Sleeping with the Enemy

by cyndrarae

Summary

Jess returns to Stars Hollow for a break, and he’s different, older and maturer, just a little. He runs into his one-time arch nemesis, Dean, under unusual circumstances, and discovers a whole new perspective of him that Jess never knew (or saw) before.

Notes

Some liberties taken with canon and medical conditions. Play along will ya ;)

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The phone rang at precisely twelve-thirty in the AM. Luke exhaled deeply, rubbed his eyes open and went to answer it.

“Hello Marge… no it’s alright, please don’t apologize, Marge… I will take care of him. No, no, no problem. Alright, you go back to bed now, yeah…”

He hung up the phone and sighed, then went downstairs to the diner area where he switched on the lights and put a pot of coffee on to wait.

There was a knock on the door exactly seven minutes later. Luke quickly got up to answer it, expecting one twenty-year old and finding another one altogether.

He frowned, not believing his eyes.

“Jess?”

Jess Mariano stood at his uncle’s doorstep and smirked. “I want to say ‘surprise’ but you look like you were expecting me. Or… someone I guess.”

And then casually he walked in with his sack of stuff flung over one shoulder, looking around the old place nostalgically.

Luke was still in sort of shock. “Wh-what are you doing here?”

“I’m taking a two-week break from work, Dillon thinks I’m burning my freaking candle at both ends so he kicked me out. And I figured, might as well pay you a visit. Is that cool?”

Jess turned to face Luke once again and the two men took the time to look at one another. They’d both aged, and to Luke, it seemed Jess had more than Luke.

He looked more… settled, calmer, maturer than he had been two years ago when he left Star’s Hollow in a huff, leaving in his wake memories of a lot of harshly spoken (but not completely meant) words. The kid had had his heart broken and chosen to go back to his rebellious ways in protest, far from here. Luke couldn’t say he blamed him. Rory seemed to have had that effect on more than a couple of boys he knew.

Luke suddenly realized how much he’d missed the kid. He opened his arms and engulfed Jess in a quick hug, clapping his back a couple of times before letting him go. When they parted, the men smiled at each other like they hadn’t in a long, long time.

“It’s good to see you, Jess. I’m glad you came.”

“But you were expecting someone else…”

Luke remembered then. “Oh, yeah, um…”
Jess raised a hand in placation and started to walk up the stairs to the apartment and his old bedroom.

“No need to sweat. You’re a big boy now, Uncle Luke, you can have whoever you want over. Is my room still mine or did you rent it out or something?”

With a parting smirk he started walking up the stairs and Luke quickly followed. “Not rented it out, no…”

“Sorry for barging in on you like this, figured you wouldn’t mind if I took you up on your offer after all.”

Jess pushed open the door to his room and entered, Luke still following him scratching his head, wondering how to break it to his nephew that his room wasn’t… exactly just his room anymore. Even though he’d promised Jess he would always have a place in his house. In fact, those had been his parting words to Jess on the phone the last time they spoke, just two months ago.

Jess flicked on a light and gazed first up at the walls. Still the same old, small but cozy little room with his lone poster of Zeppelin on one side, and his books stacked up in two neat columns almost all the way up to the ceiling by the north wall.

Jess smiled and lowered his eyes, and that’s when he frowned.

“Dude, what did you do to my bed?”

Luke pasted his best cheerio smile on his face and spread out his arms. “Don’t you like it? I upgraded it! Kids grow so fast at your age, you know, I figured…”

“That I’d turn into a Sasquatch when I returned?”

Jess gave him his patented ‘not buying it’ look. Luke sighed and scratched his head.

“Fine, I have to tell you something. And you’re probably not going to like this but hear me out. Do you remember that Forester kid? Dean?”

Jess scowled almost menacingly. “Do you really think there’s a chance in hell I’d forget that jerk?”

“Yeah, I was afraid of that. Well, there isn’t any other way to say it so I’ll just say it. He crashes in here once in a while.”

The rucksack slid off Jess’ shoulder and hit the carpet with a loud thud.

“What? Why?”

“Look, it’s complicated. I…”

Someone thumped at their front door, three times and very, very loud. Jess turned towards the intruding sound.

“It’s him, isn’t it? You were expecting that big dump of grocery store garbage this time of the night? What, are you doing him now?”

Of course. Luke had forgotten how vicious Jess could be with words. His caustic tongue and endless
repertoire of sarcasm and insults were the reasons uncle and nephew never could get along very well for too long. It just happened to be one of those relationships that was best served apart. Like, from a really, really long distance.

Luke exhaled, gave Jess his best (or worst) death glare and chose not to honor him with a response. To his credit, and surprisingly so, Jess did immediately look sorry for what he said, but his irritation hadn’t abated. Someone thumped the door again, methodically, three times and very, very loud again.

“Look, we’ll talk about this later. Just don’t cause any trouble right now, okay?”

Before Jess could react, Luke was already on his way down, leaving the youngster steaming and bursting with unanswered questions up in his room. Downstairs, Luke opened the door in the middle of the third set of three very, very loud thumps and found the other twenty-year old boy with his head, as always, lowered to the ground and his hand raised into a fist looking for a door to punch.

“Come on in, Dean.”

The boy didn’t look like he heard him at all and continued to stare down at his feet. Bare feet. In the cold.

Luke sighed and waited for the said feet to start moving after another verbal prodding. Dean stepped in quietly and like a robot, started to walk straight across the diner and up the stairs… into the second bedroom. Jess’ bedroom. Where Jess still was.

Luke followed silently, skipping ahead only once to remove a stray chair from out of Dean’s way and falling back again.

Lord be merciful.

He was not looking forward to Jess’ reaction to all of this.

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Jess was pacing back and forth in his room, already regretting his decision to come back to Star’s Hollow.

This is exactly why he left – this... emotional wretchedness he felt every time he came across the idiosyncratic people inhabiting this idiosyncratic town. They made you like them, then they made you get attached to them, and then they went ahead and did something to break your heart and leave you feeling like a stupid pathetic ass.

Alright, so giving his room away wasn’t exactly heartbreaking per se, but Jess was prone to exaggerate. Why shouldn’t he be allowed his quirks just like everyone else in this whacked out place?

Luke knew how much he hated, no despised, literally abhorred that Forester kid. He knew their history and all the bad blood and split lips and bruised ribs they’d shared. Then how the hell could he go and replace Jess with him?

