Jess. The fact that everything was the most imperfect and flawless at the same time. There were no fireworks or gazebos or even stars in the sky, but under the ceiling that they shared every night, she felt more at home than she ever had. And although she'd suspected it, the second his lips touched hers, it was confirmed. She knew everything that she thought was the case was true.

Rory wasn't the only one having realizations. Immediately when Rory's eyes closed, Jess had been able to see what was so new in them. Clarity was funny that way. The seconds she, unquestioning, gave herself over to the moment, he understood that she was ready for it too, and that she was letting it happen. Breathing into the moments, not chasing them down. The realization made him pull her even closer, compelled him to show her, somehow, that he got it, that he would always get it, and that he would make a world for her where she was always safe to let go.

After a brief eternity, Rory reluctantly pulled away. Jess looked at her, confused, and she gestured to the floor.

"I'm pretty sure you're supposed to be running the business down there," she sighed, "As unfortunate as it feels right now, your screaming didn't chase every customer away."

"I've never been so unhappy to have business," Jess smirked, and Rory grinned back unabashedly, "Or to have such a motivated employee."

"One of the pitfalls of the Gilmore women," she replied, starting toward the stairs, her eyes still glued to his own.

"I should probably start a list," he retorted, opening the door for her and softly brushing her hand with his own before they both quickly returned to the store.

An hour later, the smiles had faded from their lips but were still clear as day in their eyes. Luckily Chris and Matt were too swamped with the chaos of this rush to pay any attention or Jess would probably be in an office interrogation. Every time Rory came by to get an inventory form or input something into the computer system, no matter who Jess was talking to or what he was doing, his eyes would follow hers and she could feel the familiar flush creeping into her cheeks. It was different now than it was when she was a teenager. Back then it was a slightly abashed, curious, fearful, hesitant phenomenon, but now it was a giddy exuberance reminding her of the moment they'd shared, and rooted in her consequent thoughts of where it could go. Her mind hadn't dared to go the places then that they did now, without her even trying. When she had met Jess, that part of her was so repressed that she didn't even realize it existed, and now she had become so assured with him that the thoughts came to her naturally and she hadn't really tried to stop them. Didn't plan to. But to stare at Jess as they ran through her head...definitely blush-worthy.

Jess knew all of this. One of the most transcendent things about his relationship with Rory had always been the fact that the second he touched her it was like he could read her mind. Some sense
of his just turned on, and nearly every glance, word, movement was clear in its intention and its meaning. So the second he saw that flush he knew it wasn't the same shy one he'd known when they were younger, and the gazes changed accordingly. Less exploratory, more longing. He felt in his bones a need so deep that he didn't think could be incited without actually touching another person. But one look from Rory and every muscle and sinew in his body became electrified with desire.

Of course, it wasn't just sex. It was sex, yes, and that had always been there, no matter how they acted or what choices they made or how they chose to delicately play things off when they were respectively too innocent and too damaged to really deal with something that powerful. But in addition to that, the desire was something instinctual, possessive, a sense of claiming. He would almost feel ashamed of how sexist it seemed if he didn't see the exact same thing reflected in the way she looked at him. It was an unspoken understanding. They belonged to one another, always had, always would. Exclusively. There was no argument or agreement to be had or made. Technicalities would be worked out in time, as appropriate, but until then they would rest in the knowledge that they both knew exactly what this was. This, combined with the clear physical compulsion that was charging through the veins of both Rory and Jess, made them realize that their legendary chemistry hadn't even reached anything near its full potential.

As Rory returned to the shelves to put a few books away, her mind wandered back to the Bracebridge Dinner. It didn't matter who she was with. That experience, like most things that really moved her at that age, was about Jess. It wasn't the fact that he hopped into her sleigh or destroyed the snowman or any of the other crazy, random, romantic or exciting things he did that had stuck with her the most. It was the way he looked at her when they were about to leave. He knew everything she was feeling, and his eyes were telling her just to wait and see the fire when it happened. And it would happen. It wasn't a question, and he knew that. She confirmed it to him that same day, in that same conversation that they had wordlessly in an empty room full of people. That moment had been so defining for her, for them. She wasn't worried about what had happened upstairs, per se. Not about what would happen or what it meant. But it occurred to her that maybe this was the same way, where they both knew the truth of the moment but would have to wait until it found them again, naturally, when it was time.
The next weekend business had started to lull, so Jess decided to take the time to catch up with the authors whom he'd been too swamped to handle. Rory, being unnecessary to Truncheon for the moment, made an impulsive decision.

"I'm going to Star's Hollow," she announced as Jess entered the apartment on Friday morning, bearing coffee. She had a packed bag on her bed. "Lane's band is playing a gig in Hartford tonight, her mom's watching the boys and she wants me to come see. So I'm gonna go."


"And...I may or may not have decided to come back by tomorrow night," she admitted, "For some reason I just haven't been sleeping well on my bed there."

"Must be the mattress," Jess shrugged, his eyes shining. Rory nodded in assent.

"Must be. So I'm staying at Mom's, I have my phone, and I stole your copy of The Holy Barbarians."

"What?" Jess demanded, turning to her, "You can't..."

"Possibly think you'd mind sharing? Of course not, I know how selfless you are," she grinned, picking up her backpack.

"You have your own copy," he glared, though he was unable to keep the smile out of his eyes.

"Yes, but my copy is plain and blank and boring because you haven't gotten around to decorating it yet," she pleaded, her eyes widening. Jess sighed deeply.

"You know the eyes aren't fair," he said, before handing her a to-go cup, "Go. Before I change my mind."

"I'll call you tonight," she promised, leaning in and hugging him before leaving.

They hadn't kissed since the first time it happened. Rory wondered as she walked towards the car if Jess' logic in avoiding it was the same as hers. Rory knew instinctually that the next time they kissed she would be absolutely unable to stop there. At this point, with the level of intimacy that a single touch, hell, a single look could convey between them, there was no stopping it once it began. And she wasn't sure it was the right time yet. She suspected that's why Jess hadn't made any advances either, though you couldn't really say things were the same as before. The glances were longer, and neither ever shied away from them. They held each other's gaze without nerves or giddiness, and didn't let go until something required it. When they separated, they embraced, so closely that they could feel each other's hearts beating against the other. And not one ounce of it felt awkward in the slightest. It all felt natural, and right. So did the way that they started talking once the lights were off in the room, not really about anything as much as everything, and let it go on until one of them fell asleep.

Matt and Chris had of course noticed the change in demeanor, but Chris had obviously made it clear to Matt to stay out of it. Rory had made an impressive amount of progress with Chris. At this point he seemed more like he was trying to stop himself from really getting close to her, trying to find reasons to avoid accepting her fully and without conditions. But she was kind and considerate and funny and always did more than her fair share of work, and Chris was having a damn hard time
holding onto his grudge, no matter how well-founded it may have been. Which is why, when he realized that something had altered between Rory and Jess, and saw how much happier they had become, he made certain to stop Matt screwing it up before he had the chance to start. So for now, all was quiet and the two were more than welcome to bask in the anticipatory uncertainty of the moment.

To be honest, though, Rory wasn't really going to Stars Hollow for Lane's band. Or to see her mom. There was something else she needed to do, to understand, to make sense of, and she couldn't do it with Jess around. Rory sighed involuntarily. She couldn't stand having to leave him, even for the night. She knew she'd barely get any sleep, and that he wouldn't get much either. Sometimes you had to make a sacrifice.

As soon as Rory drove away, Jess sighed and went to his dresser to find some work clothes before meeting with Peter. He smirked when he realized that the shirt he'd been meaning to wear was missing. It was funny, he thought. It had never occurred to him how happy the absence of his own shirt from his dresser could make him. But sure enough, the emptier the drawers became the more impossible it was for Jess to stop grinning. Finding alternate attire, Jess started to get dressed, already feeling weighed down by the emptiness of the room around him.

He had been resisting the incredibly powerful compulsion to kiss Rory again since their last encounter. But he knew that the second he touched her he wouldn't be able to let go of her, that he would need her so desperately, and that she would cling to him in the same way. He would take her. And it wasn't time yet, no matter how much every single muscle and bone and fiber of his body begged to differ. There were things he had to do first.

As irritated as he was to be alone for the night, it actually worked out in a convenient way for him. He had to attend to a couple things that he couldn't do with Rory present. And the sooner he took care of those matters, the closer they'd be to what was coming. That is, if he survived. Such a mission could open him up to great mortal peril, but sometimes there were risks you just had to take.

Rory mused along the same lines of thought as she approached the little hamlet that had raised her. She wasn't looking forward to what she was about to do. She was seeking answers she wasn't sure she wanted, in fact, that she was pretty sure she didn't want. She was testing things that were fragile, hanging by single threads, and she knew how devastating it would be if they were broken. But if she ever wanted to have a shot in hell of making things work out this time, in a way that was good, honest, right, she had to make this choice.

That night, Jess picked up the phone and began dialing. At that same moment Rory knocked on a glass door. As they waited for their respective answers, it occurred to them that what happened next really didn't matter in the long term. It was a step that could work out in their favor, or against them. But either way, there was a them to work against.
"Rory?"

"Hey Luke," Rory smiled softly, "Mom mentioned you stay here sometimes on Fridays because the inventory guy comes early in the morning. I don't want to keep you up. But do you mind if I come in for a minute?"

"Sure," Luke opened the door wider and gestured her in, staring as she walked through and headed toward the counter, "I'm sorry, I would've left donuts or something. I just…your mom didn't mention you were coming to town."

"I kind of surprised her," Rory explained, smiling as she watched Luke put on a pot of coffee, "And I'm only staying in town for the night. Things were kind of calm at Truncheon so I figured it was as good a time as any."

Luke nodded as he poured coffee into a mug for Rory. He knew intrinsically that something bigger was going on, and also knew her well enough to just let the silence speak until she was ready.

It felt very similar to when she had come to him after Jess had left, but he knew that this was different. Jess wouldn't leave now. Luke honestly believed that given the choice he would never leave Rory again, not even for one night. But something was weighing on Rory, and he could see it in her eyes as he had that early night. He knew that in these moments he was the father Rory never really had, more than he was at any other moment. And he would always be there for her. But given what he understood to be her circumstances, he would later be surprised that he hadn't guessed what she was there.

"Luke, why is Jess still…cruel…with Liz?" she softly asked, looking into the man's pale blue eyes. Immediately his brows furrowed and he sighed deeply. "Is it just that he can't forgive her?"

"That's a part of it. But he doesn't want to," Luke answered, looking at Rory sadly, "He doesn't believe that she's better."

"How…"

"She's the same person. By his logic, there's no reason to believe she's changed," Luke explained, "And even though I've tried to change his mind myself, I have to admit that considering his past with her, he has a good reason to think that way."

"He acts like a different person than the man he is now when he talks to her," Rory replied, "Like all the things that have changed about him since he was in high school…"

"Have reversed and gotten even worse?" Luke cut her off, grimacing. She nodded.

"Well, that's Liz. That's what she does to him," he sighed, "Though what he does to her isn't pretty either. It's hard to be in the middle of it."

"I'll bet," Rory said quietly, staring into her coffee.

"Rory," Luke quickly implored, his tone forcing Rory to meet his eyes, "He is a good man. He is the man you know him to be. Those changes are real. It's just her. He's not going back. I promise you."

Rory smiled sadly, a tear streaming down her cheek. "I just…I want it to work this time," she
clarified softly. Luke nodded. Even though neither of them had told him anything he didn't need an explanation.

"I think it will," Luke answered, "Rory, he looks at you the same way he always has. But now he's ready to be there. Not just until he gets scared and bails. But really be there. He's not gonna go anywhere or change on you. You can count on him now."

"Thanks, Luke." Rory looked at him gratefully. "I mean, I felt like that was the truth. But you know him better than anyone, and I wanted to be sure."

"You can never be sure, Rory," Luke said quietly, "But Jess...you know how he feels. How he's always felt. He always will. And I know you. That's all you really need to make your choice."

She nodded, still holding Luke's gaze. It was moments like these that made her grateful that Chris had been a deadbeat. If he'd been halfway decent she might not have come to depend on Luke like she did. Even though the times she came to him were rare, they were important and he never disappointed her. He was always there. He was the kind of father every girl deserved to have but she was lucky enough to get, even when he didn't have to be that for her. She'd always understood why what he thought meant so much to Jess. It meant the world to her too.


"Anytime," he answered, opening the door for her. She walked out and headed for home, her heart full of content and appreciation. She had no idea what she'd do without the Danes-Mariano men to help her make sense of life.
"Hello?"

"Hey," Jess said, his voice nervous. He rolled his eyes at his own reaction. "Is this a bad time?"

"Jess?" Lorelai asked, confused, "Um, no, not at all. Just give me a sec, I'm holding a pizza."

"Should've guessed," he smirked to himself as he heard her walking through the house to put it down.

"Alright, sorry. So, is everything okay?" she asked, her voice resonating with a slight tone of worry, "With Rory? Or, with you? I mean…"

"I know it's weird that I called you," Jess sighed, cutting her off, "Rory's fine. I'm fine. I just…need to talk to you."

"What's going on?" Jess heard her drop something onto a table. Pizza box. Obviously this conversation called for sustenance.

"Well…remember when you asked me why I was helping Rory?"

"Yeah…"

"And I told you it wasn't because I had feelings for her?"

"Jess…"

"I think that it's gonna happen. And I wanted to talk to you."

"Me?" Lorelai asked, confused, "You seriously want my opinion on you dating Rory?"

"Operating under the probably extraordinarily naïve assumption that you're past your blind hatred of me at least enough to offer an opinion that's grounded more in what you think to be her best interest than your bias against me, yes. I do."

He could hear the grin on Lorelai's face. "That is some serious overestimation. I'm flattered."

"So?" Jess implored. He couldn't stand when she delayed like this. Diversion tactics infuriated him to no end.

"Jess, I told you before. You have my blessing," she responded, "And I meant it. Of course, I'm worried about her. I kind of wish she had her own shit figured out before this happened. I don't want her to become dependent on you or her life to be all about a guy. But I know Rory and that she's not that girl. And you're the best possible guy for her. There will never be a perfect time or perfect scenario or anything like it. I want Rory to be happy, and you've always made her happier than I've ever seen her without you."

"Lorelai," Jess started, his voice lower than usual, "I appreciate it. I really do. Your approval means the world to her, and by extension to me. Hell, at this point, your approval means at least a small something to me regardless. But even though I'm not the jackass kid I was in high school, I'm not perfect. Trust me. Luke knows the list. But the short version is that I could still hurt her, badly, even though I'm not going to run away or leave her. I'm not a savior or a Prince Charming. I'm fucked up. Seriously. And scars are permanent, no matter how many times you scrub yourself clean."
"Jess, I'll admit that given the choice I'd probably want Rory to be with someone completely infallible," Lorelai answered, "But that's not reality. And in reality everyone is fucked up in their own specific way. Yeah, you have more baggage than most. By far. Definitely more than Rory does, or that most of the people she's dated did. But she wants to carry it, and that's what really matters. And the most important thing about those scars? You keep trying to, even if you know that they'll never completely disappear. That's what makes you the man I think deserves to be with my daughter and can make her happy. That's what makes you good enough for her. That and the fact that she wants to be with you."

"Did she tell you about…this?" Jess inquired, unable to stop himself from asking.

"Usually I wouldn't answer that," Lorelai began, "But no, she didn't. She came in today, dropped her stuff, said she really needed to see Lane, and then came back from Lane's, we ate, and then she went off somewhere now."

"So the pizza…"

"I'm part hobbit."

"From now on I don't want you visiting unless you wear socks."

"I can't make any promises."
Chapter 57

The next day Rory arrived back at Truncheon around two, somehow managing to carry all of her luggage as well as three coffees. Jess had told her Matt would be working in the office and that Chris had the day off. He wasn't thrilled about her plan but he knew better by now than to get in the way of a Gilmore on a mission. Plus, she'd had more success with Chris than he'd expected. So after Rory dropped off her things and a coffee for Jess upstairs, he looked at her solemnly.

"All yours," he sighed, gesturing towards the door, "Sure you want to do this?"

"It can't possibly make things any worse," Rory pointed out. Jess nodded in acknowledgment.

"Alright then. Thanks for the coffee," he smiled, "And if it goes poorly I'll buy you one after."

"You'll buy me one after anyway," Rory smirked, "Unless you want me to die of withdrawal."

"You know, I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to encourage an addict," Jess rolled his eyes, unable to suppress his grin, "Fine, fine. We'll get coffee after. Now go get it over with."

Rory smiled at him nervously and he took her hand, reassuring.

"Look, Rory…" Jess said, his voice low, "You know it doesn't matter to me right?"

"What doesn't?" Rory inquired, her voice soft.

"Whether or not he likes you," Jess answered, "Now or ever. I mean, it'd be great if he did, but if he doesn't, it's not going to change…"

"This?" Rory filled in. They hadn't had that discussion yet and they hadn't kissed since the first time, but they both knew there was something there, and openly acknowledged it.

"This," he affirmed, "The way I feel about you…his opinion won't change that. It couldn't. But it does mean a lot to me that you care about what they think. I just wish you wouldn't put so much pressure on yourself."

"I've been hearing that for twenty something years now," Rory smiled grimly, "I'm pretty sure that's something I can only change about myself so much. At least this time it's for something I'm sure I want."

He nodded in understanding. They hadn't spoken much about her technically-still-ongoing life crisis. They were both blissfully ensconced in their new status quo. But of course Jess knew that she was still coming to terms with certain things, and trying to figure them out, and sometimes, little things like this would come out of her that would reassure him that she was coming into a deeper self-awareness.

"Well best of luck," Jess offered, gently squeezing her hand once more before returning to his bed and the manuscript he was attacking with his signature green pen. Rory had laughed when she'd noticed the green ink. No one else would have gotten it, but then again, it was Rory. He knew he couldn't get anything past her.

"Thanks, I'll need it," she replied. Then she walked down the stairs to go handle the nuclear missile sitting in an office chair.
"Matt?" Rory asked briskly as she knocked on the door. She heard an audible sigh.

"Come in," Matt replied, his tone annoyed. To be fair, she'd never really heard much of another tone from him. Other than maybe sarcastic politeness.

"We need to talk," Rory said, sitting down at the chair opposite him before he had a chance to respond. She handed him a coffee and he rolled his eyes.

"God, I should've known you were sleeping together. Jess put you up to this?" Matt gestured to the coffee and Rory's eyes narrowed.

"Not that it's any of your business, but no, Jess and I aren't having sex. We are, however, close. And might eventually, yes, sleep together. Which really seems to piss you off," Rory shot back, "Why is that?"

"Just because I think you're a bitch doesn't mean I think you're stupid," Matt responded hatefully, "I'm not blind. You're smart. Which makes it all worse. So don't even try to pull that I don't understand crap on me. You know exactly why I feel the way I do about you."

"Chris is past it," Rory replied pointedly, "And so is Jess. The person who actually had to endure it. So I don't get why you feel so entitled to hate me endlessly when the person who actually suffered the abuse that you claim as your just cause has managed to reconcile those feelings and move past them."

"What?" Matt asked blankly, "Look, I know we write books for a living, and that you like to use all the fancy words you learned at Yale. Get your money's worth. But why don't you just make your point? If you think there's any value in doing so."

"Jess and Chris are past it," Rory rolled her eyes, "But you just will not let it go. You won't allow me to go a single day here feeling like I'm actually welcome."

"Because you aren't," Matt glowered, "I didn't want you here. Chris didn't want you here. And Jess was blinded by infatuation. Happens to the best of us, but usually he can work past the more base urges. Guess you're an exception. I hope you feel special. But don't mistake it for the right decision."

"I'm not going anywhere," Rory crossed her arms across her chest, "And I mean that in two ways. I'm not going anywhere as in I'm not leaving Truncheon, the apartment upstairs, or Jess' life anytime in the foreseeable future. If I have my way, probably ever on that last bit. Which means you're going to have to deal with me for a long time."

"And the other way?" Matt inquired, glaring at her.

"I'm not leaving this office until we figure this out. Jess is handling things outside."

"I can kick you out. I work here."

"Jess and Chris voted. 2-1. They win. I am not leaving this office until we figure this out. And neither are you."

"I'm pretty sure that the co-owner agreement doesn't have the ability to bind me to my chair," Matt narrowed his eyes.

"Maybe you shouldn't have made the agreement so vague then," Rory smirked, "Used a few more fancy words. Dared to specify."
"What exactly do you think you're going to accomplish here?" Matt asked, "Do you think you're going to make me like you? Forgive you? Give you another chance, or whatever you got Chris to do?"

"No," she answered, "I'm not stupid. You were right about that. But we're going to get on decent enough terms with each other than it no longer presents a conflict to Jess. To be honest, I don't care about you. Just like you don't give a rat's ass about me. But I care about Jess more than…"

"Oh, shut up," Matt cut her off, "You don't care about Jess. Or maybe you do this week. This month. Which boyfriend are you trying to piss off this time?"

Rory flushed crimson in humiliation and anger. She knew this is why Jess had wanted to come in, because Matt would be harsher. Matt wouldn't mince words if Jess wasn't there to protect her. Matt would be cruel. But this is why she'd wanted to talk to Matt alone in the first place. They wouldn't get anywhere with holds barred.

"You're not seriously telling me that you've never done something really cruel in your life," Rory responded, "If so you're full of it."

"I have, but not to people I loved. Not to people who meant something that important to me," Matt continued, "Not for such a superficial, stupid, petty, weak reason. To someone who had put so much goddamn strength into everything he did. With me as his motivation. So no, Rory. I've done cruel things. I've cheated on women. I've broken women's hearts. I've done wrong to my family and even my friends. But I've never done something as terrible as what you did to someone who did that much for me, because of me. No, I haven't."

Rory's eyes started to sting with tears. For the first time since she had started speaking to Jess again, she was finding the actual answers. And the truth wasn't pretty.
"Look," Rory began, her voice lower than it had ever been in her memory. She was fighting back tears with every breath. But this was important. "I'm not trying to justify what I did. I can't. Not to you, not to him, not to me. Ever. And that's something I'll have to carry."

Matt looked at her impatiently. "Yeah, but you know what? So will he," Matt countered, "And he didn't deserve it. Not one ounce of it. He changed, he made something of himself. And all of it was for you."

"Okay, that is shit," Rory burst out, "Maybe he did it because of me, maybe he thinks I inspired him, maybe I even did. But he did it for himself and by himself. He deserves at least that much credit. It wasn't like Jess making something of himself and living up to his potential was some Say Anything grand gesture to get me back. If you care about him as much as you claim to, you should damn well know that and have more respect for what he did than to think that."

Matt was slightly taken aback. Taking advantage of the moment of silence, Rory continued. "And no, he didn't deserve it. I agree with you. I agree with you completely about this. On everything from how wrong what I did was to how bad of a person it made me. Makes me. But wallowing in self-loathing seems pretty damn unproductive. So you can sit here, hating me and judging me, just as much as I sit here and hate and judge myself. But I can't do that forever, I have to move on. I have to keep living my life. And whether or not I deserve the opportunity I'm getting, here, with Jess, which both of us agree I don't, I have that chance. And I'm going to damn well take it. Because for the most part I'm learning that I have no idea what makes me happy, but I know he does. I've never doubted that, when it comes down to it. So selfishly, narcissistically, undeservedly, I'm going to take advantage of that and be with him for as long as he will fucking choose to have me. And if I make him happy, whether or not you agree with that, whether or not it worries you, whether or not it pisses you off, you have no right and no authority to choose whether or not he pursues his own happiness and how he goes about it. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that as his self-proclaimed closest friend, or one of the two, you're obligated to at least try to be supportive if it's something he's this goddamn stubborn about, something that isn't going away. And as much as you hate it, that's me. I'm something that's not going away, whether or not I should. So you can either learn to deal and work with this or you can continue having dramatic bullshit with everyone until one of us dies of exhaustion from all the effort it takes to keep up this hatred."

Matt stared down at the keyboard. After a few moments he looked up at Rory. "Most people can't talk about themselves like that," he said slowly, "For good reason. It's not healthy to tear into yourself that hard."

"Well, my own health isn't really my priority in this conversation," Rory replied sharply, "This is about Jess. I don't deserve shit. But he deserves peace and the opportunity to be happy, and even with how badly I've treated him in the past, if the best I can do to try in some tiny way to make up for the pain I caused him is to help give him that chance now, I'm going to fucking do it. Whether you like it or not. I'm not going to give up, or take off, or any of it. Unless he wants me to. And he doesn't, and I don't think he will, so if I were you I'd think really carefully about which choice is going to have the best long-term effects."

"Even if I agree with all those things you said about yourself, which I do," Matt responded, "I have to admit it takes a lot to reach that kind of self-awareness. I didn't expect you to be able to admit that what you did was so shitty. To really understand it."

"That doesn't make it any better," Rory said flatly, "I still did it. Knowing it was wrong doesn't
"No, it doesn't," Matt agreed, "But it does make me hate you a little bit less. Because if you feel this awful about it, it seems pretty damn clear to me that you wouldn't pull anything like this on him again. So even if I think you're bad for him, and you don't deserve him, I don't think you're going to hurt him as badly as you did before. In fact, I know you won't."

"No, I won't," Rory answered, her eyes fixed on Matt's. He sighed deeply.

"Here's the best I can offer," Matt began, "I can stop getting in your way. Being a thorn in your side. Constantly trying to find things to fault you for and making things worse for you here. I can stop saying negative things about you unsolicited and trying to convince Jess that you're a bad decision. And I can attempt to spend more time with you in a group setting, to give you a shot to make a second impression. A better one. I cannot and will not promise to change my mind about you, or even to try. Or that I will ever say I think well of you if I'm asked. But I can do my best with the couple things I know I realistically have the ability to do. How does that sound?"

"More than fair," Rory agreed, her expression still serious, "Thank you. It'll mean a lot to him."

"I know," Matt replied. Rory stood up and nodded a goodbye before exiting the office.

The moment she walked out onto the street the tears started flowing. As she walked toward the coffee shop, she knew he wasn't crying about Matt's words or even what she'd done to Jess those few years ago, the way she'd treated him. She was crying for the person she was becoming, the person she now knew herself to have been, and the fact that she had just realized that she hadn't known who they really were until just now.
Chapter 59

An hour or so later, Rory walked in the door to the apartment. Jess immediately stood up and walked over to her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice low, "I heard Matt out talking to Chris like forty minutes ago. Where were you?"

"Went to get coffee," she mumbled, "Sorry."

"Don't be," Jess said, looking at her strangely, "What's going on?"

"I just..." she began, willing the tears to stay back. They didn't.

"Fuck this," Jess hissed, starting toward the door, "Whatever he did, whatever he said..."

"It wasn't him, Jess," Rory sighed, "It's me. I just...need a minute."

"So the tears?"

"Have nothing to do with Matt. We worked it out as best as we can. I'm pleased with the results. This isn't about him."

"Then..."

"Jess, can you sit down? I want to ask you something."

Jess nodded slowly, walking over to her bed and sitting down next to her. She sighed, looking down.

"Jess...when I...when I showed up here, at Truncheon, the first time..." she said quietly. Jess's face remained stoic.

"Yeah?"

"Did you know that I...could you tell that I wasn't okay?" she choked out. A grim smile appeared on Jess' lips.

"So you figured it out," he exhaled.

"Jess...I don't even know how long I've been like this. The person I was, the things I was doing...I know that when we were together I was more like I am now. But I just keep looking at everything and thinking that I really, really screwed up. A lot. And that when I fixed everything, I really didn't. I just made everyone think I did."

"You fixed a lot," Jess countered, "Even if you didn't fix the underlying shit, you fixed your circumstances. Gave yourself a fair shot to do better, be better."

"So..."

"Yeah, I could," Jess answered, "Are you kidding? You kissed me, Rory. I know you, that part of you especially, better than anyone. I could tell that you were still a mess the second your lips touched mine. Before I knew about him, or anything else, or that you didn't really want to be with me again yet. I just knew that you weren't..."
"Okay."

"Yeah," he finished, "You weren't okay."

"Then why didn't you…"

"I was angry," Jess admitted, "Really, really angry. I wasn't sure if I could do anything. If it would work. Or if I could even handle the attempt. It really wrecked me."

"Really meaning…"

"You don't want to know."

Rory nodded slowly.

"Jess, I'm…"

"I know."

"But you don't!" she exclaimed, "I didn't even know until today! I couldn't face that I was that kind of person, that I could do those kind of things. That I really did them, that I was responsible for them, and that there was no one to blame but me. The person who does those things…that's me, Jess. That's a part of me. I did that. I have the potential to be that selfish and awful and completely just… cruel."

"That's true," Jess replied. His eyes met Rory's. "But there's a couple things you're missing here. First, just because you have that potential doesn't make you a bad person. It just means you have to be strong enough to choose not to take that course. And you are. You're doing it now. And why are you asking me this now? What are you afraid of?"

"How could you love someone like that?" Rory asked, her voice low, "Even think to. Just even consider forgiving that person. Stand being in a room with them. Eventually it's going to hit you that I'm that girl that did that, and I'm still that person, and you're going to…"

"No, I'm not," Jess cut her off, "Look, I know that about you already. I know you did that. I know the ugliest things about you, and I'm not going to spin them into gold. But knowing all those things about you, I want you here anyway. Here, in Philadelphia. Here, in my apartment. Here, in my life. Even with the broken, ugly, jagged parts. I know the risks and I accept them. No one's perfect. I know your flaws. I can live with them, and more importantly, I want to."

"You shouldn't," Rory responded, "It's not smart. It would be really easy to find a girl who hasn't completely fucked you over. In fact, I think that's the entire remaining 99.9999 percent of the female population."

"But none of them are you," Jess said simply, "I don't care if it's smart. I don't want them, I want you. Whether or not you think you deserve that. I never thought I deserved you anyway. So I guess we're even."

"You really don't hold it against me?"

"Of course I do," Jess replied, "And I always will. It's never going to go anywhere. But it's also never going to stop me from feeling the way I do about you."

"God, I really wish you were still teenage Jess sometimes," Rory grinned, wiping the tears away from her eyes, "It'd be a lot easier to handle being the awful person here if you were a jackass."
"He's still in there," Jess smirked, "And trust me, I've fucked up enough that we're at least even. You just haven't seen most of it."

"Will I ever?"

"God I hope not," Jess smiled at Rory, "But probably."

"I'll start carrying a video camera."

"Kind of inconvenient."

"Tap the FBI's resources?"

"Probably difficult."

"I could hack it."

"You didn't go to Yale for nothing."

"Or maybe I did," Rory grinned, beginning to crack up, "I'm shelving books. Not exactly worth the 200 grand."

"Disagreed," Jess laughed, "The pleasure of my company is priceless."

"You've either been smoking crack or watching too many Mastercard commercials."

"Close. Both."

"I should've seen the signs."
Chapter 60

A few weeks later, conditions had significantly improved at Truncheon. The crazy rush that had plagued them the previous month had dulled into their usual busy-but-manageable workload, and the place was regaining some semblance of its usual camaraderie. At least between Jess, Chris and Matt. And best of all, Rory was fitting in nicely, quietly, unobtrusively. Chris often brought her into things, letting her be a part of them, and Matt stopped objecting for the most part. At times, Matt even invited her, often grudgingly, but with a sense of respect that hadn't been there before. Rory picked up on this and always gratefully accepted, giving Matt as much space as possible but taking the olive branches he offered, trying not to overstep and to just be grateful for what she was getting.

Jess watched this process cautiously, trying not to get his hopes up. He understood that Matt and Chris had sound reasons to dislike Rory and that Rory couldn't put up with the way they had been treating her forever, and there was a likelihood that this truce wouldn't last. Just too many negative feelings and bad history all around. But it seemed to be lasting. Improving every day, as a matter of fact. He even approached Matt directly about it once, after two weeks of this change. The conversation was brief but illuminating.

Jess had knocked on the office door, going in as Matt got off the phone with a fairly new client.

"Is this thing with you permanent?" Jess cut to the chase.

"It's an attempt, and it's going better than I expected," Matt answered, not looking up from his notes.

"So this isn't just some act?"

"No."

"And you're going to keep it up?"

"Looks that way."

"Why?"

"Because she knows how you deserve to be treated, and just because she screwed it up before doesn't give me a reason to screw it up now. Or for her to screw it up now." With that, Matt gave Jess a meaningful look and Jess nodded, meeting his eyes before slipping out of the office.

It had been about three and a half weeks since the confrontation between Rory and Matt when Chris showed up at Truncheon with a proposition.

"Fellow slave laborers, I would like to suggest something," Chris began, walking into the office where Matt and Jess had been arguing about a client while Rory finished an inventory report.

"Alright, well can you make it quick? Matt needs to talk to Roberts before 2."

"Over my frozen corpse," Matt snapped, "Take all the time you need, Chris."

"Alright, stop the bickering for two minutes," Chris rolled his eyes, "Rory?"

"Listening," she nodded, looking up from her notes briefly to assure him.

"Okay, well, in spite of your lack of attentiveness," Chris sighed dramatically, "I do have news to share, and I simply cannot hold it in any longer. I'm seeing someone."
"Weren't you before?" Jess mumbled. Rory raised her eyebrows. Matt completely ignored him.

"So I was thinking that tonight you two could join us. And Matt could wrangle someone…"

"You know I'm seeing someone," Matt glared at him. Jess raised his eyebrows and Rory stifled a laugh.

"Matt? Chris?" Jess asked innocently, "You know, if you want to just tell us now…we can take it. We love and support you both."

"No matter what lifestyle you choose. Love is love," Rory affirmed, before bursting into laughter. Jess couldn't help but join her. After their mirth had died down, and the evil looks from Matt and Chris had ceased, Chris began to speak again.

"Either way, I was thinking pizza and beer at our place, 8:00, and board games if it gets desperate," he finished. Matt and Jess nodded, but Rory excitedly turned to him.

"Bop It!" she shrieked. They all looked at her, confused.

"Bop It?" Jess asked, "Does that thing still exist?"

"Call Luke," she said dismissively, "But I'll bring the Bop It!"

"Oh…kay…” Chris looked at her in confusion. Matt snorted.

"We'll be there," Jess affirmed, earning two smirks and a confused glance. "What?"

"Nothing," Matt said innocently, winking at Chris, "Absolutely nothing."

"Have a great day, you two," Chris sing-songed as he walked away. Jess looked at Rory and shrugged his shoulders. She blushed and turned away, unable to hold back the smile that had crept onto her lips.
Later that evening, Rory was in the apartment throwing clothing all over the place. Jess entered and viewed the chaos with a sense of amusement.

"Didn't realize Matt and Chris' women of the week were fashion critics," he smirked, gesturing towards the discarded piles of clothing strewn across the apartment, "Or that pizza called for...is that a skirt?"

"I just want to make a good impression," Rory huffed, "But of course I have absolutely nothing. I tried calling Mom but no answer, which is weird enough to begin with, but..."

"Okay, you need to calm down," Jess said, walking over to her and placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder, "This is Matt. And Chris."

"Exactly."

"Rory, trust me. What you wear will have very little effect on their opinion of you. Unless, of course, you show up dressed like Anna Nicole Smith," Jess looked at her, trying not to laugh, "Look, I know you're a perfectionist. But just...try to let it go, okay?"

Rory looked at him before exhaling deeply. "Fine," she relented, "But if I really don't have to care about this, I'm wearing your grey tee shirt with my jeans."

"I was gonna..." Jess began before seeing the uncompromising look in Rory's eyes. He laughed, unable to stop himself. "Fine," he agreed, "God, what is it with you and my clothes?"

She blushed. "Well, it's not like you're a basketball player. They kind of fit me. And they're comfortable. And...well...yeah."

"Yeah?" Jess teased, "That Yale education is really paying for itself."

"Shut up," Rory retorted, "Plus, it's not like I haven't noticed your reaction."

"Reaction?" Jess raised his eyebrows.

"You like it," Rory continued, her voice low, "Me wearing them. Especially around, during the day."

"Actually, it's even better at night," Jess replied, his voice deep and a little raspy. Rory flushed crimson, but couldn't look away from him. Jess moved closer to her.

"Because at night," he explained, running his hand slowly up and down her side, sliding his fingers against the fabric of his black shirt that she was wearing, "It's just touching skin."

With that, Rory turned away from him, quickly walking toward the dresser. He smirked.

"Isn't there some saying about if you can't take the heat, you should get out of the kitchen?"

"I don't know. Kitchens have always been a problematic area for me," Rory retorted, still refusing to face him as she quickly selected a pair of tight jeans and took Jess' gray shirt out of his drawer, "I need to change."

"If I haven't scared you out of stealing my clothing."
"Quite the opposite," Rory answered quietly, meeting his eye briefly with a look he could only classify as desire, before turning away and walking into the restroom to change.

"Damn it. Guess I'll have to live with it then," Jess called, trying to distract himself from the need that was beginning to course powerfully through his veins.

"Guess so," Rory called. Little did Jess know that she was flushed from her cheeks to her upper chest and was forcing back the exact same physical responses. Resisting the temptation to just walk back into the apartment and kiss him as fiercely as she had at Sookie's wedding, with the follow-through that she had been anticipating in her head since that second in time, she quickly pulled on her clothes and forced herself to stop imagining the many things she would rather spend her night doing.
"Rory! Jess!" Chris opened the door with a bow and a flourish, "Welcome to our humble abode."

Jess rolled his eyes, smirking. "Looks nice. Did you finally bother to throw away that bag of chips from three months ago?"

"Jess constantly mocks our housekeeping skills, but I argue that's just another sad consequence of his OCD."

"Which didn't seem to be present when he was leaving books all over the place when we all crashed upstairs at Truncheon," Matt called from the kitchen.

"Untrue," Chris replied, "The haphazard piles always had some bizarre logic to them, according to Mr. Angst over there. We just weren't capable of understanding it."

"If you're going to mock me mercilessly and without any sort of basis in reality, can I at least get a beer first?" Jess asked, walking forward into the main room. Rory followed him closely, trying to calm her nerves.

"Jess, Rory…this is Hannah," Chris smiled, gesturing to one of the two girls sitting on the couch. She smiled and stood up, brushing her long chestnut hair off of her shoulder.

"Nice to meet you," she said shyly, "Chris's told me so much about you, both of you."

"All slander, I promise," Jess shook her hand, his eyes sparkling. Rory felt her own eyes narrow.

"Yeah, really nice to meet you, Hannah," Rory immediately held out her hand to the woman, meeting her eyes purposefully. Hannah offered a small nod of understanding.

"You too, Rory," she continued, "Chris was telling me that you went to Yale?"

"Yeah. It seems like a lifetime ago," she answered, relaxing somewhat. She glanced at Jess and caught amused expression on his face.

"I grew up in New Hampshire and a lot of my friends from boarding school ended up there. Everyone said they loved it," Hannah continued, shyly.


"What?" he asked irritably. Jess smirked.

"Geez, what have you been doing? Heavy construction?"

"I'm…never mind. Did you call me here for a reason or just to mock my appearance?"

"Both," Jess answered, "Chris was just introducing us to Hannah and I was wondering if you were ever going to bother…"

"Oh, yeah, of course," Matt cut him off, "This is Chloe."

He gestured to the other blonde girl lounging on the couch. She offered a halfhearted wave, before leaning over to grab her beer.
"Nice to meet you, Chloe," Rory offered.

"Yeah, same here," she responded, not looking up. Jess and Rory exchanged a look.

"Now, if you're done telling me how to live my life, I really have to get back to…"

"Building the Hoover Dam? Can I help?"

"Only by letting me drown you in it," Matt mumbled as Jess followed him into the kitchen. Rory looked at Chris nervously.