Course he didn’t mean what he’d said to his uncle before, just like he hadn’t meant what he’d said two years ago - Luke looking out for his family was noble and admirable and even if it got overbearing at times, it still was more than Jess’ father ever did for Jess or his mother. But that’s a story for another time. Besides, Luke was way too boring (and way too smitten with Lorelai) to be even remotely gay. Jess just wanted to get a rise out of the old man and damn it he didn’t even get that.

Two pairs of footsteps approached him and Jess turned toward the door, slipping his baddest bad-ass scowl onto his face to greet his arch nemesis from two years ago. Why he still hated the guy, considering their point of contention (read: Rory) was long past moot, Jess didn’t know. He was still practically itching for a confrontation like it was three years ago. And no way in hell was he getting his bed. Which technically, wasn’t actually his bed anymore but the floor space it occupied was pretty much the same so... yeah.

His room. His bed.

Jess folded his arms against his chest, bit petulantly.

Bring it on, Forester.

The door was pushed open and there stood Dean, tall and lean with the same goofy, girly bangs covering half his face, only longer. He was wearing a faded gray, nearly tattered t-shirt that barely grazed his navel, and what looked like sleep pants, deep blue flannel, draped low at his waist so loosely they looked like they might fall off if Jess so much as touched them.

Not that he wanted to, touch them that is, of course.

“Forester,” Jess muttered, almost in surprise. Because yeah, this was so... surprising.
The other boy didn’t even look up, didn’t even acknowledge his fucking presence. Dean simply walked in and stopped a short distance from the bed. Jess’ bed. Ex-bed technically but in the same floor space as Jess’… oh, whatever.

Luke followed him in and gestured at Jess with a finger pressed to his lips.

Jess frowned. “What’s going on?”

Luke ignored him and went up to take Dean’s left arm. “Go ahead Dean, get in.”

He gently nudged Dean on until the boy took a step forward almost automatically, without resistance, still looking down at his… bare feet?

Jess’ jaw dropped open.

“Is he sleepwalking?”

Luke shushed him angrily, but nodded. Jess kept his mouth shut after that.

“C’mon Dean, here we go.”

He watched as Luke pulled the covers down and gently squeezed one of Dean’s shoulders. Dean immediately moved and got into bed, his movements severely robotic as he lay down his head on the perfectly placed pillow and closed his eyes in slow motion. He lay quietly while Luke pulled up the covers to his neck.

“What the hell, Luke?” At least Jess had the good sense to whisper this time, instead of screaming his uncle’s ear off.

Luke sighed, tired already, and started to walk out the bedroom. Jess glanced at the boy sleeping soundly and quickly followed. He closed the door behind them (as softly as he could without actually intending to, of course) and crossed his arms again, waiting for an answer.

Luke put one hand on his hip and with the other he rubbed his brow. “He started this about three months ago. Not sure why he comes here, insists on sleeping in your old room. I think it could be because he feels safe in there?”

“In my room?”

“He once spent the night before his wedding here ’cause he got totally smashed and started to babble some really inappropriate shit and I figured he couldn’t be left alone with his buddies and…”

“Woah, woah, wait, back up. He got married?” Jess’ heart nearly stopped at that but he had to know. “To who?”

Not Rory. Not Rory.

“Not Rory, another girl, you don’t know her. It doesn’t matter, that got over long ago. Long story short, he sleepwalks over and crashes in once in a while.”

The relief he felt was mild, and short-lived once he processed the second half of Luke’s hurried explanation.
“What do you mean once in a while?” Was this going to happen every night he was here for the next two weeks?

“Like once, maybe twice a week, no more. I promise.”

“So he sleepwalks what – three blocks to come here? And in the cold just like that, no jacket, no shoes?!!?”

Luke could only shrug. “We’re just lucky our town blocks aren’t as gigantic as Manhattan blocks. And that he started in the spring and it hasn’t gotten around to freezing cold yet.”

Apparently the good people of Sleepy Hollow have all made their peace with this brand new notch of weirdness, hell this might even have added a dash of excitement for awhile when it began.

Jess ran a hand through his hair. Course he still hated the guy’s guts. But this was way too freaky and he couldn’t deny he actually felt a little… maybe, sympathetic toward the guy.

He huffed. “Alright, fine. Whatever. So where do I crash now?”


Jess pouted unhappily. “Trade beds with me.”

Luke snorted and started to walk back downstairs. “No way, kid.”

“But… Luke? Jesus, you can’t expect me to sleep in there with him?”

“Why not? It’s not like you have to share a bed with him. What’s the big deal?”

Jess rolled his eyes. “Well for starters, he might get up tomorrow morning and try to kill me in my sleep!”

Luke laughed as he went into the kitchen and took the pot of coffee down, clearly not needing it anymore.

“Trust me, he won’t. He’s just going to slip out at dawn, whenever he wakes up, to save himself the trouble of looking me in the eye. Even after three whole months, he hates doing it. Hates waking up to find himself in this house instead of his own. And he won’t mention a word about it to you or me or anybody and we’ll all pretend like it never happened and life will go on as usual.”

“Really?” Jess squinted. “Why don’t his folks like, take him to a shrink or something?”

Luke smiled. “What makes you think they haven’t? Nothing’s worked so far. So for the time being, we’re all just glad Dean comes straight here, instead of wandering around aimlessly on the streets into oncoming traffic or worse. You hungry?”

Startled by the sudden change of subject, Jess blinked at his uncle but shook his head no.

“Okay then. You must be tired. Go get some rest, kiddo. We’ll catch up in the morning,” Luke squeezed his shoulder as he passed him by, and then turned around towards him one last time.
“I’m really glad you’re home, Jess.”

Luke left him standing in the kitchen, alone, and wary of going back to his room. He contemplated maybe bringing the extra beddings down here instead, or maybe just taking the couch in the living room.

Although, damn it, he couldn’t let the stupid bag-boy kick him out of his own room now. Could he?

Jess stalked back into his bedroom and stared at Dean’s sleeping form suspiciously.

Dean looked… serene, docile, and really, really out for the count. Jess sighed, tip-toed (why, he wasn’t quite sure himself) to his closet and pulled the futon and extra blankets and pillows out. He shirked out of his button down and stepped out of his jeans and boots, lying down on his make-shift bed on the floor on his back with his hands crossed under his head.

It sure was good to be… the only place that ever came close to being “home”. California with his dad hadn’t worked out so well. And New Jersey with his delinquent mom had been hell. Luke… he probably wouldn’t admit it out loud but Luke was the only stable parent figure he’d ever known. And he was, rather grudgingly, but grateful. It was why he needed to come back, to make amends. Hopefully in a way that wouldn’t involve any touchy-feely-ness or long, heartfelt conversations. Maybe he could just, you know, help out with the diner for awhile.