"I should go make sure they play nice," he rolled his eyes apologetically, "We'll be back soon."

He followed after them, leaving Rory standing awkwardly in front of the couch with the two girls. Hannah smiled reassuringly.

"Here, sit with us. So how did you meet Jess?" she asked, moving over to make room for Rory on the couch. Rory glanced at her appreciatively before sitting down.

"We actually met back in high school. He lived in my town for a while, with his uncle, who's a good friend of my mom's. And how did you meet Chris?"

"Nothing special," she looked down sheepishly, "I was at a bar with a couple friends and he came up to me and…well…yeah. Completely unlike me, but Chris seems really great."

"He's a really nice guy," Rory affirmed, "What about you, Chloe? How'd you meet Matt?"

"I'm a waitress. He asked me out," she answered in a monotonous tone. She twirled her blonde hair around her fingers, "Happens a lot. He's alright."

Hannah and Rory exchanged a look.

"Alright…" Hannah replied awkwardly, "Um…so Rory, you're working at Truncheon?"

"Right now, yeah," she answered, "It's kind of a long, crazy story."

"Those are the best kind," Hannah responded. Rory couldn't help but smile. Maybe this night wasn't going to be as tedious as the ballroom dancing marathon night after all.

"So two questions. One, why the hell do you look like such a mess and second, does the fembot sitting on your couch have a soul chip or is she an earlier version?"

"Can you shut up? I'm trying to work here," Matt replied to Jess irritably, going into the pantry and gathering an assortment of items. Jess furrowed his brows.

"What is all that?"

"Ingredients."

"For?"


"You have to be shitting me."

"Chloe's fine. She's got a brain. She just doesn't talk a lot."
"Seriously, all of this is to make dip? I mean, I knew you weren't domestic, but…"

"Plus not all of us date to marry, Jess," Matt continued pointedly, "We're in our twenties. What's wrong with dating an attractive woman just to have fun?"

"I don't mind casual dating. But you seem to think it's the only possible option," Jess argued, "Plus, did you see that look she shot at Rory?"

"Have you considered that Rory might be an acquired taste?" Matt countered, "I didn't like her much at first myself."

"Children," Chris interrupted, "Can we please try to behave?" Matt scowled at him.

"Yeah, Matt, behave," Jess called, sticking his tongue out as he walked back toward the living room, earning a snort of laughter from Chris and a flying packet of onion soup mix to the head from Matt.
An hour later Matt was avoiding the collective glares of everyone in the room.


"What? I had no idea that she held fascist views," Matt answered, "It's not like we exactly spent our time conversing."

Rory and Hannah looked at each other and shared an eye roll. Chris grimaced.

"Great, now you two are gonna team up against us."

"Conspiracies are already underway," Rory smirked. Hannah nodded.

"By the way, Chris, your bra is in the freezer."

"Smartass," Chris mumbled as he leaned over to grab another piece of pizza. Hannah glared at him and he raised his hands in surrender.

"I said nothing!" he swore, "Wow, this is really good pizza."

"Now who's the smartass," Matt scowled and Jess grinned.

"To be fair, Matt, it's pretty damn hard to screw up dip," he chimed in, "That's a new level of culinary ineptitude. Though I've seen worse." He looked pointedly at Rory.

"What? I have no idea what you're talking about," Rory doe-eyed. Matt raised his eyebrows at Jess.

"A couple weeks ago she tried to boil an egg. Firetrucks were called, NASA was on the phone…"

"Not all of us have diner experience."

"You do."

"What?"

"You do. Don't you remember when you and your mom helped out at the diner and you dragged me out of the apartment to join in the fun?"

"That was waitressing. That's not culinary, that's service."

"You said diner experience, not culinary experience."

"It was clearly implied."

"Enough, lovebirds," Chris cackled, earning a smirk from Matt, "Let's just agree that neither Matt or Rory should be allowed near a stove."

"Just like your girlfriend shouldn't be allowed near intelligent life forms," Rory continued, grinning at Matt. He laughed loudly.

"Ouch, that was harsh, coming from the girl who can't boil an egg."

"You can't make dip! That doesn't even involve a stove!"
"It's like the song that never ends..." Jess moaned, "Though I do second Rory's opinion of Chloe."

"Well, I'm pretty sure she's not coming back after you called her the reincarnation of Mussolini in drag."

"She might. It's very likely that she didn't even understand the insult," Jess smirked. Matt threw a chip at him and he dodged it.

"Relax, I'm sure you can find another girl of the week. Now you'll just have to start counting on Fridays."

"Throw off my whole schedule," Matt shook his head.

When Rory and Jess arrived home, Jess immediately fell back onto his bed, sinking into the mattress.

"Fuck Chris and his games," he moaned, "It's 3 AM. He's a sadist."

"I'm pretty sure you can't construe Twister as sadism," Rory responded as she walked over to Jess' dresser to find a shirt. He turned his head to glare at her without getting up.

"Then you must have been experiencing tonight in a different dimension. How aren't you beat?"

"I don't get up at 6 AM for no apparent reason," she answered, pulling out the Metallica shirt, "Oh, I talked to Mom earlier."

"How is the second Lorelai?"


"They need to just get it over with already," Jess replied, his pillow partially crushing his mouth, "Bake the cake, have the party, send the thank you notes. It's a joke."

"How romantic," Rory deadpanned, "Yeah, I completely agree. There's absolutely no reason they shouldn't be married by now."

"Less that none," Jess admitted, "He has the ring."

"Doesn't she still have the ring?" Rory asked, confused. She was nearly certain her mom had kept her last engagement ring and had awkwardly left it in her jewelry box since the first breakup.

"He got a new one," Jess answered, "And don't you dare tell her."

"Cross my heart," Rory promised, "So is he gonna..."

"Don't know," Jess responded, "I know that last time she did, and this time he wants to. But he's had the ring since...well, at least a year or so now. So I don't get it."

"Have you tried talking to him?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because my name isn't Lorelai," he smirked, "So it's not my business."
"Jess!" Rory exclaimed, "Luke doesn't listen to anyone. He'll listen to you."

"Look, if he hasn't done it yet, there's a reason."

"Well maybe if you find out what it is, it can be remedied and we won't have to watch them play this awkward are-we-aren't-we game until we die," Rory finished. Jess smirked.

"You just wanna see the ring."

"Hey, just because I hang out in bookstores doesn't mean I don't appreciate fine jewelry."

"I'm pretty sure that's in the female genetic code."

"Probably. That and Sephora." Rory started to head to the bathroom.

"You know I've seen you before, right?" Jess muttered. Rory stopped dead in her tracks and blushed scarlet.

"Jess…"

"That time back in high school," he sat up, meeting her gaze, "After the Distillers. In the front seat of my car."

"Well no way was I getting in the backseat with you," Rory replied, her voice shaking with tension, "You couldn't be trusted."

"Still can't," he corrected, his eyes never leaving hers, "Even so, it seems odd that we're so prudish about our changing habits. It's really inconvenient."

"The bathroom is five feet away."

"I mean inconvenient for me to have to imagine it when the real thing is five feet away behind a door," Jess smirked. Rory's jaw dropped. She grabbed a towel from the nearby chair and threw it at his head.

"Hey!" he exclaimed. When he pulled it off he began laughing hysterically.

"There is no way…you had to have…"

"Women are magic," Rory smirked, the Metallica tee shirt barely grazing the middle of her bare thighs, "Goodnight, Jess."
Two hours later, Rory's phone started to buzz. Obnoxiously. Without end.

"Ugh!" she groaned, waking Jess. He rubbed his eyes and lazily looked toward her.

"Thinking about me?" he smirked. She shot him a glare he couldn't see.

"Phone," she grumbled, quickly picking it up, "Do you have a death wish?"

"Rory," Lorelai said quietly, "There's been...well...an...

Suddenly Rory heard someone grab the phone.

"What your mom is trying to say is that someone robbed the Dragonfly."

"What?" Rory shot up in bed. Jess immediately came toward her, climbing in and leaning toward the phone to hear, "What do you mean, robbed?"

"I mean, someone came into the Dragonfly, broke into the offices, and took bank files as well as a great deal of the valuable property on the premises," Luke said flatly, "Including a lot of your mom's personal assets."

"Dirty," Jess muttered, earning a simultaneous glare and smile from Rory.

"When? How? Doesn't she have a night manager? She always had a night manager!" Rory exclaimed, standing up and pacing.

"She rehired Tobin a few months ago. We haven't been able to find him and no one saw him come in tonight. Michel said they usual try to avoid seeing each other. I'm going to strange him..."

"Have you tried calling?"

"No answer. Rory, she needs you."

"We're on the way." Rory handed off the phone to Jess, meeting his eyes. He nodded, taking the phone and putting it to his ear as she picked up a backpack and started shoving some of each of their clothing into it.

"Luke, we're coming. How is she?" Rory turned, her face in shock.

"I can't believe I didn't even ask that!"

"It's okay," Jess mouthed.

"She's...well...hold on," Luke became quiet for a minute before continuing, "Sorry, went into the other room. She's a wreck, Jess. The whole place looks like a crime scene. Which, of course, it is. But it's not like Stars Hollow has a decent police force. And I swear to god, when I find the guy that did this..."

"I'll help you wring his neck," Jess affirmed, "Now, is there anything we can bring? Do? Pick up from either of your places? I'm assuming you're at the inn."

"Yeah, actually," Luke answered, "Bring enough for a week and tell Matt and Chris you won't be
into work. I'm gonna need you at the diner. Maybe Rory too."

"We can do that."

"And have Rory bring some things to calm Lorelai down. Candy, movies, whatever girly crap they like. There's some stuff called Sephora that Lorelai seems to be into…"

"It's a store," Jess sighed, "As I have recently learned. Don't worry, we'll take care of it. What about you?"

"I'm fine," Luke said gruffly.

"Luke…"

"I'll be fine, as soon as Lorelai's fine," Luke answered firmly.

"Okay," Jess nodded, "Well, we'll bring enough for the week. We're leaving in the next half hour so we should be there by two or three. Want us to meet you at the inn?"

"I'm gonna try to get Lorelai to come home, back to her place, though I'm not sure if I'll have any luck," Luke answered, "So no, just head to the diner. Mind opening tomorrow? I'll come by when I can and we'll go from there."

"Anything you need," Jess promised, "Tell Lorelai I'm sorry. We're sorry."

"I will," Luke answered, smiling. He couldn't help it. This was the kind of man that Jess had always been, that he'd always known. And if anyone could help him fix this it was Jess. "Thanks, Jess."

"Anytime," he replied. Hanging up, he looked at Rory.

"Holy shit."

"Go ahead and tell me there's no use for my OCD," Rory grinned, gesturing to the two fully-packed bags, as well as the additional tote bag stuffed with candy and movies, "Though we need magazines and more candy."

"You're both gifted and sick," Jess affirmed, "We can stop. Malomars?"

"Got 'em," Rory answered.

"Then let's go."

An hour or so later they were halfway to Star's Hollow. Jess turned to Rory.

"You know, the point of me driving was so you could sleep."

"I can't sleep. I'm worried about her."

"Your mom? The infamous Lorelai?" Jess scoffed, "Rory, that woman left your grandparent's house with you and a stroller and a Walkman. She'll be okay."

"It's just not fair," Rory said quietly, "Her, of all people. She does all this, for everyone. She's so unselfish. I mean, sometimes she seems selfish, but she's not really selfish. She's more selfless than anybody."

Jess nodded, remembering the time she'd spoken to him on the back porch of the Gilmore house.
"But of course, the Independence caught on fire. She was functionally single the entire time raising me, got divorced before even being married for a year, and hasn't actually been married, really, to someone she loved and wanted to spend her life with, even now. And someone decided to rob the Dragonfly. Why does all this shit happen to her? Why can't it happen to someone awful or even someone just...not as good as her."

"Maybe it's because she can handle it," Jess offered, "I know that probably doesn't help, and you know as well as I do that I don't believe in God or fate or any of that Sunday-school-tarot-card crap. But your mother is strong. Maybe the reason it happens to her rather than someone else is because she's strong enough to take it. Whereas if all of that happened to most people, they'd collapse."

"I don't know how she hasn't," Rory replied.

"She won't."

"How do you know?"

'I know."

They sat there quietly for a few minutes. Suddenly Rory grinned.

"Do you remember the first time we drove together?"

Jess glared at her.

"Really? You had to bring that up?"

"Why do you look so mad? It was fun."

"We crashed and you ended up in a hospital."

"Details."

"What exactly was fun about a night that ended with me leaving you in an emergency room?"

"Well, for starters, I realized how bored I was with my life," she answered, "That I hadn't thought anything through. I realized I'd never really put thought into why I wanted to be a journalist."

"And I felt awful about making you doubt your lifelong goals. I'm really feeling great about my performance that night," Jess looked at her, slightly irritated.

"No, it was good," Rory insisted, "I just wish I'd been...that I hadn't...I was scared."

"Of me?"

"Of being wrong," she admitted, "That it wasn't what I wanted to do. Or even that it might not be. That I might not want to date a lanky guy who played sports and had never read a book for pleasure in his life. That my mom was flawed. That I was even more flawed. That it was okay to be angry and imperfect."

"You got all that from one conversation?" Jess asked disbelievingly, "I think I made one comment."

"Think about it. You weren't talkative," Rory answered, "So when you said something, I listened. It usually mattered. I was just afraid to risk everything it would mean risking. The life I thought I wanted and had planned out."
"And now?" Jess ventured, meeting Rory's eyes briefly before returning his to the road.

"Now," she sighed, "I have no fucking clue. Which is wonderful and everything I knew it would be, and also completely terrifying. But I wish I'd been brave enough to do it sooner. Save myself and everyone else a lot of trouble."

"You aren't trouble," Jess countered, "Except for when you're intending to be."

Rory smirked. "You really can't keep your mind out of the gutter these days, can you?"

"Well, you are still wearing the Metallica shirt," he pointed out. She looked down in surprise. "Good thing you're not stopping by the inn. I have no idea how you'd explain that one to your mom."

"Dropped on my head one too many times on a baby?"

"Nowadays that might go over more believably than my negative influence."

"You aren't completely redeemed, Jess," Rory smirked, "You still corrupted her only daughter."

"Just helped bring out what was already there," Jess shrugged, "Plus, I wouldn't say you're completely corrupted…" His hand grazed her thigh experimentally and she drew in a sharp breath. He grinned widely.

"Maybe a little," he retorted, "But I won't tell."
"Mom!"

Rory ran to her mother's arms, hugging her, first thing the next morning. She'd driven over to the Inn when Luke had shown up at the diner around 8 AM, explaining that Lorelai refused to go home and maybe Rory could talk some sense into her. He and Jess would man the diner.

"Loinfruit!" Lorelai tried to smile, but she still looked crestfallen. Her hair was a disaster and she was still in the clothing she must have been wearing when she got the news, a sweatsuit and Uggs with her glasses. She held Rory tightly for a few moments before pulling back and meeting her daughter's eyes.

"We had a robbery."

"I know."

"Luke…"

"I know."

"I can't…"

"I know," Rory answered finally, "So let's go in."

Lorelai nodded sadly, gesturing to the entrance. Rory noticed that no employees seemed to be present outside and that there were no cars parked in the lot other than her mother's, Sookie's, Michel's, and maybe two others. As she walked inside, she could immediately see why her mother was as much of a mess as she seemed.

The entire front lobby was a disaster. The books from the shelves were strewn about, and two of the more valuable paintings were gone. The front desk was covered in a flurry of papers. Rory peered toward the barely open office door.

"That's the worst," Lorelai sighed, "Whoever it was took all our account information, credit card numbers, identifying information…it's pretty bad, kid."

"Do you have any idea who did it?"

"No," Lorelai shook her head, "It just makes absolutely no sense. This is Star's Hollow. There hasn't been a crime around here since your boyfriend was walking the streets. And even then he wasn't cool enough to commit real crimes. Just fakes ones."

"How'd you know that was him?" Rory asked curiously, ignoring the side comment.

"Please, everyone knew it was him," Lorelai replied, "I knew once I heard about Babette's gnome."

"Not that I'm not interested in hearing about the gnome," Rory rolled her eyes, "But can I see the office?"

"Your funeral," Lorelai shrugged, pushing the door open. Rory gasped.

Every cabinet and drawer was opened and jammed, random pieces of paper strewn around the floor. The computer was disconnected and some drawers were even just lying on the floor, the contents
spilling out the top. The lock on the top of the door was completely intact.

"Key's missing from where it was hidden at the front desk," Lorelai explained, "Wasn't impossible to find, so I guess they got lucky."

"I guess," Rory responded, taking in the sight, "I cannot believe this."

"Just when everything seemed to be going right," Lorelai said quietly, "Getting better. Things were good. You're better. Well, happier. To me that's better. And things with Luke…"

"Yeah, how are things with Luke?"

"He's been amazing since we found the place like this. Actually, he's been amazing since he started seeing Jess more," Lorelai admitted, "Things have been really great with him."

"But still no…"

"Nope."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. I don't really know," Lorelai said noncommittally, "But if this is how he is, just as my boyfriend or whatever I guess he is, I don't really care about titles. He's Luke. He's always been this guy for me. Always will be. Though I still can't believe he made you guys come out here."

"Mom," Rory glared, "He couldn't have stopped us if we tried. Especially me. Plus Jess is going to help bash the perp's head in."

"Did you just say perp?" Lorelai turned to Rory, unable to stop herself from giggling. Rory tried to look at her seriously, but ended up in a fit of giggling as well.

"Yeah, I guess I did," Rory answered, still smiling, "But really mom, we want to be here. We need to be. We're here for you. We'll help in any way we can."

"How long are you staying?" Lorelai asked.

"A week, at least," Rory answered, "Matt and Chris are taking care of Truncheon and it's all been handled. Why?

"Think you could stand one night without your hunky piece of man flesh?"

"Not if you ever say that again," Rory answered seriously, "But if you promise not to I'll be at home tonight."

"And this is why you're my favored child," Lorelai smirked, linking her arm through Rory's, "Let's head to the kitchen to see Sookie."

"I'm your only child," Rory corrected, "But yeah, the only way that this could get worse would be if she set the Dragonfly on fire."

"We have a pretty good policy for that here."

"Good decision."

"We thought so."
"Sookie!" Rory rushed towards the woman in front of her, enveloping her in a hug. Sookie was wearing pajamas and her hair was in curlers, but she crushed Rory with enthusiasm.

"Rory!" she smiled brightly, though a tinge of sadness was visible in her expression, "How are you, honey? You didn't have to come, but it's always so good to see ya! I can't really offer you brunch here now, but if you'd like you and your mom could come over to my place? I was just about to head out there to catch Jackson up on the news and check on the kids."

"I'm fine with whatever Mom wants to do, but you know how much I love your bacon," Rory grinned, "Are you sure you guys don't need to be here to meet anyone?"

"No one's scheduled to come but Michel will be here," Lorelai answered, "And honestly, I could use a bite. Though Luke'll probably be offended we didn't go to him."

"Friends before men! Or something like that…I feel like I've heard something like that before…" Sookie pondered curiously. Rory held back a smirk.

"I'm not sure," she lied, "But I agree with the sentiment. Plus, we can stop by there on the way back and grab coffee to go."

"Or to stay," Lorelai teased, "If you want to spend more time with your…what is he? Roommate? Friend? Those don't exactly seem to cover the way you guys were looking at each other last time you were in town."

"Wow, for someone traumatized you can still interrogate very effectively," Rory replied, walking out the door.

"Evasive! Evasive!"

"What are you two talking about?" Sookie asked, confused.

"Jess," Lorelai answered.

"What about him? I haven't seen him in years. Since the wedding you went to with Luke, I think. Why would you be talking about Jess?"

"Oh, boy, Sookie, do we have a lot to tell you," Lorelai smiled as the three walked down the road to Sookie's house.

Back at the diner, Jess and Luke were serving up breakfast.

"Fried eggs and ham on rye for Table 8," Jess said, gesturing to the table where one of the local pastors was sitting, "And coffee."

"I got the food, you get the coffee," Luke replied, "Thank god that's over."

"It was a crazy morning rush today," Jess admitted as he walked over to the coffee pot, "Lucky I'm here."

"I would've been fine," Luke protested, but he was smiling against his better judgment.

"Honestly though Luke, you need to get someone in here. I can't remember anyone working for you
since Lane, and she had her kids a couple years ago," Jess continued as he poured the coffee and returned to meet Luke by the counter.

"I don't need anyone. I handled it on my own before Lane and I can do it now," Luke responded stubbornly, "Just help me with the damn food."


"I can't let just anyone work here," Luke explained slowly, "Remember Trevor?"

"No."

"Exactly," Luke confirmed, "Lane was incredible. Completely overqualified. She was way too good to work here, but I can't just hire anyone off the street. I'm here all the time, Lorelai's here all the time. I just can't think of a good solution. And I do manage fine here. But it would be convenient to have another pair of hands around for times like these."

"Well until you figure out something better, I'm a phone call away in case of something like this coming up," Jess affirmed, "But you should think on it more. I'm sure there's an answer. I'll consider it too and see if I can think of anything."

"Well, you were always better at thinking," Luke smiled at Jess, "That is, with everything except your own damn life."

"A skill I acquired only recently," Jess smirked, "That you've probably had since…"

"Always."

"Exactly," Jess finished, "It's not about the books. As much as I love them and live in the things, the real world doesn't give a damn if you learn everything that books can teach you if you're still living your life like shit."

"You make your living off of books."

"And I changed my life with the one I wrote. But even so, it was the choices to change things, to do them, that matter. Back when I was living in Stars Hollow I was just as well-read as I am now, maybe more so, since I had more time. I knew what the right things to do were. What matters is doing them."

"I see your point," Luke admitted, "Remember the…the tape thing and the book?"

"Yeah," Jess answered.

"It wasn't those that helped me. Or you. It was making the decision to be open to changing things."

"To taking those risks."

"I've been telling you forever, Jess," Luke nodded, like it was as plain as the blue sky, "It's not the books. It's you."

"Even…"

"Even with her."

"That's coming, by the way."
"I could tell."

"How?"

"The way you two looked at each other this morning was nauseating," Luke smirked, "And also, I know you."

"You know more than you should."

"I know enough."

"But…"

"Now shut your trap and help me make some damn pancakes." Luke grinned and walked back towards the kitchen, leaving Jess impatient and intrigued.
"Do you think Sookie's gonna be able to breathe soon?" Rory laughed once she and Lorelai were heading back to the Inn. Sookie had to stay home to take care of a kid-situation (Davey put a meatball up his nose) and Lorelai had assured her it was fine, she could handle everything that day. But Rory refused to leave her side.

"Nope," Lorelai laughed. When Rory had explained to Sookie about the progress with Jess, and Lorelai had admitted to being somewhat fond of him now, Sookie had been completely lost. She couldn't understand how this would possibly be the same person who wouldn't eat the food she cooked the first and only time she'd really met him. She didn't count things like the Bracebridge dinner, where she was in the kitchen all night. But with the look on Rory's face and the calmness and satisfaction that was so obviously present there, Sookie quickly came to the same conclusion as Lorelai: he was good for her. Actually, incredible for her. And to her. When Rory had gone to pass on a message to Jackson and Davey upstairs, Sookie had leaned over to Lorelai.

"I've never seen her so happy," Sookie stated in wonder, "How did he do it? What changed?"

"Everything. Nothing at all. All I really understand is that they're sharing their books, which means that you and I should probably be picking out china patterns."

"And flowers."

"And a dress."

"And planning a menu!" Sookie exclaimed, "Does he like cheese?"

"Does who like cheese?" Rory asked as she returned. Lorelai grinned.

"Your boyfriend," she teased, "Sookie never really got an answer the first time she met him."

"Yes, he likes cheese, he's human," Rory answered, looking at them strangely, "And he's not my boyfriend, he's my…Jess. But why do you want to know if he likes cheese?"

"Just…making sure he's a suitable match for you," Lorelai answered quickly, "You shouldn't even consider a man who doesn't like cheese."

"Wouldn't," Rory affirmed, "Never in a million years. In an alternate dimension."

"What if there was a dimension with no cheese?" Sookie proposed. Lorelai and Rory gasped simultaneously.

"Sookie!" Lorelai scolded, "You, of all people, know how horrific such a world would be. So why would you jinx it?"

"I couldn't live without cheese!" Rory added in her patented cute-whine, "What's the point of such a life?"

"Does this mean…" Lorelai began.

"Fine," Rory relented. "Jinx back, double pinky, round the side…"

"Luke, you need to take a break," Jess ordered firmly, three hours later. He hadn't seen the man sit down since he'd arrived and he understood why. "You working yourself to the bone is not going to
make things any better for her right now. What will is if you try to calm yourself down and think rationally for a while."

"Oh, so now you're giving me romantic advice?" Luke huffed as he cleaned the counter in his nearly empty diner. This time of day was always very slow, too early for dinner and too late for lunch. "I'm really not that confident in your abilities."

Jess sighed deeply. "I didn't want to have to do this…Kirk?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell Luke that story you told me this morning."

"Oh!" Kirk brightened as Luke's face immediately fell, "Well, my mother and my fiancé were arguing today because Lulu wants us to get a cat and I don't but from what I hear, marriage is all about sacrifice, so I was telling Jess how my mother told me to leave Lulu and find a girl who's more accommodating but that I told her that she doesn't understand why I like Lulu so much since she hasn't seen her…"

"Kirk, as fascinating as this story is, I need to have a private word with Jess for a minute," Luke cut him off quickly, "You paid your bill already?"

"Well, yes, but I really feel my advice could help the predicament that you and Jess seemed to be alluding…"

"Out!"

"Fine," Kirk grumbled, "But since I already paid I'm not tipping you next time. Terrible service here."

"Really? You set Kirk on me?"

"Either him or Taylor and Kirk happened to be here."

"Do you realize how immature that was?"

"No less mature than your reaction to it."

"Why in the hell…"

"Because Lorelai is in a complete hellhole of a situation and since you love her more than anything, bar nothing at all, ever, it's driving you crazy not to be able to help her. It's written all over your face. Now, you can either keep doing this, which isn't helping anyone but your counter, or you can listen to what I have to say. I'll admit I'm no Dr. Phil and that my relationships aren't perfect but you have to admit, there's no one else who could tell you how to effectively handle a Gilmore."

Luke met his nephew's eyes and stared for a moment, trying to find a decent counterargument. He sighed in defeat. "I guess it can't make things worse." He sat down at the counter and Jess sat next to him.

"What happened to her is awful," Jess said slowly, "And you know that. You also know that no matter how you handle it she's still going to want to be in the Inn at all times, as long as possible, even if it drives you crazy and her even crazier. And that since she wants to do it, she will do it and nothing can stand in her way. So instead of fighting it, the best option you have is to screw compromise for the time being. Go there. Be with her. Don't try to make her come home, bring home
to her. Let her come home when she's ready."

"You mean…"

"I mean you and Lorelai, staying at that goddamned Inn until she stops feeling guilty about letting something happen to it. Until going home actually feels good to her, rather than like a betrayal of a place that she irrationally feels guilty for letting get hurt. I mean being by her side whenever you don't have to be here. It's great that Rory's with her. She needed a day of that. But let Rory take the diner with me a couple days this week and you go be with her while she deals with this. It doesn't matter if she's talking to a contractor and you're sitting on the couch at the Inn or if she's making phone calls and you're arguing with Sookie in the kitchen. Be there. She says she doesn't want you to, but it's because she doesn't want to feel guilty about you being there when you don't want to be."

"But how can I change that?" Luke asked in exasperation, "She's Lorelai! No matter how I act, she always knows what I'm thinking.""Then want to be there," Jess said simply, "Think about it. On some level, you already do. You hate that she's there worrying and that you aren't there to comfort her. Of course you'd be happier if she were here and you were comforting her, and better still at her house. Your house, whatever. But that's not an option, and given that, you'd be happier being there with her than refilling coffee all day driving yourself crazy with how upset she is and how stressed she is and how you can't do anything to fix it, especially when you know that just you being there will make a difference."


"What?" Jess asked, confused.

"It's her house," Luke answered, "I stay there most nights, but it's always still her house. It's that we're staying at her place, or my place. It's not our place."

Jess looked at him carefully, refusing to break the older man's gaze.

"Do you want it to be?"

Luke looked up and breathed deeply before looking at Jess with more certainty than he ever had in his life.

"Yes."

"Then do something about it," Jess said, looking at his uncle's unblinking orbs. He could see reflected in them the pain that Lorelai had put him through, that life had put him through, but rising above that the desperate hope and need for something strong, permanent, that he could hold onto, that was his. Jess had seen it from the first day he'd met Luke and seen the way he looked at Lorelai. He'd always known it was there. But it was never brighter or more clear than it was now.

Luke nodded at Jess. After a few moments of bursting silence, he looked back at his nephew.

"How the hell did you figure all this out, anyway?"

"Hey!" Rory exclaimed, walking back into the diner and to the counter. She smiled at Jess, resisting the urge to lean in and kiss his cheek. He smiled back. She frowned immediately.

"Why are you smiling?" she asked suspiciously, "Did you lock Luke and Taylor in the supply closet together or something? You don't smile like that for no reason."

"So now you're cataloging my different expressions of pleasure?" Jess inquired, refilling a coffee and pouring one for Rory, "That seems a bit totalitarian. Plus, it's quite possible that you're missing a few…"

She glared at him. "Tell me!"

He laughed. "Was that supposed to be convincing?"

She pouted her lips and pulled the Bambi eyes. He looked at her severely.

"No. Not fair. Not allowed. Not this time. I'll take away your coffee."

She grabbed the mug protectively and pulled it close to her chest. "Why are you keeping secrets?"

"Don't you have any?"

"From you?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"Really?"

"None that matter. This does."

"How can you tell?"

"The smile."

"And?"

"The way your head is positioned."

"What?" Jess looked her like she was crazy. She shrugged.

"You asked," she replied, "Seriously, you have to tell me. Is it about you? Me? Matt? Chris?"

"Not answering," he hummed, "You'll find out soon enough yourself."

"What does that…" Suddenly Rory's eyes widened. "Luke!"

"Rory," Jess warned, lowering his voice. Suddenly the man in question walked down the stairs. He smiled widely at Rory and Jess.

"Rory!" he exclaimed, leaning in and hugging her, "Thank you again so much for helping with the diner. I just think I should be there, at least for a while, you know?"
"Of course," Rory answered, her the corners of her lips curled upwards suspiciously, "Hey, how was your day here with Jess?"


"No, he didn't," Rory said smugly, "You just confirmed it. So what is going on? You're both…"

"Rory, you know I would do anything for you, right?" Luke asked, his voice clear and his eyes level with Rory's. Her eyebrows raised in surprise at his bluntness but she nodded.

"And you know the same of Jess too," Luke nodded, and Rory and Jess exchanged a look that said more than words could. "Given that, if we aren't telling you, why don't you consider that maybe it's not in your best interest to know? At least yet?"

"So I'll find out eventually?" Rory asked, sighing.

"Only if you don't die of a caffeine overdose first," Jess answered, staring at Rory as she poured herself another mug, "You've been here three minutes!"

"Four. And it was too hot for two of them," Rory explained.

"Addict."

"Enabler."

"Without my enabling you can't get the good coffee."

"God."

"Little better," Jess smirked, "But I prefer deity. Sounds marginally less blasphemous."

"And you've minded blasphemy since…"

"It would count as a violation of probation for the probationary period I received in Stars Hollow for the savage kidnapping of Babette's lawn gnome," Jess answered seriously. Rory grinned wide.

"On that note, I'm going to leave you two," Luke smirked at Jess who glared in response. "We'll see you tomorrow here for breakfast?"

"Sounds great," Rory smiled, "Give Mom another hug for me."

"I'll give her plenty. Though she's yours tomorrow for movie night, she said. She called earlier."

"Yeah, guess we're sharing custody."

"Doesn't generally work well for me."

"Well you're just too possessive."

"Alright, Abbot, Costello has to get to his next show," Jess rolled his eyes, ushering Luke out the door. Rory grinned in spite of herself and willed herself to hold back the intense wave of emotion that hit her when Jess closed the door, that was compelling her to launch herself into Jess' arms.

"So now we work?"

"Like Joe the Plumber."
"You mean Miss Patty's seventh husband?"

"Your wit is cruel, Miss Gilmore."

"I learned from the best."
Getting in his truck, Luke turned around to watch his nephew talk to Rory. The smile on Jess' face lit him up in a way that Luke had really never seen before. The closest thing he could remember was when he first started to date Rory, but even then there was an awkwardness, a fear, a distance. Now he watched a man who, since his youth, refused to be close to someone, to try to be, to be open, even to the only people who helped him. And that was changed. There was nothing fearful in his eyes and he knew that Rory was ready to receive him and he was ready to give of himself. If Jess could be brave, given everything he'd gone through...Luke gripped the steering wheel tightly as he pulled away. It was time.

There weren't going to be a thousand yellow daisies or a thousand bacon strips. There wouldn't be champagne. There probably wouldn't even be a plan. But Luke knew that it was happening, that it was time, that soon enough he'd do the thing he'd been wanting to do since the first time he really gazed into the blue orbs begging him for a fifth cup of coffee.

It had been too long, so long. And she had been waiting. She'd been patient, so patient, ever since the first thing, the reconciliation. She didn't bring it up often, and when she did it was usually accidental or apologetic but necessary. She was as graceful about the matter as she could possibly be, especially since he knew exactly how much she wanted it. He'd seen the wedding dress still hanging in the back of her closet, not put away in a box or even covered in some sort of garment bag but only by a clear protective layer, and he'd notice the way her eye would get caught on it as she tried to select something to wear, the quick flash of need and sadness and why not, why not yet. He knew it was hurting her and he'd known it for a long time now. But he'd done it anyway.

Jess was a lot of it. For a long time, when Luke knew that Lorelai didn't accept Jess, couldn't accept Jess, wouldn't accept Jess...it pained him more than he would admit to anyone. The fact that when they got married Jess wouldn't be standing by him, the idea that their children might not be raised to like him, Luke just couldn't deal. Sure, his relationship with Jess wasn't perfect. Definitely not back then, and still not. But he had one and he knew who the man was at core and the way he could be and the fact that he was on the path, and he wanted Jess to be a big part of his life and any new life that he created for himself. He needed him to be. Jess wasn't his nephew and he really hadn't been.

He thought back to the few times he'd seen Jess as a kid, and even then he felt compelled to take him in, keep him safe, teach him, show him, shape him. Someone had to, he knew what could happen. And he could see the potential in the kid's eyes from the first fleeting glance. Luke always knew that Jess was smarter than he was, even as a kid. That he always would be. And that he desperately wanted something other than the shithole life that Liz had provided him, he wanted a way out, an escape into something where he could be a man, a real man, the kind he only read about in books as opposed to the creatures that he woke up to find sleeping on his couch. Luke knew all this, and knew that as much as his life would be incomplete without Lorelai, it would be just as incomplete without Jess.

But recently that excuse had faded into nothingness, and he'd been waiting for Jess to call him on it. He knew it was coming, but not when. God, everyone wanted to. He could imagine that it drove Rory crazy, watching her mom wait for something that never seemed to come when she knew she deserved it, more than anyone. And it made Luke sick to keep it from her. But marriage was a horse of a different color. Marriage was something that no one seemed to do right anymore, and marriage was forever, and marriage was a promise that you couldn't break and a coupon drawer that wasn't always easy to talk about. Family was a time bomb. You start having expectations and you start being disappointed. You start caring and you start losing. Worse, someone you love is disappointed.
Someone you love loses. And it's your fault.

Luke thought back to when his dad died, how much he hated the man, cursed whatever place he'd gone to for leaving him to take care of a tramp like Liz, when they didn't have a mother anymore either. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, and the tornado that was grief would still topple him sometimes, shoving his body to the ground and leaving him scratched, bruised, and bleeding. It wasn't his father's fault that he died, but it didn't stop the bleeding. He'd watched Jess bleed. He'd watched Rory bleed. He couldn't be the one to cause it. If it was a choice between a scrape on Lorelai's arm and her getting the wind knocked out of her and her skin torn in shreds, he knew it had to be the lesser of two evils.

But Lorelai Gilmore wasn't a static object. She didn't just sit there and assimilate to his pontification. She wasn't water, she was lightning and when she struck she struck and when she sparked a flame nothing could put out the fire except the rain. She wasn't going to leave him and if he fell, she would still be scraping broken glass out of her arms and her legs, no matter whether or not she wore a ring while she did it. At first he thought marriage was her everything, the ruination of their relationship. Because he wouldn't address it they were doomed to fail. But now Lorelai stood tall at his side, every day, planning to the rest of his life, and her only white dress was the daily coffee he offered her. There was no tangible proof that he would stay, that she would stay. But now they both knew. He couldn't keep her safe, she wanted to stand in the midst of the storm with him, security be damned in favor of what they had, and according to her he didn't get to say a damn thing about it. Luke smiled in spite of himself at her stubbornness.

So when Jess said it was time, Luke knew he was right. He knew it was a long time coming. And he knew it was coming now.
An hour or so later, Rory resumed her attempts to break Jess’ composure.

"Why won't you tell me?" Rory pouted, her Bambi eyes in full swing. Jess dodged them and headed to the one occupied table to fill his coffee. When he returned she smirked.

"Forgot something," Rory said casually, holding up a small yellow notebook. Jess' eyes narrowed.

"Seriously?" he sighed, "You're going to deprive innocent people of food because I won't tell you something that isn't either of ours to tell? That's really only Luke's business at this point?"

"But it doesn't only involve Luke," Rory challenged, "I could tell by the way he accused you. He thought you might tell me. Therefore, there would have to be a good reason that I would have a vested interest in knowing."

"Or, since he somehow figured out something's going on between us, he assumes I converse with you about any and all matters I so choose. Which, actually, I always have. Have you considered that you might be making a mountain out of a molehill?"

"Have you considered that if this has to do with my mother and you aren't telling me I'm going to murder you in your sleep?"

"First time you try that I'm going to jack up your rent."

"I don't pay rent."

"Well. I'll devise a rent system."

"So it does have to do with Lorelai?" Rory ventured. Jess looked heavenward, dramatically shaking his head. "Is he…"

"Rory, think about it," Jess turned to her sharply, finally meeting her excited, hopeful eyes, "If it is, do you really want to hear that news from me? And if it isn't, do you really want to resent him for not doing it and me for passing the message? There's no advantage to this conversation."

Rory looked at him quietly and then sighed. "Damn your logical reasoning skills," she muttered, grabbing the pad of paper and going to take the customer's order.

"I have an idea of how to take your mind off of it," Jess offered, a few minutes later. Rory raised her eyebrows.

"No, not…" Jess blushed furiously, "God, that's one of the worst lines in the book. I was being sincere about an idea."

"Which is…"

"Why don't I teach you to cook?"

Rory burst out in laughter so loud that the one customer turned and looked at her like she was having a fit. In fact, she was very close to it.

"You…" she choked back tears of amusement, "Are going to try to teach me to cook?"
"Succeed," he challenged and the laughter began again. He narrowed his eyes.

"What, don't think you can do it?" he asked her, his tone condescending, "It's okay if you need a man to provide for you."

She glared at his sarcasm. "You know, at one point I thought you were funny," she countered, "And I am perfectly capable of providing for myself."

"Unless some sort of radioactive war takes out all the take-out," Jess pointed out, "Then you'd need...someone."

"Well..." Rory said thoughtfully, "I mean, I guess I can't do that much damage supervised. What are you gonna teach me to make?"

"Bacon."

"Ooh! Can we do pancakes too?" Rory pleaded, her eyes shining with anticipation again. Jess laughed.