Yeah. He was sure Luke would get it.

Jess glanced out of his window at the full moon, let the rush of memories from two years ago flood his senses unabated.

It didn’t hurt anymore, none of it. It was all part of his past, part of who he was now as a person. Sure some things still lingered – like his bittersweet attraction to Rory Gilmore and everything that came along with it, including his hatred for Dean Forester, the perfect damn ex-boyfriend.

To be sure, Jess did not come back for Rory to Stars Hollow. In fact, he was well aware that she was at Yale now, apparently having the time of her life with some Huntzberger guy. Strangely enough, that didn’t bother him as much as he thought it should. But this Forester kid had obviously left a lasting impression on Jess’ mind that he couldn’t shrug off as easily.

Jess looked back toward the bed, at Dean sleeping away peacefully. A part of him relished the idea of humiliating him next morning when Dean woke up – get some well deserved payback for – well, okay, nothing in particular Jess needed to avenge himself on. But he couldn't pass up on this opportunity to get a leg up on this age-old, practically traditional rivalry.

Another part, a much smaller one, was also curious. He wondered what could have made Dean start to sleepwalk in the first place. Weren't these things supposed to have a psychological trigger or something?

Exhausted as he was, he didn’t ponder too long, and couple minutes later he drifted away into the arms of welcome sleep.

When he woke up the next morning, it was bright out already.

Jess stretched and rubbed his eyes, squinting to look out through his window at the sun-kissed sights
of Sleepy Hollow he’d actually really missed. Took him a few seconds to remember the events from the night before, and then with a big jolt he sat up and turned toward the bed on his other side.

It was empty.

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Much to his own irritation, Jess couldn’t stop thinking about Forester all morning.

He’d wanted to be there when Forester woke, fact Jess had already imagined the scene in much detail the night before. Forester would wake up, all disoriented, wondering where he was. And just when he’d get it, and start flushing red with humiliation at having sleepwalked (or was it sleptwalked?) again, Jess would clear his throat loudly. And Forester would jump a mile high, and Jess would add insult, well, more insult by spouting off something awesomely witty and dripping with biting sarcasm. And Forester would just die and run out of the room (his room) and never dare show his face around here again. And Jess would totally revel in his final victory and destruction of his arch nemesis, Dean Forester, the guy who… who…

…just a guy he didn’t like very much. Period.

“Jess!” Luke called out from the kitchen, startling Jess where he sat behind the diner’s counter. “Need you to make a quick trip to the store. We’re out of pecan nuts.”

His first instinct was to scowl and refuse to move. He was actually quite comfortable hogging the far table by the window with his feet up and dark shades covering his eyes as he stared out into the bright morning sun. But then he remembered.

Forester still worked at the store.

Jess smirked and grabbed his jacket.

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“Greetings!” Jess called out as loudly and as cheerily as he could. That was just something he’d picked up back in Manhattan from an obnoxious and over-the-top realtor friend, and it stuck.

The store owner looked up and smiled at Jess as he walked in, and so did a few customers close by. But Jess wasn’t satisfied until he’d scanned the entire store area and found what, who he was looking for.

Dean Forester stood between the beverages and the DVDs-for-rent aisle, body facing the racks but face turned towards Jess, contorted into a horrified expression.

Jackpot.

Jess smirked and leaned his back against the counter, watching the tall boy in the ugly green apron whip his head away quickly and gulp hard. His Adam’s apple danced in the center of his long column of throat, his freakishly long fingers trembling enough for Jess to spot from the distance.

Jess hesitated, just for a second, before he remembered what he came here for.

He strolled over to the aisle in front of Dean so he could be in his direct line of sight. If Forester was
man enough to look up into his eyes, that is.

“Had a good night’s sleep, Forester?”

Dean did look up, his face flushed and pale, and tired – which should be answer enough.

“What do you want, Mariano?”

Jess smirked. “Pecan nuts. Five pounds. If you have ‘em?”

Dean sighed and turned away, walking all the way to the other end of the store with Jess following a few steps behind, thoroughly enjoying the other boy’s discomfort.

“Thanks,” he half-laughed, after Forester practically shoved a bag of nuts into Jess’ chest and stood with his fists on his hips, his feet set apart resolutely.

“Anything else?”

“Actually, there is one more thing. I was thinking of refurnishing my room, since I’m going to be staying a while. So which color do you prefer – Persian red or Cerulean blue?”

Dean just frowned at him.

“Curtains? Bed sheets? A highly relevant question of course, seeing how it directly impacts you and your nighttime experiences.”

At first Forester’s nostrils flared. Then he huffed in evident exasperation and crossed his arms. “You can have her, man.”

Jess started. “What?”

“Rory. You can have her. I don’t want her. I’m not in the way anymore. Okay? You can have her.”

And with that he started walking away.

Jess felt… felt offended, outwitted, practically outdone. This, after all his efforts to stay away, break free of that stupid, manic hold she once had on him? How dare Forester imply he was still in love with her?

“What makes you think I want her?”

It was Forester’s turn to scoff. “So you don’t? What are you doing here then?”

“I came to see my uncle Luke. I do know other people in Stars Hollow too, you know.”

“No, Jesse, I meant what are you doing here? In my store?”

Seconds ticked by in utter silence, because honestly, Jess did not know how to respond. Why could he not let go of their history and move on like he’d done with everything and everyone else? Why exactly did he feel compelled to see Dean today and try to cut him down to size?

And why did he feel this urgent need to hear Forester say his name elongated like that again? No one
ever called him that. Strangers by mistake maybe, but no one he knew.

Jess pursed his lips, adjusted his hold on the bag of nuts. “I’ll go with blue, if you don’t mind.”

They glared at each other one last time before Jess abruptly turned towards the billing counter and walked. He told himself he was only imagining that pair of hazel eyes boring into his back as he paid for his purchase, and as casually as he could pretend to be, strolled out of the store.

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“Stupid, stupid, stupid…!”

Jess muttered to himself as he snapped the book shut for the fourth time. He just couldn’t concentrate on anything today. Reading *Lolita in Tehran* was probably easier than reading anything in *Stars Hollow* for Jess tonight. Not after the short and highly unsatisfying confrontation he’d had with that overgrown jerk.

It was a little after eleven and Luke, tired as he was, had already retired to his bedroom, leaving Jess with nothing but his thoughts. He’d never been a television or movies kinda guy. Books were his only solace, as was his work at the construction business that he’d recently started in partnership with his buddy, Dillon, back in Queens. Neither of them, however, could take away the restlessness he felt inside.

_No, Jesse, I meant what are you doing here? In this store?_

“Stupid Sasquatch.”

He was doing what arch rivals do, of course! Make hell each other’s lives even when there’s no reason to anymore. Isn’t that like, one of the cardinal rules of manhood or something? Didn’t Forester get the freaking memo?

Jess didn’t know how long it took to get over the sulking and finally drift into much needed sleep. But the peace didn’t last too long.

The wall phone rang out, loud and shrill, through the apartment, several times before Luke got it. Jess got out of bed, clad in a black t-shirt and grey sweat pants, and opened his door to catch the last of the conversation.

“It’s alright, Marge… You know you don’t have to… Yeah, I’ll text you when he gets here… You take care now... Good night.”

Jess huffed and stepped out until he was in cursing range of Luke. “Not again, man! This is two nights in a row.” He said soon as his uncle hung up.

Luke sighed and turned to him. But he didn’t utter a word; his eyes did all the talking this time.

“Alright, fine!” Jess huffed and grunted and turned to go back into his room. “But he’s taking the futon tonight.”

Jess retreated to his room, shutting the door on Luke with a solid slam. He ran a wary hand through his hair still wet from his shower and exhaled deeply. If his uncle knew about Jess what Jess now knew about himself… Luke would probably not allow Dean to sleep in the same room as him.
Maybe he should tell Luke? Maybe that’s what Jess needed to do - in order to get himself out of this stupid predicament?

Forget it. He wasn’t getting into *that* this vacation.

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Fifteen minutes later, someone knocked on the door. Luke was already downstairs this time and opened the door immediately, allowing the tall boy to sleepwalk inside.

“Here you go, Dean.” Luke led the way up the stairs, not that Dean seemed conscious (or even in need) of his presence at all.

Jess opened his door and stood aside, refusing to acknowledge the way his heart skipped a beat at the sight of his rival.

Dean was dressed in his own brand of sleep clothes – black and white checked pajama bottoms once again barely hanging off his narrow hips, and a baby blue Smurfs t-shirt that was wide enough to be just comfortable but so short it barely covered his mid-riff. His feet were bare again, which made Jess weirdly uncomfortable, and his eyes were open but lowered as if he was studying his own toes very intently.

Once again, Dean walked up to within a two feet distance from the bed and stopped, as if waiting for further instruction. Luke looked at Jess and Jess crossed his arms, not about to surrender his crabbiness just yet. Luke sighed and took Dean’s arm, turning him.

“Here, Dean. You sleep here tonight.”

Jess had made the futon bed before Dean’s knock on the door, really well actually, if he could claim so himself. He watched quietly as Luke gently coaxed the other boy into it, talking to him softly, quietly, as if he could hear him through the haze of his somnambulism.

“It’s very comfortable. Trust me, here you go.”

Dean lowered himself automatically onto the mattress and lay down, his head landing on Jess’ favorite pillow (that Jess had just decided he didn’t like so much after all) and Luke covered him with the two blankets to keep him warm.


Of course, he’d never spoken to Jess like that ever. An unexpected lump of jealousy rose to his throat but he quickly squashed it. This was ridiculous. He never sleepwalked out of the protection of this house, cold and barefoot and completely vulnerable, at the mercy of strangers in the middle of the night…

Jess swallowed. He found himself unable to look away from Dean’s face.

With supreme determination, Jess wrenched himself away, got under the covers of *his* bed and turned to face the other side. Luke tiptoed out the room and clicked the door shut behind him. The room was cast in complete darkness, except for a soft full-moon glow seeping through a gap in the
window curtains. It was always so quiet, here in the middle of the night in Sleepy Hollow. So unlike Queens and its round-the-clock hustling and bustling.

He’d only just started to drift away when something moved behind him, pulling him slowly back to consciousness. Jess turned in his bed, away from the window and back to the other guy in the room… the guy who was no longer tucked in from neck to toe on a floor mattress. And instead, was standing right next to him.

Jess jumped and almost fell out of the bed. “Shit!” He hissed, almost angrily. “You scared me, man!”

He didn’t get a response. Jess sat up, his covers falling to his waist. “Forester? Are you… are you awake?”

No response again. Instead Jess watched with his mouth agape as Dean moved robotically and slid into the bed, his bed, with him in it, right next to him!

“Forester! De-Dean!” Jess hissed again, for some reason still unable to be any louder.

Instead all he could do was jump out of bed just as quickly as Dean had slid into it and promptly fallen sleep. Jess stared, just… stared… for a whole minute, or a year maybe. And then he sighed, walking around the bed and over to the futon, collapsing bonelessly onto it.

*Man. This was going to a very long two weeks indeed.*

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Chapter Four …

The third time happened two nights later. Even Luke was surprised by how frequently it’d been happening of late.

“He must be under a lot of stress lately,” was all he could offer by way of explanation.

Okay, so, curiosity got the best of Jess and he ended up doing some research of his own.

Apparently, Forester had gotten into State university, but after one and a half years, he’d had to take a break because his dad left. Just up and left one fine day, no explanation, nothing. No one even saw it coming. He also made a bunch of bank withdrawals draining years and years of the family’s savings and left behind a giant mortgage on the house to pay back. It was bad enough that Dean figured he couldn’t afford his college tuition any longer. So he took a break and came home, to support and take care of his mom and sister – be the man of the house.

Not to mention the very bitter and very messy divorce from his wife, Lindsay something, that he was still paying monthly for.

Dean worked three jobs – his old one at the grocery store, a new one at a local construction company, and another at a landscaping firm. All physically strenuous jobs that should exhaust him so completely and utterly that he’d sleep like the freaking dead. Except, he didn’t.

Sleepwalking is more commonly experienced in people with high levels of stress, anxiety or psychological factors and in people with genetic factors (family history), or sometimes a combination of both.

That’s what Wiki had to say about it. And as per Luke’s conversations with Dean’s mom, the Foresters didn’t know of anyone else in the family tree with this particular disorder.

Jess tried hard to ignore the pangs of guilt throttling his guts. Surely his visit to Stars Hollow and his blatant attempts to rile the guy up had nothing to do with this elevated level of stress? Technically, if Jess was the reason, Dean should not still be sleepwalking to where Jess was, should he?

Apparently somnambulists didn’t have any conscious awareness of what they were doing while they sleepwalked. Maybe it was just force of habit. Sleepwalker-Dean probably had no idea that Jess even existed, or was in Stars Hollow, let alone in that room he’d taken such a shining to.