"Wow, you really do have shiny ball syndrome," he smirked, "No way. Too hard."

Rory looked at him with disapproval and he sighed in defeat.

"But I'll make them for you to go with."

"Deal."
Lorelai threw a pile of laundry into a hamper violently. She was just about at her limit. Michel had left to go feed his dog, and Sookie had to go home to check on Davy again. So, in a fit of stress, she had decided to clean.

Although she'd never been very clean when it came to her own living space, she was immaculate about it at her Inn. And she had been like that ever since she was a maid. She had just been so grateful to get the job that she wanted everything to be absolutely perfect, her rooms to be the best, unrefutabley so. And they always were. Not a millimeter out of place. She liked the orderliness of it, the fact that in her constantly spinning mind and constantly changing world it was completely methodical, and that she could do it perfectly, every time, and she knew it. So whenever she became extremely stressed out, she would work, but if doing her own work wouldn't cut it, she'd clean. It always did the trick.

This time though, it wasn't doing as much for her as usual. She was trying not to cry thinking about all the things she had to do that she had no idea how to even begin to do. She needed to keep the guests happy and feeling safe at the Inn, not worried. She needed to keep morale high with her employees and she needed to figure out who was responsible for it. She also needed to secure her finances, immediately and perfectly, as well as any related to the inn. She'd always been awful with numbers, and now if she couldn't remember something correctly or didn't know how to handle a situation it could be hugely detrimental to the business that she worked so hard for, that she'd slaved over and for years to get. The Dragonfly had become another home in her life, on the landscape where she placed the shed she lived in with Rory and her home and Luke's apartment and the Independence Inn. She couldn't stand to let something or someone hurt it, and they had. On her watch. She was robbed blind under her nose and she should have prevented it. She should have prepared better, she should have worked harder, she shouldn't have left, she should have made sure…

Lorelai forcefully pulled the sheets taut before folding them into the bed in the exact perfect measurements. There was no way in hell she was letting this break the Inn. Too many people depended on her. Sookie, Michel, their families, her employees, their families, her customers! The hundreds of customers she had lined up to stay here. She had promised them safety and security and she had failed them, all of them, and she needed to make it right, she had to, she was the only one who could…

"Hey," she heard a gruff voice behind her. She turned to find Luke with a small, white paper bag and a cup.

"What is…"

"I brought donuts. Please, sit down, for just a…"

"I already made the bed."

"Then sit on the floor. You need to breathe, Lore," he smiled as she offered the bag to her gently. She grabbed a donut, sitting on the ground, and then took the coffee and started to gulp it down. She shouldn't cry, she wouldn't cry, not now. He was being so nice and so supportive and she'd screwed up and he was around to help fix it even though it was her mistake, she had to fix it, but he wanted to, and god, she didn't deserve him, she never had.

"The breathing thing means tuning out the voices of your other personalities as well," he added. She
exhaled deeply and nodded. He sat down beside her and she leaned into him, their backs against the footboard of the bed.

"Look," he said, gently taking her hand in reassurance, "I'm not going to stop you or try to stop you from driving yourself crazy over this. I know you don't want to leave. So we can stay here."

"We?"

"We," he affirmed, "It isn't you and me. You know that. It's us. And I'm not gonna leave you to deal with this on your own. If I can't help, that's fine. But either way, I'll be there. You're not getting rid of me."

A few tears gathered in the corner of Lorelai's eye and she smiled through the pain and stress apparent on her exhausted face.

"I love you," she murmured, leaning against him again and allowing him to put his arm around her, her head resting in his lap and him gently stroking her hair.

"I love you too," he answered quietly.

A few minutes later they stood up and walked over to the bed. Lorelai locked the door.

"I still can't believe you're doing this."

"Yeah, you can."

"Yeah, I can."
Meanwhile, back at the diner, Jess and Rory were getting ready to close up.

"Did you do this part a lot? Back when you lived here?" Rory asked as she went around, shutting off the lights and Jess locked the door.

He shook his head. "Barely ever. I was usually asleep after Luke, and awake after Luke. So the opening/closing thing is new to me."

"Wow, you sound like such a good employee."

"I was employee of the month once, I'll have you know," Jess replied playfully, walking over to her and pouring them each a cup of coffee. They sat at the counter in the darkness.

"Employee of the month until they found the bodies, probably," Rory smirked, gulping some coffee and grabbing one of the two remaining donuts in the case, passing it to Jess before taking the last one for herself. He smiled at her gratefully and she reciprocated, feeling herself blush lightly. If she could end every night like this, she would die with no regrets.

Whenever she sat with Jess like this, at night, sure, her pulse race and she flushed and she felt that deep, low, guttural moan inside her that begged for release. But that wasn't all. He looked at her with reverence and she could see that. Even after all this time, all the things she'd done, all the ways she'd been broken and broken him. He knew every goddamned thing there was to know about her, the ugliest cracks, and he still gazed at her like she was the Mona Lisa and somewhat had told him he could take her home.

Rory didn't think she'd ever understand how he could see her that way. She knew that her having been able to hurt him, after everything he'd been through in his life, meant that she hurt him badly. Really badly. But instead she was still the light to him, in a world that was dark, that he would follow, guide, pursue her warmth. He needed to be near her, close to her, always closer.

One of Jess' favorite things about Rory was the fact that she would stare at him so unabashedly, wrapped up in her own thoughts. Other people would self-consciously look away or feel awkward, but she would just stare into the depths of his eyes, searching for answers that she could pick and choose at her free will. The answers in his eyes were much easier to find than hers sometimes. He knew how unreadable she was to most people. But even he struggled with hers. It took reflection, careful consideration, to come to any sort of definitive conclusion about what she was probably thinking or wanted or didn't want. And he loved thinking about it. But what he liked best about night's like this was the way that the tiny slivers of light fell on the paleness of her arm or the way that she exhaled so lightly that it was almost a prayer. There was such a dignity and grace about her when she was relaxed, calm, satisfied. He often found himself drowning in wondering what it would be like if she were satiated, completely undone, the ultimate tranquility. Such thoughts distracted him to no end on a regular basis, but they just mused past him on nights like this, like beautiful dreams, whispering in his ear before floating off again. And the way she looked, spoke, moved all told of what could be, what might be, little hints of what his imagination would yield in reality. It wasn't just about the physical, though he couldn't deny that those pulses were overpowering. But Rory undone was like seeing a beautiful heroine let her hair down. Rory was always beautiful but often tightly wound, and what most people usually saw was the enthusiastic but compulsive and perfectionist aspects. Only a chosen few, people most carefully selected and trusted intimately, could see her in a state of such vulnerability.
"Are you just gonna sit there staring at me? Because if so, I'm gonna eat your donut," Rory smiled good-naturedly across from him. He smirked, pushing it towards her.

"Fair trade," he answered, his eyes never leaving hers.
Chapter 73

The following morning Luke and Lorelai arrived at the diner for breakfast around 10 AM to find Rory in a heated argument with Taylor. Jess looked on in amusement from the counter as he refilled coffees.

"No, you absolutely cannot create executive privilege for yourself at town meetings," Rory admonished, "That's a complete abuse of power, especially in a system that is so purely democratic. Frankly I'm shocked that someone who appreciates history as much as yourself would even think to dishonor our founding fathers and their concept of the democratic process in such a way."

"But no one would have questioned George Washington if he wanted to thin the deer population!" Taylor exclaimed, nearly knocking over the untouched plate of food Rory had brought over, "My dear girl, didn't that fancy college of yours teach you anything? The world is changing, and not for the better. Of course I care about history, and to preserve it sometimes I have to make sacrifices for the common good."

"That's the argument dictators use when they take over countries."

"You know, although dictatorships get a bad reputation, you can't say they aren't efficient," Taylor replied, "Think of how much more George Washington could have accomplished without those damned Anti-Federalists continuously blocking his heroic efforts! Maybe he'd have solved the deer problem!"

"You're completely…just eat your breakfast, Taylor," Rory huffed before returning to the counter, not noticing Luke and Lorelai at the door.

"I hate him," she mumbled to Jess, "I swear to god I hope a deer hits his car."

"You mean he hits a deer with his car?"

"No. I hope a deer hits his car. Actually, I hope all the deer hit his car. Like an offensive attack."

"I've never heard of…"

"It's possible, trust me."

"And I'm the bad driver?"

"Sorry to interrupt the When Harry Met Sally banter," Lorelai cut in, walking over and sitting at the counter seat next to where Rory was standing, "But if I do not get caffeine in my system in the next five minutes I will either faint or die in this diner, either of which could result in a serious drop in business for the morning."

"Well in that case," Jess smirked, pulling out a mug and filling it to the top.

"Bless you," Lorelai smiled at Jess, before reaching over to hug Rory, "How are you, hon?"

"Fine, but I'd be better if we could send Taylor back to whatever stork he came from."

"Rory, I thought you would've picked it up on the streets by now. Babies come from…"

"And I think it's time we order food. Lorelai?" Luke cut her off. She grinned.
"Everything with a side of everything. And make it sugary." Jess nodded dutifully before heading into the kitchen.

"Let me help him," Luke insisted, "You stay out here and catch up with your mom."

"Thanks, Luke," Rory smiled, pouring herself a cup of coffee and then sitting down next to Lorelai. "So how was your night?"

"We stayed at the inn."

"We?"

"Luke too."

"Wow."

"Yeah. I picked a good one."

"The best."

"I think so," Lorelai smiled, her eyes falling on Luke as he stood in the kitchen with Jess. "What about yours?"

"My…"

"Night," Lorelai answered, a Cheshire Cat grin appearing on her face. Rory rolled her eyes.

"It was fine," she answered, "Uneventful."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Because?"

"Because it was."

"Because…"

"Do you really think this is the place to discuss this?"

"Wow, do you really find the concept that unappetizing?"

"Mom!"

"Sorry, sorry!" Lorelai laughed. Rory grinned in spite of herself. Lorelai looked at Rory conspiratorially. "Listen, I have an idea. Why don't you go tell Jess you're taking today off and come hang with me?"

"But aren't we doing movie night tonight?"

"And we'll do keeping-Mommy-sane-day-today."

"But what about Luke?"

"I needed him yesterday," Lorelai admitted, "And I'll probably want him there for me as much as possible. But right now I'd like to get some time in with you while I can. Plus I need to binge on
cake, and Luke doesn't possess the champion cake eating skills that you do.”

"It's a Gilmore gene."

"Comes with the eyes."

"Undoubtedly so."

"So?"

"I'm in. Just let me go tell Jess."

"Do you still want to do movie night or do you think you'll…"

"Mom!" Rory glared.

"What?" Lorelai asked innocently, "I was going to say have work to do."

"Uh-huh," Rory responded, "Sure. That's exactly what you meant. But no, I'm in for movie night. Work…can wait for another time."

"Well when you've got a deadline that's screaming your name…"

"If you continue with this I'll have him cut you off!"

"Wrapped around your pretty little finger already?"

"Jess! Mom's capped."

"No fair! I gave birth to you!"

"I gave you a warning."

"I'm done, last time, I swear."

"You are a total addict."

"I prefer to think of it as an obsessive love affair."

"Much more healthy."

"By leaps and bounds."
The moment Lorelai and Rory walked out the door, Luke pulled Jess into the kitchen.

"Call Rory, get her alone, and tell her that she needs to keep Lorelai away from the Inn all day. No exceptions."

"And what reason should I give for that request?"

"Say that I think it's absolutely necessary to her minute level of sanity, and to all of mine, to keep her away from it for a while. To distract her. Tell her to bring her to Hartford."

"What's in Hartford?"

"I don't know...isn't there a mall?"

"You're asking me?"

"Just make the call," Luke grinned, before walking out of the kitchen. He looked to be sure that Rory's car was gone and then immediately turned to Jess.

"You're coming with me. Cesar can handle all of this."

"So we're..."

"Going to the Inn."

"To..."

"Fix it."

"Is that possible?"

"Look, you do bookkeeping at Truncheon, right?"

"Some."

"Well, you'll work on that while I handle the physical destruction and we'll tag team on phone calls. I let Sookie and Michel know this morning and they'll be there to help, but by tonight if all goes as planned it should be done."

"So is this some big plan to..."

"No. I just want to make her happy. I can't even think about doing that until she's happy again. So tonight is just about making things better, fixing them for her. It'll happen eventually. When the time's right, I'll do it. And since I'm saying it to you, you know it's not bullshit."

"I believe you," Jess replied, "And I agree. But can I make a suggestion?"

"What?"

A moment later Luke was grinning from ear to ear. "Maybe we should bring it with us, just in case."

"Well aren't you a boy scout, always prepared," Jess smirked before following Luke out the door and to the truck.
Meanwhile Rory, having received Jess' message, was driving Lorelai out to Hartford for mani-pedi-facials followed by lunch followed by shopping followed by cake. A foolproof, time-perfected plan. Rory was sure there was more to the story than Jess was telling her but didn't press it, assuming that it probably wasn't his information to give.

"But I just want to…"

"No," Rory cut Lorelai off, shooting her a death glare for the eighth time in ten minutes, "And if you don't stop asking I'm making a stop at Grandma's."

"Why didn't I drive my own car?" Lorelai pouted, slouching back in her seat.

"Because you're the pretty one and I'm the smart one," Rory smirked.

"Says the girl who believed that stove burners were the devils hands."

"That's when my knowledge base was entirely formed by you."

"Excuses, excuses."

"So is purple with glitter weird now that I'm, like, a real adult?"

"Like that's stopped you with anything else."

"Rory…"

"People expect you to be glittery, Mom. They have at least 20 years of data to back up their hypotheses. I wouldn't overanalyze it."

"You aren't gonna do pink again, are you?"

"Just listen to the music and let me drive, okay?"

"Fine, fine," Lorelai relented, "But when you're toes are yawning from boredom constantly don't say I didn't warn you."

"When my toes start yawning I'll go blonde and get a tattoo of Bon Jovi lyrics on my hip."

"I don't know whether I'm repulsed or impressed by your ingenuity."

"I get it from you."

Later that evening, Luke returned from the Dragonfly's kitchen and handed Jess a fresh cup of coffee and some of Sookie's white chocolate macadamia nut toffee cookies.

"Sit down, take a break," Luke gestured to the table, "We've done a hell of a lot."

"You've done a hell of a lot," Jess corrected, "The rest of us spent most of the day watching in awe at the fact that you can actually work a computer."

"Only in dire circumstances, and remember the confidentiality agreement. If you ever tell a soul…"

"You'll make Privet Drive look like Eden, I got it," Jess rolled his eyes, "But seriously, Luke, there's almost nothing left to do."

"Well, everything's in order, the reservations that got messed up have been fixed and or rebooked,
the insurance guys have come and gone and done their estimates and been paid, and all of the stolen accounts have been re-secured with their respective agencies. Seriously Jess, I can’t thank you enough for your help."

"It was nothing," Jess shrugged, "I get it."

"I know you do," Luke looked at him meaningfully and Jess nodded, "By the way, how's Rory doing with all that?"

"Better in my opinion but probably worse from an outward viewpoint," Jess answered, "She's at Truncheon more than ever and is barely doing anything for her jobs at those publications anymore. And she's taking her time. I think it'll happen soon."

"So she'll be okay?"

"She'll be better than she was before," Jess answered.

"And you two?"


"Do me a favor and make sure Sookie's got dinner going? Rory and Lorelai are gonna be back soon and I want her to be surprised."

"And you're sure you're not…"


"Really good point," Jess said, "I will no longer doubt your intentions. Just dinner at the Inn with the people who love it."

"And her."

"That too."
Chapter 75

Lorelai and Rory walked slowly towards the Inn, laughing hysterically.

"So she really…"

"Fembot. Complete, full-on fembot, but without the awesome weaponry."

"Wow, I'm so surprised," Lorelai deadpanned.

"Matt's a nice guy," Rory defended, "He just…"

"Chooses booty over brains?"

"Seriously Mom?" Rory groaned as they approached the door. Lorelai reached for the key as she smirked.

"It was too easy," Lorelai continued as she opened the door, "It was like oh my god!"

"Who are you, LC?" Rory asked, confused, as she followed Lorelai inside. Lorelai's arm stopped her as she looked in front of her. "Oh my god!"

In front of them stood Sookie, Jackson, and Michel, as well as Luke and Jess. The entry table held three different types of cookies and fresh banana and zucchini breads, as well as a new, gorgeous vase of fresh flowers. When Lorelai had left, her usual vase of tasteful flowers had been shattered, probably just collateral damage from the criminal rushing out. A new guestbook lay open, the pen next to it, to replace the one that had been found on the ground next to the shards of glass with water damage. And above their heads were string lights, everywhere, dazzling white.

"I knew you were about to decorate for Christmas," Luke smiled as Lorelai looked at him in awe. She began to walk forward. The banister of the staircase was wrapped in tinsel and garlands. She turned around and noticed a sprig of mistletoe hanging above the doorway, and another few above the other entryways of the various rooms of the inn. Lorelai inhaled deeply and walked into the dining room, Rory, Jess and Luke following close behind her.

There were Christmas centerpieces on the tables (miniature trees, ornamented and tinsel), as well as a small tray of three Christmas cookies on each of them ("A prototype!" Sookie rushed to add, running over, causing Lorelai to smirk and hold back a laugh). Each table was also covered in a gorgeous white tablecloth sprinkled with tasteful fake snow. The lights in this room set off an ambient glow, as did the number of varied ivy and cranberry candles that were lit and burning dimly on the side.

Lorelai looked back at Luke in disbelief before starting to walk back into the main lobby. Rory began to turn to walk with them. Jess grabbed her wrist and she turned her head rapidly to face him, confused.

"They're still warm," he grinned, handing her a snowflake-shaped cookie. She smiled back at him and took the cookie with her other hand, allowing him to lead her into the next room to catch up with the others.

When Lorelai finally reached the lobby she stopped dead in her tracks and turned to Luke, tears starting to stream down her cheeks. Through her open office door she could see that the floor was clear of all of the mess, her files had been returned to their cabinets, and that the cabinets had new
locks. Her desk had been cleared and a jar of candy canes was resting next to her replaced computer. Another tray of Christmas cookies sat on the other side of it. The front desk, which had been strewn with literally about a hundred pieces of paper only the day before, was clear. The drawers that had been jammed open or thrown to the floor had been replaced and re-entered, and string lights hung from the front edge of it. A brand new snow globe with a gazebo in the center lay next to Lorelai’s computer, which had been reconnected and repaired. The message pad had been replaced with one shaped like a holiday peppermint.

"I didn't choose that," Luke hastened to correct, "That was Sookie. And Jess."

"We said we'd never speak of it," Jess glared at Luke darkly, and Rory stifled a giggle, her hand closing around Jess' tightly. He squeezed back. Lorelai laughed out loud.

"There are candy canes in the pencil cups!" she exclaimed, "And more cookies!"

"Yes, somehow I guessed you liked cookies," Luke rolled his eyes. Lorelai turned to him, her eyes shining. She took his hand in her own. "Show me the rest."

He smiled at her, his eyes bright, and pulled her toward the main living room. There she saw the Christmas tree.

"Oh my gosh," Lorelai breathed, almost reverently. The thing was at least four feet taller than any tree they'd had before and was real, as she could tell from the scent of pine that was hanging in the air. The entire thing was strung in hundreds of tiny white lights and was decorated in all white ornaments. It looked like a blizzard had come into the Inn. On top was not the star that had been there, but an angel that she'd never seen before.

"It was my mom's," Luke told her softly, so the others couldn't hear. She turned to him, amazed.

"But…"

"We're family, Lorelai. I know you and Rory have your special one that you have at home, but I thought…for here…"

"It's perfect, Luke. Everything is perfect."

He smiled, and it took everything he had not to kiss her right there. But that would come later.

"There's more." She grinned.

"Of course there is," she shook her head, "There always is with you?"

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Only for the rest of us men that are mere mortals," Jess joked to Rory. She met his eyes and grinned.

"Don't think for a second you are getting away with acting like you're innocent in all of this," she accused, her cheeks flushed. "And mere might not be the word I'd use."

"Care to enlighten me with your impressive vocabulary?" he cocked an eyebrow and she smirked.

"I would but I wouldn't want to inflate your already engorged head."

"And just when I thought you could be nice."
"It comes and goes."

Luke started back outside with Lorelai and they walked around to the side, Jess and Rory following a couple feet behind. The cold air was biting but none of them felt a thing.

"Rory!" Lorelai squealed, turning, "Look!" She pointed at the stables. They were lit with Christmas lights too, as were the front (Jess had surreptitiously slipped the switch on as they walked out). Above them on a board was painted, "Reindeer Lodging" in beautiful lettering. A rack of sleds stood next to the stables. And further off Lorelai saw an ice rink, just like the one Luke had built at her house.

"Yeah, I'm not sure if it's a liability, or if the guests can really use it, I just thought…"

"It's amazing," Lorelai smiled, "They'll love it. I love it."

"And...there's a little more," Luke admitted, "Jess, you want to take Rory inside and help get dinner ready?"

"Dinner?"

"Sookie kind of...did her thing."

"I'll bet you asked her to."

"I might have."

"We'll see you guys in a bit," Jess nodded at Luke, his eyes quickly asking a question. Luke smiled and gave a slight nod. Jess bit his lip to stop himself from grinning and quickly turned, leading Rory back to the house.

"Luke…"

"Follow me."

He led her past the stables and around to the back of the Dragonfly. When they finally reached their destination he stopped and they stared at the object in front of them.

"Luke, I thought you…"

"I kept it," he admitted, "I couldn't get rid of it. Because when we were standing under it I knew... exactly what I know now. What it was really meant for. What I realized I'd known since the goddamn moment you first accosted me in my diner."

Lorelai's eyes widened. She turned away from the chuppah to face him.

"Lorelai, you know I love you. You've always known. And I know it's taken me a long time to get there, to the place where I actually...follow through. But it's always been right with you. Always. No matter what's happened between us, I never doubted that when I ended up being with someone, for the long haul, it'd be you."

"Now I'm not good at any of this, so I'm sorry. It's probably good you did this the first time, because I sure feel like I'm making a complete ass of myself here...you're the one who's good with words. And emotions. And saying what you feel. But for me, it's really simple. When I met you, I knew wanted to be the one to make your coffee every morning from then on. And ever since I made this chuppah, I knew I wanted to stand under it with you, and then spend the rest of my life building
other things to make you as happy as this did. So, Lorelai…"

"Yes, Luke?" she smiled through the tears now streaming down her face. He bent down on one knee.

"Will you stand under that chuppah, with me? Will you let me make you coffee every morning for the rest of our lives? Lorelai Gilmore, Will you marry me?"

"Yes." Lorelai nodded, finally breaking down into full out sobs of joy, "Yes, of course, Luke. Yes, I'll marry you. Yes."

And he pulled her underneath the chuppah and kissed her as the snow began to fall overhead.
Meanwhile, inside, Rory and Jess had taken a detour on their way back to go help Sookie.

"I can't believe you guys did all this," Rory said in wonder, looking around, "In one day."

"It was all Luke," Jess answered her simply, "Honestly. All his idea, nearly all his execution."

"Don't even try to act like you weren't a huge part of this," Rory smirked, "The jig is up. You're a decent guy. Who wants Lorelai Gilmore to be happy."

"God, they should take away my leather jacket," he buried his face in his hands, "I don't deserve the privilege of wearing it."

"Do you even still have it?"

"Of course! It's legend," he replied, "It would be like getting rid of the Metallica shirt."

"Good thing you didn't. I wear it all the time."

"And look far better in it than I did."

"True. But it's a close race."

"I disagree."

"You underestimate yourself."

"Habitually."

They sat down on the couch across from the enormous Christmas tree, staring at the blinking lights. Jess took Rory's hand again and she couldn't help but smile. This was exactly the kind of Christmas she could imagine having for the rest of her life. Last year she'd been out on assignment for almost the entire week near Christmas and had barely gotten home for the day, and then had to rush right out again. She didn't have any real time to spend with Lorelai or Luke or even just in Star's Hollow, a town made for Christmases. She'd acted like it was no big deal, just the life of a reporter, a labor of love kind of thing. But right now, sitting in front of this Christmas tree, she knew there was no labor worth losing this kind of moment. It wasn't even about everything that Luke and Jess had done or about how happy her mom was or the fact that everything looked beautiful. It was just that they were all there, together, and sitting like this in front of a Christmas tree with Jess, she felt more at peace than she had, honestly, since she was with Jess the first time. But now it was even better, since Jess, Luke and Lorelai all had become close. It was like a family, the kind that her dad never was. The kind she'd always dreamed of having. And the kind of person she wanted beside her for all of it was sitting next to her.

Jess, meanwhile, was thinking about Luke. How he knew exactly what Luke had gone out to do, even though he knew Luke had probably planned to wait until later in the week, until things calmed down, since Lorelai never went out in the back in the winter anyway. But something had taken over him, the spirit of this night, the complete and total love on Lorelai's face. It had almost taken Jess aback, seeing the way that Lorelai had looked at Luke when she saw what he had done. The grateful, unconditional, but completely unsurprised love that Luke had always needed, always deserved, but never really had to call his own, for the rest of his life. And now he would. If anyone was worthy of that, it was Luke. However, Jess couldn't help but think about Rory, his hand curled
into hers and the warmth of her body leaning against him on the couch. The way she looked, completely relaxed like this, she was at her best. Her eyes were half shut and her body was languid, and everything about her was breathtaking. Even though the way Lorelai and Luke had been interacting had intrigued the writer in him, he couldn't help having been distracted a few times tonight by the way Rory looked watching them. The way Rory's eyes would glaze over in a type of satisfaction when her mom saw each new thing, the way she looked at Luke with a sense of pride and appreciation for what he was doing for her mom. He knew that she was thinking everything he was, without even asking. That was simple between them. Maybe the rest would be complicated, but there was no denying that it was worth it, anything it would take. Because if he one day got to be the guy that made her feel the way Luke made Lorelai feel tonight, every day for the rest of her life, he knew it wouldn't be a day too soon.
The next morning, Rory and Jess woke up in the apartment above the diner, just in time to open up. He and Lorelai had actually managed to make it through Sookie's dinner at the Inn before rushing off to Lorelai's house to celebrate their new engagement. After the announcement, while they were all celebrating, Luke had asked Jess if he and Rory could handle the diner the next day, and he'd readily agreed. Not because he was thrilled at the prospect of Rory's murderous attitude that came as a consequence of being woken up at five in the morning, but because he couldn't believe Luke was actually going to take a real break for once. As long as he tried not to think about exactly how Luke would be relaxing, he'd be just fine.

Plus, there was of course the advantage of getting to sit around with Rory during the lulls, lounging, talking about books over coffee at the counter, a throwback to the earliest days of long looks and knowing smiles. Even Jess, as much as he detested living in the past, liked to reminisce on occasion when it came to her. But nowadays it was better because they could talk about their real lives, well, their real life. They seemed to share a life, he thought, as much as they were separate entities. But they really shared a world, one that other people could be a part of but really they lived in together, just the two of them. Back when they'd lived in this town he'd had to share her with everyone, and neither of them was really to jump in with both feet. Now they were just floating together on a peaceful current, wondering why it took so long for them to get to this point.

"Why did you agree to do this?" Rory groaned into her pillow, pulling Jess out of his reverie. He smirked.

"Come on, if you get out of bed and come downstairs with me, I'll make you breakfast."

"You're acting like you have a choice in the matter," Rory replied, shooting him a grin as she walked over to the dresser to pick out some clothes. She had fallen asleep in just one of her own wispy white tee shirts worn over a pair of simple white cotton underwear, and it was taking massive amounts of self-control on Jess' part to not just stare at her legs, her…everything. He looked up to find her eyes on his. He flushed.

"Can you really blame me? It's like you do this by design," he exclaimed defensively, turning away quickly and walking to the other side of the room, "I'm only human."

"I don't mind if you look," Rory said quietly, a moment later. Jess turned to her, his eyebrows raised.

"I said I don't mind if you look," Rory said quietly, a moment later. Jess turned to her, his eyebrows raised. She met his eyes carefully.

"What did you…"

"I said I don't mind if you look. In fact, I like it when you do." She blushed a rosy pink as she said it but managed to keep her eyes glued to his. She saw his pupils darken.

"God, Rory," he groaned, "Do you know what that does to me?"

"I have a general idea," she smirked, "But you can never have too much knowledge." With that, Jess snapped and immediately walked back over to her, pulling her up against him in a searing kiss. She responded eagerly to him with just as much enthusiasm as was coursing through his own veins. Tentatively, exploratively, she lightly bit his lower lip and he moaned into her. Without breaking the kiss, he managed to move them toward the wall. There he immediately pushed her up against it and began to run his hands greedily, reverently down her body.
Rory tried to catch her breath. Thank God for the wall, because her knees had turned to jelly and she was sure she'd honestly be sinking if it weren't for the wall and Jess supporting her. She'd been kissed a lot of times, but any time Jess kissed her it brought to light parts of herself she didn't know existed. A level of desire ignited in her that for a long time she tried to deny was even possible. She had been ashamed to think that she wanted it just as much as he did, maybe even more. But with Jess she could never feel that way for long, because soon she'd become wrapped up in the sensuality of it, every tiny touch and movement shooting lightning through her core. Especially now, when she was so sure, knew everything was right, that they could really do this, that there was nothing to get in their…

"Hello?" a voice yelled from outside, "Luke, it's 5:30!"

"Are you…"

"There is no way in hell…"

"Luke, are you there? It's Kirk! Can you let me in? It's cold out here and I left my coat at Lulu's and Mom wouldn't let me go back last night…"

"I have never hated anyone with this much ferocity in my entire life," Jess said darkly, "Especially no one who lived with his mother."

"And for once I'm on bored with your angst and hatred," Rory said, rolling her eyes at the window, "But we really should…"

"Finish this?"

"Later, I swear."

"I'm gonna hold you to that."

"You better."
An hour later, Cesar was running the diner and Jess had Rory pinned up against the same wall.

"You work fast," she moaned as he began to kiss down her neck. He smirked.

"When it's urgent."

"It's urgent?"

"Isn't it?" he grinned, pushing closer up against her and she groaned, catching his mouth in another deep, languid kiss.

"Why are we wasting perfectly good lips on words?"

"That's what we have books for."

Rory laughed as they tumbled onto the spare bed. Her hands never left his, reminding her of the first time they were up alone in this apartment together. The way they were so nervous around each other, the way when he took her hands, she felt electricity she'd only read about and felt hints of in the glances they'd shared before she was really able to act on any of it. Everything about this place was her start with Jess, and it just felt right.

One would think that strange, considering that they were in Luke's apartment. But they were surrounded by books, Rory's books, and in a place that had so much history for them, both long ago and even recent. Rory couldn't help but think of the time that she and Jess hadn't been able to stand sleeping in different rooms for more than a few days, and were just discovering that fact. Coming to this room to share it with him after that trip was a moment she'd never forget, the need for his company finally fulfilled, the total sense of relief and comfort that washed over her the second they were lying in the dark, alone, together again.

But this was now, and she needed to focus on now, and the way Jess's soft but calloused hands were running over her arms, her jeans, her stomach, as he made his way up her body and closer to her skin. She felt like she was overheating as he started to kiss her neck gently again as his hands explored every inch of skin they could comfortably reach.

But who could blame him? Jess had been staring at her porcelain skin for years, the perfection that it was, and touching it, the barest parts of it that no one else could touch, was nearly overwhelming to his senses. As his hands glided over her, she felt the softness of skin like the petal of a flower, so delicate that he was afraid to break it. But every time he met her eyes he saw fire, drunkenness and desperate need that came from the most primal parts of the human mind, human body, human soul. Something so elemental to the human experience that she had seemed to shy away from before, but that now she clearly wanted, needed, was asking for him to give her. And who was he to deny her pleasure?

Curiously, he slipped his hand beneath the waistband of her jeans, drawing a heavy sigh of contentment from the girl whose eyes were starting to roll backward. He smiled and moved his hand down her skin tantalizingly, slowly. She glared at him and he smirked, nodding quickly and unbuttoning and unzipping her jeans and pulling them off her body. As soon as he did so, she found her pulling his shirt over his head. The layers of clothing fell quickly to the ground, as they kicked, rolled, and threw them off the bed, as did blankets and sheets. Suddenly everything was sense, everything was skin, everything was touch, and Rory and Jess could feel each other's heartbeats...
racing in tune to the increased intensity of the moment. This was what they'd been anticipating, what they'd been waiting for, what so many little tiny looks and comments between the two of them had alluded to for years, since they were teenagers. And now it was finally happening. Rory pushed herself as close to Jess as she could, trying to connect every inch of her skin to every inch of his. Yes, she'd had sex. Yes, she'd pressed up against other people like this. But it had never felt so electric, so reactive, so overpoweringly sensual. She couldn't think coherently or do anything really other than feel, feel every tiny touch and every nerve ending that those touches would activate. She could feel the way her heart was starting to beat hard in her chest, begging her to give it release, give all of her release. In that moment she knew every part of her past was a past, and that the life she was so spontaneously building, here and now, was home. She felt it in every bone of her body and in every movement she made, every time her body curved against him, with every touch of his lips to hers. She knew this was where she belonged.

Jess carefully looked at her for confirmation. This was really it. The much-anticipated, much-speculated-over first time, the one that they almost had back in high school, a few times, the one he'd lived out in his fantasies hundreds of times, but the one that somehow they'd managed not to get to in real life until now. Jess had no doubt that making this choice would fundamentally change their relationship, their situation, the strange current thing they had going on now. Jess knew that doing this meant a commitment, from both of them, a signal that they were ready and wanted to take on the world together rather than apart. He knew all of this and he wanted every part of it. The physical, the emotional, Jess wanted to be as close to Rory as possible. In this moment he was so enthralled by her, devoted to her, in awe of her that he wanted to share her air, simply because it was touching her. To see her like this, slowly building up to the throes of passion, she was even more breathtaking than he could ever have imagined. He snapped out of his reverie to see her nod urgently, the need in her eyes burning with a bluer flame now than when they'd begun. His own eyes darkened to see the way her body tensed to him, how ready she was, how every part of her was anticipating him, wanting him, needing him. He began to slowly close the one remaining gap between them, every neuron in his brain firing signals of sparks and fireworks and yes. Rory's eyes glazed over when he made contact and as he continued, she moaned deeply, digging her fingernails into her back and catching his mouth with hers in a hot, desperate, needy kiss. They didn't break contact, continuing to move against one another until eventually Rory fell apart, tightening around him and crying out his name over and over again, like a chant, Jess, Jess, Jess. As he watched her come undone, Jess did as well, unable to stop himself from such a primal reaction to the most stunning and natural thing he'd seen in his life. Reluctantly they broke apart, quickly leaning back into one another to bask in the afterglow of their combined bliss.
"So should we…"

"Do we need to?"

"Jess."

"Rory, we've wanted this since we first saw each other," Jess answered definitively, holding her gaze as he held her close next to him, "And now it's happened. Things have been happening with us for a while now. We both know where this is going, what this is. That this wasn't casual and I sure as hell hope it wasn't a one-time thing."

"It wasn't," Rory reassured him, grinning. He grinned back.

"Good," Jess smiled, "And in that case, do we need to?"

"Nope," Rory affirmed, her entire body relaxed into his, "All we need to do is figure out when and how to tell…people."

"Well this time I don't want it to be a secret, or to flaunt it," Jess began, smirking at the memory as Rory glared at him, "I just want it to be us."

"I agree," Rory nodded, "But don't you think we should tell Luke and my mom first?"

"Absolutely," Jess answered, "Why don't you go tell your Mom and I'll tell Luke?"

"We could do that," she begun slowly, "Or we can just tell them together. I'd think they're still…"

"We should probably call," Jess finished, taking out his phone and dialing Luke's number.

"Hello?"

"Luke?"


"Yeah, everything's fine," Jess answered, "But, Rory and I have something we want to tell you and Lorelai. Is there a good time today?"

"Sometime in the next few hours, we'll come by," Luke answered, "And you can tell us then."

"Alright," Jess nodded, "By the way, congratulations on the engagement."


"Thanks," Jess replied, a grin spreading across his face. He hung up.

"What was…"

Jess cut Rory off with another deep, soft, tender kiss. When he finally pulled away, Rory inhaled sharply. He raised his eyebrows and smirked.

"So that was…"
"You're not supposed to."

And with that, Rory immediately wrapped her arms around him again and pulled him closer to her, ready to enjoy a little more relaxation before they had to return to reality.

Meanwhile, at the Dragonfly, Luke was trying to get out of bed himself.

"Luuuuke," Lorelai whined, pouting her lips as she cocked her head to the side ever-so-slightly, "Just a little longer. Ooh…"

"Dirty! Yes, I know," Luke grumbled, trying to ignore her. She always won, but right now he needed to get himself together so that they could go see Jess and Rory. "Look, Lorelai, that was Jess, and he and Rory need to talk to us. They want us to come over to the diner."

"Is everything okay?" Lorelai asked quickly, sitting up and pulling the sheet over herself.

"Everything's fine," Luke answered, "Actually, I would bet better than fine. Maybe even amazing, incredible. I really couldn't tell you but that's why we're going over there."

"Wait a minute," Lorelai said, looking at Luke suspiciously, "Did he…she…they…"


"Luke! Why aren't you excited?"

"Because technically nothing has happened yet to get excited about." Luke answered.
Chapter 80

Half an hour later, Luke opened the door to the diner to find Rory and Jess sitting at the counter, talking and holding hands. As soon as he entered they turned their heads toward him, their fingers remaining interlocked and their smiles intact. Jess nodded towards Luke.

"Hey. Take a seat at the counter. Let me get you some tea," Jess offered, looking apologetically at Rory as he pulled his hand away from hers and she began to make her patented pouty face.


"Parking around the side," he answered, "For some reason the street's busy today."

"Well it's beautiful outside."

"It's icy and slushy."

"Bite your tongue!" Lorelai admonished Luke as she walked inside, "You cannot speak of my soul mate that way. Oh, hello Loinfruit."

"I thought we killed that nickname years ago," Rory sighed deeply, turning pink as Jess raised his eyebrows at her while he poured Luke's tea.

"It's been resurrected," Lorelai replied, "After all, it is the season for that kind of thing. Hooligan, can you please caffeinate me? It's for the good of the general population."

"Don't I know it," Jess mumbled, smirking as he quickly grabbed the coffee pot and filled a mug for Lorelai, "Enjoy your addiction."

"I plan to," Lorelai answered, a grin lighting her face as she raised the cup to her lips. After a huge gulp she looked at them expectantly. "So…"

"Well…Jess and I have some news."

"I gathered that from the 'Come over and hear our news' bit."

"Well, the news is that we're together."

"We're in a relationship," Jess affirmed, "And we wanted you two to be the first to know."

"So…" Rory looked at her mother anxiously. Lorelai smiled widely.

"Finally!" she exclaimed, getting up and walking over to Rory to hug her, "It only took you forever."

"I second that," Luke smirked at Jess, who narrowed his eyes.

"Like you have any right to talk," he retorted, earning a blush of frustration from Luke, much to his satisfaction.

"But…really…you're happy about this?" Rory asked her mother carefully, "I mean, I know how you felt last time, and I would understand if you're not…"
"But I am, Rory," Lorelai answered firmly, "Really. I could not ask for someone better for you. And for the last few months you've been happier, calmer, more yourself than I've ever seen you. I have nothing but love for this decision."

"Thank you, Lorelai," Jess smiled at her and she nodded, smiling back. "Luke?"