And that sort of… stung. It shouldn’t. But it did.

The third time, Jess had stubbornly held on to the bed and again Luke had made Dean lie down on the futon. But once again, five minutes later, he’d sleepwalked back out of that bed and into Jess’, displacing the other boy again. Jess had cursed under his breath, seeing how there was nothing much else to do anyway, and collapsed onto the futon with a muted thud.

The fourth time though, which happened the very next night, Jess decided he wasn’t going to give in so easily. Enough was enough. This time, he wasn’t going to so much as move.
He waited for Luke to switch off the lights and leave. And he stayed on his side, looking at Dean’s sleeping (or not) form on the floor, so peaceful and still, like a statue. Just under five minutes later, the body rose. His movements were robotic and seamless, no fumbling, no clumsiness, like he knew exactly what to do.

Jess swallowed and waited, and then just as Dean approached the bed, conveniently forgetting his resolution, Jess slid over to make space for the other boy in his bed.

He didn’t quite understand why he was doing this. All he could fathom of his own scrambled thoughts was this… dimly lit realization that, he didn’t actually mind lying so close to Dean after all. He really didn’t.

Dean lay himself down, flat on his back on the bed and promptly closed his eyes. He had no idea he was sharing it with someone, a guy, and that made Jess smirk. It was probably something else he could use to make the boy’s life miserable the following morning, just to see his long nostrils do the sexy flaring thing again.

Sexy? Jess pretended he didn’t just think that.

Confused, conflicted, and kind of furious (with himself, with Dean, with the whole damn universe) but not sure what to do about it… Jess just propped himself up on one elbow and watched the other man sleep. He knew he’d have to get out and take the futon eventually. But for now, there was something about a serene Dean that kept him enthralled enough to stay just a few more minutes.

“Dean…” he whispered, softly, expecting no response and getting none. He just liked the way the name rolled off his tongue.

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It was Friday, the morning after, and Jess was having a beautiful dream.

He was lying in a hammock, somewhere on a beach in Hawaii. The sun was bright and high but not harsh, warming the cold, clammy skin of his bare chest and arms. He wore a pair of grey cargos snipped at the knees, and brown aviator shades covering his eyes but nothing else. He lay on his back, his head cushioned in his own entwined hands, and his ankles were crossed at the other end of the hammock.

A cool breeze swayed him gently from side to side, and Jess felt so utterly relaxed, like he had nothing to worry about, nothing at all. The business was doing great, he trusted Dillon with his life, he’d finally found a purpose and a way to keep himself comfortably in books, booze and the company of good friends who seemed to like him well enough. Luke seemed to have forgiven him, and his mom didn’t need him anymore, nor he her. There was no girl trouble, or boy trouble for that matter - not anymore.

Semi-conscious as he was, Jess knew his face was split into a wide smile, even in his sleep. It couldn’t possibly get any better than this, could it?

Jess sighed deeply, and only then did he realize he wasn’t alone on the hammock in this island of paradise. A long, elegant body was curled up beside him, facing away from him.
Awareness crept up on him slowly, of certain parts of that body in warm, electrifying contact with certain other parts of his. Like the soles of two feet planted carelessly against Jess’ shins, a head full of floral smelling, silken hair nestled in the crook of Jess’ arm, his own hand resting languorously in the dip of a narrow waist, and a slim but curvaceous butt pressed right up and wiggling sexily against his rock hard…

Jess’ eyes snapped open with a jolt.

*Dean!*

“Oh fuck, oh fuck! *Oh fuck!!*”

Weirdly enough he stuck to whispering because he still didn’t want to wake the other guy up, and just as quietly he cursed himself for falling asleep before getting off this stupid bed. His first instinct was to bolt out now (too fucking late) and put as much distance as he could between himself and Forester. For God’s sakes, *Forester!!*

But moving would require getting his arm out from under Forester’s head and that would definitely wake him up. At least the awkwardness of the situation was inflicted only on him, for now. Maybe Dean would shift away on his own in some time? So long as no one else, including Forester, saw the two of them like this, Jess could always push it under the carpet and deny it ever happened. Brilliant plan, right.

*Right?*

Dean wiggled again, and Jess gasped as soundlessly as he could. He held his breath and his mouth stayed tautly open for what felt like hours until his jaw started to ache. Forester seemed to be pushing his ass into Jess’ groin, making space for himself in between Jess’ legs with absolute wantonness.

“Don’t do that, Dean, ah, God… fuck!!” Jess pled silently, his eyes rolling back into his head at the sudden waves of pleasure coursing through him, still unable to move even an inch.

Of course this wasn’t the first time Jess found himself getting so hopelessly turned on by a guy. He’d in fact, spent a good time in the last few months exploring this new side of him. He wasn’t averse to being gay in any way. Jess just figured he was one of those fortunate ones who got to swing both ways. No big deal.

What he couldn’t quite deal with yet was – the fact that this was a guy he didn’t even like, heck, had *hated* for years and years. This was Dean Forester.

And Dean Forester was fast asleep. Unaware of his own actions. And in a manner of speaking, this could easily be seen as Jess taking advantage. He winced pathetically, and started to slide out as slowly and gently as he could from under Dean’s head. And that’s precisely when (or why) the other man decided to wake up.

Jess stilled. Dean stirred.

The taller boy sighed, rubbing his face languidly against the elbow he was resting it on. An elbow that, he belatedly realized, did not belong to him.

Jess knew the exact second in which Dean realized what he was doing and where he was. The entire length of his body from head to toe froze. He wondered if Dean was doing what he’d done when he
first woke up – taking inventory of every single part of his body in contact with a warm, living body part behind him. Parts that, if Dean was recognizing his surroundings correctly, could only belong to a certain dark haired ex-teen rebel, construction worker who went by the name of Jess Mariano.

And when Dean gasped, it was anything but soundless.

He jumped straight out of bed and turned, his face once again twisted into a terrible expression of shock and embarrassment. His chest heaved with outright panic and his fists were shaking at his sides, actually all of his was shaking pretty visibly at this point.

Jess gulped hard and slowly sat up in bed, praying his pants wouldn’t give his stiffness away. “Forester…”

Dean winced at the sound of his voice, but he didn’t respond. Maybe he wasn’t capable of it yet.

“It’s not as bad as you think.”

And that, for some reason, made Dean find his voice – the annoying accusatory one that always blamed Jess for everything. “What the hell were you doing?”