"You're happy, I'm happy," Luke said honestly, "Though it's even better that it's Rory. Even though I don't think there's any man who's worthy of her, you're the kind of guy that comes close, that would try to become worthy. Even if you aren't a prince."

"Don't get where the monarchy comes in, but thanks for the support," Jess replied, meeting his uncle's eyes gratefully, "It really means a lot to me."

"To us," Rory added, "You're family to me, Luke."

"Don't say that too loud," Lorelai warned, "People will start connecting the dots."

"But what about…"

"Oh my god, if you give me the Cher argument again I swear I am going to fling your tiny little body across this diner."

"Violent response for a Clueless reference."

"Why don't you two take off and enjoy your insanity for the day? Jess and I will handle the diner and then we'll meet you over at your parents for dinner tonight."

"We?" Jess asked incredulously, turning to face his uncle.

"We," Luke answered firmly.

"Okay," Lorelai smiled, "I guess I can kidnap Rory for the day. Otherwise I'm betting she really wouldn't be getting much done around here. Depending on how you define the word…"

At 6:00 PM sharp Rory and Lorelai pulled into the driveway of the Gilmore house. Rory parked and turned off the radio, ignoring her mother's continuous stream of complaints.

"But Rory, I really shouldn't have to tell her, because we were already engaged and technically I never told them that we were un-engaged, and were we even really un-engaged? See, so actually, I shouldn't tell her, in fact, it would be wrong to tell her, because I wouldn't want her to be misinformed or confused, like I am. Plus, the rock kind of speaks for itself, doesn't it? So if there's a message, can't I let the pretty jewelry deliver it to her for me?"

"You're a child," Rory shot her mother an annoyed glare as Luke and Jess pulled in behind them, "No. You have to tell them. Especially because of how you've handled it in the past. But at least now you'll get to find out what her wedding present was for you."

"Do you really think she saved it?"

"Nope. Probably discarded it years ago."

"With the hopes and dreams."

"Little later. Probably closer to when she discarded her expectations."

"That'd make sense."


"Hey! You're my fiancée. Doesn't that require you to be nice to me?" Lorelai pouted at Luke.

"Nope," Luke answered, "Actually, all it means is that I have to stick with you even when you're a pain in my ass."


"Luke, haven't you learned not to argue with her by now? It's pointless," she chided him, "She always wins."

"You must get it from her then," Jess challenged. Rory narrowed her eyes.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Ayn Rand?"

"That's not fair. I didn't write the book."

"Winter carnival."

"You won and then changed your mind!"

"Friday night dinners."

"You made the choice to promise to go to another one. I didn't ask you to."

"See? You always win!" Jess gloated triumphantly. Rory crossed her arms across her chest and
rolled her eyes, trying not to smile.

"So shall we?" Luke asked, gesturing to the door. Lorelai sighed deeply and met Jess' equally reluctant eyes.

"Do we really have to…"

"Yes, Mom, we do," Rory cut her off, "You have to tell them you're engaged, and they have to meet Jess. Grandpa still hasn't really officially met him."

"Wasn't he at the Bracebridge Dinner?"

"But they didn't meet there."

"Close enough," Jess mumbled. Rory turned to him

"Jess, I know that meeting my grandmother wasn't necessarily a fond memory." Jess snorted. "But my grandfather is an amazing man, and I'm very close to him. I really think he'll like you if you just give each other a chance. And either way, it means a lot to me that you try with him. Okay?"

"Alright," Jess agreed, walking over to her and taking her hand, "I'll try to make a good impression. No jail references or gang stories."

"That'd be appreciated," Rory smiled, kissing him on the cheek. Lorelai looked at her curiously.

"Are you planning to tell them tonight?"

"No way," Rory immediately straightened up and let go of Jess' hand, "I mean, I won't lie to them if they ask. But I figure one bombshell's enough for now."

"So you're making me sacrifice myself on the altar of their disapproval without a soul to stand by me?"

"You have Luke!"

"It's not the same!"

"Gee, thanks," Luke grumbled and Lorelai smirked, grabbing his hand. "Okay, really, we're gonna be late."

The group approached the door and Rory looked at Jess expectantly. He sighed and rang the doorbell.

Immediately a maid opened the door.

"Hello! May I take your coats?" the maid asked, holding out her arms. They immediately shimmied out of their outerwear and passed them to the woman, who quickly hung them in the closet. "Mr. and Mrs. Gilmore are waiting in the next room."

"Thank you," Rory smiled at the woman, and the group quickly walked in the indicated direction.

"I spy our coping method," Lorelai whispered to Jess, flicking her eyes at the drink cart. He smirked.

"If that's our coping method we're gonna come out of the evening with the need for a twelve step program," he replied, earning a huge grin from Lorelai.
"Sacrifice for a noble cause."

"Lorelai, when you're done mumbling, you might consider actually greeting us politely," Emily trilled, her voice annoyed. Lorelai rolled her eyes to Jess and Rory before turning around and flashing a fake smile towards her mother.

"Sorry, Mom. How are you?" she asked, taking a seat on the couch. Luke immediately sat down next to her, and Jess next to him. Rory took a chair next to where her grandfather was reading the paper.

"Richard!" Emily snapped, "Put that away right now! We are in the middle of drinks."

"Actually, we are just beginning to have drinks, Emily," Richard corrected with a sigh, folding the paper, "Just because I'm reading doesn't mean I've gone deaf to the world around me."

"You may as well have," she muttered.

"Rory! How are you?" Richard greeted her heartily, with a kiss on the cheek. "And I don't believe we've met. You are..."

"Jess Mariano," Jess stood and shook Richard's hand, "I'm... Luke's nephew."

"You remember, I told you about Jess," Emily added, her voice venomous, "The one with the black eye."

"I'm sure you did, Emily," Richard said, bored, "But the name does sound familiar."

"I've mentioned him to you, Grandpa," Rory interjected, "He reads. And writes."

"Oh! The writer! Yes!" Richard replied, brightening quickly, "Rory tells me you've written a short novel."

"It's nothing, really," Jess said humbly, "Just a small novella I finished a few years ago. Self-published, only put out in a few independent bookstores."

"It's amazing, Grandpa," Rory endorsed, "He's just modest. You have to read it."

"I'd love to," Richard smiled at the two of them, "Perhaps you can send me a copy through Rory? Or the next time we see you?"

"Absolutely, sir." Jess answered. Emily narrowed her eyes and Jess quickly looked down.

"Um, Ms. Manners? Isn't it past time for you to offer us libation?" Lorelai called, staring at the drink cart, "Because I could really use a martini."

"For goodness sake, Lorelai, the level of obsession with cocktails that you display whenever you come here would lead people to believe you were an alcoholic," Emily shook her head. "Martini?"

"Yes please," Lorelai grinned. Emily sighed. "Rory? The same?"

"Sure, Grandma. Thank you."

"Luke? A beer?"

"No, a scotch would be fine, Emily."
"And Jess? How about you? Would you like a beer?"

"Actually, just a soda, if you have it." Emily shot him a glare and a saccharine smile.

"Of course we do, Jess. But are you sure you wouldn't like…"

"I'm sure, thank you," Jess answered, "I might drive back to Philadelphia tonight so I'd rather wait on that."

"Very practical," Richard nodded, "Oh! Philadelphia! Didn't Rory say you had some sort of bookstore there?"

"Kind of," Jess admitted, "It's actually a small independent press and publishing house, as well as a bookstore. Nothing fancy, very small."

"Well, quality trumps quantity," Richard responded, "Right Emily?"

"It depends on the subject matter," she sniffed, "If you don't have enough product to sell it doesn't really matter how good what you're putting out is. That's just practicality." She smirked at Jess, who lowered his eyes to the floor.

"Emily, I'm sure his business manages just fine," Richard sighed, "And some of the best literary history was created in small, independent bookstores."

"We're in a new century now, Richard," Emily exclaimed, "This is the era of technology, as you all seem so insistent on proving to me. If that's the case, it seems highly impractical to waste one's time and effort on a venture that has little to no appeal to the modern…"

"Hey! Look at my hand!" Lorelai said quickly, after receiving a swift pinch and gesture from Rory. Rory smiled at her gratefully and Jess nodded at her in appreciation as Lorelai held up her left hand. Her mother looked on in confusion.

"Lorelai Victoria Gilmore, if this is some kind of…"

"It's not. Luke and I are engaged."

"Weren't you already engaged?" Richard asked, confused. Lorelai smiled and Rory glared at her.

"Yes, but then we broke up and he proposed again a few nights ago so now we're engaged again."

"Lorelai, one does not announce an engagement by pointing to a piece of anatomy."

"I don't know. In some species, that might…"

"Lorelai!"

"Alright, Mom, I'm sorry for not announcing it properly. Mother, I would like to inform you that I am engaged to be married to Mister Lucas Danes of Stars Hollow, Connecticut."

"Really, Lorelai, you can't take anything seriously," Emily huffed, "I have to go check on dinner. Congratulations," she offered stiffly. But as she turned around and headed toward the kitchen, Jess caught a hint of a smile lighting up the older woman's face.
"I suppose champagne is in order," Emily said flatly as they all sat down at the table, "Richard, would you..."

"I'd be delighted," he answered. Standing up, he looked at Jess. "Care to help me with the glasses, son?"


"Please, call me Richard," he insisted, clasping Jess on the shoulder, "You're practically family now, right?"

Rory and Jess exchanged a look.

"Because we're getting married," Lorelai added helpfully, "See the ring?"

"That big, shiny thing on your hand that you've been pointing at for days? Yes, I've noticed," Rory rolled her eyes and Luke stifled a laugh. Richard and Jess departed toward the study.

"So Jess," Richard said, slowly, "Emily tells me that the first time you came here, you didn't make the best impression."

"No, sir," Jess answered. He'd been expecting this. Even though Rory had said that Richard would like him, he knew it wouldn't be that easy. He saw how protective the man was of his granddaughter and furthermore understood it.

"Do you have any explanations to offer?"

"None that justify my behavior," he answered, "But I can very honestly say that I'm not like that anymore."

"Like what?" Richard said, abandoning all pretense and walking to Jess, staring him straight in the face, "What were you like?"


"That doesn't change the fact that you treated my granddaughter with a lack of respect and that you made a very poor impression on my wife. Those things do not speak well of you."

"No, sir, they do not."

"So explain to me why I should approve of this relationship which you two are so clearly embarking upon."

Jess looked at him and smiled. It wasn't that he hadn't believed Rory, but it was incredible how she could see these things coming.

"Because I make her happy. Happier than anyone she's ever been with and happier than she is alone," Jess told him honestly, "And because I know I'm not good enough, and never will be, but I'll spend the rest of my life trying if she'll let me. I don't deserve her, that's true. But Rory knows what
she wants, and for some reason that I'll never understand, it's me. And considering how close you are
to her, I know that at the core of it you really just want her to be happy, and you know as well as I do
that no one is good enough for her. So given that, I'd pose myself as the best alternative."

"Well," Richard said thoughtfully, after a long pause, "How about that."

"What?" Jess asked, anxiously.

"I didn't really expect you to have an answer!" Richard boomed, beginning to laugh. He grabbed the
bottle of champagne and gestured to the glasses, which Jess grabbed. He followed Richard to the
kitchen, looking at him in a curious confusion as the older man continued to laugh hysterically.

"Well there you are…Richard! What on Earth is the matter with you?" Emily asked, perplexed, as
Richard set the bottle on the table, his laughter only beginning to subside, "Are you having some
kind of fit?"

"Jess?" Rory turned to him, confused. He shrugged.

"No idea," he answered quietly, "But I think it's a positive."

"Ever the optimist," she smirked as her grandfather gathered himself. She caught his eye and he
winked at her, giving a small nod towards Jess who was busy passing the glasses around the table.
Rory grinned widely in spite of her better sense and reached for her drink. Perhaps this time Friday
Night Dinner would actually involve some version of everybody getting along.
"Well, overall, I think that went really well," Lorelai announced as soon as they walked outside and the door was shut behind them. Luke turned to her disbelievingly.

"Your mother just spent twenty five minutes screaming at you about how tacky it would be for you to get married at your workplace! That was after your father spent a good thirty lecturing me on how if I'd franchised Luke's, as he'd suggested, we could have made enough money so you wouldn't have to work and could focus on raising our children. By the way, when did they decide we were having children?"

"Immediately. It seems ironic they're so eager for you two to reproduce when their attitudes suggest they aren't completely enthused with your choice of a husband, Lorelai," Jess smirked. Lorelai grinned.

"Husband…I like the sound of that," she cooed, "And hey, I can raise our nonexistent children. I'll make them all my little work minions."

"Child labor laws be damned, you have an inn to run," Rory added jokingly, glancing at Jess.


"Think about it," Lorelai began, "They didn't actually protest about us getting married. Just everything about the choices we're making surrounding that fact."

"You baffle me."

"I intrigue you."

"And we'll leave you to settle this amongst yourselves," Jess nodded at Luke, "Congratulations though, one less hurdle to jump."

Luke turned to Lorelai immediately.

"You told him?" he demanded, "As if it's not enough for you and Rory to mock…"

"What are you talking about?" Jess cut him off in confusion as Rory and Lorelai began to crack up.

"I'll tell you in the car," Rory smiled, "Goodnight. Love you Mom, Luke. We'll see you tomorrow, and then I think we really have to get back soon."

"Oh yeah, don't you have a job to do or something?"

"Something like that," Rory answered easily, "And Jess definitely does. If you leave anything with Matt and Chris for too long it'll either disappear or sprout two heads."

"Sounds like a dangerous choice."

"We're living on the edge." Jess smirked at Rory's comment and took her by the hand.

"Goodnight, lovebirds," Lorelai called back toward them as she got into the car with Luke and drove off. Rory and Jess watched them go and as soon as they were out of sight he pushed her up against the car, his eyes filled with lust.
"You know, your grandparents have a really beautiful home."

"Mhm," Rory replied as he began to kiss her neck.

"Ever think about taking advantage of one of those strategically placed ivy-covered walls?"

"Not before now," Rory answered, smirking, "But I'm always open to well-intentioned creativity."

"I can't promise that I'm well-intentioned," Jess responded in a low voice. He grabbed her by the hand and pulled her around the side of the house, their hushed laughter filling the air with something that hadn't been present there in a long time.
The next morning, Jess woke up in the apartment above Luke's to find Rory sitting at the kitchen table, drinking a cup of coffee and reading easily. When she saw his eyes meeting hers she grinned.

"You're up!" she exclaimed, immediately going over to the counter and grabbing another mug to pour coffee into, "Come here!"

"You're peppy," he grumbled, "How many have you had?"

"Only five," Rory answered innocently, "And this one's for you!"

"I'm eternally grateful," he mumbled as he straggled out of bed and up to the table to meet her, taking the mug she was holding out. He sat down in the chair next to her, "Not that I'm not enthused about the enthusiasm, but want to clue me in?"

"I quit my job," she answered, smiling, "This morning. I gave my notice, I file three more stories and I'm done. On good terms and everything, but I'm out."

"Really?" Jess immediately met her eyes curiously, "What made you…"

"I figured out what I want to do. Well, first I admitted that I didn't want to keep being a reporter," Rory began, "Which was harder than expected, but it's been a long time coming."

"How long?"

"Since the night we drove around and talked about me becoming Christiane Amanpeour," she answered honestly, "It had nothing to do with the fact that you didn't think it was right for me. It was that I knew it wasn't what I wanted on some level, but I couldn't imagine giving up the security of the idea. But when you said it you voiced something I kind of felt for a while. Just the idea that I might not want to, which seemed so crazy and not an option and revolutionary at the time."

"Well if it helped you, I'm glad," Jess replied, "Though you know I would've…"

"I know," she reassured him, "But I didn't want to. I don't want to. I don't want to always be moving and traveling and never home and never in one place. I don't need to be in Stars Hollow for the rest of my life, but I want to come home for Christmas and I want to have a life, in one place, stable, with people I love, and see them more than once a week. And reporting itself just doesn't excite me anymore. In fact, the writing aspect was more fascinating in terms of craft. I think I liked it because it was close to what I wanted, which I started to realize when I was a senior at Yale."

"You mean…"

"I want to be an editor. I don't want to be a foreign correspondent. I want to run a paper that's based in a city, with limited travel and the ability to be responsible for an entire paper. To manage a team again, to make things happen, to be the one getting it out, not the one getting the scoop. I want to be in the newsroom, not on the ground. So I quit."

"Wow," Jess said, his eyes not leaving hers, "That's amazing, Rory. Congratulations." He stood up and so did she. Gently he wrapped his arms around her waist and leaned in to kiss her. "I'm so proud of you. And I'm here for you every step of the way."

"As you have been this entire time," Rory continued, unable to stop herself from smiling, "I couldn't
have done it without you."

"Yes, you could've."

"Maybe. But you give me the courage to do the things I'm afraid to do," she admitted, interlocking her fingers with his, "Like this. Even taking the time to figure out that this was what I wanted. I'm the person I want to be when you're there."

"Well, that makes two of us," Jess admitted, "I can't remember when I was last this happy."

"I was thinking never, but maybe that's just me."

"I concur completely, but maybe we should try to prove ourselves wrong?"

"I'd like that," Rory grinned, "Anyway, I really want to go talk to Mom and tell her before we start heading home. By the way, would you be averse to me continuing to work at Truncheon while I do the crazy list thing I do?"

"I expect it," Jess smirked, "Honestly though, I don't know how we'll get by without you. Before you were around the small paperclips were in the same place as the big ones. I'm not sure we can keep the system going without you."

"Perhaps I'll have to initialize bi-weekly checks, just to make sure you're all doing what you should."

"It may come to that."
Chapter 85

Rory knocked on the door of the Gilmore house cautiously. It opened immediately.

"Rory!" Lorelai squealed, pulling her inside and hugging her immediately, "I saw you pull in. What are you doing up?"

"I've been up since early," she answered, smiling, "Do I even want to know what you're doing up?"

"Nope," Lorelai grinned widely, "Or who."

"Mom!"

"Dirty!" Lorelai laughed, "I know. Oh Luke! Lover boy, man, whatever you are. Come say goodbye to Rory!"

"Hey Rory," Luke said, emerging from the kitchen. Then he turned to Lorelai. "Don't call me that. Don't you have any sense of decorum?"

"Only in the monkey lamp."

"And on that note," Luke sighed, "It was good seeing you Rory. Is Jess with you?"

"He's actually at the diner. I think he was gonna wait for you to say goodbye there and I'm gonna head over there with Mom in a few minutes, if that works."

"Sounds good," Luke nodded, "I'll see you two later."

"Bye!" Lorelai blew him a kiss, "Walk away sexy, you stud."

Luke turned his head to glare at her and then left, shaking his head all the way.

"So…" Lorelai asked, leading Rory to the couch, "I have a feeling you're not just here to fill me in on why you weren't answering your phone two minutes after we left last night's dinner."

Rory blushed and Lorelai cackled.

"No," she answered, "I actually have some news."

"Oh? Share, share!" Lorelai said, looking at Rory excitedly.

"Well, I'm sure you saw this coming," Rory began, "But I quit my job."

"Finally!" Lorelai exclaimed, "I'm so happy for you, hon. But what now? I'm assuming your life plan hasn't become stocking at Truncheon, in spite of how hot your coworkers may be."

"Nope," Rory shook her head, "I'm going to apply to be an editor at a paper. Not traveling all the time, just based in one place. And I miss it, Mom. I've missed it ever since I left Yale. I had no idea that was what I wanted to do, but it was just…it's just what I'm meant to do. I know."

"It makes sense," Lorelai replied, smiling, "I'm so proud of you, hon. It hasn't been easy. I know how much you love your plans, and this was kind of like taking a tank to your biggest one."

"Well, I do like plans," Rory admitted, "But I'm starting to realize that the best things happen to me
when I let them happen and I just...go with my gut."

"I'm sorry, who are you and what have you done with my endearingly OCD daughter?" Lorelai asked, reaching out and putting her hand on Rory's forehead, "Do you have a fever? Are you an alien?"

Rory rolled her eyes. "If I were, I'd have beamed us some breakfast by now. I'm starving. I didn't even get pie before I left."

"You've been living at the diner!"

"I just really wanted to tell you!" Rory smiled, standing up and hugging her mom tightly.

"Aww, hon," Lorelai hugged her back, "I am so happy for you. Really."

"Thanks, Mom," Rory said, pulling away finally, "Now let's go get pie."

"Which kind?"

"This is a celebration."

"So three?"

"All."

"Yeah, you're definitely my daughter."
"We're not going to Philadelphia."

"What?" Jess looked at Rory as if she'd said that she was going vegetarian.

"We're going to Boston."

"Okay, do you really think we need to include Christopher in our trip of…"

"It's not for him," she said, the last word dripping with disdain, "I need to talk to Paris."

"Okay, now I'm actually stumped," Jess scoffed, "Why do you need to see Paris?"

"Doyle has a lot of newspaper contacts, and I actually cut off a lot of my resources back in college by burning a pretty long bridge."

"The douchebag?"

"That's the one."

"How?"

"His dad owns around half of the publishing world. Not something I want to dwell on. Point is, if I'm going to get a job in that field, I need to talk to Paris and come up with a plan. See what she thinks of. She's crazy but beyond efficient."

"I can imagine," Jess nodded, remembering their one literary discussion, "Alright. Boston it is. As long as we're back by Monday."

"That won't be a problem," Rory nodded, "She said she was going to kick us out by then anyway because we'll be disrupting her regular routine if we stay any longer."

"She's a doctor, right?"

"Surgeon, but yes."

"Can't she just prescribe herself some Prozac?"

"You like Paris," Rory batted her eyes, "Remember the Jane Austen and Bukowski discussion?"

"We do have more to talk about than I tend to with most people," Jess admitted, "But really, she's crazy."

"Which is why she hates the Bell Jar. Too close to home," Rory smirked, "Oh, by the way, Doyle may or may not be there. He's out of town but he doesn't know yet if he's coming back Saturday or Sunday."

"And Doyle is her boyfriend?"

"Fiance, last time I checked," Rory answered, "But I never heard anything about a wedding."

"Maybe you weren't invited," Jess teased.

"Sure, like Paris could find another maid of honor," Rory grinned, "I mean, I love the girl, but she's
not the best at being friendly."

"That's like saying you aren't the best at eating healthy. Or Luke's not the best at communication. Or Lorelai's not the best at getting along with parents."

"Wow, you really make us all sound like we have a lot of issues," Rory smirked, "You're definitely the best at analyzing others while pointedly refusing to analyze yourself."

"Do you have some witty title to ascribe to me?"

"You're not the best at being simple."

"I don't know if that's witty or even true."

"Well now you have something to think about on the drive."

"Was the third stop really necessary?"

Rory stopped in her tracks and turned to glare at Jess. "Donuts are always necessary. You can't just pass a Krispy Kreme, Jess. That's like ignoring fate."

"I'm assuming you're not supposed to ignore fate?"

"Unless you want karma to smite you."

"I think you're confusing your religious references here."

"Or to be crucified by your bad chi."

"Thank God you aren't a church person, I'm pretty sure you'd get kicked out immediately."

"Like you wouldn't."

"Of course I wouldn't. They wouldn't let me in in the first place. God knows better."

Rory grinned at him and leaned over as the car came to a stop, gently kissing him. They fell into the moment, completely losing themselves in the feeling of skin against skin and the passion that just seemed to permanently surround them when they were together. A moment later they heard a very loud banging.

"Paris?" Rory screeched, quickly rolling down her window.

"Are you lovebirds through? Or do you have a mating call you can sound so that the entire neighborhood can be aware of your patterns and rituals?"

"Hello to you too," Rory grinned, pulling her door open as Paris backed up. When she got out of the car, she enveloped the blonde girl in a tight hug. "How have you been?"

"Busy, busy, and more busy," Paris answered, "And Doyle's getting on my nerves."

"And Doyle is?"


"Husband? You got married?"

"Courthouse. No one was there," Paris answered, "Trust me, if I were one for the whole wedding
thing, you would've been around, but we just figured it was easier this way."

"How long ago…"

"A year. Can we go inside? I need to put away some things and we can do the whole talk-about-our-lives-or-whatever-the-hell-it-is-ya u-need-help-with thing just as easily under a roof."

"Got it," Rory nodded. Jess walked over to the trunk and grabbed their bags. Rory smiled at him gratefully as they walked toward the apartment building in front of them.

"I wonder what the judge thought of her," Jess mumbled to Rory as they followed behind Paris.

"I'd be more interested to see what she thought of Doyle."

"Probably considered a court-ordered psych eval." Jess smirked at Rory and she smiled at him, holding back laughter as they walked into Paris' apartment.
"So you two are back together," Paris observed as she unlocked the door, allowing them into the living room. Jess looked at Rory, amused.

"Yes, Paris, we are," she sighed, "Wasn't that clear from me bringing him here?"

"No. It could've been a number of reasons, especially since if I remember correctly his father and your mother were involved," Paris replied. Jess flushed.

"My," he began, then stopped himself.

"Whatever," Paris dismissed his beginnings of a thought, "It was clear from the way you two were doe-eyeing each other back there."

"Hey, I take offense to that!" Jess protested, "She's the only one with doe eyes."

"Well your take on it was equally pathetic," Paris said as she walked into the living room and sat down on the couch. They joined her and sat on the two chairs opposite her, "So, can we get to why you're actually here?"

"Sure," Rory answered breathlessly. Jess noticed she looked nervous for the first time since she'd told him the news. He frowned in confusion as Rory inhaled deeply. "Well, Paris, I…um…"

"Paris, would you mind if Rory and I put our things away beforehand? I think that the fact that she hasn't yet unpacked her books and made sure that a shampoo hasn't exploded on them is causing her minor brain failure." Rory glared at him and he arched his eyebrow at her innocently.

"Sounds like Rory," Paris nodded, "First door to your left is the guest room. I'm going to make a few work calls and then we can talk about whatever the hell it is you're here for."

"Sounds like a plan," Jess agreed, taking Rory by the hand and leading her toward the guest room. Once they entered he closed the door and turned to her, his brows furrowed. "So wanna explain to me what's up with the nerves? Did Paris join the mafia or something? Not that she wouldn't be ideal for the lifestyle, but…"

"She's honest!" Rory blurted, her face contorting into an expression of worry. Jess raised his eyebrows. "That's not what I meant…god…see, this is why I didn't…"

"Just try again," Jess sighed, sitting down next to her.

"She won't tell me that I'm good if I'm not good enough. And she'll know the difference, and she'll tell it to me straight. And even if I am good enough, or was good enough, she's realistic enough that she'll tell me if at this point it's too late to…do it. Make it work. If I lost the chance. She knows those answers. It's great and all that you and Mom are so supportive, but neither of you has worked in that industry, or has been as close to it as Paris. And she knows my work from a journalistic standpoint better than either of you. She's not going to try to spare my feelings here. She might say it was stupid
to quit my job and that there's no way I can get into it and that even with the connections she has, it's a shot in hell."

"So you're asking her because…"

"I want to know if I even have a shot in hell. If it's a shot worth taking," Rory answered, her voice soft but clear, "And she'll know. That's the thing about Paris, she's a double-edged sword. Plus, if she says it is, there's no one better to help me work it out."

"Or cause you a nervous breakdown."

"Whatever it takes," Rory laughed drily. She stood up. "I'm sorry for freaking out. I need to tell her. I do."

"Then let's go tell her," Jess nodded, standing up and kissing Rory on the cheek, "And if it doesn't work out, I'm here for you to help you figure out what's next."

"What would I do without you?"

"Marry well and eat more fruit."

"Harsh and completely untrue," Rory retorted, crossing her arms across her chest, "I said no to the tree."

"I know, I know," he smirked, "Alright, you'd be in Azerbaijan in the middle of a street with a bunch of people screaming at you in different languages."

"Much better."

"Alright," Paris said, hanging up the phone, "I'm done. God, medical professionals have to be some of the most ineffective minds in America."

"Coming from…" Rory cut off Jess' muttered retort with a glare.

"Alright," Rory began, "Look, I need your honesty, and maybe your help."

"Can you be less vague, Gilmore? I thought you were detail-oriented."

"I quit my job," Rory confessed, "I actually cut back on my hours and contributions a few months ago, and I moved in with Jess and started working at his bookstore. We weren't together at that time. I just knew that something was wrong and I wasn't happy with my life anymore."

"Or your career," Paris continued, bored. Rory looked up at her in surprise. "Come on, Gilmore, the writer glow was nice, but it wasn't your pinnacle of success."

"I agree, though I wish I'd done something about it earlier," Rory responded, "But I quit my job last week. And I want to become an editor of a paper in a major city. I want to know if you think I can do it, in terms of my capability, as well as circumstance."

"Of course you can do it. Did you lose brain cells that time you dyed your hair pink?" Paris scoffed, "I hate to admit it more than anyone but the way you ran the newsroom back at Yale was nothing short of expert. You're a natural in the field. The real question is whether you can now, given how long you waited to pursue it and the broken ties with the heir apparent to the entire field."

"Can we not talk about…"
"We can try not to, but you can't ignore the fact that it makes this more difficult, Rory," Paris chastised, "You've already cut out San Francisco, a number of New York papers, and a few around here and Chicago."


"It's not his fault, he has every right to hate me."

"Just like I have every right to hate him, and you had every right to reject him."

"Let's save the lover's quarrels for later, shall we?" Paris sighed, "This is a matter of practicality. There are probably only about five papers in the cities you'd want to be in where you'd have a decent shot, so this won't be a resume-blasting job, it'll be a matter of concentrated war efforts. I'm assuming that you planned to ask for my help in this?"

"Correct, as always," Rory said, "And Doyle's. If he's willing."

"Willing but I don't know how far it'll get you," Paris answered evenly, "He's only got a few contacts outside of the paper he's at. He's happy with his job and so am I, but I can't sit here and tell you he became a titan."

"That's okay, whatever bit helps."

"Good attitude to go in with. So we're going to need posterboard, Sharpies in multiple colors, both laptops, printers, and the information of all of your current journalism contacts. I'll gather mine as well. You also need to provide me with a copy of your current resume so I can overhaul it, because god knows the last time that thing's gotten any action was your senior year."

"Takeout?"

"Chinese and Thai, and if we need more we can do pizza. Thai donuts," Paris added. Rory smirked, remembering how during college Paris had gradually begun to eat more takeout and junk food under her tutelage. "We'll also need a ruler, about 300 envelopes, stamps, and self-addressed labels. Jess?"

"Yeah?"

"You're doing the shopping. And picking up the takeout. We'll place the order before you leave so you're included," Paris said, handing him her credit card, "Also get a few bottles of wine, some Red Bull Zero, and some carrots in case our brain cells start to fail from excessive exposure to grease."

"Are you…"

"We really appreciate it, Jess," Rory chimed in, her eyes meeting his. He narrowed his eyes at her and she shrugged innocently.

"Alright," he gave in, knowing that this was the plan all along and that this insane, OCD plan was going to make Rory happier than he could imagine for reasons he couldn't possibly understand, "Text me if there's anything else."

"There will be," Paris called as he shut the door behind him. She turned to Rory and smiled slightly.

"I did always like him" she admitted, "Think he can get us some Mac and Cheese?"
"Paris, this is ridiculous. I don't think that just because I one time had a failed interview at the New York Times, we have to automatically cross off any other papers where their writers may have been employed at the Times when I interviewed!"

"Rory, people hold grudges. This isn't your goody-two-shoes-happy-small-town-little-corner-of-the-world anymore. This is business. The business of journalism. A business you've managed to burn your way through pretty quickly for someone as seemingly quiet and likable as yourself. So now we have to play hardball. I can get you into at least three papers on this list in spite of the facts if we use Doyle's knowledge as power."

"We are not blackmailing reporters Doyle found together in a copy room, Paris. That's cruel and also creepy," Rory shook her head, "We're doing this the right."

"Have it your way," Paris shrugged, returning the black marker to the posterboard, "Then we'll have to parenthesize these eight papers and add extra references to those."

"And if they don't accept…"

"Everyone accepts extra references if they're all worth a damn," Paris said, her voice bored, "If Oprah, Madonna and the Pope all wanted to sell my skills, I'm sure most people would be willing to read all three letters."

"Well, Oprah might be kind of long-winded," Rory joked, returning to her computer and the list she was reading out loud to Paris. "Boston Globe and Boston Herald."

"We know someone at the Herald, so I'll mark that with a red plus," Paris said, doing so, "The Globe you'd have as good a shot as anyone. What do you think of Boston?"

"I'd be okay with it," Rory answered, "I like the city, and it is close to home."

"Home being Connecticut or your shacked up apartment?"

"Paris…"

"Look, he's gone, can we just level about this for a second?" Paris sat down next to Rory and looked her in the eyes. After a few seconds she spoke.

"You want to be in Philadelphia."

"I didn't…"

"It wasn't a question. You'd be okay with Boston or New York, well, more okay with those than anywhere far, like Chicago. But when it comes down to it, you want to be in Pennsylvania. Not even just Pennsylvania, I'm guessing Pittsburgh would be too far for you. In fact, judging by the look on your face as I'm saying this, I'm just about certain that you want to be sleeping in the same bed that you are now for every night in the foreseeable future. Is that true?"

"Is it wrong?" Rory asked quietly, "Look, I remember when we were graduating from Yale and you got all your acceptances. You were strong enough to not factor Doyle in and to make the right decision for yourself. But he was able to factor you in and work around you. Jess can't do that for me. He has a solid base there, and he loves it, and it's good for him. I love it. I don't want him to
sacrifice. But I don't want to have to do long distance with him. I just...I don't know. I don't want to be the girl that gives up her career for the guy, but I want to be near him. I don't want to wake up without him. There. Go ahead, judge me."

"It's not weak to know what you want, Rory," Paris answered, looking at her friend carefully, "I know I made that decision with Doyle, or tried to. And it hurt, if you recall, and took a lot of strength. I won't deny that. But you don't have to choose one or the other, necessarily. It might work out that you can get everything you want. And even if you do choose to prioritize him over your career, I wouldn't hold that against you or call you weak. You have the right to make your own decisions based on your own reasoning. But to be clear, you want to be in Philadelphia. And you'll apply for other jobs in the New England area, but primarily, you want to reside in Philadelphia, run a paper there, and live where you're at. Am I correct?"

"Yes," Rory answered, more firmly this time, "Is that a possibility?"

"Absolutely," Paris answered, "In fact, you might have more luck there. It's not a big journalistic hub, so your dear old friend the Titan lacks as much reach there. Smaller papers, a bit more independent, not much prestige, but you'd probably have a good shot at getting the job and getting a lot of creative control. There's the Inquirer, the Tribune, and the Press. Doyle has a contact at one of them, I believe the Press, but I think that either way you're overqualified for the positions. My suggestion is that we narrow our focus to primarily prepare you to interview for any of those three places, and then spend a lesser amount of time and energy preparing back-up for other New England papers."

"But are any of them even looking for an editor?" Rory asked, "I mean, I know that if the editor, or maybe even a high profile journalist for the Wall Street Journal walks into your paper and wants to be the editor the current guy is likely to be moved out. But I'm not either of those things."

"No, but the field of journalism is more open now and more political. Which in this case proves an advantage to you. Since print journalism is beginning to fall, papers are desperately trying to retain and increase readership to save their own asses. So they do a lot of corporate restructuring, frequently, and are often willing to push away those who have spent years dedicated to a company in order to make room for someone who actually does the job better."

"That sounds cruel," Rory bit her lip.

"It's just efficiency," Paris shrugged, "Utilitarianism. And it's going to get you one of these jobs. So should we restructure the boards?"

"Okay," Rory answered, "But don't make it too clear. I don't want Jess to notice."

"Ahh," Paris exhaled, smirking, "So Kerouac doesn't know you want to settle down?"

"I just don't think he'll be happy about me limiting my options," Rory answered, "Especially 'for him', as he'll see it. I don't want to have that argument yet. I know what I want and eventually we'll hash it out, but right now, I just want your help getting there."

"Fine by me," Paris shrugged, "Just keep providing posterboard and Mac and Cheese and I'm here for whatever you need."

"I can do that," Rory grinned, "Let me just call Jess and have him continue to do our bidding."

"Good man, that one."

"I wholeheartedly concur. Especially when food is involved."
"Rory, I got the Mac and Cheese, but I couldn't find the…what the hell happened in here?"

"What do you mean?" Rory asked innocently, continuing to add color-designated lines to the posterboard.

"I mean, I left for a few hours and suddenly I see…eight posterboards," he counted, "All with intimidating titles having to do with your perceived chances of attaining a particular position, and you're attacking those already terrifying creations with what is clearly a system of color coordination and sectioning. And there are more check boxes than I can possibly count."

"Jess, this is my career," Rory said, still focusing on the ruler in front of her, "Attention to detail could make or break my shot here, and I'm already actual years behind. I may be good at playing catch-up but this is a whole new league. Even with expert advice my chances…"

"Are better than you think they are but worse than he thinks they are," Paris finished bluntly, walking back into the room, "Hi, Jess. Did you bring…"

"Mac and Cheese is on the counter. I couldn't find any carob chips," Jess cut her off, "And no, I did not check the list of eight health food stores you referred me to. Only the first three."

"Good thing you're not in charge of this search," Paris mumbled, heading towards the kitchen.

"You're welcome!" Jess called sarcastically. He sighed.

"That girl is crazy."

"But she's Paris."

"That's what I just said."

"Funny."

"Can you stop for a minute? I want to ask you something."

"Okay…"

"It's kind of serious."

"Let's go in the other room then," Rory eyed Paris, "Hey, I have to take care of something."

"If you aren't back in ten minutes I'll take scissors the posterboards," Paris replied, her voice a monotone. Rory's face turned in disbelief and then hardened.

"If you do that, I'll tell Doyle you had Mac and Cheese."

"Hey, that's just my relationship. This is your career, Gilmore. Get your priorities in order."

Jess held back a laugh as he followed Rory into the guest room.

"So? What is it?" Rory asked, sitting down on the bed. He sighed deeply.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about something that I noticed on the way here," he admitted,
"The way you reacted when I asked if we were coming here to see...him. Are you guys not on..."

"We don't speak," Rory answered, "You know he married Mom. And they got divorced. He wasn't good to her, or for her. He wasn't bad or anything, but she deserved much better. And so after that breakup and another shitty thing he did, I just got sick of it. For a while we were speaking sporadically, but over time I've just stopped. Mom stopped a long time ago, and I don't need him. I never really have. And if I did, I didn't have him anyway. Plus, now I have Luke. And actually I've always had Luke. So I really don't...he's not a part of it. No."

"Hey, it's not like I can say anything about it," Jess reassured her, sitting down next to her and putting his hand over hers, "Liz and I aren't exactly poker buddies. I just...I wanted to make sure you didn't want to stop and see him while we're here. And tell him."

"I don't," Rory answered, "And it's nothing to do with you. I'm just...done. I'm sick of it. I have been for a while. Just assume that no matter the situation, he's not in the picture. Okay?"

"Whatever you want," Jess responded, kissing her gently. Pulling away, he smiled. "It's your call. And if you ever change your mind, just tell me."

"I will," Rory agreed before pulling him back toward her. Afterward she grinned. "I really gotta get back or Paris is going to..."

"Be crazy?"

"In a motivational way."

" Doesn't make it any better. Only crazy people rationalize insanity."

"Well I guess it makes sense that I'm friends with her now," Rory shrugged, getting up and heading out of the room, "You coming?"

"I think I'm going to go back to the health food stores before Paris kills me in my sleep with a glue gun."

"She's moved onto knitting needles."

"That's a whole new level of terror."
"I really don't think this is what they meant by a room with a view."

"Hmm?" Rory mumbled in confusion, rolling over in the bed and turning to look at Jess. She kissed his cheek lazily. "Go back to bed."