Jess sat up straighter. “Me? I wasn’t doing anything! You’re the one who – ”

“You were molesting me in my sleep, you sick bastard!”

Jess’ face turned red. “Watch it, Forester.”

“Why are you in this bed at all?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

Dean wheezed harder. “I… this… I – you were supposed to take the floor!”

“Yeah well, this is my bed. Why do you get to throw me out of it every night just because you’re a sleepwalking freak?”

And he should have stopped while he was ahead. Except Jess never really learnt how to do that.

He watched and kicked himself mentally as Dean’s face crumbled before him a second time in two days, the almond shaped eyes filled rapidly with tears that made Jess feel all of two inches tall. Shit.

Jess got out of bed and stood up. “Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to – “

Forester didn’t wait to hear the rest of his apology. He turned on his heels, bare as last night, and ran as fast as he could.

“Dean, wait. Dean!”

The tall man flew out of the diner just as Luke came striding out of his bedroom to see what the commotion was all about. “What happened?”

Jess just swallowed tightly, standing at his door with his arms crossed, hoping he didn’t look too guilty. Luke’s expression of question melted into one of realization, and he shook his head and
sighed.

“Why couldn’t you just pretend to be asleep when he woke up?”


***
Jess Mariano gritted his teeth, dug his hands into his jacket pockets, and resolutely put one foot ahead of the other until he reached his destination – Doose's Market. It was almost noon, Dean would be out on his lunch break any moment now. Yep, he’d done his homework alright.

The moment Dean stepped out of the store into the bright sunlight, he spotted Jess waiting on the sidewalk for him. His face went pale and rigid and he turned toward the opposite direction.

“Forester! A moment, if you will?”

“And that’s all Dean said, exasperated as hell, but he didn’t stop. He just shoved his own hands into his oversized leather jacket’s pockets and kept striding away with his stupid long legs that made it harder for Jess to keep up with him.

“You know the Gilmores don’t have a copyright on the American English language, or verbal diarrhea, or even the art of putting one’s foot in one’s mouth at the wrong place at the wrong time and you should know, seeing how I’ve already given you a phenomenal demonstration earlier this morning…”

“I don’t want to talk about it, Mariano. Please go waste your verbal diarrhea on someone else. I’m still on the clock…”

And that’s all Dean said, exasperated as hell, but he didn’t stop. He just shoved his own hands into his oversized leather jacket’s pockets and kept striding away with his stupid long legs that made it harder for Jess to keep up with him.

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“I don’t want to talk about it, Mariano. Please go waste your verbal diarrhea on someone else. I’m still on the clock…”

Jess frowned as he continued to stalk the taller boy who very abruptly changed course to now start walking towards the coffee shop. Jess nearly slipped on the pavement in trying to follow suit. “But this is your lunch break?”

“It’s the illusion of a lunch break. And a very, very short one at that so please, if there’s nothing else…”

“Yes there is…”

“No interested!”

“Look man, I just want to apologize.”

Dean stopped at that, again with the abruptness that nearly sent Jess skidding to the ground. He turned to his stalker with annoyance (and more than a little desperation) rolling off every inch of that long, sinewy… really well-cloaked in baggy clothes body. Oddly enough, Jess found himself struggling to keep his breathing steady.

“I… I was an insensitive ass and you did not deserve what I said, this morning. I-I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Dean scoffed forcefully at that. “Don’t kid yourself, Mariano. You can’t hurt me. And besides,
we’ve said worse and done worse to each other in the past. How come you’re so worried about my feelings now?”

Jess glared, losing it again. Humility was never his strong suit and, apparently neither was graciousness Dean’s. “Clearly, apology accepted is not a phrase you’re familiar with.”

And Dean glared right back. “Yeah, clearly.”

“Why do you always have to be such an asshole, man? I see you three years later and you still haven’t grown up!”

“Oh so now I’m a sleepwalking freak asshole who needs to grow up? Some apology!”

Jess exhaled, and took two steps closer until he was standing right in Dean’s personal space, not that he was ever able to intimidate the guy. But it was a reflex mechanism Jess always resorted to when he was provoked.

“I said what I came here to say, man. But you better not let it go to your head. I only came because Luke sent me. He wants you to know you still have a place to crash during your nightly expeditions.”

The armor cracked at that. Dean started to cross his arms before realizing what he was about to do and stopped. There was doubt and hesitation, and pain, in his eyes again – not unlike what Jess saw there this morning. He’d lied purposely about Luke sending him, knowing this would happen. And a part of him regretted it deeply but another part, the hot-tempered one, really didn’t.

“Are we done?”

Not by a long shot, hopefully. Jess bit back the instinctive response riding the tip of his tongue. A lot more needed to be said but now just wasn’t the time. He quickly turned on his heels and walked away as fast as he could.

It occurred to him minutes later, that Dean had not mentioned the earlier incident about finding Jess in bed with him at all, not once. Almost like he was in outright denial that it even happened. And here Jess had prepared such a long-winding speech explaining how it’d all come about completely by accident.

An accident he was more than happy to have happen over and over again.

***

Jess found himself pacing back and forth in the diner area, long after they’d closed up and Luke was done scrubbing his tables and counter tops to his satisfaction. He looked about ready to hit the sack but lingered on as Jess continued to pace.

“It’s almost midnight,” Jess offered by way of explanation. “He should be here by now.”

“Maybe he’s taking the night off. He does that, you know.”

Jess bit his lip. “No, I don’t think so.”
Luke narrowed his eyes at him. “You think he’s stressed out even more because of what happened this morning?”

“That and later when I, uh, tried to apologize but which somehow…”

“… snowballed into another round of insults, of course. What a shocker.” Luke bit a little grin back. “But what I am pleasantly surprised by is this.”

“This?”

“This. You, showing actual concern for someone other than yourself, Jess. I’m impressed!”

Jess fumbled to explain his irrational behavior, not that he understood it much himself. One minute he was angry with that stubborn jerk Forester and lashing out at him, another minute he was drowning in the guilt of making him look like a sad puppy left out in the rain.

“Look, I’m just worried he might like, you know, not come over here because of me and, you know…”

Luke frowned, realization dawning slowly. “And roam the streets into oncoming traffic or something worse oh my God Jess I’m going to kill you!”

“Or maybe a confrontation was exactly what he needed and now I’ve miraculously cured him of his sleepwalking habit?”

Luke just looked at him.

Jess winced. “Yeah, I didn’t think so.”

Just when Luke was about to come back with another round of chastisement, the knocks came.