"Rory, seriously. We have one on every flat surface."

"What do we have?" she asked, sighing and rubbing her eyes as she tried to follow Jess' gaze. "Oh."

"There are eight. Eight!"

"Nine. One's in the closet because it's in progress," Rory corrected, taking Jess' hand and pulling him back down and putting his arm around her waist, "And I can't do anything about that. I need them."

"You do not need all of that to get a job," Jess responded, "You're one of the best writers I've ever met. And everyone knows it. And you've worked in the field since you graduated, by the way, from one of the best schools in the country, where you were, what do you know, the editor in chief of the newspaper. You're as good as in."

"You're sweet and delusional in equal parts," Rory answered, "I need the boards."

"You don't need the boards."

"I need the boards. And they need to be there, unless you want me putting them in the office…"

"Leave the boards," Jess groaned, laying back down and putting his arm around Rory, leaning down to kiss her deeply, "You're crazy, you know that?"

"I think I've heard that around somewhere before," Rory answered cheekily before pulling Jess back towards her to make the most of the early wake up.

An hour later, Rory was at the kitchen table finishing the ninth board, titled very ambiguously "P3". Jess continued to lay in bed as he watched her frown, trying to figure out the best way to format something. The way she bit her lip every time she was about to draw a line, even with a ruler, wanting it to be absolutely perfect. It blew his mind. She was such a perfectionist, and she would not settle for anything less of every possible ounce of effort going into this cause. She was going to do anything in her power or the coerced power of anyone she knew to get what she wanted, what she needed, what she deserved. And Jess had to admit, it was mind-blowingly sexy. She was attacking life with a ferocity that he knew well, but hadn't seen a while. One of her most attractive qualities had always been her drive, her ambition, her confidence when she was on a path. Now that it was the right one, she was absolutely unstoppable. She was driving herself crazy day and night, editing her about twelve versions of a resume to within an inch of their lives, making calls both to contacts she had and cold calls to specific jobs, where she marketed herself with a precision and determination she could have only learned from Lorelai. She was running errands all the time, picking things up and had forsaken her personal reading for purely articles, research in the vein of what she was accomplishing. Her only literary deviation was when at night, Jess would sometimes read to her.

Yes, Jess now read to her sometimes. And on occasion she read to him too. Since they'd returned a few days ago, their routine had adjusted very naturally to fit their new relationship. The extra bed had been ignored and they had moved permanently into Jess'. Yes, it was a tight fit but neither of them seemed to mind. Every night they would read, as before, but when they'd come across something
beautiful or something terrible or hilarious they would just read it out loud to the other. It was cheesy and ridiculous and sometimes obnoxious and on occasion incredibly romantic. But they wanted to share the words with one another, the ones that were inspiring them, making them feel things, because they were really feeling things as one now more than separately. Almost everything was shared. In the same vein, there was no question of the living situation anymore. Rory had moved in completely, her things no longer residing in bags but now in drawers and closets, and she'd even brought a fair number of her books back with her to Jess', and they were now on the floor waiting for the weekend when they planned to figure out how to organize the new and massive collection of literature they would share.

At this moment, though, Jess wasn't thinking about any of those things. He wasn't even really thinking about her ambition or her career or her focus. He just watched her, not thinking, only reveling in the newfound feelings of love and home that he'd never felt quite as fully as he was experiencing them right now.
"Jess!"

"Hmmmmffft.

"I have an interview!"

"What?" he sat up immediately, climbing out of bed and walking over to where Rory was excitedly trying not to bounce of the walls as she stared at her computer screen, "When? Where? How?"

"A good paper in a big city. The interview won't be for a few weeks but it would be for a features editor position. That's really only one step away from editor in chief! Their features editor is leaving for a position the Chicago Sun-Times, so they're beginning to interview in the next few weeks, and I'm the first one in line. Two and a half weeks from today. I can't believe it!"

"Did you have a connection or something? That was really fast, Rory. You've only been looking for a couple weeks," Jess smiled groggily. She grinned.

"Nope, absolutely nothing. I don't know a soul there. Which makes it so much better. They said that my reputation preceded me and that in spite of the 'unusual circumstances' under which I left my last job," Rory grimaced, "They were very excited to hear that I'm following a new path and very much look forward to meeting me."

"What about the…"

"No affiliation whatsoever. I checked. Actually, the group that this paper is a part of is in competition with those papers, or at least one could look at it that way."

"And do you?"

"Right now I'm just looking at it as I have a job! Or a possible job! And that they seem positive about it!" Rory laughed. Jess frowned slightly.

"Look, I'm really happy for you. Honestly, that's amazing. But are you that surprised? You have a name in the field."

"Well, not entirely. But it's still never certain."

"You just seem really, really excited for just hearing that you got an interview." Rory bit her lip and looked at Jess. He met her eyes and held her gaze.

"Rory," he said, his voice lowering slightly, "What's going on? What paper is it?"

"The Tribune," she answered, looking away from him. He stared at her in shock.

"Can I assume you aren't referring to the one in Chicago?"

"Jess…"

"Rory," Jess continued, his voice low, "Are you telling me you're interviewing to be a features editor at the Philadelphia Tribune?"

"Yes," Rory answered finally. quietly. They sat in silence for a minute. "Well, your opinion is
obvious."

"And I'm sure you knew it was coming," Jess retorted, "What are you thinking? Rory, given what you did at Yale, as an editor you'd probably have a shot at just about any paper in the damn country. And of all places, you're limiting yourself to Philadelphia. Philadelphia! I know you haven't lived here long but I was pretty sure you were aware that we're not the journalistic capital of the nation."

"It's a reputable paper, with quality material," Rory crossed her arms, "I'd have more creative control than I would at a bigger paper."

"That's not why you're doing it."

"No, it's not."

"You can't do that!"

"Why?" Rory asked, her voice beginning to crack, "Is this just temporary? Are you gonna take off or want me to or are you secretly planning to relocate?"

"No, but even if any of that were true, it doesn't matter," Jess snapped, "This is your career. It is a hell of a lot more important than some relationship."

"Some relationship?" Rory echoed disbelieving, "You do not seriously think that's all this is. Just some relationship. Any old relationship."

"You know what I meant," Jess said darkly, "It doesn't matter how great this is going, your career should be your priority. You can't put everything on hold to be with me. I didn't ask you to do that! I don't want you to do that!"

"What if I want to do that?" Rory cried, tears finally starting to fall, "Why is it so wrong to think we have enough of a shot that I don't want to leave? That I'm happy enough right here that I don't feel the need to go be on the forefront of American journalism, rubbing noses at the Algonquin? Why is it okay for me not to want to be a reporter anymore, but not okay for me to want to factor you in?"

"I'm not worth that!" Jess exclaimed, "No one is! You have to live up to your full potential! You're going to limit yourself, hold yourself back, and for what? Some guy who runs a bookstore in Philadelphia that you started dating a week ago?"

"Don't you dare try to trivialize what we have," Rory cut him off, her voice low, "And I cannot believe that you, of all people, are telling me what I have to do with my life. You! You who said I could do anything, be anything I wanted. That I didn't have to listen to them, to what everyone expects!"

"It's not about what everyone else wants or what they expect," Jess replied, his voice in a full yell now, "It's about what you deserve. What you're capable of. It's about you. I want the best for you, I have to want that, you should want that! You're better than the fucking Tribune and you're better than Philadelphia and…"

"Better than you?" Rory cut in, her voice cracking as tears streamed down her face, "Yeah, Jess, I know that's where you're going. I know you well enough to know that's where you're going. But you have to stop. I don't want us to be having this argument for the rest of our lives. Why can't you just accept that I want to be with you and I want that enough to put it before a fancy office and a high-profile job?"

"You're better than becoming barefoot and pregnant in a guy's kitchen," Jess fought back, "If you
really thought that was okay I don't know why you dumped your first boyfriend."

"You know perfectly well I'm not going to be that, that's not who I am," Rory argued, "But why do you get the right to decide what I should want, what I should deserve?"

"Because I love you more than anybody, Rory," Jess yelled, his voice booming off the walls, "And have since the second I met you. I know you more than anyone else can or will. And I'm not gonna let you throw away your life for me."

"What if I want you to be my life?" Rory replied, shaking with full sobs, "What if that's the life I want? What if I want to be with you, and I don't ever want to spend another night away from you?"

"Well then I guess you're out of luck," Jess snarled, "I'm going to Luke's. You need to figure out what you really deserve to get out of life, and I'm not gonna sit here and keep watching you throw it away to hang around in a room with me and read books."

"Jess!" Rory yelled, "You can't just leave."

"Watch me," he snapped, "You know, Rory, of all people I thought you'd get it. That you'd understand. I'm stopping you from making one of the most stupid decisions you could make in your entire life."

"When are you coming back?"

"Rory…"

"When are you coming back?" she demanded, "If you walk out of here without a word and without telling me when you're coming home, I swear to god, if you walk out and leave me, again…"

"I'm not leaving you!" he cried in exasperation, tears beginning to sting at the corners of his eyes. He quickly turned away. "I'm going to Luke's. I'll be back by Sunday, but I'll call you if that changes. Once you've had some time to think."

"I'm not going to change my mind," Rory said stubbornly, "So you might as well save your minutes."

"You're going to regret it if you do it."

"You're wrong."

"Rory…"

"Just go, Jess," she sighed, sitting down and wiping the tears from her cheeks.

"Rory…" he said, a bit more softly, looking at how much of a wreck she was.

"I'm fine!" she snapped, "Just go away, Jess. You don't want to be here and right now I really don't want you here anyway."

"Whatever," he scowled, grabbing his backpack from by the door, walking through the apartment and shoving a few things into it. He turned back to Rory. "Tell Matt and Chris I'll be back in a week."

"Fine," she said coldly, looking pointedly toward the door. "Drive safe."

Jess sighed and walked out the door, shutting it hard behind him. As soon as Rory heard his
footsteps descending the stairs, she began to sob again and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Mom?"

"Rory?"

"I need you."
Chapter 92

Rory opened the door. "Mom!"

"Aww, Rory," Lorelai said, pulling her daughter into an enormous hug, "What's going on? What happened? Where's Jess?"

"Stars Hollow," Rory answered, her head hanging low. Lorelai cocked her eyebrow in confusion and Rory sighed. "We had a fight. A really bad fight. Really, really bad."

"What happened?" Lorelai asked, guiding Rory over to the bed. They sat down on it and Rory burst into tears again.

"God, he is just so infuriating!" she choked, "All I want is to be with him and around him and near him and suddenly that's a crime and it makes me a 1950s stereotype and Gloria Steinem and Simone de Beauvior should pull my arms in different directions until I split in half!"

"Well honey, then you'd only be half the woman you are now, and given your current stress level I'm not sure you could handle life that way," Lorelai said, trying to keep a straight face. Rory glared at her. "Okay, hon, catch me up a bit here. Why are you pissing off the feminist movement?"

"I want to work in Philadelphia," Rory answered, "And stay here. With Jess. And yes, I know how disappointed in me you're going to be and you're going to react just like he did and I get it, I know that makes me awful considering everything you sacrificed for me, and how hard you worked to have your dreams anyway, and how I have that opportunity and I'm just throwing it away for a guy, and how completely…"

"Okay, stop right there!" Lorelai cut her off, "This conversation requires ice cream. Serious ice cream. Do you own serious ice cream?"

"Vanilla?"

"That's a no," Lorelai sighed, "We're going to the grocery store to pick up supplies. But before we do, listen to me. I do not agree with him."

"You don't?"

"No," Lorelai said flatly, "I wouldn't leave Luke for anything. I don't even like leaving him to come see you, as much as I hate to admit it. And that doesn't make you any weaker or any worse of an independent, strong, self-assured woman. It doesn't make you antifeminist or unmotivated or one of those girls with no ambition who only aspires to getting her MRS. There is nothing wrong with being in love with someone and wanting to settle down with them. And I would never, and will never, hold it against you that you want that. In fact, I think it's one of the most amazing things that could ever happen to you. Are we clear?"

"Clear," Rory smiled weakly, hugging her mom tight, "Thanks."

"Anytime," she answered, "So let's go get stocked up. I have a feeling I'm going to be here a while."

"Okay, we're just about done. Let's make sure we didn't miss anything. Marshmallows?"

"Check."
"Nutella?"
"Check."

"Three jars?"
"Four."

"Good daughter. Phish food ice cream?"
"Check."

"Fudge brownie?"
"Check."

"Strawberry cheesecake ice cream to fill our health quotient?"
"Check," Rory rolled her eyes.

"Cookie dough?"

"Um…ice cream or actual dough?"
"Both."

"Check and check."

"Frosting?"
"Check."

"Doritos?"
"Check. Nacho cheese."

"The only good kind. Fritos?"
"Check."

"Twizzlers?"
"Check."

"Kit kats?"
"Check."

"Reeses?"
"Sticks or cups?"
"Cups."

"Check."

"Soda?"
"Check."

"Wine?"

"Check."

"Strawberry daiquiri mix?"

"Check."

"Whisky?"

"What do we need whisky for?"

"Our much anticipated Literature of the Shared Bookshelf drinking game?"

Rory leaned over and grabbed a bottle. "Check."

"Popcorn?"

"Check."

"Donuts?"

"Check."

"And pie?"

"Nope."

"What? No pie?" Lorelai looked at her daughter incredulously, "But…"

"The pie at the coffee place is better," she answered, "Trust me."

"Alright. And we're ordering Chinese and Pizza?"

"Should that be enough?"

"I think so. We can always add tacos if not."

"You do realize we're diseased?"

"Absolutely sick."

"We should be studied under a microscope."

"Don't be silly, the food will make us far too fat to fit under a microscope," Lorelai grinned, "Ooh! Sour gummy worms!"

"There's nothing even resembling food that makes up any part of that."

"No, but there's gelatin in them. And gelatin is in marshmallows."

"Your logic is astounding. Grab 'em."

"Yay!" Lorelai smiled widely, throwing three bags in the cart. Rory smiled.
"Have I mentioned that I'm glad you're here?"

"You might have, but it can never hurt to be reminded," Lorelai smirked. Rory grinned.

"Thanks for coming, Mom."

"Anytime, anywhere, hon," Lorelai nodded, "I'm always here."
"Luke?"

"Jess?" Luke muttered into the phone, rubbing his bleary eyes, "It's eleven at night. Is everything okay?"

"It'll be fine," Jess answered shortly, "Sorry to bug you. Just wanted to be sure the key was in the same place."

"So you're…"

"Coming there."

"How far…"

"20 minutes away."

"I'll see you then. I'm at the diner tonight. Early shipment."

"Alright. Be there soon."

"Lorelai's in Philadelphia."

"I figured as much," Jess rolled his eyes as he walked through the door Luke had opened, "Nice to see you too."


"Look, don't go off on me, alright?" Jess snapped, "If you're gonna do that I'll find…"

"I'm not going off on you, Jess," Luke cut him off, "You're not a kid anymore. You're a man. And I'll bet you had a pretty damn good reason if you were willing to get into a fight with her, especially one serious enough to chase you out of your apartment for the night, given how much you dislike leaving her. So I'm operating under the assumption that you were doing or at least trying to do the right thing. But I still want to talk to you about it."

Jess looked at his uncle, a bit surprised. "You're…you're assuming you're on my side?"

"You could say that," Luke nodded, "Come on, I'll get you some coffee."


"She wants to stay in Philadelphia."

"Why wouldn't she…"

"She's going to be an editor. She knows what she wants to do now, and she's more than capable of being the best there is," Jess answered quietly, "I'm not going to be the thing that holds her back from that. She deserves everything, everything the world can offer."
"So you..."

"Told her that, in different words. And then left. She needs to realize that she can't shape her life around me. She has to put herself first. I'm not worth that. No one is."

"I can see where you're coming from," Luke nodded, "When Lorelai first told me she left Yale I had a similar thought process. Nothing is worth giving up her future over. How did she respond?"

"Badly," Jess admitted, "She basically said that it was her choice and I didn't have the right to make it for her. And that it wasn't fair of me to make her feel bad for wanting to be with me."

"I mean, you see where she's coming from with that," Luke nodded, "But I get where you're coming from too. So how bad are you guys..."

"I'm here for a week at least."

"So...I guess I'll see you to open tomorrow?"

"You're not staying?"

"I figured you'd want..."

"I'm not gonna call her. Stay. I'm not kicking you out of your own apartment, especially when it doesn't make sense to," Jess nodded, "If you don't care."

"Nope," Luke nodded, "But if you start playing that crap again, I reserve the right to throw it out the window."

"As long as you don't chainsaw through my wall, I don't see any need for it to get to that point," Jess smirked, walking upstairs.
"But Lulu always cuts the crusts off, and I don't even have to tip her!" Kirk whined as Jess looked at him disbelievingly. He inhaled deeply.

"Kirk, I have no idea how old you are, but I'm pretty damn sure you're too old to…"

"I paid for a service! And just because…"

"Kirk," Luke came over, his voice low, "If you want the crusts cut off, go eat with Lulu."

"But she's in Alaska! She's a part of…"

"Or just cut them off yourself. What a thought," Jess scoffed. Kirk raised his eyebrows.

"Fine," he grumbled, "But don't expect any favors on the tip."

"I'm crushed," Jess said flatly before returning to the counter.


"Sorry," he replied quietly, "Just have…things on my mind."

"Well there's nothing to take your mind off of things than good-old fashioned murder," Luke suggested, glancing at Kirk, who was now attempting to cut off the crusts, much like a child who has never before used a knife.

"Good point. You pull one side, I'll pull the other," Jess smirked, and Luke grinned as Miss Patty and Babbette walked in.

"Luke!" Babette exclaimed, rushing over to him, "We need to talk to Lorelai! It's important! Oh, hi Jess."

Jess nodded in amusement. Miss Patty narrowed her eyes at him. Luke looked at them in confusion.

"She's not here. What did you need?"

"We tried her house too, and she's not there either. That only leaves the inn, but Sookie said she wasn't there either. Where in the…"

"She's out of town," Luke cut them off, "But is there something in particular I can help you with?"

"Well…” Miss Patty began hesitantly, looking at Jess, "I don't…"

"It's fine," Babette assured her, "Maybe he'll know. We heard Rory quit her job!"

"Don't you two think…"

"Hush, Luke. Is it true? Is she okay? Last time she did something like this was when she left school, and there was a rift! Is there another rift? I don't think the town could take another rift…" Babette asked, her voice speeding up until Jess' head was spinning.

"He doesn't have to…"

"There's no rift," Jess answered, "And yes, it's true. The rest is for Rory to tell you if she wants, so
"ask her."

"But is she…"

"Yes, she's okay," Jess assured them, seeing the panic in their eyes, "In fact, she's better than okay. Now will you two please go find someone else to harass?"

"I liked him better when he didn't talk," Miss Patty muttered to Babette as they walked away to a table. Jess raised an eyebrow in amusement, trying not to laugh.

"They're nuts," Luke shook his head, before taking a plate of food, "Table 5?"

"Got it."

"So earlier…"

"You're going to have to be a little more specific than that."

"You answered them."

"And? They wouldn't have ever gone away otherwise."


"I'm not mad that she quit," Jess sighed, "I'm happy she quit. I just…"

"Don't want to lose her but don't want to hold her down?"

"Something like that," Jess nodded.

"Been there," Luke grumbled, going to the fridge and taking out a pie. He offered a piece to Jess.

"With Lorelai?"

"A few times," he admitted, "Why do you think it took me so long to actually do anything about it?"


"I always thought she could do better than me," Luke answered, "Even when she kept picking losers. Guys who didn't treat her right. I would still say to myself, Look at her. She runs this inn better than I've ever seen anyone run a business. She could be doing this with any hotel in any city. And once she opened the Dragonfly, it was clear this place was nothing compared to what she could do."

"So…"

"She didn't want the big things, Jess. She wanted the job she wanted and to be here in this fit-it-on-a-postage-stamp town and she just wanted someone that would love her, for every fault she had, and for every virtue she couldn't see that was there. She didn't care about what I did for a living or that I wasn't the guy on the paper towel ads or George Clooney or anything. She knew what she was capable of having, and she picked me anyway. For some crazy reason I make her happy, and that's enough to make me happy."

"I just…I don't want her to hold it against me one day," Jess admitted, "That's selfish, but…"

"She won't, Jess. She will, however, hold it against you if you force her into having a life without
you in it because you think it's the right choice for her. Plus, it's not like she can't do her job where you are."

"But it's Philadelphia. It's not like it's a Mecca of journalism."

"No, but it's a major city, with papers."

"It's not New York."

"She doesn't need the Times, Jess. Don't you get it? She's like Lorelai. They could both go to the ends of the earth and back again. They're shooting stars in a planetarium. But they don't want that. They want to feel safe, protected. There's a reason that Lorelai ran to this tiny little town instead of some city, and it's not just because the Independence looked like a welcoming place to seek refuge. They want to feel like a place is theirs, like they know every corner of it. They want to create their own stories and their own little world and have that. They want a home."

"I can't…"

"You have, Jess, and you can. Just because you didn't get one then, doesn't mean you don't deserve one now. Or that you can't give one to someone else. You of all people are probably more prepared to do that than anyone else, because you know exactly how awful it is to be without one."

"I yelled at Liz," Jess admitted, not looking his uncle in the eye.

"She told me," he nodded.

"I was…"

"I know. And I get it. I'm not gonna say you're wrong for thinking like that. But…just think about giving her a chance, alright? It'd make things a lot easier."

"If I do, it won't be for her," Jess nodded, "Thanks, Luke."

"Anytime," he smiled, standing up, "Now if you don't mind, I need to call Lorelai before she trades me in for someone that actually pays attention to her."

"If I remember her luck with engagement isn't so great, so I doubt she'd risk it," he smirked, earning a pillow thrown violently at his head by Luke.

"Lorelai? Hey, sorry, just finished eating. Yeah, well, he's still alive, though I'm not sure he will be by the end of the night…"

"Boy, is it nice to be home," Jess laughed.
"Rory?"

"I miss him," she admitted, turning around in bed to face her mother on the bed next to her. "And it's only been three days. How can he not feel like this?"

"He does," Lorelai assured her, "You know that. You remember what it was like the first time he went to Stars Hollow without you."

"But if he's completely fine with me just moving across to New York, or Chicago, or wherever he thinks the kind of job is that I deserve…" she bit her lip, "Maybe it was just a phase."

"Rory…"

"A phase. Like newlyweds. We were happy, because of all the anticipation, all the excitement, and so everything was in some perfect unrealistic state. But now maybe it's wearing off for him and he doesn't want to be around me all the time anymore."

"Hon, you know that's not true," Lorelai said softly, stroking Rory's hair as she heard the tremble in her daughter's voice, "Jess is absolutely crazy about you. He just…he wants you to have everything."

"But I don't want everything. I want him."

"I know," Lorelai nodded, "And that's okay. You have the right to want whatever it is you want. But just…try to look at it from his eyes. Here you are, this gorgeous, perfect angel of a creature…" Rory rolled her eyes, "Hey, I'm your mom, so you get my bias. As I was saying, drop of perfection from the heavens, eyes like the oceans and so smart, so funny, so witty, and completely capable of anything. You could take the world by storm. I know it, he knows it, Luke knows it…all of us know it. And as much as he cares about you, maybe he just feels like he's holding you back from that. From being everything you could be."

"But that's not…"

"Let me tell you a story. Remember that disastrous double date we went on?" Rory nodded. "Well, I was talking to Luke about his attitude and he said he didn't think the guy deserved to be with you. And I asked if not him, then who? Was Jess good enough? Who was good enough? And his answer was no one, a prince, maybe. Now, you know I like Jess. And how completely nuts it is that I can admit that without vomiting. But Luke, and me, and it seems like Jess too…we all think the world of you. Nothing's good enough for you. And no one. If you ask me, Jess is just about the closest anyone could come. And I think Luke would agree. But Jess…I would think he has a hard time seeing himself for that. To him, he's still the guy that screwed you over in high school and fucked up a lot and wasn't a great guy, for a long time. And he thinks you deserve…better. Even if it's impossible. So cut the guy some slack. I'm not saying he's right. He's not. But just…he cares about you, Rory, and it's making him act a little stupid. Love can do that."

"We haven't…"

"You know, though."

"Yeah, I do," Rory nodded. "So what do I do?"
"Right now?" Lorelai grinned. "You hang out with the woman who gave you life and blood and rot your teeth quickly while Jess slowly comes to his senses. You gotta give him space, kid. You guys will work it out, I promise. And he'll be back soon, I'm sure he's already miserable without you."

"Fuck this!" Jess exclaimed, immediately pulling his hand off of the scalding pan, "Just…screw it. All of it, I'm done."

"Jess…" Luke looked at his nephew in concern.

"What, you don't let your employees heal their injuries now? Maybe I should join a union," he snarled. Luke looked at him sharply and he sighed. "Sorry. I'm going to go run my hand under some cold water, I'll be right back." Shaking his head, he walked up the stairs. A few minutes later Luke appeared in the main room.

"Jess…"

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" he said, his voice breaking slightly, "It's just…not my day."

"Here's a thought," Luke proposed, "Why don't we let Cesar handle the afternoon lull for a few and take a break?"

"You? Take a break?" Jess scoffed, "To what end?"


"Well, with sweet talk like that…"

"So can I ask what put you in such a charming mood today?" Luke asked a few minutes later, when they were up in the apartment, "I mean, I know that Taylor was in this morning and being Taylor, but then again, that's nothing new."

"You know what it is," he looked at Luke, annoyed.

"You miss her."

"No shit. But I have to get past it," he answered, trying to sound resolute, "It's for the…"

"No, it's not, Jess," Luke cut him off, his voice firm, "You need to get it through your goddamned skull that you're what's best for her. And if you can't make yourself believe that, at least have enough faith in her to think she knows what's best for her."

"It's not that I don't…"

"Think about it, Jess. That's what you're saying."

"That's not what I mean…"

"Well I know you're better with words, but just…think about your actions here. And think about who we're discussing. This isn't the same confused, lost Rory that you were having to help and protect and give guidance to the last few months. This is Rory when she knows what she wants. You have to trust her."

"I do," Jess said simply, "I always have."

"Well, now that she's made up her mind, you have to just…follow it. It's called blind faith. You love her. You have to trust her judgment and let her make that choice for herself."
"She hasn't…"

"But she does."

"She hasn't…"

"Jess."

"Yeah, she does."

"Tell me something. How does it feel to be gone right now?"

"I want to throw heavy objects at everything. Whereas usually I only want to throw heavy objects when people like TJ are around."

"Well, as much as I empathize with the latter part," Luke nodded, rolling his eyes, "Stop being a damn martyr. You love her, she loves you, you want to be together, and I'd be willing to bet she's miserable without you here."

"Did Lorelai…"

"No. This is your deal, both of you. We aren't gonna pass notes or any of that crap," Luke cut him off, "But you know her, and I know her, and that's the truth of it. You guys are so crazy about each other that you don't want to spend a day apart. So don't get scared just because she's making a real, significant choice that will actually ensure that you don't have to. It's a good thing, Jess."

"But what if it wears off?" he asked, "What if it's just…temporary? Feeling like this? What if it stops and then she regrets making that choice?"

"Is it gonna wear off for you?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

"How could I…"

"Jess, you'll fight, you'll piss each other off, and there'll be days when your apartment will seem too small, no matter where you're living," Luke explained, "But let me tell you this, I've had one really great love of my life, and there isn't a single night I want to go by without her there. And I knew it from the moment I first woke up with her next to me. Even now, I still hate it when she's gone. Or when I leave. And I do it, because it's life, and sometimes you have to. But there's nothing wrong with the fact that you feel that way, and that Rory feels that way. That's what great love is. And sometimes, almost always, it's worth sacrificing for."

"But she shouldn't have to…"

"Yeah, she should. I know you'd rather be doing the sacrificing, Jess, but you'll both have to, in your own time, and your own ways. Is it worth it to you?"

"Do you really have to ask?"

"And it's worth it to her?"

"It seems so."
"Then consider yourself the luckiest damn bastard on Earth and spend the rest of your life proving to her that you're worthy of that choice."

Jess sat in silence. After a few moments he looked up at Luke.

"If I end up half the guy to her that you are to Lorelai, I'll be good," he said softly, "Thanks, Luke."

"Anytime," he nodded, "Now let me go tell Cesar…"

"Tell him he's in charge tomorrow."

"He'll be so thrilled."

"Just hide the specials board and you'll be fine."
"So explain to me why we're watching Moulin Rouge."

"Well, watching someone cough up blood for two and a half hours always makes your problems seem just a little bit less grave."

"But we hate blood."

"True."

"And Nicole Kidman."

"Mostly true."

"And we really hate musicals."

"Not true!" Lorelai argued, sitting up to reach her hand back into the second popcorn bowl, "You hate musicals. I love them. Don't you remember when I took that trip to New York, specifically to see a musical?"

"That you said sucked."

"You're just jaded because that ballerina scarred you for life. You're anti-fine-arts."

"She did not scar me!" Rory protested as she grabbed the bowl from her mother and proceeded to shovel the mixture of popcorn and Moose Tracks into her mouth.

"So those phone calls about those recurring nightmares involving a tutu and a very large fork…"

"Don't even get me started on dreams. You're the queen of crazy dreams. Especially since the one you had about Kirk and the…"

"We said we'd never speak of it!"

Rory giggled and dodged the Red Vine Lorelai had just thrown at her. "You could never wear those boots again…"

"That's it, I'm officially going back in time and sending you to a convent. Or military school. Whichever one has uglier uniforms," Lorelai glared. Rory opened her mouth to say something but suddenly they heard a knock at the door.

"Who could it…"

"I have a pretty good guess," Lorelai rolled her eyes, gesturing toward the door. Rory walked over and opened it to find Luke and Jess.

"You two, talk," Luke grunted, "Lorelai and I are going out to get ice cream."

"But we have…"

"Frosting."

"But we…"
"Cake for underneath the frosting."

"Well now that just seems superfluous," Lorelai smirked, grabbing her purse and coat from by the door, "Hello Jess. You should inflict severe emotional damage on my daughter more often. It bodes well for our unhealthy level of attachment to one another."

Luke glared at Lorelai as Rory tried not to smirk.

"Um, I guess I'm going now," Lorelai finished, "If you need anything hun, call me."


"Don't thank me yet," he muttered before slamming the door behind them. Jess sighed and looked at Rory.

"Mind if I…"

"Please," Rory gestured to the couch, "Sorry it's a mess. We decided to do a classic marathon with all the trimmings."

"Is that Moulin Rouge?"

"Don't ask," Rory rolled her eyes at the screen. They sat there uncomfortably for a moment before Rory exhaled deeply.

"Jess..."

"Alright," he nodded, turning to look at her, "I can't lie to you and say that I didn't mean what I said. About it upsetting me. You limiting yourself because of me. I don't like it. But it's not because I don't love you or because I don't want to spend every waking moment with you. I want to live with you, be with you…you know how much. The last few days...I hate being away. You know all of this." Rory nodded, waiting for him to continue.

"But Rory, I trust you, completely. And more than anything I want you to be happy. And it was wrong of me to try to control that, and to doubt you. You know what you want better than anybody. And if I'm lucky enough to be that guy, and if you want to prioritize me, I need to shut up and thank my lucky stars that the fates have dropped that anvil on your head in my favor."

"Jess…"

"Rory, stop. You won't change my mind on that," he said firmly, "I will always believe you're crazy for thinking I'm worthy of all of that. But I'm just going to be grateful that you do, because nothing makes me happier than being with you, and I'm more than happy to live with you in whatever drug-addled mania makes you think that I'm good enough for you."

"Why don't you believe me when I say you are? You saved me, Jess. Twice now. You brought me back from the edge of the precipice when I was falling over or hell, jumping off. And you know I was on that cliff, you've seen me there, you know I'm scraped and bruised. You know what I am and that it's not perfect or unscathed. So why can't you see that I'm flawed? And that you're the one who saves me from the biggest ones, and that means that not only are you good enough for me, but you might be…"

"Don't even go there," Jess cut her off, "I disagree with you, and you know it, but we'll have to agree to disagree. And yes, you're flawed and yes, I was there for you, but I didn't save you, Rory. You're not the kind of girl where a guy needs to save her, or even does save her. I was just there, helping
you figure it out for yourself. You opened the door, I just helped you pick the lock. Don't sell yourself short. What you've done, what you're doing…it's one of the strongest things I've ever seen someone do. So you're gonna have to forgive me when I go a little crazy and overprotective, and knock some sense into my head so I remember that almost every goddamn time, you're right. And even when you're not, it's your right to be wrong."

"Right to be wrong?" Rory giggled, unable to stop herself. Jess smirked.

"And now that you've killed the moment…” he rolled his eyes, leaning in and kissing her softly. She pulled him closer to her for a long, lingering kiss. After a few moments they separated and Rory smiled at him.

"Well, whatever else happens between us, at least we know that part works." Jess laughed out loud and shook his head.

"And they say I'm the smartass."

"Guess it's contagious."
"So I take it you gave one of your famous motivational pep talks," Lorelai teased Luke as she got in the truck. He glared at her.

"I cannot believe you said that."

"Well, it's true!" Lorelai exclaimed, "She's my daughter! I get to be mad at the guy who hurts her."

"It should stay in your mind," Luke grumbled, shaking his head.

"Yes, because silence is golden has always been my mantra," Lorelai nodded sarcastically. Luke looked at her wearily. "Alright, fine. I'll try to be less snarky."


"Everything okay?"


"Because I'm not around to bore you with my hours of conversation?"

"Something like that," he smiled, pulling up to a stoplight. He leaned over and kissed her. "So how have you been?"

"Fine, hopped up on sugar from copious amounts of junk food, so basically in a state of normalcy," Lorelai answered casually, before turning to grin at him, "Which has been completely fine except for the state of stress that I've been in constantly for the last few days."

"And that would be from…"

"Too much coffee?"


"Yes, but without my coffee you're basically a walking corpse with anger management problems."


"It sounds good," he defended when he saw Lorelai smirk at his reaction.

"Yeah, it does," she agreed, intertwining her hand with his free one.

"You know what would make it sound better?"

"Me naked in your monty hat?"

"Your mind is a terrifying place."

"What, then?"
"Removing the word 'future'."

"Luke, what are you saying?" Lorelai asked slowly, raising her eyebrows as she looked at her fiancée. He grinned.

"I want to set a date."

"Really?"

"Preferably soon. But really, any day other than June 3rd works for me." Lorelai shot him a glare and he laughed. "But really, I just want to be married to you. We've been waiting too long for this. I don't want it to get put off again. Let's just…go."

"Luke Danes, are you trying to get me to elope with you again? Because I don't see any crazy amount of stuff in your truck…"

"I know better than to think that you wouldn't have Rory at your wedding," he answered, "And I wouldn't want it to happen without Jess there. But let's start planning. Our engagement has been too long, too delayed already. I want to be your husband. Let's set a date. Let's get married."

"How's June 3rd?"

Luke rolled his eyes. "And this is why we can't have serious conversations."

"Well, you knew who you were marrying."

"So?"

"How does February sound?"

"Are you serious?"

"Are you changing your mind?"

"No, that's exactly…it's perfect," Luke admitted, "But I always thought you wanted a spring wedding."

"I think I want the snow."

"And your dress?"

"Must be white, I know!"

"I meant with the…"

"Let the women worry about the clothes. You just worry about not wearing flannel or finding out about any other children by then."

"I'll do my best."
"Mom?"

"Rory!" Lorelai exclaimed as her daughter open the door, "Not that we want to interrupt what I am sure is an incredibly romantic make-up…"

"Mom!"


"Um, yeah, we know. We were there when you got engaged," Rory replied, confused, as Jess walked up behind her and put his arm around his waist.

"Lorelai."

"Holden Caulfield."

"…We're really back to that?"

"Probably just for another hour or so before I forgive you," Lorelai answered, shooting him a genuine smile, "Yes, you both know we're engaged. But we're getting married. In February."

"February?!!" Rory squealed, immediately enveloping her mother in a huge hug, "Oh my god, that's amazing! It's so soon! We have so much to do! How are you going to get invitations out? What are you going to wear? Where are you going to have it?"

"Alright, calm down," Lorelai grinned, "I planned the last one in a day. How hard can it be?"

"Mom," Rory chided, "That was…"

"A miracle!"

"Luck," Rory countered flatly, "Weddings are hard. They're real work. We need to start right away if we want everything to be perfect."

"So does that mean I'm moving in with you?"

"Please, God, no," Jess smirked at them both.

"Unfortunately this place is too small, even for us," Rory laughed, "But why don't you come back next weekend and we can plan and do some wedding shopping? As amazing as Stars Hollow is, you'll have so many more options here."

"That's not a bad idea," Lorelai admitted, "It never occurred to me that there might be advantages to my only daughter, the angel from heaven, shacking up with her boyfriend hundreds of miles away from me."

"I'm so flattered," Jess mocked, reaching for Rory's hand. She blushed as he pulled her closer to him.

"God, you two are nauseating," Lorelai rolled her eyes, trying to hold back a smile, "I'm going to leave before you two make me sick."

"If I'd only known it was that easy…"
"Goodbye, darling daughter. And her escort."

"You make him sound like a prostitute."

"I'm not judging! Don't you remember how many times I showed you Breakfast at Tiffany's?"

"What is with all the gigolo implications," Jess muttered darkly, glaring at Luke. Lorelai turned to her fiancée curiously.

"Um, what did I…"

"Nothing, we're leaving," Luke cut her off, "Goodbye, Rory. Goodbye Jess."

"But I wanna…"

"This is why you can't have sugar past midnight." The door closed behind them and Rory turned to Jess, grinning.

"So what in God's name could have made Luke think you were a gigolo?"

"I am so not discussing this with you."

"…For less than…"

"You are pure evil," Jess mock-glared, "I can never leave you alone with your mother again."

"Or you could just never leave me alone again at all."

"Hey, I guess that Ivy-League education of yours worked after all." Rory grinned, leaning in to kiss him deeply. "Though I have no idea where you learned that."

"On the streets."

"That's not Breakfast at Tiffany's."

"Pretty Woman."

"She didn't kiss."

"You've seen Pretty Woman?"

"Hey, weren't you about to show me something?" Jess turned around quickly, pulling her toward the bedroom.

"I can't believe you've seen Pretty Woman. Did you cry? Didn't you love the part when she was in the shop…" Rory teased him.

"I'm going to have to find a way to shut you up," Jess cut her off.

"Pretty sure that's im-"
"Jess! Where's my copy of that Anne Sexton biography?"

"You really think I stole that?" Jess asked her disbelievingly, as he shoved the rest of his things in a bag, "You know how I feel about poetry."

"I also know how you feel about biography," Rory pressed, her hands on her hips as she glared at him. After a moment he sighed in defeat.

"It's in my bag."

"Thief."

"It's not even technically yours!"

"Yet."

"What, are you gonna steal it from the public library?"

"No, you're buying me a copy."

"And what makes you think…"

"You stole it! If you're stealing my copy you have to provide me with a new one."

"Your logic hasn't become any more logical since you were an illogical teenager," Jess teased her, taking the book out of his bag and tossing it to Rory. "Fine, you can have it on the drive, but then I get it during the weekend while you and Lorelai come back here. And then we'll search the bookstores when you get back."

"But…"

"Most of our books are here now! I'm going to die of boredom. And god knows all you and your mother are gonna do is watch movies and mock me," Jess rolled his eyes and Rory laughed.

"Alright, fair point. As long as you keep your word about the bookstore trip."

"You really think I'd bail on a bookstore?"

"Well, you have for the last four weekends."

"We've been busy!"

"A month, Jess. I'm going to die of literary starvation."

"Well, it is the man's job to make sure his woman is well-fed."

"This metaphor's getting weird."

"I agree. Let's slaughter it."

"You're awful."

"And you love me," Jess kissed Rory on the cheek, "But yes, we will spend an entire day browsing
"bookstores next weekend."

"You say that like it's a lot of time."

"It is!"


"True," he conceded, "Maybe we should factor it in more often."

"As in…weekly?"

"I was thinking monthly."

"But…"

"Bi-weekly. That's my final offer."

"Add your Kerouac-Ginsberg letters for a week and it's a deal."

"You drive a hard bargain," he smirked, grabbing the second book off of the shelf and passing it to her, "You're just lucky you're beautiful."

"No, I'm lucky the love potion worked," she grinned, leaning over and kissing him quickly, "Now we gotta go or we'll never make it by dinner."

"Remind me again how I convinced you to come with me up to Stars Hollow for the night when you and your mom have to come back in the morning and I'm staying there with Luke all weekend?"

"I think it went something like this…"

"Huh."

"Back to monosyllables? I guess I could say I made you speechless," Rory grinned an hour later as they finally picked up their things and headed out towards the car.

"I just thought the convincing involved more words than that. Or at least, a greater variety of them. Less spiritual references and exclamations…"

"Shut up," Rory hit his arm playfully as they climbed in, "Or else I'm gonna tell Mom that you stole Just Kids."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Have I not proven my evil-ness to you enough times already?"

"Evil-ness?" Jess cracked up, "Remind me not to sign you, ever. Your grasp of vocabulary is severely lacking."

"And your grasp on how to speak to your girlfriend is severely lacking."

"Girlfriend…"

"Yeah, pretty sure that's how I'm classified. Not that I'm great with vocabulary, but…" Rory stopped when she saw the expression on Jess' face, "What?"

"I just…nothing," he shrugged.
"No, what is it?"

"It sounds like a silly word for everything you are," he admitted, his eyes locking on hers. A blush crept up her cheeks.

"Jess…"

"Not that I mind it," he added, "I just…you're so much more than that."

"So what are you saying?"

"How does love-of-my-life-slash-most-annoying-infuriating-an-devastatingly-gorgeous-woman-I've-ever-known-or-could-hope-to-know-sound?"

"Like a great line for a book, but a little long for a title," Rory giggled, now unable to stop the grin from spreading across her face.

"Alright. I guess I'll have to settle for calling you my Rory then."

"You'll have to fight Mom on that one."

"So…"

"So I guess we'll have to wait until I come up with something better," Jess finished, raising his eyebrows. Rory looked at him curiously.

"You're not saying…"

"I'm not saying anything. I'm implying."

"But…"

"Relax," he smiled at her, "For now it's just the love of my life."

"Oh, thank god that's all," Rory rolled her eyes sarcastically, still grinning, "Well I certainly hope you aren't expecting me to keep calling you my boyfriend after that."

"I thought I was your gigolo."

"My Julia Roberts, actually."

"I was sort of hoping for an alternate title."

"How does love-of-my-life-slash-part-time-redeemed-hooker sound?"

"Like a pretty damn good movie."

"Your taste in movies is questionable at best."

"Almost Famous is a work of genius!"

"I was referring to Pretty Woman."
Chapter 100

"Mom!"
"Loinfruit!"

Rory immediately crossed her arms across her chest. "I thought we'd decided to put that to rest."

"No, you decided to put that to rest. And then I vetoed you."

"Who gave you veto rights?"

"Honorary position I earned by magicking you…"

"Alright, enough with the gory details," Rory cut her off, glaring at Jess who was smirking, "And you are to forget this conversation ever happened."

"Not a chance," he laughed, "But I'll spare you the mocking and go put away our bags."

"Smart move."

"It's the withering stare," he replied, grinning at her. Rory blushed and shook her head as he walked up the stairs to Luke's apartment.

"Withering…"

"It's a hoodlum-daughter thing," Rory smiled at Lorelai, "So where's Luke?"

"The house," Lorelai answered, walking behind the counter and pouring two cups of coffee, "The lock on the back door is jammed again."

"Must be nice being able to take advantage of Luke's handiness all the time instead of one day a year. What does he do for your birthday now?"

"All things dirty," Lorelai grinned and laughed.

"Gross," Rory rolled her eyes, "He handles our food."

"And he does it so well…"

"Topic change, for the love of all that is holy…"

"Kirk offered Lulu as my maid of honor."

"Wouldn't it be matron?"

"He said matron sounded too uptight for her personality. And he winked!"

"Kirk winked?"

"Well, attempted to wink," Lorelai admitted, "But it was even creepier than it sounds. I had to let him down gently."

"Are you capable of that?"
"Hey! I let him down gently when he asked me out."

"A shining moment on an otherwise grimy record."

"Mean daughter! Be nice or I'll take away the coffee." Lorelai pulled Rory's cup towards her threateningly.

"I'll just ask Jess for more."

"I guess I've lost all parental control."

"I'll probably shave my head and then go live in a commune."

"Your hair was already pink, you should put that on your commune application form."

"They have applications?"

"Hey, those hippies can be quite the snobs. Pronounce quinoa wrong and you've got a room full of withering stares. How do you pronounce quinoa, anyway?"

"Keen-wa."

"That's stupid."

"Like culs-de-sac."

"I still say you're lying about that."

"Let's ask the expert," Rory smirked as Jess walked down the stairs, "Jess! We need you to settle an inquiry."

"I can already tell this is a bad idea…" he rolled his eyes, walking behind the counter and pouring himself a cup of coffee and grabbing two doughnuts. He handed one to Lorelai and Rory. "Preventative peacekeeping measures. So what's the question?"

"Culs-de-sac."

"Stupid but true."

"He lies!" Lorelai protested dramatically, "He's only agreeing because he gets to…"

"Give you my doughnuts?" Jess whispered to Rory, who burst out laughing.

"What? What is so funny about the fact that you are clearly manipulating…"

"So Mom, how about those magazines?" Rory quickly stopped her, shooting one last amused look at Jess, "We should really get an idea of what we're looking for before we go."

"I don't know why you think it'll be so hard to find a dress…"

"Mom, I've seen you take three days to decide which flavor of Pop Tarts to buy," Rory rolled her eyes. "But they're all so wonderful!"

Rory sighed and Jess smirked at her.
"Well enjoy your browsing," he replied, "I've got to meet Luke at your house. Apparently he could use help with a number of slave-driving demands you've left for him?"

"Finally, I get why you're useful for us to have around now," Lorelai grinned at Jess, who laughed.

"Just another man-slave. I know my place."

"As you should," Rory added, smiling widely, "I'll see you tonight."

"To serve your other demands," he murmured in her ear before kissing her on the cheek. She turned bright pink and gestured to the door, unable to stop the grin spreading across her lips.
"So you two seemed very Claire-and-Bender-post-closet-scene today," Lorelai observed, glancing at her daughter as they walked down the street towards the first of the wedding shops.

"Really Mom? I can promise Jess has never gotten me high, or worn my earring," Rory rolled her eyes, still unable to stop smiling.

"You know what I mean," her mother pressed, "You two are…awfully couple-y today. Something happen? Or is it hoodlum-daughter stuff?"

Rory looked at Lorelai. "Mom, you're not…"

"No! You're an adult. Your personal life is your business."

"Yes, because that's always been the rule in this household," Rory rolled her eyes, "Seriously. Do you feel like I'm shutting you out or something?"

"Well, now that you mention it," Lorelai sighed, "Look, I am really happy for you, kid. Really, insanely, dancing-Oompa-Loompas happy. Grinch's heart almost exploding at the end of that movie happy. I just…I guess I know it's serious, because other than that awful time when we weren't talking, you used to tell me everything when you were dating someone. And yes I know that it was probably dysfunctional and resulted from my stubborn choice to let you eat ice cream as a baby or something and that Dr. Laura wouldn't approve but I just kind of miss that. Don't get me wrong, I love that you come to me when things are rough, and I know it's not like you don't trust me, but I just miss the being involved. I guess it's just something I have to get used to."

Rory was quiet for a minute. Finally she turned to face her mother.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm doing that thing where when you're absolutely, totally in love with a person you kind of forget about all of your friends and ignore and neglect them, but it's way worse than normal because you are my best friend, and you're also my mom. I don't mean to shut you out, I'm just so wrapped up in it, in being in it, and I think what's different is that when I was with all of the rest of them...I was always thinking."

Lorelai looked at Rory, confused. "You're not…"

"I'm not thinking. That's the craziest thing. I'm happier than I've ever really been and I'm just...going with it. Doing it, living it, whatever happens is happening. And I know I should be worrying and planning and thinking and analyzing and calculating and doing my thing, the Rory thing, that's my thing! But since things have started again with him, my mind's just kind of...shut down. Which is weird, because my writing is better than ever and I'm less stressed and more organized and getting more done when I want to do things and things that would normally totally overwhelm me don't even really worry me for more than a couple of minutes. Do you remember the box of cornstarch?"

"I still have it," Lorelai admitted, the corners of her lips curling into a smile. Rory laughed.

"Of course you do," she rolled her eyes, "And you're right, now I'll probably be happy for the memory. But when I kissed him and I stole that cornstarch, all I could do was think. When was I going to tell you, how was I going to tell you, what would Lane think? What did it mean? Would it happen again? Were we dating? And it just kept going. When we broke up, it wasn't really him and me that upset me so much. It's was this all it was? All this whole dating thing is? Was that what love is and if so, I got cheated and I hate Mom for showing me all those movies that made me think it was
more and I hate all the books I read that made me believe in it and oh my god, I can't hate books, I'm Rory! Who am I if I hate books? When Jess first showed up in town, my brain started to turn off. I stopped thinking. I went to New York, I kissed him while I was with someone else, and a million other things. Back then I wasn't ready for it and he wasn't ready for it either. But now, I'm not thinking again but it's safe to. You know what I mean? Well, mostly safe to. Until I forget that my best friend in the world has feelings that are probably being hurt by the fact that her daughter is quickly morphing into a different person and totally neglecting her in the process."

"Wow," Lorelai exhaled, "I think we need another cup of coffee before we go on to dresses." She pulled Rory into the café next to the wedding dress store and they got in line. After getting their coffees they sat down and Lorelai looked at her daughter carefully.

"It's amazing," she started, "What love can do. It made you calm and me stable and that alone is proof that it's everything that everything has always told us it would be. But there's something that I never thought to teach you about love. I remember when you stole that boat all I kept saying was "This isn't Rory, this isn't her, this isn't you." I think you thought that you'd lost yourself in the process of being with him. And I think you were right, in a lot of ways. But love, real love, the love that you end up with, good love…that changes you too. And it can change you drastically. But it doesn't mean you're losing yourself or that there's something wrong with that. You aren't Rory because you analyze or even because you read. You're Rory because you're Rory. Jess brings out the happiest side of you I've ever seen, and you weren't a sad kid. It makes you even more beautiful than you are just by virtue of being born, and it makes me feel like you're getting everything I really wanted you to have in life. Yes, I wanted you to go to Harvard (well, Yale eventually) when you were a kid, and I wanted you to have a house and I wanted you to have an amazing career. But what I wanted most for you, from the minute I found out you existed, was for you to be sublimely happy. And that's what he makes you. This isn't like the cornstarch, hon. We're not going to sit on your bed and dissect your relationship, because the difference is, this time I'm wrong. It's better the way it is, that you two have your world, and that you let me into it sometimes in some ways but really it's just this place where you two exit where cotton-candy-bunny-rabbits would probably feel right at home. And I think it's wonderful that you have something that you can close the door on now at the end of the day, something of your own. It does have to change us, you and me, that you have him. Just like it changed us that I have Luke. But that's okay, and that's something that I don't think I fully processed until you said that it was safe to stop thinking. Don't start now, hon." Lorelai stood up and kissed Rory on the cheek. "Now, what do you say we go find a dress that doesn't make me look like Morticia Aadam's?"

"Morticia Aadam's in a white dress?" Rory questioned, standing up and smiling widely at her mother, wiping a tear from her cheek, "Where in the…"

"I had a dream."

"Oh god, not this again. Alright, the doctor's in…"
Chapter 102

"It's perfect."

"It's better than the original one."

"Sacrilege!"

"Hey, blush is pretty, but this came first," Lorelai retorted, smoothing the folds of the gown down as she admired herself in the mirror, "So isn't it technically the original?"

"Being vintage doesn't give it originality rights," Rory rolled her eyes, unable to stop grinning at her mother's reflection. For the past ten minutes Lorelai had been smoothing, readjusting, pulling and prodding and hadn't been able to take her eyes off of herself.

"What are you smirking at? That boyfriend of yours finally rubbing off on you?" Rory's smile grew wider remembering her earlier conversation with Jess.

"No, I've just never seen you look so happy about something with zero calories."

"Well, I'll be living on zero calories to fit into it." Rory looked at her mother plaintively. "Alright, that's unrealistic. Maybe I'll just have to cut out the Mallomars."

"And that's realistic?" Rory scoffed, "Plus, you don't have to worry about it with this dress, the way that it falls. But it's still nice and…"

"Cleavage-emphasizing?"

"Don't tell me that's not a very important attribute of your wardrobe."

"Hey, if you've got 'em…"

"Use your v-necks as a publicist so they get their due?"

"I've taught you well."

"You've taught me the secrets of your evil trade."

"Then why do you wear so many crew necks?"

"I haven't completely succumbed to your corruption yet."

"Thank God, otherwise maybe you would have caused more trouble in high school."

"Running to New York to see Jess wasn't enough trouble?"

"You grounded yourself immediately upon return! I didn't even have time to enjoy punishing you. Inflicting that dictatorial form of justice known as parenting."

"Well if you want to you can ground me now."

"Alright. No…um…hold on a minute…"

"You're really good at this."
"Shut up," Lorelai shoved Rory playfully, "Fine. No ditching Friday night dinner next week."

"Why?"

"You need to tell them about you and Jess."

"But…"

"HA! Parentally imposed justice at work."

"You're a cruel, cruel woman."

"One of the many charming descriptions to come in my eulogy."

"Right after 'I want my ashes scattered at Sephora' ."

"This dress."

"It's the dress," Rory smiled softly as she walked up next to her mother, "And it's even white."

"I know. Luke's going to go into cardiac arrest."

"Didn't he want you in white?"

"Exactly. I never do what he wants."

"You're right. I'll tell Jess to have an ambulance on standby."

"Pretty sure the major law enforcement agencies in our town just ignore him by now. They've given up hope of punishment or reform since he stole the caution tape."

"He actually already had that."

"I so don't want to know."

An hour later they were walking into Luke's.

"I still don't understand why you didn't buy it. It's the dress," Rory emphasized, looking at her mother curiously.

"I just… want to be sure this time. Don't want to rush it. Plus, this is Star's Hollow, so putting it on hold means indefinitely."

"You have this town wrapped around your finger."

"I prefer to think of it as being on the ropes and I'm the puppetmaster."

"I can see the nightmares already."

"Speaking of which…"

"No, you did not look like Dolly Parton!"

"But…"

"Cleavage does not make you Dolly. Platinum blonde and super-cleavage make you Dolly."
"Can that be my superpower?"

"Can what be your superpower?" Jess asked, setting a mug in front of each of them and starting to pour coffee. Lorelai smirked.

"I could so make your boyfriend freak out right now," she taunted, and Rory involuntarily grinned again, thinking of this morning.

"Oh my god, Rory, I had no idea that you were internally so cruel."

"It's not…nothing," Rory quickly stopped her, earning a curious look from Jess, "Please don't inflict that kind of pain on him. I'm not sure he'd survive."

"And even if I could I'm pretty damn certain I don't want to know," Jess added, "Hey, would you mind helping me out with something for a second?"

"Oooh, secrets!" Lorelai trilled, and Rory shot her an exasperated look before following Jess upstairs, "God, sometimes I swear I don't know what I'm going to do with her. What's up?"

"Luke wants to know what color her dress is."

"I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because she didn't buy it."

"But I thought you said she found one."

"She did."

"So…"

"She didn't buy it."

"But if she found one…"

"She wants to take her time."

"Paying the clerk?"

"Jess, this is a girl thing. You'll never understand so you may as well stop trying," Rory finished, a smile forming in the corner of her cheeks, "But tell him we haven't decided wedding colors yet so not to worry about his tie or tux until we get there."

"He's wearing the same…"

"He can't wear the same tux."

"Women," Jess sighed defeatedly, starting to go back downstairs. Suddenly he turned to face Rory. "So are you going to grin like the Cheshire Cat every time someone calls me your boyfriend?"

"I was not…"

"Mickey Mouse with a hanger in his mouth?"
"I hate you."

"The entire cast of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory?"

"Mom! Jess really, really wants you to tell him what your superpower would be."
"Finally. Coming to collect?"

"If only," Rory sighed into the phone, "Mom wants me to stay the night planning. And maybe that way we won't have to come back next weekend?"

"Have to?" Jess chuckled in spite of his disappointment, "Are you implying that you're less than thrilled to spend as much time as possible in Stars Hollow? Or with your mother?"

"Of course not," Rory replied, her voice going low, "It's just now I kind of have a better offer."

Jess looked to his right, where Luke was sitting at the dining room table, going through some paperwork. "Well I can guarantee that offer doesn't have an expiration date."

"That's your idea of dirty talk? I'm severely disappointed."

"Guess you'll have to call an operator."

"It may come to that."

"I miss you," Jess said softly, shooting a quick glance at his uncle, "And if I get no sleep tonight, it's your fault."

"You mean when," Rory corrected, a smile flitting across her lips, "And I'll have to find a way to make it up to you. As long as you caffeinate me tomorrow when I'm the zombie from the dead."

"Wow, if that's your idea of…"

"Goodnight, Jess."

"Goodnight, Rory." He hung up the phone, trying to hide his grin. Luke looked at him knowingly.

"Rory?"

"Nope, Angela. She's my regular Saturday night, had to reschedule," Jess answered sarcastically, still grinning in spite of himself, "She was heartbroken."

"You've been spending too much time with the Gilmores," Luke shook his head, "So thanks for your help at the diner today."

"It's nothing," Jess shrugged, sitting down at the table, "I don't mind hanging around. And it's good that Rory's getting to see Lorelai so much."

"This coming from you?"

"You should have me committed."

"Don't think I haven't tried."

"Now look who's becoming a Gilmore."

"Hey, I'm marrying into it. You have no excuse."

Jess ducked his head and shoved another bite of pie in his mouth, avoiding Luke's gaze.
"I'm gonna head to bed early. I'll open tomorrow if you want."

"Jess…"

"Luke, Kirk spent an hour today asking me about the difference between our Western Omelette and our Fiesta Omelette. I'm tired."

"We don't sell a Fiesta Omelette."

"The precise reason for the exhaustion."

"Alright, fine," Luke said, "But I'll open tomorrow. You need to get some sleep."

"I'm not going to anyway," he mumbled to himself before rolling onto his side. Luke smiled in spite of himself. Jess in a tux, now that would be the day.

Rory walked back into the living room after hanging up the phone.

"Good conversation with Holden?"

"Yes, he said it's no problem if I'm late tomorrow as long as I look swell."

"How marvelous of him."

"Isn't he always?"

"So really, what are they up to tonight? Strip club? Vegas?"

"I have no idea. Plausible deniability."

"I taught you well."

"So which movies are we starting with?"

"Well The Wedding Planner was downright shameful, so that's a must. My Big Fat Greek Wedding is just cringe-inducing enough, and oh! Coolhand Luke."

"You're not serious."

"Fools Rush In?"

"Why?"

"There's a diner?"

"Mom."

"Alright, fine. You pick the third movie."

"Father of the Bride."

"Seriously?"

"How can you possibly not like Steve Martin?"

"It's not that, it's just that we've seen it a hundred times."
"Well, there's one more option."

"Being?"

"It's bad."

"Then it's probably perfect."

"Really bad. Worse than the Fat Ladies."

"Well now you have to tell me, or I'll think you were lying. It's really hard to be worse than the Fat Ladies."

"We could watch…bridal shows."

"Oh my god, seriously?"

"Think about it. Bridezillas? Say Yes to the Dress?"

"Rory, we promised we'd never be those kinds of women!"

"But that is like the pinnacle of trash television. And they also provide a useful cautionary tale for your own adventures in wedding planning."

"Adventures in Babysitting!"

"That has nothing to do with weddings."

"So?"

"The whole point of a theme movie night was to have a theme."

"Alright, fine," Lorelai sighed, "But in that case just the bridal shows. We aren't tainting the movies with them."

"The movies you called shameful and cringe-worthy?"

"It's a league of its own."
"That was…"

"Amazing."

"We should both be sterilized."

"After we meet David Tutera."

"And the people at that shop."

"The one from Say Yes?"

"Obviously. All the dresses were perfect."

"You hated 80 percent of them."

"Well maybe they were just so bad that I blocked them out."

"Some of them really were that bad."

"But Bridezillas…"

"Completely took the cake. Won by a landslide."

"The girl who thought she was a princess or something?"

"With the really creepy fiancé who she just verbally assaulted the entire time?"

"And then at the end with the bus stop?"

"That was crazy!"

"Not crazier than the Latina girl."

"The one with the lips or…"

"The nose."

"Oh my god, the girl with the nose. How much plastic do you think was in her body?"

"Probably enough to fill up a ball pit with as many rubber balls as it takes to fill up a ball pit."

"That was a weird analogy."

"My brain's in a weird place. What time is it?"

"I don't know," Lorelai shrugged, "The TV clock went out last week. I need to make Luke fix it."

"I'll check my phone."

"No! No phones on movie night, that's the rule. Check the kitchen."

"Alright, fine. But the information age is moving on without us."
"I prefer vintage."

"You're insane."

"Delightfully unexpected."

"Oh my god!"

"What?"

Rory rushed back into the living room. "It's 6."

"6 at…"

"6 AM."

"Oh my god!" Lorelai exclaimed, standing up and rubbing her eyes, "How is that possible? That would mean we've been watching these shows for…"

"Ten hours."

"It's official. We should be guillotined."

"Guillotined?"

"The beheading-thing from the French Revolution."

"Oh. That's a bad way to go."

"You know, actually it was fairly painless. Considered very humane overall."

"Okay, this conversation is way too creepy for six in the morning. God, what was the last time we were up at six in the morning?"

"I don't remember," Rory shrugged, "When I made you go to kindergarden?"

"You know, that was the first time I ever wanted to sell you to the wolves."

"What a sense of nostalgia you have."

"Wait, that wasn't it. Dance marathon."

"Oh, you're right! That was the first time I wished you had sold me to the wolves."

"Man, we're really not good at getting up early."

"But apparently very good at staying up late."

"Is it late?"

"Early?"

"I don't know."

"Are you tired?"

"We've been drinking coffee and soda and eating for ten hours straight. So no, but I am a little
shakey."
"Me too."

"So what do we do?"

"Um…exacerbate the problem?"

"Only logical solution. Two lefts make a right kind of thing."

"I'm pretty sure that's not the phrase."

"Well maybe I'll figure it out once I've had some coffee."

"Or maybe you just want to see your boyfriend."

"Or maybe you just want to see your fiancé."

"Please, I see him all the time," Lorelai waved off the accusation, "You're my only daughter."

"And how many fiancées do you have?"

"Twelve at last count, but I think I lost one of them in the park the other day."

"You should really get leashes."

"Or shock collars."

"Are they really that unruly?"

"Only when they see one another."

"And on that note, I really need coffee."

"Right behind you."
"What in the hell…"
"Coffee."
"Is everything al…"
"Coffee."

"Okay, okay." Jess went over to the counter and grabbed the pot, then headed back towards the two girls, who were now lying their heads down on top of their table, "Jesus, what happened to you two?"

"We forgot to sleep."

"And since we weren't tired, we came here to get coffee."

"But then on the walk over here…"

"We realized we were tired."

"Not just tired."

"Exhausted."

"So you two didn't sleep at all?" Jess asked, disbelievingly.

"Why, did you?" Rory looked at Jess accusatorily. He raised his eyebrows in amusement.

"What?"

"Did you sleep? Were you lying to me? You said you wouldn't get any sleep."

"Alright, you need to take your meds."

"I'm not on any meds."

"Explains so much."

"Hey, when you two are finished with your verbal foreplay, I need more coffee!" Lorelai called, her face still buried into the table but her arm holding up her coffee cup expectantly. Jess smirked.

"Here," Jess filled her cup up again, "Luke'll be out in a second, he's back in the kitchen. Rory, do you want to borrow a book or something? Take a nap upstairs?"

"Well…" she looked at her mother hesitantly.

"Oh for god's sakes, at least come up with a decent excuse. Hey Mom, I'm going to go join a cult that's meeting upstairs. Hey Mom, I'm going to go steal all of Luke's baseball cards and hide them in Taylor's soda shoppe. But reading? Really? I'm ashamed of your lack of creativity."

"And on that note, I'm ignoring my mother and coming upstairs."

"To read?"
"Anaïs Nin."

"You are a devil-woman," Jess said softly, smirking as he gestured up the stairs.

"So…"

"So."

"Are you tired?"

"Unfortunately," Rory answered, looking at Jess apologetically. He smiled.

"It's okay, I am too," he admitted, "God, aren't we supposed to be married like twelve years before we're too tired to…"

"Read Anaïs Nin?"

"That is not going to become a thing."

"But…"

"No."

"Doing laundry?"

"No."

"Playing monopoly?"

"No."

"Come here," Rory murmured, pulling the comforter on the spare bed around her. Jess walked over and gently kissed her on the cheek before lying down beside her, "Mmm…perfect."

"Can't disagree with you there," he whispered, wrapping his arms around her waist, "God, maybe now I'll get some sleep."

"You didn't sleep?"

"Maybe two full hours."

"This is a sickness."

"Please. It doesn't even compare to the level of sickness of your book or junk-food consumption."

"Hey, you share at least one of those with me."

"I didn't say we're not equally afflicted."

"I missed you."

"I missed you too. Now go to sleep or I'll pull out A Farewell to Arms."

"I don't appreciate blackmail."

"Bribery?"
"Listening."

"Pie when we wake up?"

"And?"

"Anaïs Nin."

"Knew you'd come around," she grinned lazily before pulling Jess' arms closer around her to drift off to sleep.

"Lorelai?"

"Hm?"

"What are you doing?"

"Passing out."

"I can see that. Why are you passing out on my table?"

"Because it's under my head."

"Oh, that makes more sense."

"You're marrying me. You should know by now that I make no sense."

"Where'd you get the…"

"Jess. Heathen when he's not saving the world with his coffee-bringing."

"And he is…"

"Upstairs with Rory."

"Upstairs with Rory?"

"Reading."

"Reading?"

"I'd let them be."

"And you don't care?"

"Well, she's not sixteen. And it's six in the morning. Knowing Rory she's actually going to sleep."

"Why are you here at six in the morning?"

"We didn't sleep."

"You couldn't sleep?"

"No, we didn't sleep."

"At all? Lorelai, go home and get some sleep."
"No, no sleep, coffee."

"You're deranged."

"And enchantingly beautiful. More coffee?"

"Alright, fine. What do you want to eat?"

"Cake."

"Cake?"

"Blame the girl who thinks she's a princess."

"You're making no sense."

"One of my innumerable charms."

"How could I have forgotten?"

An hour later Jess heard a gentle knock on the door to the diner's upstairs apartment. Regretfully he untangled himself from Rory, stood up, and went over to open the door.


"Yeah, I know. I was just about to take Lorelai home. Do you mind taking over downstairs? Cesar should be here in half an hour and then he can take over for you again."

"Sure, no problem," Jess said, walking out of the apartment and closing the door carefully behind him, "And sorry for just taking off like that, I just kind of dozed off."

"It's okay," Luke answered, "The box is still up here, so I had a solution if I thought things were really dire."

"The box?"

"Nevermind. I'll see you tonight, okay?"

"Dinner?"

"And a movie. Lorelai's idea."

"She must have gained some consciousness since I last saw her if she can form ideas."

"Coffee is like shock therapy for her brain."

"Must be genetic."
"Got everything?"

"Yes Mom, for the millionth time, we have everything."

"But… you just got here! You can't leave yet."

"The lack of sleep is making you crazy. I'll be back the weekend after next and you'll see me on Friday."

"Friday?" Jess looked at Rory inquisitively. She sighed.

"Mom conned me into Friday night dinner. And by me I mean us."

"Oh? How did she do that?"

"I played the Mom card."

"You what?"

"Yes, Luke, I played the Mom card. You've skipped out on the last few and if I have to go to another one alone I'm going to crack!"

"You're already cracked," Luke grumbled, putting the last of Rory and Jess' things in the trunk.

"I still don't see how I got roped into this. The Mom card doesn't apply to me."

"First of all, yes it does. And second, Rory needs to tell the grandparents about you. It's been too long."

"How do you figure? And are you really sure you want me there when she does? Your dad is fine, but I'm pretty sure Emily will string me up by my toes from her chandelier."

"Yet another source of the entertainment to keep me from cracking that I had previously alluded to needing."

"That sentence barely made sense."

"I didn't sleep!"

"Neither did I, but I can still articulate."

"There's no use talking to either of them for another twelve hours or so."

"Or twelve cups of coffee."

"Common conversion. Speaking of which…” Luke stepped behind the counter and picked up a bag and two cups, which he handed to Jess, "Donuts, bacon and a couple burgers. And coffee. I figured they might help in getting you two home without you voluntarily running into a tree."

"As long as there's not an animal in the road…” Lorelai mumbled before Rory shot her a dirty glare.

"You really think I'm going to come to dinner now?" Jess cocked his eyebrow at her.
"What? I'm not judging! Rory hit a deer!"

"I was hit by a deer! There's a difference!"

"Are you sure we should let them own cars? Or drive, period?"

"Oh, relax. As long as there's no boats involved…"

"Hey! You're mean without sleep!"

"Says the girl who decided to keep watching Bridezillas."

"Bridezillas?" Jess immediately started cracking up. Rory turned to glare at him. "Ooh…apparently you learned something from it too."

"I'll help Grandma with the toes," Rory shot her mother a look before grabbing her cup of coffee from Jess' hand.

"So I wasn't really clear on this, is it actual brides? Or are they paid to act that crazy? Do their fiancées actually stay with them? Do they all have hair that big or is it just the ones with extra daddy issues that dress like Texas beauty pageant contestants?"

"I will push you out of the car."

"Unlikely, with your athletic abilities."

"Hey, she hit the deer."

"The deer hit me!"

"And next week on Abbott and Costello, wildlife edition" Luke rolled his eyes, waving goodbye as the couple finally got into the car, "Have a safe drive."

"Don't push him out until you're at a full stop!" Lorelai called, grinning.

"No promises," Rory said darkly as they pulled out, Jess' laugh still echoing through the air.
Five nights later, Rory and Jess stood in front of the imposing front door to her grandparent's house.

"We have to go in eventually," Jess pointed out, turning to look at Rory. She sighed.

"Not really. We could just never tell them."

"Won't they find out?"

"How?"

"Rory, our lives are pretty damn intertwined. We live together. It seems realistic to expect our futures to continue to be really involved. There's no way you could hide that from them."

"You're right. Why don't we get a kid and make it tell them?"

"Oh my god, there is so much wrong with that statement," Jess said, his jaw dropping in horror, "First, 'get' a kid? Did you pay any attention in health class? Second, making our hypothetical child tell them is cruel and unusual and that kind of goes against my hypothetical child-rearing philosophy. And third, don't you kind of hate kids?"

"Two out of three valid points. Alright, fine. What about a dog?" Rory looked at him innocently.

"We're going inside now, if only to replace your crazy with the other two generations of it," Jess rolled his eyes, ringing the doorbell. Immediately it opened to Emily Gilmore.

"Grandma!" Rory jumped, "Since when do you open your own door?"

"Since the maid decided to be completely incompetent at her job. I've already fired her. Well don't just stand there, come in. And I'll have the cook come in to take your coats."

"Seriously?" Jess muttered to Rory once Emily had turned around and begun walking towards the living room.

"You were the one who wanted to come in," Rory shrugged, smiling gently as she handed her coat to the nervous-looking woman who had just appeared.

"Probably not one of my better ideas."

"Probably not."

"Rory?" they heard a voice call from the living room.

"Mom!" Rory smiled, quickly walking in and going over to hug her mother, Jess following a few steps behind.

"You're late!" Lorelai accused, looking at both of them suspiciously, "Were you…"

"Busy with Truncheon? Yes," Jess cut her off, "And Rory had an important phone call."

"Wait, you two drove here together?" Emily asked, looking at Rory curiously, "That doesn't make any sense. From what I remember, Jess was based in Philadelphia."
"He is," Rory answered quietly, her eyes on the floor.

"So why would you two come here together? Did you have an assignment in Philadelphia? Your mother said you were doing less traveling. And I can't really imagine what they would have you doing in Philadelphia, of all places," Emily rolled her eyes.

"Mom…"

"Hello, everyone! Sorry I'm late, I was on an important call with Brussels."

"Ah, yes, how are the Sprouts?"

"Really, Lorelai," Richard shook his head, "Emily! Rory and Jess don't have cocktails! Rory, Jess, would you like anything?"

"Red wine, please." "Just a soda would be great, thanks."

"You didn't answer my question," Emily said pointedly, forcing Rory to meet her gaze, "Why did you two arrive together? Did Jess have an appointment in New York?"

"No, Grandma," Rory sighed, "We came from Philadelpiha."

"And what were you doing there?"

"It's where I live."

Suddenly Emily stood up, outrage spreading across her face. "What do you mean, it's 'where you live'? You were relocated and you didn't tell us?"

"Well, actually…I wasn't relocated, per se," Rory continued, looking hesitantly at Jess. He nodded at her slowly, reassuring her to go on. "I don't work for that paper anymore."

"You have a new job and you didn't tell us?" Emily demanded, her cheeks reddening with anger, "How could you…and what type of job could possibly locate you in Philadelphia? That city is for starving painters and waitresses, not for the brightest minds of our nation."

"The DAR would probably disagree," Lorelai mumbled to herself, quickly picking up her martini and gulping down the rest of it before handing it to her father, "More please."

"Actually I…I'm looking for a new job."

"You were fired?"

"I quit."

"You quit?"

"I quit."

"What on earth were you thinking? And that still doesn't explain…" Suddenly Emily's eyes widened and her lips pursed.

"Mom…"

"You're together."
"What?"

"You and this awful young man...you're involved. And you're in Philadelphia, shacking up with him, wasting your life away. And I thought you knew better..."

"Mom!"

"After all, you weren't willing to relocate for a man before, even one who was actually deserving of your affection, who could have provided you with a good life, who was going to marry you! Is Jess going to marry you? He can't provide for you! From what I understand to be the case, he can barely provide for himself. Living above a shop, that's what brothel-owners do..."

"Did you just compare Jess to a pimp?" Lorelai asked unbelievingly, drinking her next martini, "Or a madam?" She handed Rory and Jess their glasses and looked cautiously at their faces. Rory's was perfectly still, and Jess' looked blank as well. Only they could have seen the rage that was boiling beneath each other's expressions.

"Lorelai, for once in your life, be quiet, and do your job! Parent! It is abundantly clear that your daughter, your only child, is throwing her life away for a man, a man that isn't even worthy of her affections, something you told me yourself!"

"Mom!"

"You called him a weasel! You were going to forbid her to see him!"

"Mom!"

"Do you want her to end up like you?"

"Enough!" Richard boomed, right as Rory stood up and opened her mouth to interject, "Rory, Emily, sit down. We are going to talk about this calmly and rationally."

"Calmly and rationally?" Emily asked, disbelieving, "Are you being serious, Richard? This girl is throwing her life away!"

"I highly doubt that, Emily, and even if that were the case, your histrionics aren't helping. You haven't even let the poor girl explain. Or given Jess a chance to speak, as you so enthusiastically degrade him, in spite of the fact that I have told you multiple times of my own personal approval of the boy."

"You cannot approve of someone who would corrupt your granddaughter, take her away from her dreams, her life!"

"I guarantee you, Emily, no man is capable of that. We've seen proof."

"I can't talk about this anymore, I'm going to lie down," Emily snapped, "Call me when at least one of you gets some sense into your head. And Rory, if you're going to make your mother's mistakes, I hope you realize that in doing so, you put all of the support we've given you over the years to waste. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"No, she shouldn't," Jess said, his voice low.

"What was that?" Emily snapped, turning around.

"She shouldn't be ashamed," Jess replied, more loudly this time. He looked cautiously at Richard.
"Mr. Gilmore, sir, I'm sorry, but I have to say something here." He stood up and walked directly toward Emily, looking her straight in the eye. "You can think whatever you want about me, and even say whatever you want about me, and I will sit quietly here and just take it, because there's some grain of truth in every criticism you make. Hell, some of the things I agree with. And even the unfair ones really don't matter to me, because what matters is that Rory knows who I am and that those things aren't true. But the second you start in on her, we have a problem."

"Young man…"

"I wasn't finished. Maybe it was wrong of Rory not to tell you she moved or about her job, and you have every right to disapprove of her decisions, but you will not make her feel like a lesser person for making her own choices instead of the ones you want her to make. And you will not make her out to be some victim, some guy-obsessed bimbo that throws everything away for the first guy she meets. That's not Rory, and you know it, and I won't let you demean her that way."

"This is my house, and I can say what I want inside of it, and I certainly don't…"

"You're right that it's your house, but Rory and I don't have to be in it. You guys don't have a deal, and I'm fairly certain that she comes here because she loves you and wants to spend time with you. And her grandfather. But if you love her, which I would think you do, considering how fiercely protective you get of her, you should realize that saying things like that to her is only going to do more harm than good."

"Young man…"

"Emily," Richard said, his voice low, "Go upstairs. We can talk about this later, and I'll call you when they've left and we'll have dinner, alright?"

"Richard, he can't…"

"I will take care of it."

With one last disgusted look at Jess, and one last glare from Rory, Emily stomped up the stairs. When she was finally gone, Richard turned.

"Jess, although I appreciate the merits of many of the points you made and happen to agree with a fair lot of them, I think it might be for the best if we all got together another time. Perhaps we could stay another ten minutes, finish our drinks, discuss the basics, so that we're up to speed, and then arrange for another night? I think that might be for the best."

"Absolutely. Mr. Gilmore…"

"Richard."

"Richard. I apologize, I know I upset your wife…"

"She'll calm down. In truth, it will probably do her some good."

"Grandpa…"

"Yes, Rory?"

"I'm sorry for not telling you."

"Your grandmother's just upset…"
"No, that's not what I mean," Rory corrected, her eyes still alight with anger but meeting her grandfather's directly, "I'm sorry for not telling you. I should have told you. I just didn't know how."

"Well, why don't we start with when and go from there." They all sat down and Rory sighed, beginning slowly.

"A few months ago, I started visiting Jess in Philadelphia on some weekends. I'd been having a rough time at work for a while. Not performance-wise. Performance-wise, everything was great. I just wasn't happy. And I started visiting Jess, but only as friends. Once he realized something was wrong, he helped me. He let me stay with him while I cut my workload, first down to only assignments I could file remotely and finally, once I quit. Yes, I'm living with him, but I was staying with him before we were involved. We only began dating...again, I guess, really, a month or so ago. It had nothing to do with the career things."

"I believe you," Richard nodded, "Now, matters of practicality. Are you paying any rent?"

"I won't let her pay me money," Jess replied, "But she does work in our offices, on a temporary basis."

"How long..."