*Oh thank you, Sweet Mary Mother of Jesus!*

Jess lingered just behind him as Luke went to open the door. Dean was as he’d been every night – dressed in his sleep clothes – the gray tattered t-shirt and flannel pants this time, barefoot, hair falling over his lowered eyes and in a deep state of not-consciousness that no one who’s never sleepwalked will ever understand.

“Come on in, Dean.” Luke’s voice was calm and gentle and tempered as always, like he hadn’t been getting ready to whale away at Jess two seconds ago.

Jess followed quietly, watching the ritual like he did every night. Something about this ritual, this… this taking care of Forester, it had turned into a regular scheduled event Jess didn’t seem to want to miss. He’d even blown off some old friends of his and decided to spend Friday night at home. For *this.*

Luke sent him a warning glare before he turned off the lights and closed the door on the two boys. Jess lay on his stomach in his bed, once again watching Dean. Hoping he’d get up. Get up and come join him like he did last night and the night before, and the one before it.

Dean didn’t disappoint. And this time, Jess didn’t even pretend to mind.
Jess slid easily to his left and pulled the covers back, making space for Forester to climb in and lay on his back again. Jess pulled the covers on top of the other boy with a light hand, careful not to jar him awake by mistake. And then he stayed on his side, head propped up on one elbow, watching Dean.

He counted off exactly four minutes and twenty-six seconds on his wrist watch, listening to Dean’s breath even out as he truly sank into a deep, healing sleep. The sleep he must so desperately need if he was to keep up with his three day jobs. And once he was sure Dean was really, really out, he couldn’t stop himself.

Jess raised a hesitant, trembling hand and let it hover over Dean’s face, waiting to screw up enough courage. Morality and ethics warred with temptation in his mind but in the end, the devil won out. Jess brought an index finger down to a point on Dean’s forehead right between the eyes. The skin was warm and soft, and Jess slowly, cautiously, slid the finger down to the bridge of the perfect nose. He reached the tip of it and licked his lips, swallowing the lump of unexplainably strong desire clogging his throat. Letting the finger explore a path down from the nose to the mouth, tracing the contours of the plush red lips, Jess shuddered.

“Pervy much?” He rasped, to himself, in the quiet darkness.

Wincing so hard as if it were hurting him physically to do so, Jess pulled his hand away. Then he forced himself to turn to his other side and stare out the window. A storm seemed to be on its way, the wind rustling through leaves right outside his room was pretty loud and insistent.

Of course he was going to leave, in just a minute. Just one more minute, and then he’ll slip out from under the comfortably warm covers, abandon this precious proximity to the boy with the alluring hazel eyes… and crash on the stupid futon instead.

Jess had clearly underestimated the hypnotic cadence of the north winds, and how quickly they succeeded in lulling him to sleep.

***

At the crack of dawn, Jess opened his eyes and for a second panicked when he realized he couldn’t move. Took him another couple of seconds to understand why.

He was flat on his back, in his bed. And Forester was also in his bed, on his stomach, using Jess’ chest as a pillow. His endless limbs were sprawled all over and across Jess, effectively trapping him under his warm, solid, and very heavy weight. So much as a twitch would disturb the other man’s sleep and…

_Not again._

Jess grimaced and sighed, as quietly as he could. He really, really didn’t want a repeat of yesterday morning. Maybe he could just close his eyes and feign sleep when Dean started to wake up. Until then, he had to stay absolutely, nerve-wrackingly, still. All he had to do was relax, into the arms holding him, the legs straddling him. Bury his nose in the softness of Dean’s hair, long, silky bangs that smelled fresh and sweet, like a girl’s. Like maybe Herbal Essences.

Maybe they were forced to cut corners with supplies at home, sharing stuff like shampoos. And
considering Dean lived with his mom and sister…

Jess took another deep whiff, and suddenly being trapped under Forester didn’t seem like such a hardship after all.

A few minutes later (and way too soon), Dean started to breathe deeply, deeper than he normally did in his sleep. Jess smiled, making up his mind at last. He was not going to take his uncle’s advice after all.

When Dean awoke, he stayed still for the longest time, as if he was trying to figure out what his latest predicament looked like. He stretched and pushed a little against Jess, and only then did he realize that his pillow wasn’t actually a pillow at all.

“Fuck!” Dean gasped louder than he did yesterday, jumping off the bed and falling to the floor, crawling away from Jess until his back hit a wall.

Jess rolled his eyes, and turned to his side, propping his head up on an elbow again despite the cramped arm protesting the smart-assed posturing. “Honestly, Forester, I thought you’d be used to this by now.”

Clearly not, if that look of abject horror on the other boy’s face was anything to go by. Dean’s mouth had fallen open as he wheezed, staring wordlessly at Jess, flushing a bright red with a brand new wave of embarrassment.

“I know your secret, Forester.”

Dean panicked even more, if that were possible. “Wha-what?”

Jess smirked softly. “You’re a cuddler. And don’t you deny it, I was there. First hand eyewitness accounts are not that easy to discredit, you know.”

“Why? Why do you keep doing this?”

Jess got out of bed. “Why do I keep doing what?”

He noticed the trembling intensify, along with the flinching as Jess approached Dean. Jeez. He put his hands up in placation.

“I’m not the one doing anything, Dean. You’re the one who slips out of your bed and into mine after I’ve already fallen sleep.”

Jess felt guilty for throwing that little white lie in there, but at least that way he could feign innocence and maybe Dean wouldn’t hate him so much.

“See I’m the molester here.” He chuckled, fully intending it to be a joke but obviously Dean was not amused. So he backtracked. “I’m kidding. I didn’t mind, really.”

Dean grimaced. “Why not?”

Yeah, why not, Mariano?

Jess inhaled deeply, and decided… the hell with it. He looked straight into Dean’s eyes – playing the
biggest gambling hand of his life.

“I think you know why, Forester.”

Seconds ticked away in silence. Jess watched realization dawn on Dean’s face, and turn into ten times the shock and horror from a minute ago. “Dude! You’re… are you…? But, I’m… I’m not gay!!”

Jess could only laugh. “Okay. If you say so.”

Dean narrowed his eyes. “What the fuck does that mean?”

Jess shrugged and sat back on the bed. “You’ve been pressing up to me for two nights in a row, man. Trust me, I know. But I do understand Stars Hollow is not the best place in the world to come out to…”

“No, I mean… that’s not what… damn it, Jess!”