"Since the remote-reporting phase. Until now," she answered, "Recently, I realized that what I wanted to do wasn't reporting. It was being an editor. And subsequently, I began a job search which is just now starting to bear fruit."

"And you plan to live..."

"In Philadelphia."

"You realize you're limiting yourself..."

"Yes, and Jess wasn't pleased about that at first either. But I want to be with him, and this isn't a casual, temporary situation."

"Alright," Richard sighed, looking at Jess, "Now you, young man. I don't agree with most of the things that Emily said, but if you are at least partially providing for my granddaughter, there are questions I need answered."

"Anything."

"You make enough money to support yourself?"

"Comfortably."

"And Rory, if the need occurred?"

"Yes, though less comfortably. I'm not wealthy, by any means. Independent presses don't lend themselves to that. But I'm self-sufficient and I can support her as long as she needs me to."

"Are you financially supporting her now?"

"Not really," Rory answered for Jess, "In terms of free rent, yes, and some food, but I have more than adequate savings to live off of."

"And your job search is promising?"
"Yes. I have an interview next Thursday with a paper for a Features Editor position."

"And the most important thing," Richard leaned forward, "Are you happy?"

Jess and Rory looked at each other and grinned. Lorelai feigned a gag, and Richard looked at her disapprovingly.

"Yes, we're happy," Rory smiled, shooting her mother a smirk.

"So happy it makes me sick, actually," Lorelai added.

"Actually, Lorelai, I have a few questions for you as well," Richard turned to her and she sighed.

"And this is where it'll get ugly…"

"Get?" Jess asked, smirking.

"How long have you known about this?"

"Longer than you, but not exactly as it was happening. I've been kept up to date as Rory's felt comfortable keeping me up to date."

"And did you have any intention…"

"No, I wasn't going to tell you. But I have been trying to get Rory to do it for a while now. She was just afraid of how you guys would react."

"More how Grandma would react."

"How crazy of you," Jess rolled his eyes. Rory grinned.

"That might be the only time you've called me crazy that you've meant it sarcastically."

"Savor the moment."

"I can understand that," Richard nodded at Lorelai, "You were respecting her wishes. She's an adult. Now, what do you think of Jess? Is it true, what Emily said about you disapproving of him?"

"Yes, no, well…" Lorelai started, earning glares from both Rory and Jess, "I mean no! I don't disapprove of him! Meaning yes, I approve of him! The things Mom said were from a long time ago."

"And a long time ago…"

"I didn't approve of him."

"Because?"

"Because he was an angry kid and I thought he'd hurt Rory and do her more harm than good."

"What changed?"

"He did. They both did, actually," she corrected, smiling at Rory.

"And now? You trust him with your only child?"

"I do," she nodded, "She's never been happier."
"I can see that in her."

"So…"

"So, Rory," Richard stood up, and the others followed suit, "I cannot speak for your grandmother, but I, personally, am happy for you. And I will support you in both of these endeavors, professional and personal, in any way I can. If you need anything, I am here."

"So you don't…"

"Think you threw your life away for a man? Not the Rory Gilmore I know," Richard answered, grinning at her, "You'd never. And you don't have to work at the New York Times to make us proud."

"Wall Street Journal?"

"Lorelai."

"Washington Post?"

"Lorelai!"

"Oh, that one was louder," Lorelai smirked, "Probably because of all the left-wing…"

"Goodnight, all of you. And Rory, give it a few days. She'll calm down. She just wants the best for you."

"I know," Rory smiled slightly, "Thanks, Grandpa."

"And Jess?" Jess turned to face Richard. "I have a very upset wife upstairs, and you're majorly responsible for that."

"Yes…"

"But I also have a granddaughter that I'm very proud of here, and I'm happy to see that someone feels as protective of her as I am. Take good care of her."

"I will."
A few minutes later, outside, Lorelai turned to Jess.

"I can't believe you angered the beast."

"Mom…"

"No, don't get me wrong, I'm not annoyed, I'm impressed!" she grinned, "That took serious cojones."

"Cojones?"

"Let's not go there," Rory rolled her eyes, "I'm just happy that Grandpa took it well."

"And I'm impressed that you kept your cool. I was expecting a Shakespearean-exam level tantrum."

"Shakespearean-exam level…?"

"Rory pulled a Katherine."

"The Great?"

"Taming of the Shrew."

"I can't see it."

"Neither did I. Which I'm unbelievably sad about. God, if only we had video phones back then…"

"Then I could've seen you call my principle Il Duce."

"You what?" Jess turned to Lorelai disbelievingly.

"There was a stunning resemblance."

"I'm sure there was. Anyway, we've gotta get home," Rory said, gesturing to Jess, who nodded.

"Wait! Why don't you just stay the night in Star's Hollow? It's only an extra hour of driving and then you get to do it in the morning."

"Actually, that probably makes more sense," Jess answered slowly.

"But Jess…books!" Rory pouted.

"…weekly. Starting Sunday."

"Deal!"

"So…you're staying?"

"Yeah. Luke's?"

"Yeah, I'll call him on my way home and tell him to leave the key for you guys."

"No need."
"I don't want to know," Lorelai shook her head and smiled, before walking over to Rory. "Hon, are you…"

"I'm fine," she nodded, not meeting her mother's gaze. Lorelai sighed.

"Jess, do you…"

"All yours. You might be better with this one, plus I'm still in a bit of a Shakespearean-exam mood myself," Jess answered. He smiled at Rory. "Look, go with your Mom and have her drop you at the diner. I promise I'll wait up and leave a cup of coffee."

"Really, I'm…"

"Rory."

"Fine," she sighed. She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Defending my honor."

"I thought I destroyed it by dating you in the first place."

"Rebuilding it?"

"Impossible after you stole that boat."

"Well then, thanks for making a senior citizen scream with rage."

"For you? Any time," he smiled, giving her a quick kiss on the lips before nodding to Lorelai and getting into his car.

"Hon…"

"I'm fine."

"Your face says otherwise."

"Well, thanks."

"Rory…"

"Look, I know it's not true. That's not why it bugs me."

"Then…"

"It's that she could think that poorly of me. Exactly like Jess said. It's demeaning. I mean, I get where she gets all that, but still, to think that I'd just give it up like that."

"Uh huh."

"And that Jess is just some deadbeat that's hell bent on ruining my life, some stupid guy not worth anything…agh!" she groaned, shaking her head, "You know, I take it back. That's the worst."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It's not just that she doesn't trust my taste, but she can't see how amazing he is, how right he
is for me, what an amazing guy he is and how lucky I am to have him. Wait! That's not the worst!"

"It's not?"

"Saying that I'm doing 'what you did' and that he shouldn't want me to 'end up like you'? If I've ended up half as incredible as you I've basically achieved my life mission. I can be done now."

"Now honey, you haven't achieved your life mission until you can eat 10 tacos in one sitting, and you're still at a firm seven."

"Honestly, though, Mom. I can't believe you didn't say anything! And I was going to defend you but then Grandpa…"

"Fixed everything. Rory, listen to me. Mom and I are better than we were at some points, yes, but we're never going to be…great. That's just a fact. And she's always going to think of me that way, and see me as a girl who was stupid enough to get knocked up at sixteen and who threw a lifetime of contentment and leisure and prestige away for things like monkey lamps and a diner owner. That's her take. It's sick, but it's her take. And she's grown into seeing the value in some of it, but sometimes…she just reverts. But it doesn't hurt me like it used to."

"You can't honestly tell me it doesn't hurt."

"No, I can't. It does hurt. But not like it used to," she said, "Because now, when it's over, I get to drive home with you and go see my incredible fiancée, who is the best man I could've ever hoped to meet, and I see you as happy as you are, and I know that what I did was right, no matter what her opinions are. And that I wouldn't have had any of that had I stuck to her plans. Rory, you can't let her get to you. She's wrong, just like Jess was wrong when you guys argued before. It is your life and whatever makes you happy and is best for you in your eyes is the right choice. Period. You don't have to answer to anyone but yourself. And like it was with Grandpa, the people who love you will come around to it, because they want you to be happy. She will too, eventually."

"I'm so mad at her," Rory said, in a low voice, "I know how immature it is but I'm really mad at her, especially about the things she said about Jess, and I don't want to talk to her or see her."

"You don't have to."

"But ignoring her is really…"

"It's a lot more mature than going there and stomping around and her huffing and you two hating each other. Plus, it's not immature to stand your ground. Jess is your ground. Your man is your ground."

"Jess is my man?" Rory couldn't help but giggle at that, "Really, mom?"

"Oh my man, I love him so…he'll…never know!" Lorelai started singing at the top of her lungs as Rory cackled behind her.
"Jess! Where's my black bag?"

"What?"

"Black bag!"

"Downstairs in the office," he shouted back up to her from the stairs. He heard her groan. "Hold on, I'll bring it up."

"Hurry! I'm already running late!"

"You are not running late, he said, rolling his eyes as he returned with her briefcase, "You're only running late from your completely anal-retentive, OCD daily schedule, which conveniently includes a ton of cushion to prevent you from ever being actually late."

"Usually I could combat the mocking, but right now you're just being unhelpful," Rory huffed, "Except for the bag. That I needed."

"Was that 'thank you' in crazy?"

"It was 'don't push it' in panicked."

"You need to calm down," he said, walking over to her with a mug of coffee, "Sit. Drink."

"But I don't have…"

"Your interview doesn't start for another two hours, Rory, and the place is twenty minutes away, thirty max. Sit."

She sighed deeply and sunk into the chair, taking the mug and gulping from it greedily. "Ugh, this is awful."

"Decaf."

"Jess!"

"I have to draw a line somewhere, you've had seven this morning."

"I've been up for hours!"

"2 hours to seven cups of coffee still isn't a healthy ratio."

"Jess," she pouted.

"Not the doe eyes," he said sternly, before sighing in exasperation, "Fine, I'll make you another cup. But while I do you will relax, and you're also going to drink some water. Everything will go fine but not if you go into cardiac arrest from overcaffeination beforehand."

"Is that a thing?"

"I don't know. With you, I bet it could be."

"It's just…it's not just a job. It's everything. It's a life."
"Rory, you're beyond overqualified for the position."

"So they probably won't hire me!"

"Is that what I said?"

"It's the truth!"

"The truth is that you're crazy," he corrected, sitting down opposite her. He looked down at the table and grinned. "Nice reading material."

"Shut up."

"Really?"

"It helps me relax."

"It's Hemingway."

"It's simple."

"Hey, he's not simple."

"He's simple and boring and it will lull me into a sleep-like state so I stop panicking."

"You shouldn't be panicking in the first place."

"Have you met me?"

"Yes, but you lose all perspective when you're nervous about something or when something important comes up. Like the fact that you've been preparing nonstop for this ever since you decided it was what you wanted, and the fact that all of your preparation is going to make you the most desired potential employee of the Philadelphia Tribune ever to exist."

"You're biased and sentimental."

"You're anxious and fatalistic."

"Match made in heaven."

"Very Austenian."

"No, we're not."

"You like Austen."

"But we're not Austenian."

"Then what are we?"

"I don't know what you are, but I'm late," Rory stood up, grabbing her bag and a leather portfolio containing her writing samples, as well as an array of samples from her work as editor of the Yale Daily News, "And wrinkled. Fuck. The iron?"

"Left it out just in case."

"I still can't believe you have an iron," she grumbled, unceremoniously kicking off her heels and
pulling off her skirt, leaving only a long-sleeved shirt over black tights as she lifted the garment to iron it.

"I am a functioning adult. Plus, when Truncheon first started I needed to be taken seriously."

"And now?"

"I need an excuse to get you to strip in front of me," he smirked, walking over and grazing her lower back teasingly.

"Jess…"

"Is that my shirt?"

"Are we really going to do this now?"

"That's my shirt!"

"It's good luck."

"Since when?"

"Since today, hopefully."

"I can't believe you're wearing my shirt to your interview."

"You can't even tell! It's tucked into the skirt and then once the blazer's over it you don't even notice and really it fits perfectly, it doesn't look…"

"Rory?"

"What?"

"You can wear my shirt. As long as I can help you out of it later."

"Deal," she grinned at him, "In spite of the cheesy line."

"My brain stopped functioning as soon as your skirt came off. Blame human instinct or testosterone or something."

"Rather than calling you a pig?"

"Hey, you readily agreed…"

"I didn't say I was any better."

"Hey," Jess walked over to Rory, who had just struggled back into her shoes and was rapidly walking towards the door. He handed her a paper cup. "Coffee for the road."

"Thank you."

"You're going to be amazing."

"Jess…"

"No, wait you're not. You're already amazing. You're going to wow them with your already-amazingness."
"And you get paid to write things."

"Not that often anymore."

"I see why."

"It'll be great," he said, "And if it's not? Nothing changes. I'm here. Period."

"Thanks, Jess," Rory replied, a smile gently playing at her lips, "Believe it or not that actually calmed me down."

"For…"

"Three point five seconds."

"New record."

"You're an amazing man."

"I thought I was a god."

"Most of them do."

"So…"

"So…I'm waiting on a call."

"But what do you think?"

"I don't want to jinx it."

"So it went well?"

"Hello, not jinxing it!"

"Sorry, sorry."

"We need to un-jinx it."

"No."

"You don't even know what I'm talking about."

"I don't want to."

"So…"

"I made dinner."

"You…"

Rory walked into the kitchen and stared in shock.

"You made pancakes."

"Yup."
"For dinner."

"Yes."

"And bacon."

"So the pancakes wouldn't be lonely."

"And French Toast."

"So the bacon would have options."

"You made breakfast for dinner."

"I thought you'd like it."

"I do."

"There's coffee."

"Those might be the two best words I've heard all night."

"Well, that would've saved me some cooking time. Here," Jess handed her a mug, "Sit. I'll get you a plate."

"Jess, this is…"

"It's nothing fancy, but…"

"You know I wouldn't like anything fancy."

"No lobster?"

"Nope."

"Oysters Rockefeller?"

"Eugh."

"Bow ties?"

"Only if you're naked."

"Keeping that in mind," he grinned, "Hey, do you want to change into something more comfortable?"

"After," she grinned, "I'm starving. I didn't even stop for lunch."

"Crazy woman," he shook his head, passing her a plate piled high with bacon, pancakes, French toast and scrambled eggs.

"Jess, really…this is perfect."

"I'm glad you like it."

"So is this what I'll come home to every night if I get the job?"
"This, or pie."

"Did you wash the windows?"

"And vacuumed?"

"Really?"

"No."

"Damn. So close," she grinned, "This is amazing." Rory stuffed more bacon into her mouth.

"I think you've mentioned that."

"I think instead of having anniversaries, we should do this."

"Celebrate your job interview every year?"

"No, you should cook. Or I should cook. We could alternate."

"Meaning every other year we'd get takeout?"

"Basically."

"Sounds good to me. Oh, I actually did have something else," he said, taking their empty plates and putting them by the sink. After that he walked over to the DVD player and held up a case.

"Picture Perfect!"

"You should've seen the look the guy at the video store gave me. It was like the look I give Taylor every time he mentions one of his committees."

"That's a withering stare."

"And not in the sexy way."

"Speaking of which...before we start the movie..." Rory stood up, and slowly unzipped her skirt.

"Wha..."

It dropped to the floor. "Hey, I promised."

"And you never break your word."

"Integrity is a skill on my resume."

"Probably not applied to stripping there."

"It's a flexible characteristic to have."

"I wholeheartedly concur."

"So the movie..."

"Is a three day rental."

"Smart man."
"Rory, they'll call."

"No, they won't. I screwed up the interview and they won't call."

"And here comes the crazy. Thirty-six hours, ladies and gentlemen, a new record."

"More like 45, but who's counting?" she grinned, "Alright, sorry. It's just stressing me out."

"I know. Which is why it's so fortunate that today's Sunday."

"But there's stuff to be done around here…"

"Rory, are you seriously trying to get out of going to the bookstore?"

"Maybe."

"What's going on?"

"I just can't stop freaking out. I don't want to taint it."

"Taint it?" Jess asked, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. "Taint what?"

"Taint Book Day."

"Book Day?"

"Bookstore Day?"

"Weekly Reading Day?"

"Then it sounds like a class."

"Or a religious ceremony."

"Neither of which are very suited to your personality."

"Preaching to the choir. So tainting?"

"It would taint the experience."

"Of buying books? Impossible."

"Wait, we're buying? I didn't think we were buying."

"You seriously think we won't buy anything? Rory, it's us."

"But we're broke!"

"True."

"And have no space in the shelves."

"True. I need to talk to Luke about that. Your books are seriously screwing with my apartment's
interior design."

"Sorry to have offended your Queer Eye sensibilities."

"And again, taint?"

"It's our thing!" she burst, quickly gulping more coffee from her mug, "Or at least it looks like it's a thing that could be our thing or could become our thing and it could be or become or whatever our thing for however long this thing goes on so basically forever or I don't know, wow, that sounds weird, but you know what I mean, if this is an indefinite thing or our indefinite thing I don't want to taint the thing with my anxiety!"

Jess looked at her, biting his lip. "What? What is so funny?" He began laughing in spite of his better judgment. "Jess!"

"I'm sorry!" he said, trying to control his laughter, "That just didn't make a lot of sense, even for you."

"Mean!"

"Alright, alright," he said, walking over and putting his arm around her waist, "I get your point. But assuming the possible scenario in which these book buying adventures continue indefinitely and become our 'thing', so to speak, do you really think that in the rest of our lives there won't be a single Sunday when you'll be panicking about something? Do you just plan to banish your panicking proclivities to the other six days of the week and have Sunday be a day of rest? Because as great as that sounds, I have to admit it doesn't seem very realistic."

"Fair point," she sighed, "You're right. Maybe it'll help me relax."

"I know it will. And if not, we can always try massage."

"Spa?"

"Better."

"You think you're better than a spa?"

"Spas get shut down if they offer the full experience like I do."

"You're disgusting."

"No, just a mere mortal. And you're wearing my Clash shirt. That combination doesn't bode well for my hormones, even now that I'm past my teenage angst phase."

"Fair point. I should probably take it off before we go."

"Maybe then we won't have to buy the books," Jess grinned. Rory laughed, throwing the shirt at him as she went to get ready.

An hour later, Rory and Jess were huddled in the back corner of a random shop, trying to contain their laughter. They'd managed to get to four stores already, walking out with only a gently-used copy of a book of letters between Kerouac and Ginsberg ("If we do not get this, I swear to you, Austen and her friends will end up in the garbage disposal.") and a copy of Love and Friendship ("Necessary payback for that comment. Plus, she wrote it when she was fourteen. Fourteen, Jess! Do you know what I was doing at fourteen?" "Impersonating Pilgrims and campaigning for
objectivism?" "Not funny."). Overall, it had been a success. But now, they were drawing glances from all the other patrons of the tiny hole-in-the-wall that they had recently walked into.

"Jess, you cannot..."

"I am no bird, and no net ensnares me!" he mocked, holding up the book dramatically and reading in a high-pitched voice, "I am a free human being with an independent will.' What bullshit!"

"Jess!"

"At the end she breaks the fourth wall to tell us that she married him. It was important enough to break the wall! Where's her independent will then?"

"It's a love story."

"It's pathetic."

"You're jaded."

"And cynical."

"That's not something to be proud of."

"I'm flexible on some things, but you won't change my mind on Eyre," he said, setting the book down where he'd found it, "Oh! Hey!"

"What?"

"Arthur Conan Doyle."

"Going through a detective phase?"

"Just noticed they were lacking from your collection."

"You mean our collection."

"Yeah...we'll have to figure that out eventually."

"Merge them. Mom suggested a drinking game."

"Might be the best way to do it."

"Drink every time we argue about something on it?"

"We'd die of alcohol poisoning."

"And join some of the best literary minds in that particular realm of..." Rory's phone began to ring. "Oh my god."

"Breathe."

"Jess..."

"Breathe. Answer the phone."

Inhaling deeply, she answered the call. "Hello, this is Rory Gilmore. Yes...yes...really? Oh my god, that's...that's great news! Thank you so much, Ms. Russell. I really appreciate it...uh huh...no,
Monday's perfect…8:00 sharp…I’ll bring the samples. I look forward to seeing you…Thanks again!"

"So…"

"I got it!"

"Rory, that's…congratulations!" He pulled her tightly to him for a hug, and then looked around.

"There are people…"

"Like I give a shit," he grinned, before pulling her body into his and kissing her deeply, "So you're really, really staying."

"I'm really, really staying."

"This calls for celebration."

"Eyre?"

"I was thinking more on the scale of bacon."

"Sir Francis?"

"Yeah, he's a really celebratory guy," Jess laughed, taking her hand and leading her out to the street.
Chapter 111

"So…"

"I'm alive," Rory said flatly. Jess frowned, holding the phone closer to his ear.

"That doesn't sound promising."

"That I'm not dead?"

"That that's the best thing you have to say."

"No…it's not that. The job's great, really," Rory sighed, her voice tinged with worry, "It's just going to be a bit more difficult to assimilate into the peer culture here than I expected."

"Meaning…"

"Someone was an ass."

"Ah."

"And I'm being my usual, oversensitive, thin-skinned self."

"Is there a right response to that?"

"No."

"Alright…continue."

"Well, it started out fine. Eliza introduced me to all the major section editors, and my features team, which was fine for the most part. Everyone seemed really nice, and the reporters especially were very receptive. Two of them were actually familiar with my work, and one of them was really enthusiastic about the change. But the other one…he was kind of a piece of work."

"He didn't like your style or something?"

"Just the opposite. He actually did a panel with me back when I was at the Yale Daily News, and was applying for jobs around the same time as me, but coming from Stanford and just being a beat reporter, he didn't have much luck right away. I mean, neither did I, but his didn't change. And he decided to make some smartass comment about my choice to come here."

"Which was…"

"It's stupid."

"Rory…"

"He made some nasty comment about how it was obvious why I wasn't working in New York or San Francisco. Because of course, he's familiar with my history and that particular journalistic monopoly. And when one of the other reporters asked me what he meant, I said that I chose to live here in part because your business is based here, which I thought was a much better answer than the one he was suggesting, and to the point is the actual answer, he just got obnoxious."

"Well…I mean, on some level, you can't be…"
"'Yet another woman whose ambition and prodigious talent are plunged into the ground by her hormonally-driven compulsion to copulate'.

"Wow. Is that an exact quote?"

"Maybe. I was pretty mad." Rory bit her lip. Jess held back a smirk.

"You waited until the first opportunity and then wrote it down, didn't you?"

"It was sexist!"

"I'm not disputing that."

"And one of those sick insults that tries to disguise itself as a compliment, so that you feel guilty getting mad about it."

"Again, I don't disagree with you."

"It was horrible."

"It was, and I hate anyone talking about you like that," Jess said, his tone turning more serious, "But look, Rory, you know people like that exist, and sometimes you're going to have to deal with them. He's just one person out of the many. And smart people, the kind of people you choose to spend your time with, will know better than that."

"That's true," she admitted, "You can't like everyone you work with."

"Wisdom of the ages," Jess nodded, "So tell me about the rest of your day."

"Well, I got along really well with Eliza, who as you know is the Editor in Chief. And I actually got along pretty well with the Arts editor, Maria and the Crime section guy, George. I have mainly 4 reporters under my direction, and they're all great, except for obnoxious guy."

"Does he have a name or just a moniker?"

"Alex."

"And the others?"

"Tina, Taylor and Raj. All awesome, really enthusiastic and open to direction. Which is good because I'm changing a lot about the section, right away."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"Maybe not, but I can't stand it the way it is. It's a mess."

"Well if anyone can clean it up, it's you."

"Yes, because I am known for my cleaning abilities."

"It's your domestic charms that drew me to you in the first place."

"Thank god. Otherwise however would I have fulfilled my hormonally-driven compulsion to copulate?"

"Brothel?"
"Most likely."

"So I'll be home in about ten minutes," Rory smiled, "God, that's really nice to hear myself say."

"It's nice to hear on this end as well," Jess admitted, "You working so close has its perks."

"Though now you probably won't have time to hide all the hookers and blow before I get home."

"I'd think you'd be used to all of that from your brothel days."

"Don't be silly, no one likes competition."

"Everyone likes competition, especially you."

"This conversation is getting ridiculous."

"Especially since you're literally on your way home. Explain to me why we're recapping by phone when you no longer have an hour long commute?"

"You couldn't go another hour without hearing my voice?"

"If it's the annoying one in my head reminding me to separate paper clips and learn to use Quickbooks, I'm pretty sure I've heard it nonstop since 2:30."

"Oh. Then I have no idea."

"Well then this is rather inefficient."

"Wait! There was a reason!"

"Which was…"

"Can you put on coffee?"

Jess smirked. "I have no idea how you lived without me."

"Auto-timer."

"So I'm that easily replaced?"

"And don't you forget it."
"So basically Raj managed to get a really scathing quote from the guy with the fish, and Taylor has perfect shots of the compound…I just can't believe we're going to pull it off!" Rory exclaimed, helping Jess shelve the last few books from the box on the ground.

"I still can't believe you're going to do an exposé one week into your new job," Jess smirked, "Careful. They might think you're a conspiracy-catcher. Send you after Bigfoot. Or kill you."

"Bigfoot isn't in Pennsylvania," Rory rolled her eyes, "And come on. It's drugs. And fish! A conspiracy like that deserves publicity."

"You sound like you admire them."

"Fish-smuggling, Jess. Fish-smuggling."

"Technically it's still drug-smuggling, the fish are just the smugglers."

"It's still ingenious."

"Psychotic."

"Often come in the same package."

"Can't argue with you there. Ginsberg certainly wasn't the most sound of mind," Jess replied, looking at the cover of the last book, "He'll never lose his appeal, will he?"

"Not to you and your Beatnik sensibilities," Rory teased, "I'm not surprised you decided to publish the guy."

"It's a great work!" Jess defended, "You read it! It's among the five best analyses of the relationship between his works and his personal life that I've ever read. You know I'm right."

"Didn't say you weren't. I loved it," Rory admitted, a small smile playing at the corner of her lips, "But I have a soft spot for the Beats too."

"My negative influence?

"Almost totally. Before you I kind of agreed with Paris."

"You thought they were self-indulgent?"

"Yeah."

"Well, they are."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean they aren't brilliant."

"Again, not mutually exclusive. So fish-smuggling?"

"Basically the story's going well. Eliza's really happy with it. Even Alex is reluctantly pleased."

"Did he say something?"

"Not to me, to Taylor. I happened to find out about it."
"You have spies already."

"Intelligence is one of the most important and underestimated assets in war. Ask Sun-Tzu."

"Oh god, please don't tell me you're taking management tips from Paris."

"No way. After what happened at the news…"

"I would've paid to see that…"

"Look, she's good at almost everything. Everyone has to have a weakness."

"No, only humans have weaknesses. I maintain that Paris is a robot." Jess grinned, "That's the last of them. I think we're done for the day. Thanks for your help."

"Anytime," Rory laughed, "But where's my tip?"

"Don't offer labor without negotiating compensation first?"

"I'm pretty sure I can get a good deal."

"With those negotiation skills?"

"I'm pretty persuasive."

An hour later they walked downstairs, hiding their grins.

"We really have to stop doing that."

"Why? We aren't married yet."

"Jess!" Rory chided, turning pink, "I meant sneaking off together when the guys are still here, not being together generally."

"So you confirm that if we were married we wouldn't have sex? That might be a deal breaker…"

"Ignoring you now," Rory rolled her eyes, "Matt? Chris? We're heading out for a beer if you want to join us."

"I'm in," Matt called back, "Chris?"

"As long as the lovebirds keep their hands to themselves," he smirked, emerging from the office, "Give me two minutes, I've got to get my shit together."

"That's more likely to take a few years than a few minutes," Matt retorted, walking over. Chris shoved him before returning to the office to grab his things.

"So tell me," Matt grinned, nodding gratefully at the bartender as she handed him a beer, "How's the working life?"

"Not as fun as it was at Truncheon," Rory smirked, taking a sip of her drink, "But for a job job, it's great."

"She loves it," Jess added, "Trust me, when you guys aren't here I can't get her to shut up about it."

"That's not…"
"Three hours yesterday," Jess said flatly, "I mean, I know your rants, but that's a monologue of epic proportions even for you."

“So I guess that means you're whipping them into shape," Chris added.

"They don't need much direction, actually. The people I work with are great," Rory responded, "It's a bit intimidating, since it's a new job and all, but I think it's going well."

"And on that note, enough shop talk," Matt smiled, "I have an announcement."

"That you had to announce?"

"One generally announces announcements."

"Or once just says whatever the fuck they're planning to say."

"Have we lost all appreciation for the art of ceremony?"

"Please, you're talking to Jess. He's always been of the spit it out school of thought."

"And before that gets inappropriate…"

"You were announcing?" Rory cut them off, giggling.

"Yes. Thank you, Rory," Matt faux-bowed, "I have news."

"We figured." "What with the announcing." "Just tell us already, Jesus. This isn't Dancing With the Fucking Stars."

"Touchy, touchy! Alright, fine. I met someone. And she's…amazing."

"So…competent?"

"Has a brain?"

"Not a fascist?"

"All of the above," Matt smirked, "She's a regular human being. Except way hotter."

"Glad to see you haven't gone soft," Jess smirked, "So she's been around how many hours?"

"Whatever 24 x 28 would be. I'm not Stephen Hawking," Matt replied, taking another gulp of beer. They all looked at him in shock.

"Four weeks! How is that…possible?"

"In a row?"

"How haven't you mentioned her?" Rory demanded.

"I didn't want to jinx it," Matt replied, "And yes, in a row. We've been seeing each other a little less than a month."

"That's serious," Chris said, attempting to keep a straight face.

"Hey, be fair," Jess chided, "A month in Matt months is like 8 for the rest of us."
"I feel like I should be offended," Matt shook his head, smiling.

"That's great, Matt!" Rory replied, "So when are you going to introduce her to all of us and inevitably ruin it?"

"I was thinking pizza this weekend. Maybe Chris could bring Hannah, too. That way when these two do their bit to screw it up, you and Hannah can be damage control."

"Smart plan," Jess nodded, "But I'm not sure even Rory and Hannah can mitigate the fascist ex story."

"You wouldn't."

"You made us keep Sanders for eight months," Jess said seriously, "Mussolini's a small price to pay."
"So that was…"

"Surprisingly fun?"

"I was about to say tolerable."

"Jess! She's great!"

"Oh no, I completely agree with you there. But we still had to deal with Matt," Jess smirked, turning on the coffee machine and grabbing two mugs.

"Mean."

"Honest."

"They aren't mutually exclusive."

"Exactly," Jess grinned. Rory rolled her eyes, grabbing one of the mugs and filling it. "So you guys seemed to hit it off."

"Me and Matt? I don't know…he's cute, but not really my type," Rory teased, taking an enormous gulp of coffee. Jess furrowed his eyebrows.

"Funny, very funny. I meant Leah. You and her and Hannah really seemed to have a Ya-Ya Sisterhood thing going."

"Well dating a Truncheon man does create a certain sense of solidarity," Rory smiled, "And if you ever compare me to any part of that horrible book again I'm going to tie you up and read you the entirety of Anna Karenina."

"What makes you think I wouldn't enjoy that?" Jess retorted, making Rory blush, "Alright, fair, I probably wouldn't. But that's a very traumatizing choice of book."

"I love that you find that particular part of the threat to be the traumatic part," Rory grumbled, her cheeks still pink, "Regardless, she's really cool. I hope Matt doesn't manage to screw it up."

"Well, as much as I generally think it's safe to assume Matt will screw things up, he really seems to like her," Jess replied, "The entire time you guys were in the living room he wouldn't stop talking about her. That's not typical of him. Plus, he let her have the last piece of pizza."

"The international symbol of true love."

"Shocking perspective coming from a Gilmore."

"Doesn't change the fact that I'm right."

"Aren't you always?"

"Yes."

"And modest, too."
"Speaking of modest…"

"Uh oh. How do I already not like where this is going?"

"We need to go see Paris?"

"Need to? Are you sure we really need to? Maybe we'd just prefer to? Preferences we can delay indefinitely…"

"She called me yesterday, said it was important, and I needed to see her in person."

"So she didn't say anything about me?"

"Nice try. Actually, she did. She wants you to meet Doyle while we're there."

"And I'm pretty sure I have work that weekend."

"You can't use that excuse when you run the place."

"Of course you can. It's even more important to show your drive and commitment when you're in a position of leadership."

"Wow, the rebel without a cause in you truly is dead, isn't he?"

"No, his excuse would just be that he would rather eat rusty nails."

"But you like Paris."

"Maybe she's grown on me. A little bit," Jess admitted grudgingly, "But Doyle? The guy sounds like a…"

"A what?"

"A putz!"

"A putz?" Rory asked disbelievingly, starting to giggle, "Oh my god, when did I move in with Luke?"

"You know what I mean. It just seemed like the best word to express the…"

"'Putz' seemed like the best word."

"Okay, you can stop mocking me now."

"Only once you say yes. We need to go Friday."

"Why Friday?"

"I get off early on Friday so we could take the train over. Plus my next few weekends are going to be swamped, so I'd rather use one of my days now."

"…alright."

"Yes!"

"But only if we can do the Boston bookstores and come back late Sunday night. There's this one Chris mentioned to me…"
"You had me at bookstores."

"What about lobster rolls? I was about to offer up lobster rolls."

"Maybe you had me twice."

"Today? Not yet. But there's still time..."
"Doughnuts?"
"Check."
"Soda?"
"Check."
"Red Vines?"
"Twizzlers."
"Really?"
"All they had."
"Substandard."
"We'll have to survive somehow."
"Satisficer."
"Perfectionist."
"Just means I'm better at life."
"No, it means you'll always be less satisfied."
"While living a life of much higher quality."
"And never being satisfied with it."
"But it will be better."
"But I'll be happier."

"This is a ridiculous conversation. But I'm sure we're about to be subjected to worse," Rory grinned, as they pulled up at Paris' apartment, "Remember, lobster rolls and bookstores on Sunday, but tonight and tomorrow you have to act like you don't believe she needs to be institutionalized."

"Look, I respect Paris in a crazy genius type way. But I make no such promises for Doyle."
Rory sighed. "Just when I thought you were capable of growth."
"The maturity thing comes and goes."
"We're going in, so try to conjure it again. Grab the stuff?"
"Yes, but only because you have the weight lifting abilities of Spongebob Squarepants."
"I can't even counter that," Rory smiled, walking towards the door and ringing the bell. Immediately it swung open.
"I saw you from the window!" Paris says breathlessly, "Come in already! We have to tell you the thing."

"The thing?"

"The thing!" Doyle added excitedly, appearing behind Paris, "Hello, Rory. It's been too long! But more sentimentality later. First, the thing!"

"Like the Blob?" Jess asked doubtfully as he reached them, carrying the bags, "I'm Jess. You must be Doyle."

"Nice to meet you, buddy!" Doyle grinned, reaching out and shaking Jess' hand enthusiastically. Rory smirked as Jess cringed. "But more of the small talk later! Inside, set your stuff down, and then the thing!"

"Is it the thing or The Thing?" Jess whispered to Rory as they climbed the stairs.

"I don't know, but I'm pretty sure I'm scared of it," she replied as they entered the apartment, "Whoa! This place looks...different."

The apartment was a veritable disaster. Test swatches of colors had been painted on most of the walls and all of the furniture was out of place. There were shopping bags everywhere, mostly from large department stores, and so many boxes from Amazon that one could barely walk without tripping. The usually obsessively-clean surfaces of her tables and shelves were covered with books, binders, and stacks of papers. But before Rory could get closer to inspect, Paris grabbed her arm.

"Not yet. Put your stuff in your room and get your asses out here and then we'll explain."

"Did you go off your meds again?" Rory rolled her eyes, "Because this is all feeling a little bit 'craft corner' to me."

"Just do it!" Paris rolled her eyes, pushing them into the guest room. Jess looked at Rory with wide eyes.

"This is weird, right? Not just Paris weird?"

"No, this is actually weird," Rory confirmed, "But I have to know now. Morbid curiosity."

"So what are we waiting for?" Jess smirked, gallantly gesturing to the doorway. Rory looked at him nervously and they walked back into the living room.

"So..." Rory asked, looking between the two of them curiously, "What is it?" Paris and Doyle looked at each other, grinning widely.

"I'm pregnant!"
"You're…"

"Having a baby!" Doyle exclaimed, smiling widely.

"But…when…how…"

"I'm pretty sure you know the how," Jess muttered. Rory shot him a look.

"Paris, that's…that's amazing! Congratulations!" she replied, hugging her friend tightly. "I didn't realize you guys were trying! This is…great!"

"We didn't want to say anything. You know how I feel about premature excitement," Paris responded. Jess stifled a laugh. "But I've actually been for a few months, and now that we're in the theoretical safe-zone, we're fully committed to this process. It's the perfect time. Work's never been better for either of us and I'd like to do this before I'm, you know, a nonideal candidate. No offense."

"None taken," Rory said quickly. "You know how I feel about kids. But Paris…I guess I just never expected this to be a big thing for you."

"You'd be surprised how much punch that biological clock packs," Paris smiled, "And I figured, why deny the world the possibility of my genetics? It doubles the chance that someone in this godforsaken place can cure cancer or make the DMV efficient."

"Well, in that case…" Jess said, rolling his eyes. Noting Rory's glare, he quickly added, "But honestly guys, congratulations. That's great news. And explains the state of your place."

"We've been planning renovations," Paris explained, gesturing to the paint swatches, "We refuse to conform to the paradigm that says the husband, wife, kid equation necessitates a white picket fence. This location is ideal for our careers and our dedication to them won't change one we have the baby, so we're going to stay right here. But obviously, we have to make some changes."

"I'm expanding the closet in the guest room so it can accommodate a person's actual wardrobe!" Doyle chimed in. Paris frowned.

"Yeah, by the way, if you're going to continue bragging about that, you need to actually do something. It's been weeks."

"Paris, work's been…"

"What are you going to do when the baby comes? Work will always be hard, Doyle. That's why it's called work. You need to adapt!"

"Look, I'm under a lot of stress right now."


"Um…Rory and I were thinking of grabbing lobster rolls for dinner. Do you want to join us or just have us bring you back something?"

"Jess, why don't you and Doyle go bring them back and Rory can help me here? I could use her opinion on some of this stuff," Paris suggested. Jess looked at Rory hopefully.
"No, Paris, that's really not necessary…you know that I'm not any good at that stuff," Rory protested, looking nervously at the chaos around the apartment. Paris put her hands on her hips.

"Rory, just because you're not predisposed towards embracing your maternal side doesn't mean you can't help me with this. The vast majority is organizing, researching product and process efficiency, and just general management and administration. Which are your specialities, in addition to being your occupation."

"My job is editing, Paris."

"Your job is managing journalists and content."

"It's editing."

"Potato, po-tah-to."

Rory sighed. "Fine," she relented, "Jess, can you please bring me back three? This is a high stress situation." Jess nodded.

"You'll pay for this," he whispered to her as he kissed her on the cheek.

"I already am."

"Diaper delivery service?"

"Check. Starting on due date and going through the first three months. We'll reassess then."

"You've gotta love this Amazon baby subscription service deal."

"It's ridiculous how automated this process has become. You'd have to be a crack whore to fail to have your shit together."

"That seems like a bit of an oversimplification…"

"Rory, it does everything for you. Everything. All I have to do is pop the thing out and then it'll take care of the rest."

"For the sake of our collective sanity, I'll refrain from any sort of response to that. Have you thought about a birth plan at all?"

"Of course," Paris said plainly. "Drugs. I haven't been lobotomized recently. And I'm a medical professional, it's not like I'm unfamiliar with the concept of an epidural. Plus any sort of comparative advantages of 'natural birth' would probably be overpowered by the loss of Doyle to either my anger or his own weak stomach."

"Couldn't agree more," Rory nodded, "Just choose your names beforehand. Have you…"

"Not at all. I like Marie, for obvious reasons, but that's as fair as I've got."

"Are you going to find out if it's a boy or a girl?"

"No. Doyle wants to be surprised. I think it's ridiculous but personally I don't really mind a unisex nursery, so if it's that important to him, I'll let him think he won that one."

"Lose the battle, win the war."
"Win every battle but let your enemy delude himself into thinking it's not the case. Good thing you're not a war correspondent. So I should probably slate to start thinking about names in month six."

"How far along are you?"

"Between four and five."

"Exact week?"

"It's written down."

"You don't know?"

"It's not important. I've been on call constantly; work's really been a pain. My outburst earlier might have been part internal frustration."

"Are you going to…"

"Yes."

"But maybe you should think about…"

"No, Rory. I'm going to work up until I have the baby. Literally until I am either told by a doctor that I have to stop or until the thing is shooting out of me."

"You know that's not really how it works, right?"

Paris glared. "And afterward, I'm going back to work as soon as it's logistically possible. Which is another thing I want you to help me map out. And that means weeks, not years, hopefully not even months."

"Don't you think you might be putting a little too much pressure on yourself? You can't really know what to expect from motherhood until it happens."

"Not true. If it were, the manuscript for What To Expect When You're Expecting would be sitting in a rejection pile instead of on the front tables of most Barnes and Noble bookstores."

"Paris…"

"You can control things much better if you plan for them than if you just assume that it's okay to let yourself get carried away in the moment," Paris said shortly, "So I'm planning as much as I can. If I have to adapt, then fine, but at least I have a baseline."

"You are by far the strangest pregnant person I've ever met."

"Pregnancy's just a current physical state, not a personality transplant."

"Wow, I can see that glow already."
"Rory! We're back! Mind helping us bring some of this stuff in from the car?" Jess called out as he walked into the apartment. He gave her a meaningful look.

"Weren't you guys just going to get lobster rolls? It's been hours…"

"Yes, well, Doyle realized that there were baby errands that needed to be done, and he might as well take advantage of the extra manual labor," Jess grumbled, shooting an annoyed look behind him to where Doyle was struggling with a large box, "So we made a few stops. Help? Please?"

"Of course," she smiled apologetically, following him out to the car, "Paris, do not even think about editing the dates on those charts while I'm gone. I don't care how determined you are, you can't go back to work two weeks after giving birth. It's just not going to happen."

"I thought you didn't know anything about babies or pregnancy or birth," Paris retorted, narrowing her eyes.

"Yes, but I know plenty about crazy, which makes me perfectly qualified for this situation," Rory responded without even looking at her, "I'll be back." She followed Jess back outside.

"So how much payback should I expect?"

"Well, you had to deal with Paris. And her unborn spawn. That seems like a pretty even slate, if I'm being honest."

"Yeah, especially since she's absolutely insistent on being just as insane with this process as she is with every other facet of her life. Not only is it totally unrealistic and irrational but it's also just stupid. She's being so nearsighted about it."

"To be fair though, you did say you have absolutely no interest in children."

"Okay, first of all, I didn't say that. They just…freak me out. A little bit. It's totally manageable."

"Uh-huh. Your mom told me about when Sookie went into labor. Sounds well-managed. And your half sister…apparently you decided to play secretary?"

"I was younger then!" Rory replied indignantly, "Anyway, just because I'm not particularly…fond of a subject doesn't mean I'm not knowledgeable about it. I actually know a lot about this whole realm. I'm just not ridiculously interested in pursuing it at the given moment for myself. That doesn't prevent me from being able to see that Paris' brain needs to be reprogrammed."

"Yeah, but I can see that, and I have the parenting knowledge of someone raised by Liz," Jess rolled his eyes, "So she's really that off?"

"Essentially, she's trying to plan every single detail so that having a child will have zero impact on her life."

"That makes no sense."

"That's Paris."

"Well, at least you didn't have to deal with Mr. I'm so excited to be a dad but terrified about being a father! Tell me about your childhood.' all day," Jess sighed heavily as he handed a box to Rory. He
picked one up himself and they headed back inside.

"So what did you…"

"I did the monosyllabic thing. Figured it was better than being a dick."

"And that's what we call personal growth."

"Or survivalism. I know you'd kill me if I couldn't manage to be in the same room as him."

"I wouldn't kill you! I'd just…force you to be unhappy once in a while."

"I thought that this arrangement was a benevolent dictatorship."

"Only when you cooperate fully."

"See, now it's starting to sound like North Korea."

"Only since we involved Paris."

"Fair point."

"Are you two lovebirds almost done?" Paris huffed as Rory and Jess entered the living room, "I need Rory's brain for this scheduling dilemma."

"What now, Paris?" Rory sighed, walking over to the computer and leaning over her friend's shoulder.

"There's a medical conference in New Hampshire that I've been asked to speak at next year, and it's eleven days after my delivery. That shouldn't be a problem, obviously, but what exactly to do with the child at that time…"

"Paris! You can't leave that soon after having a baby! Especially to do stressful work things. Plus, she'll be a total newborn. She should be close to you."

"Is there a reason you've decided on gendering my child?"

"Because calling her it seems wildly impersonal. I'll call her him later."

"Creating gender confusion before it's even born. New level of socialization conditioning…"

"Paris. Even you have to know that's a ridiculously terrible idea. You cannot speak at this thing. It's not even local!"

"New Hampshire's only a few hours away."

"So what, you're going to drive that with the newborn and keep her attached to your breast during the speech?"

"Breastfeeding isn't even on our agenda yet! At #18, we've got six more topics to handle before…"

"Paris. You're being ridiculous. No, you absolutely cannot speak at that conference in New Hampshire."

"But what if…"

"Or attend it. Period." Rory rolled her eyes. "Jess? Please tell me you have lobster rolls?"
"And thank god I got eight."

"You're a saint."

"Just observant."

"I'll take five."

"I figured you for six."

"Starting off slow."
"So that was…"

"Horrible."

"I was going to say trying."

"Awful."

"Challenging."

"Terrible."

"You're a writer. Aren't you supposed to have more eloquent ways of expressing your displeasure?"

"Oh, I do. I'm just avoiding saying life-mutilatingly-brain-addlingly-stomach-rupturingly heinous out of respect for your feelings."

"Oh. Well that's appreciated."

"Only for you."

"Really though, it wasn't that bad."

"Rory, no amount of lobster rolls will ever make up for me having to hear Paris and Doyle argue about the logistical difficulties that nursing bras will cause for their 'special time'."

"We weren't supposed to hear that, you can't blame them."

"They knew we were in the apartment!"

"They thought we were watching a movie."

"How could they have expected us to pay attention to any movie when they were screaming that loud?"

"It was pretty loud."

"Yeah, were they that peaceful back in college?"

"I mean, they were always loud, but usually the other way."

"I did not need to know that," Jess groaned, burying his head in his hands. Rory smirked. "Serves
"you right for complaining."

"I put up with it all weekend. I should get a medal."

"Whining and putting up with it are two very different things."

"But not necessarily incompatible."

"…I'll read the Kerouac letters."

"Not enough."

"What else do you want?"

"Anaïs Nin and no Indian food for a month."

"But Jess! If I have to eat that much Thai food I'm going to end up turning into a giant rice noodle."

"I don't think that's how science works. Or even mythological transfiguration."

"We won't know until we try it."

"Another great reason to cut out the vindaloo for a while."

"You're cruel."

"And intentioned."

"Really?"

"Best I've got, the crazies have me beat. Give me a good night's sleep, some coffee, Anaïs Nin, and non-seafood food and I'll be good to go again."

"You sure you have the energy for Anaïs?"

"I always have the energy for her."

"Good, because she's quite a demanding woman."

"So I've noticed."

Rory grinned as they pulled into the parking space. And immediately furrowed her brow.

"Wha…"

"That's Matt's car. What is he…"

"It's 11:00."

"What could he possibly…"

"Only one way to find out."

"Matt?" Jess called, opening the door cautiously. They heard a gasp and feet quickly moving.

"Um, yeah, one sec," Matt called, "Don't come in."
"Matt, what the hell are you doing?" Jess growled, giving Rory a warning look.

"We were just…borrowing something."

"From Truncheon? This late? Wait, we? MATT!"

Jess stormed in, Rory tumbling in behind him. Immediately Rory smirked.

"Been keeping the place warm for us?"

"What…what are you…we were just borrowing…"

"Hi, Rory," Leah blushed, walking in as she pulled her shirt down self-consciously. Rory giggled and Jess rolled his eyes, repressing a smile.

"Both of you, out. Matt, we'll talk about this tomorrow. Leah, I'm assuming he corrupted you so I'll pretend this never happened," Jess demanded. Matt furrowed his brow.

"Hey, this place is a third mine. You can't tell me what to do."

"Alright, fine. Come in tomorrow and we'll decide exactly which third of the store you can have sex in," Jess challenged. Leah blushed.

"Sorry Jess," she smiled, "See you guys."

"Bye, Leah," Rory waved, unable to hold back her own laughter.

"Rory, it's not funny. He contaminated the place!"

"I'm just glad they weren't in our bed."

"No respect for the business."

"Not Truncheon's, anyway," Rory raised her eyebrows.

"And on that note…" Jess sighed, holding out his hand and leading her upstairs.

"So Anaîs…"

"No shot in hell. We might have to move."
Chapter 118

Chapter Notes

So I’m sure these first few chapters back are going to be a little rough. I admit, they even feel a little rough. But it’s just a matter of getting back into the swing of things, so please bear with me. I hope you read, review and let me know what you think anyway. I am so glad to be writing this series again and have even more big news possibly coming up, so stay tuned. I do not own Gilmore Girls or any of its characters or concepts, but I have entered into a book-lending arrangement with a gentleman who reads, which feels Gilmore enough for me.

“So Matt,” Jess smirked as he walked into the office the next morning, “Have a good night?”
“Grand until you showed up,” Matt retorted as he picked up a stack of books, “You guys completely embarrassed Leah.”
“Actually, you guys completely embarrassed yourselves,” Jess corrected, going over to help him, “What made you think that having sex in the middle of our place of business was a good idea?”
“A lot of beer?” Matt raised his eyebrows innocently, “It’s new territory to be conquered.”
“So how many girls have you sullied our sacred shrine with now, Matt?” Chris asked, coming around the corner.
“You told him?” Matt turned to Jess in disbelief.
Jess shrugged.
“Public sex isn’t really public unless it’s public knowledge.”
“It wasn’t supposed to be! You guys were supposed to be out of town.”
“Great defense. I hear OJ’s got some charges, maybe you should look into that.”
“Shut up, both of you,” Chris snapped, “Your adorably witty banter is too much before I have any coffee in me. Matt, you’re an idiot. Jess, if you expected anything else from Matt, you’re an idiot too.”
“Wow, what crawled up your…”
“Hannah and I are fighting,” Chris cut him off, rolling his eyes, “Not that it’s any of your guys’ business, since I don’t conduct my affairs in the middle of our establishment. Unlike Thing 1, who brings his girls here to do the deed and Thing 2, who actually resides in the place of business. Ever heard of boundaries, Jess?”
“It was your idea to live there in the first place, I just never moved out,” Jess replied, looking at Matt in confusion, “But seriously Chris, what’s going on? You’re acting even more unpleasant than usual to deal with.”
“She wants to move in,” Chris mumbled. Both Jess and Matt looked at him in shock.
“Maybe if you hadn’t been so busy defiling Leah on top of the filing cabinets, you would’ve been around to tell. You haven’t exactly been around lately.”
“I’m dating someone. That’s how it works. Plus, you two have been playing house so much it’s nauseating to be around it. I should’ve seen this coming…”
“Yeah, well there’s a difference between playing house and actually wanting to share one,” Chris shook his head, “Why did she have to mess up such a good thing?”
“So I’m assuming your fear of commitment is rearing its ugly head again.”
“Jess, it’s not even 9 yet. Don’t fuck with me.”
“I’m just saying, what’s so wrong with living with Hannah? You seem to really like her.”
“Not all of us jump stages from friends to cohabitants, Jess. Again, it’s this concept called
boundaries. Maybe we should develop a self-help section so you’ll have somewhere to go for this kind of information.”

“Seriously, stop deflecting. Why don’t you want to live with her?”

“It’s too soon. It’s that simple, Dr. Phil, so stop trying to analyze me and just help me move these damn books, okay?”


“That’s the plan,” Chris retorted, moving the last of the books, “Now let’s get to work, I feel particularly inclined towards annihilating some writing today.”

“So Hannah wants to move in? Did she ask him? When?”

“Rory, I don’t know that much. He wasn’t exactly in a talking mood.”

“But that’s so exciting! And she’s amazing! Why wouldn’t he…”

“He says it’s too soon.”

“He’s wrong. Did you tell him he was wrong?”

“Yeah, and he took a few shots with our choices as ammo. I don’t think he’s really in a listening mood either.”

“But we’re different. That’s not an excuse.”

“Or maybe it is. We’ve known each other forever. It’s not like a few months ago was our first date.”

“But if they love each other…”

“I haven’t heard him use that word, and I doubt you have either, so I wouldn’t go putting it in his mouth.”

“But it’s so clear that they do!”

“Rory, I agree with you in general, but really it’s none of our business. If Chris thinks it’s too soon, that’s his choice, and we’ll have to let the chips fall where they may.”

“I just don’t want him to lose Hannah.”

“We don’t know that he will. We have no idea what will happen between them. And if not, there are plenty of other girls out there. Either way, it’s really not our concern.”

“She’s one of your best friends!”

“Yes, but it’s not my job to push him, just like it’s not his job to tell me how to live my life.”

“Speaking of which, what exactly did he have to complain about? I thought he liked me by now.”

“It wasn’t about you, it was about how fast we ended up living together. He’s right that it’s not normal.”

“But it was right for us.”

“True. But for a lot of people, it’s a big step. Usually just preceding a ring, a house and some kids.”

“It doesn’t have to be any of that. She didn’t say any of that that we know of. She probably just thinks it makes more sense and wants to spend more time with him.”

“Then let her explain that.”

“He’s not talking to her.”

“How do you…”

“We talk, Jess. She’s my friend now.”

“Well that could get awkward.”

“And?”

“Nevermind. Point taken. Go on.”

“He won’t speak to her, he won’t listen to her, he’s been blowing her off all day. She actually asked me if he came into work.”

“And you said?”

“I didn’t know, I hadn’t been home. But that I thought he was being a jackass and that if she needed to talk I was around.”

“Good call. Thanks for staying out of it.”

“I did as much as I could!”

“Rory…”

“She’s really upset!”
“Fine. But don’t meddle. I know the Lorelai in you wants to fix all of this, but you just have to ride it out. It’s not our right to interfere.”
“…fine. But if she cries again I’m going to yell at him.”
“And there’s that non-interference I was hoping for. Fine, fair enough. Now let’s disinfect this couch before we can never touch it again.”
I hope you guys like this chapter! I know it’s short again, but it felt more cohesive and a little more normal to me than the others I’ve done recently so I didn’t want to jinx it. Please read and review, I want to know what you guys are thinking, even if it’s rough at first. I’d really just like to know if anyone still has interest in this story. I’ll probably continue it regardless, but that would be encouraging. I do not own Gilmore Girls or any of its characters or concepts, but I have been listening to a ton of interviews with ASP over the past few days and have tons and tons of crazy wild fun ideas that I hope I can bring to fruition.

“Jess, we have to go to Stars Hollow this weekend.”
“Define ‘have to’.”
“Jess!”
“Rory, you know I’m usually fine going back,” Jess sighed, “But there’s way too much going on right now. If I don’t find a replacement for Sanders soon, Matt will have my head on a platter. And Chris is still in such a foul mood that he’ll probably volunteer to do the decapitating himself.”
“But it’s been snowing for weeks! Unless you want Lorelai to decapitate both of us and turn our heads into bowls for Founder’s Day punch, we have to figure something out.” Rory crossed her arms. Jess sighed.
“Fine. But only because that stuff could bore a hole through my skull in less than an hour,” he submitted, “Though that’s not nearly as fun as your usual method of persuasion.”
“Believe me, I agree,” Rory nodded as she flopped down on the bed, “But I’m exhausted. You aren’t the only one with difficult coworkers.”
“Alex again?”
“Isn’t it always?” She rolled her eyes. “I swear, if I wanted some guy to try to tell me how to live my life or that I’m not doing it right, I would’ve just kept around Master and Commander.”
“The movie?”
“Long story.”
“Look, I know it’s rough right now,” Jess said, coming over and putting his arms around her, “But it’s still relatively new. You only started there a month ago.”
“That still doesn’t give him license to patronize me. I’m his superior! It’s like living in an episode of Boston Legal, except Alan Shore has no charisma.”
“And you aren’t old.”
“Besides the point!”
“Rory, you can’t let him get to you,” Jess lowered his voice, “That’s just giving him what he wants. To pull you down to his level.”
“Well, it’s working,” Rory fumed, “I deserve to be treated with respect! I’m his boss, technically. And more importantly, I’m a better writer. And his editor! He shouldn’t be attempting to undermine me like this.”
“Regardless, he is. And you have to be able to stand up to his assault, unless you can find a decent reason to fire him.”
“Insubordination?”
“It doesn’t sound like he’s directly challenging you, he sounds like he’s more just being a dick in insidious ways you can’t really prove. Given that, do you really want to give him the satisfaction of
knowing he’s getting to you?”
“I don’t know, firing him sounds pretty satisfying to me,” Rory replied. She sighed. “Fine, no. But it still sucks.”
“Yes, it does,” Jess responded, leaning over and kissing her cheek, “And you’ll just have to continue being better than that, which I know you can do. I’ll even get you a voodoo doll if that’ll make you feel better.”
“I really don’t know if that’s such a good idea with the strength of my will right now,” Rory muttered darkly. Jess raised his eyebrows in amusement.
“Fair point. So how soon is really necessary with the Stars Hollow thing?”
“It really should be this weekend.”
“There’s no way.”
“Where there’s a will…”
“There’s also very little will. Why can’t your mom come here?”
“Luke has a delivery this weekend.”
“Okay, but unless they’ve gone and glued themselves together again…”
“You’d be okay inviting just Mom?”
“Seems like the most practical solution,” Jess shrugged, “And I assume she’ll end up glued to you all weekend anyway.”
“True. Are you trying to get rid of me?”
“No, but if she’s not gluing herself to you you can bet I will be. Maybe if she’s around I can force myself to actually get somewhere with the replacement issue.”
“True,” Rory conceded, “Alright, I’ll ask her.” She smiled, getting up to get her phone. Then she paused, leaning down to give Jess a deep kiss. “And I’ll thank you properly after I talk to her.”
“I thought you were exhausted?”
“Miraculous recovery.”
“You just snuck another cup of coffee when I wasn’t looking, didn’t you?”
“What’s good for the goose…”
Chapter 120

Chapter Notes

A longer chapter this time, hope you guys like it! I’m hoping to bring in Rory’s coworkers more soon, so let me know what you think of this chapter. Also, yes, this is a feminist story, but I love protective!jess so so much, I had to give him a little something to do here.

“Alex! Have a minute?”
“Not really, boss,” he rolled his eyes as Rory approached, “You wanted that story on your desk by three, and I only have two hours left.”
“Well, you can spare a second,” Rory asserted, “I need to know that you’re on the right track with the Richmond piece.”
“It’s not like it’s complicated,” he shrugged, “But sure. No need to get your pan…”
“For the love of God, don’t finish that sentence,” she growled, “Listen, I want the story on my desk by three, and I don’t want any more run-ons. It’s becoming a real problem.”
“Sure thing, boss,” he retorted sarcastically, “Though I don’t know how I’ll manage it all by myself. I mean, it’s hard actually writing. I’m sure you remember what is was like. Wait, is that why you decided to take this job?”
“Why don’t you do a little less talking and a little more writing,” Rory snarled, “You just worry about doing your job and I’ll do mine.”
“Ma’am yes ma’am. It always seemed to work for the fascists,” he shrugged innocently, turning and walking away before Rory could respond. She seethed, walking back towards her desk. She picked up her phone and walked into the hall.
“…Hello?”
“I hate him.”
“Rory…"
“I know you’re at work, I know I’m at work, but I really, really hate him. He’s a petulant little…Oh, hello Brenda! Yeah, I’ll let you know about drinks this weekend. Good luck on that interview.”
“Brenda must think you have an attitude problem.”
“Shut up. What am I going to do? I might kill him.”
“Well a statement like that would only concern me if you had means.”
“I have hands, don’t I?” Rory replied darkly. Jess chuckled.
“Okay, I know you’re mad. But you’re really cute when you’re angry.”
“CUTE?”
“Alright, not the time, sorry,” Jess quickly corrected, trying not to grin, “How about this…I’ll come by and meet you at 5:30 and we’ll head out for dinner somewhere on your side of town. We haven’t gone out in a while.”
“Because we can never agree on a restaurant.”
“Can so.”
“What were you thinking?”
“Thai.”
“We can never agree on a restaurant.”
“That actually sounds nice. I’ll find a place nearby.”
“Great,” he smiled, “Now I love you, I have to go make sure that my coworkers behave themselves.
“You try not to commit homicide until I see you, okay? Because with Matt and Chris both deterring business in their very own special ways, I might not have the money to bail you out of jail.”
“Fair enough,” she assented, “Plus the body will be pretty heavy for me to move alone.”
“There’s the practical girl I know. Love you.”
“Love you too. Thanks, Jess,” she smiled, hanging up the phone. She turned around and promptly frowned.
“Ah, the mysterious Jess,” Alex smirked, “Taking time off work for a personal call, boss?”
“Did you need something?” she asked, crossing her arms across her chest.
“No, ma’am. I just wanted to ask you a question about the story but if you’re too busy talking to your boyfriend I completely understand. I know how hard it must be for you to tear yourself away from him.”
“Alex, you are walking a very thin line right now. Either ask your question or get back to work.”
“Oh, did I hurt your feelings? I’m sorry, boss. I’ll be more considerate in the future. Leave you to your…work,” Alex retorted before walking away, leaving Rory seething in his wake.

“Hey, I’m looking for Rory Gilmore?”
“Do you have an appointment?”
“She’s expecting me,” Jess smiled charmingly at the secretary, who smiled back.
“Oh, you must be Jess,” she stood, holding out her hand to shake his, “I’m Annie, the administrative assistant on her section. I’ve heard so much about you.”
“Really? It’s not like her to talk about her personal life at work,” Jess said, furrowing his eyebrows in confusion as he shook her hand.
“No, I heard about you from my friend who’s an artist. Jackie Martinez? She showed something in Truncheon a while ago, and when Rory did mention your name it rang a bell,” Annie explained, “So one day Rory and I went out to lunch and I forced her to confirm that she was, in fact, dating you. Which made so much sense.”
“Thanks, I think,” Jess smiled. At least someone Rory worked with was nice.
“Annie, can you make another copy of this for me? I can’t figure out how to…” Alex stopped in his tracks, “Who’s this?”
“Jess Mariano,” he said, holding out his hand, “And you are?”
“Um…Alex,” Alex answered, cautiously shaking his hand. Jess’ eyes narrowed. “Ah, so you’ve heard about me.”
“Actually no,” Jess answered, furrowing his brow in confusion, “It’s just that you have something on your shirt.” He gestured to a stain.
“Ah, ink. Happens,” Alex shrugged, “But, you really haven’t heard about me?”
“Why would I have heard about you?” Jess asked, shaking his head in confusion, “The only person I know here is Rory Gilmore. And now Annie.”
“I actually work under Rory,” Alex admitted, “Are you sure…”
“She’s never mentioned an Alex,” Jess answered shortly, “But that’s not surprising. She’s not one to mix work and her personal life.”
“Well then, it’s interesting that you’re here.”
“I insisted on picking her up and taking her out to dinner,” Jess replied, narrowing his eyes again, “She’s been working so much lately. I asked her why and she said she’s having some trouble with getting certain writers up to speed. I told her that’s not her problem, but hey, not everyone can be as smart as her right out of the gate.”
Suddenly Rory walked up.
“Jess! Hi! And…oh.”
“I was just meeting your coworker here,” Jess said, his eyes not leaving Alex’s, “He seemed puzzled that I didn’t know who he was. Guess he must be pretty special or something.”
“Or something,” Rory muttered, repressing her grin, “Alex, I want a final draft on my desk by nine tomorrow.”
“But we only have half an hour…”
“In the workday, but you have all night. Especially since you spent the majority of the time you should’ve been editing reading journalism gossip blogs. You should really be careful what you’re doing on the company’s internet, it all goes to your superiors.” Rory smirked. “Sorry, Jess, we can go now. Did you meet Annie?”

“Yeah, she’s lovely. I’d love to meet more of your coworkers sometime,” Jess smiled, kissing her gently on the cheek. Annie beamed.

“Well, you’ll just have to come back then,” Annie suggested, “Or maybe come for drinks with us after work one night. Rory always goes straight home to you but maybe if we wrangled you in…”

“That sounds great,” Jess smiled, “We’ll do that. It was so nice meeting you. And you take care of yourself, Alex.”

Alex glowered as Rory and Jess walked out, hand in hand.

“Isn’t he great?” they heard Annie gush.

“Whatever,” Alex mumbled crankily.

“Thanks for that,” Rory said as they exited the building, “You know you didn’t have to do anything.”

“Hey, I know you can take care of yourself,” Jess smiled, “But I admit I can get a little protective sometimes. I’ll work on it.”

“Please don’t. The look on his face when you said you hadn’t heard of him…”

“You were there for that?”

“I may have been peeking.”

“Sneaky spy.”

“It’s my job to supervise my employees!”

“I really don’t think that’s what they meant,” Jess shook his head, smiling, “So Italian?”

“Yes. Enough red wine and pasta and I’ll forget Alex even exists.”

“Enough food and I think you’d forget I exist.”

“Decent theory. Let’s test it.”
"Jess! Where are the mallomars?" Rory called.

"You ate them all," Jess replied, trying not to laugh, "Remember? After the last time you read A Farewell To Arms?"

"I wasn't sad, I was depressed due to boredom."

"Admit it, you were touched."

"More like repeatedly stabbed through the heart," Rory mumbled.

"It's beautiful."

"It's horrifying."

"And beautiful in its horror."

"No, just horrifying in its horror."

"Whatever, live in denial if you want, but that's when all the mallomars conveniently disappeared," Jess shrugged.

"Well we need more! Mom is getting here in less than an hour!"

"Or you could just feed her one of the other various kinds of junk food we have," Jess offered, "We have tons. Possibly literal tons."

"We don't have much."

"We have eight types of candy, three types of chips, and approximately twelve takeout menus. Not to mention frosting, two gallons of ice cream, and enough frozen pizza to feed a small army."

"Wait…no doughnuts?"

"Doughnuts?"

"We need doughnuts! For the snow! It's supposed to be from Luke's but if it can't be from Luke's we still need doughnuts and coffee for the snow!"

"Okay, okay!" Jess surrendered, "I'll work on it."

"But…"

"I'll work on it. You go buy whatever other crap you want for dinner. My vote is Chinese, because it's the only thing we can all agree on other than pizza."

"Fair. Thanks, hon." Rory leaned over and kissed Jess. "I'll be back in half an hour with food."

"I'll deal with the doughnuts. See you then."

"Jess…how did you…"

"You will speak of this to no one."
"But…"

"Luke taught me."

"When…"

"In high school."

"You could make these when we were dating?" Rory asked, stunned, "How could you possibly not tell me that?"

"Because I knew you would get that look in your eye that involves a lot of work for me and way too much sugar for you. You have it now, you know. So no one will hear of this. I only did it because you and Lorelai have your thing."

"Thank you!" Rory hugged Jess tightly, bursting with excitement, "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

"You cannot tell your mother. Promise me," Jess said seriously. Just then the doorbell rang. Rory smirked at Jess.

"Too late!" she grinned, running down the stairs to open the door, "Mom! Jess…"

"Is going to murder your daughter in her sleep if she finishes her sentence," Jess glowered. Lorelai looked at Rory, confused.

"Is he really a gigolo?"

"Yes," Jess deadpanned, "And I have to get over to see Chris and Matt. Rory, never again if you say a word."

"Dirty!"

"And goodbye to you too, Lorelai. Enjoy the snow."

"I always do," Lorelai smiled beatifically as Jess shut the door behind him, "So that was…"

"Hoodlum-daughter thing, but it benefits you because we have doughnuts."

"Then I don't need to know as long as I get at least four."

"We have twelve."

"Excellent."

"So how late is Jess going to be at Matt's place?"

"He's gonna stay with them tonight. I think he thinks it'd be weird with all three of us in the apartment."

"He'd be right."

"Agreed. Plus I'd feel bad if he knew how superfluous he really was."

"Aw, good daughter lying to Mommy. Extra doughnut for you!"

"Speaking of which, is it…"
"As soon as the coffee's ready."

"Wow. It's beautiful."

"It's always beautiful. It's perfect."

"You always think it's perfect."

"Because it always is."

"It's snow."

"It's magic."

"Okay, okay," Rory smiled, holding her coffee close and huddling next to Lorelai, "It's magic."

"Happy first snow, loinfruit," Lorelai smiled, holding up her coffee cup as a toast, "Or rather, fake first snow."

"We got as close as we could."

"Do you think snow'll be mad?"

"No. Her presence suggests she still loves you."

"And I'll always love her."

"You and snow...you're what true love really is."

"Tell Jess that."

"I'll be sure he knows what to aspire to."

"That's my daughter."
"It's done."

"What's done?"

"The thing that I've been waiting to do for basically my entire adult life."

"Joining the circus?"

"Try again."

"Breaking the world record for polka dancing?"

"You guys suck at this."

"Just tell us!"

"I finally replaced Sanders."

"What?" Rory exclaimed, "But how? Chris and Matt…"

"Gave in once I found a suitable replacement."

"Wait, who's Sanders?" Lorelai asked, confused. Jess sighed.

"This awful author whose books we've been publishing for years against my better judgment. And giving prime real estate in the store."

"But now he's gone! Who did you find to replace him?"

"Guy named Brock. Writes weird, modern Beat type crap, but I really like it. Matt and Chris do too, it's strange but in an awesome way."

"As if you need more Beat influence."

"Hey, until the place is full of orgies and drugs, we obviously need more Beat influence."

"Fine, fine. Who am I to question your artistic sensibilities?"

"Anyways, I'm about to go demolish the Sanders stack but I need caffeine first. I'm assuming you're both ready for your next fix?"

"Are we ever not ready for the next fix?"

"Remind me never to let you guys near heroin."

"Unless it's caffeinated I'm probably not interested anyway."

"So this is…"

"A coffeeshop."

"I could tell."
"Then why did you ask?"

"Because it's not our coffeeshop. Have you been holding out on me?"

"This is a work coffeeshop. I come here with writers."

"So you have been holding out on me."

"Um, not to interrupt your lovers' quarrel or anything, but can we actually get coffee? Otherwise the Mommy's going to start having withdrawal symptoms."

"Fine. But we are not done talking about this!" Rory pouted.

"I didn't think you'd like it!"

"It's a coffee shop! How would I possibly not like it?"

"It's…"

"It's what?"

"Masculine."

"WHAT?"

"Oh boy…" Lorelai rolled her eyes, turning towards the woman at the counter, "Hi, three large coffees and a couple Xanax? I think she might need them."

"What exactly makes a coffee shop 'masculine', Jess? It's not like there are bear skins on the walls."

"Nothing. Forget it."

"Forget what? That my boyfriend's a sexist?"

"Okay kid, I think you need your fix sooner rather than later," Lorelai said, handing Rory the coffee, "Drink it fast enough and he'll just turn into a blur." Rory looked at Jess with dagger eyes. He sighed.

"Fine, if it means that much to you, I will bring you to every coffee shop I know in this city. Happy?"

"You're buying at all of them," Rory scowled. Lorelai smirked.

"Mommy taught her well."

"In other news," Jess rolled his eyes, "Chris had something interesting to tell me this morning."

"Oh?"

"He and Hannah are moving in together."

"Really?" Rory squealed, "He finally gave in?"

"Apparently."

"That's so great! Hannah is amazing, he's really lucky."
"Yeah, they seem like a good match."
"I'm glad she'll be around."
"You two seem to get along pretty well."
"It's nice to balance out some of your masculine energy when Mom isn't here to help me do so."
"Mommy can always be here if she can live in this coffee shop."
"Can you stop referring to yourself in the third person?"
"I accept bribes."

"Fine," Jess rolled his eyes, heading for the counter. Lorelai turned to Rory.

"So...not to pry, but have you and Jess thought at all about moving somewhere? You're kind of living together by default."

"It's convenient living above Truncheon," Rory answered, crossing her arms over her chest, "But no, it hasn't really come up."

"You might want to think about it, kid. It's a small space."

"We like it cozy."

"So do I. Do you not remember we lived in a shed? There's a difference between cozy and cramped."

"We like things how they are."

"Okay, okay. Just asking."

"The only thing that's problematic is not having room for more books. But we always manage to find space."

"Like you need more books."

"We always need more books!"

"Rory, you alone own three copies of that stupid..."

"It's not stupid! It's romantic!"

"It's not romantic to marry your stepbrother. Well then again, maybe for you..."

"Okay, done talking now." Jess held the coffee out to Lorelai, and Rory took it.

"She's cut off."

"You sure that's safe? You don't want her going all House of Cards on you..."

"There's no subway here."

"Fine, I'll work on a more apt reference, but I just personally would be sad if you were murdered."

"And you're coming dangerously close to it," Lorelai scowled, "Luckily I still have the power of
walking.” She went up to the counter to get a refill. Jess looked at Rory.

"Everything okay?"

"Of course. Mom's just being Mom."

"So crazy?"

"I wouldn't have her any other way."

Three cups of coffee later…

"I think you guys are gonna need to be sedated."

"Relax, Jess, we're fine. Just mildly buzzed."

"Mildly? You've had five cups of coffee in less than an hour. I still can't believe you guys snuck those last two by me."

"We've had years and years of practice."

"Luke is going to kill me."

"Oh, come now, Luke understands. I steal his coffee all the time."

"And he screams at you whenever you do it!"

"Do you have a point?"

"You two are addicts, I swear," Jess sighed, "Thank god after tonight I'll only have to corral the one of you."

"Oh please, you know you'll miss me," Lorelai sing-songed. Jess narrowed his eyes.

"Corrupting my girlfriend isn't necessarily the most endearing of your features."

"Hey, she was my daughter before she was your girlfriend!"

"Which is why she has all those bad habits in the first place."

"You mean delightful character quirks?"

"You're cracked."

"You're mean. And you love her, quirks and all."

Jess looked at Rory and smiled. Lorelai gagged.

"You two are nauseating."

"That's the five cups of unadulteratedly intense coffee."

"Pretty sure it's you guys."

"Careful, or I'll switch you to decaf."

Lorelai nearly choked, "Why would you even say that out loud? Blasphemy!"
"If you cut her off, I might cut you off," Rory smirked. Jess raised his eyebrows.

"Oh, really?"

"Really."

"Well then. That's a horse of a different color. Lorelai, apparently you are free to mock me and drink as much coffee as you want."

"I don't know how I feel about my daughter's body being bartered in this way. On the other hand, thank you, Loinfruit, for your loyalty."

"Just drink your coffee."
"Hello?"

"I am going to kill him."

"Who? Donald Trump? You're not the only one with the thought, but I really don't recommend…"

"No. Doyle. This is his fault. He impregnated me and now I'm losing my mind and my body in one fell swoop. Can I sue? I want to sue."

"You'd know that better than I would. Didn't you want to go to law school?"

"Breach of contract, intentional infliction of emotional distress…"

"Here we go…"

"Treason."

"Alright, now you're just being ridiculous."

"This is awful, Rory, awful. I'm sick all the time, I can barely work, hell, I can barely stand. Everything tastes like other things, everything smells awful unless I Pine-Sol it to death, and Doyle just gets to go on his merry way, smiling and goating about how delicious dinner smells, how happy he is that 'we' are having this baby. We? There's no we. Before there was a we. Now there's a me, and a lot of soreness and discomfort and it's all his fault. And don't even get me started on the doctor hunt."

"Not going well, huh?"

"One of them told me to smile."

"Seriously?"

"Dead serious. He actually told me to smile. I told him he could shove his Yale degree up his condescending, second-rate ass."

"Can asses condescend?"

"Well considering how much he was talking out of his...and then the next one was such an earth mother hippie dipshit I about lost my mind."

"How on earth did you end up interviewing a hippie doctor?"

"My rabbi recommended a doula."

"A doula?"

"I told him I'd at least try interviewing her. But my god, the woman is anti-vaccine. The second I'm in labor I want an epidural the size of a spaceship shoved into me before I have time to ask for it."

"Fair enough."

"She recommended a water birth. A water birth! She said it would soothe the pain."
"I've heard…"

"Do not finish that sentence, or I swear to you I will drive to Philadelphia and slit your throat."

"Little harsh, Gretch."

"What's that from? Don't be quippy. I'm not in the mood for quippy. I need someone to remind me that not everyone in the world is stupid, incompetent, lazy, pigheaded, or obnoxious."

"You love Doyle."

"He knocked me up. I hate Doyle."

"But you love Doyle."

"Lots of people murder in the name of love. Remember the Crippins?"

"You've got a lot of murder on the brain today. Isn't pregnancy supposed to make you glowing and peaceful?"

"The glowing is sweat and everything else is a goddamned lie."

"But when you're done you'll get a baby!"

"A baby that I will have to take care of. You think Doyle will 'help'? Sure, he'll 'help'. He'll pick up dinner or change one diaper. I'll be stuck with all of the work."

"If the Kardashians can do it so can you."

"Those women started an entire empire off of one sex tape. There's plenty they can do that I can't. Probably most of them involve contorted body positions and self-tanner, but regardless…oh! And Terrence! He wants me to hire this guy who will vacuum out my baby."

"I don't even know where to start with that one. You still talk to Terrence? And you can vacuum out a baby?"

"Yes and yes. He's out of his third rehab stint and doing quite well. Happily married after the new ruling and instructing yoga out in San Francisco. He also wanted me to get bangs, so clearly he needs a little more intervention before he's all there."

"Paris, you're gonna be fine."

"How can you say that? You don't know. You've never done this before."

"Call my mom. She's done this before."

"She was sixteen! She had the distractions of finals and John Cleese to guide her through the pain. I have to contend with a full time medical career and a husband who only makes things harder."

"So wait…you're saying it's easier being a pregnant single teenage mother?"

"I'm just saying I do things better on my own."

"You're cracked."

"I'm going to crack if I can't find a doctor."
"Let me see who Lane used. She liked hers."

"Fine, I guess it can't hurt. Thanks."

"No problem. It really will be okay, you know."

"If it's not I'm going to send the thing to you in the mail."

"Stop calling your unborn child a thing, Paris."

"But it's not…"

"Okay, enough talking now. Goodnight, Paris."

"Everything okay?" Jess asked, lying down next to Rory in bed. She sighed.

"As okay as ever in Paris-land." He smirked and nodded. He reached over to touch her and immediately she turned away.

"Absolutely, 100% not tonight."

"Are you…"

"Dead serious."

"Rory…"

"Goodnight, Dodger."

"Paris is going to pay for this."
I've created this and the next chapter for the purpose of syncing up the chapter numbers between this and FF from here on out. Please disregard.
I've created this and the next chapter for the purpose of syncing up the chapter numbers between this and FF from here on out. Please disregard.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!