Dean stood up in a hurry, and one look at his face made Jess think this time he’d really done it – he’d added injury to grievous injury and with double the insult to boot. And he’d also risked himself in the process – after all, what was to stop Forester from going out and telling all of Stars Hollow that Mariano was a flaming homosexual? Not that he was ashamed or afraid, in fact not at all, but he’d rather keep his private life exactly that – private. But now he’d gone on and recklessly thrown it all over into Forester’s court.

He rose slowly from the bed. “Dean, it’s okay. I was kidding.”

Dean looked, just looked at him for a whole deathly silent minute. Eventually, having evidently made up his mind, he frowned. “No, you weren’t.”

Jess swallowed, not sure how to respond.

Dean started to shake his head over and over again. “B-But I-I don’t need this. Not now. Not with everything else. Please, I can’t…”

Jess frowned and before he could step closer, Dean ran. Opened the door and slammed it shut behind him with a bang. Jess closed his eyes and listened to the footsteps thundering down the stairs with a sinking feeling in his chest.

Way to go, Mariano. Just can’t do anything right with that boy, can you?

He groaned loudly and flopped back into bed.

***
Chapter 6

Dean didn’t show the next night. Or the night after that.

Jess paced and waited in the diner downstairs until midnight. He paced and waited in his room upstairs after that. By next morning, he’d let his disappointment (and frustration) settle into a low ebb, and was working doubly hard to pretend he didn’t care. Not about Dean. Nor about his stupid sleepwalking problem, that seemed to have miraculously vanished overnight.

Jess kicked at the stupid futon mattress, sending it flying to the farthest corner of the bedroom.

No, he really didn’t care.

He went to the grocery store both days, only to find Dean didn’t do Saturdays and Sundays. Instead he dedicated the weekend to this new in town landscaping contractor he was working for, who knows where. Jess could find out, of course, it was a small town after all, but he was not going to start stalking Dean everywhere he went. He wasn’t that far gone you know. Not yet.

At least Dean hadn’t blown the whistle about Jess’ sexuality – for that he was both grateful and surprised. Could it mean Dean didn’t hate Jess so much after all? Or that maybe, like Jess had seen Dean in a new light these past few days and developed certain, uh, feelings for him… maybe Dean had done the same?

It was a stretch, but Jess couldn’t help but hope. Course it didn’t explain why he stopped coming over to the diner and why he was avoiding Jess like the plague. Bet that overgrown dork was suppressing it all as hard as he could. Like he was suppressing everything else – his anger and his frustrations, his fears and disappointments…

Jess contemplated paying his sister, Claire something, a little visit; see if she remembered him from that disastrous carnival date three years ago. God she was such an annoying little thing, just like her brother (who wasn’t, by any stretch of the imagination little, of course).

Wasn’t she at the local public middle school in walking distance from the diner?

“Jesus!” He threw his pen across the counter, making the early Monday morning patrons at Luke’s diner look up. He winced apologetically and looked away.

“That’d be so low, even for you, Mariano.” He muttered under his breath and stalked back into the kitchen to check up on a couple of orders.

***

When Monday came around with still no sign of Dean anywhere (he tried the grocery store again – Dean had taken the day off) Jess started to get fidgety. Try as he might, he couldn’t shake the feeling
that something was very wrong. And that quite possibly, Jess was to blame for it.

The answer came to him shortly after lunch. Hell, it actually walked right into the diner all by itself.

A slender, middle-aged woman, with almond shaped green eyes and beautiful auburn hair tied loosely at the back of her neck, slid into the seat closest to Jess across the counter. She looked... tired, and lonely, and discontent. Jess immediately recognized her as Margaret Forester, even though he’d never seen her before.


He nodded eagerly and went into the kitchen to call his uncle out.

“Marge, hey!” Luke rushed out soon as he could, wiping his hands on a hand towel.

The greetings were kept short, thankfully. Jess hung in the background but within earshot, tapping his feet on the floor nervously.

“How is he?”

The woman sighed. “Not good. I thought the last two days were good but I was wrong. Luke, Dean’s fallen off the wagon. He’s taking the sleeping pills again.”

Luke looked alarmed at that. Jess frowned hard and took two steps closer.

“Is he alright?”

“Oh, he is better. Just drowsier. Keeps knocking his knees against furniture and tripping over his own two feet like the last time. That’s how I figured what he’d been up to actually.”

“God, that kid, doesn’t he realize this could lead him straight back to where he started? Where did he get hold of the pills anyway?”

Margaret grimaced painfully and looked down at her hands. “He broke into my prescription cabinet. It is my fault. I should have noticed something was off sooner. He’s been on edge all week, well, more so than usual.”

“You can’t watch him all the time, Marge. He’s a big boy now. He should be making more responsible decisions than that. Where is he? I haven’t seen him around in three days.”

“At home, I finally got him to take a day off. He is working himself to the ground, Luke, and there is nothing I can do to help him.”

The woman started to snivel softly, prompting Luke to slide next to her, putting a comforting arm around her shoulders.

Jess had heard enough. He picked up his jacket and stormed out of the diner.

*That stupid sonofabitch.*

Jess headed straight for the Forester house. Not like he needed to stop for directions. Everyone knew where everyone lived in Sleepy Hollow.
The door opened after a couple of bell rings. It was the little squirt alright. Except she wasn’t so little anymore. It was obvious she had inherited the same height gene her big brother did. Her hair was a respectably dark shade of blonde and eyes were green like her mother’s but the jaw-line was unmistakably Dean’s.

“Yes?” She asked, raising her eyebrows up to her hairline, almost like her big brother. Jess stared for a moment before she cleared her throat and snapped him out of it.

“Sorry, uh, you’re Claire, right?”

“Who’s asking?”

He tried to smile. “Jess Mariano. I don’t know if you remember, we met at the carnival three years ago?”

The girl frowned in confusion.

“Rory’s date?”

Recognition dawned at last and suddenly she didn’t seem too happy to see him.

“It’s Clara.”

Jess grimaced apologetically. “Is Dean home?”

Claire, sorry, Clara huffed, crossed her arms and stepped aside, but only barely. “Would you like to come in?”

Jess shook his head. “Thanks. Please can you just tell him I’d like to speak to him for a second?”

She glared at him (just like her brother) and slammed the door shut in his face making him flinch. He heard her inside running up a staircase, and he waited.

He was made to wait for longer than would be considered polite, and when the door finally opened, it was the Sasquatch. He stepped out onto the patio and stood with his arms folded against his chest, eyes full of wariness. Red was a becoming color on his face of late.

“Jess…”

Jess didn’t let him say anything further. Nor did he say anything in return.

Dean didn’t see it coming. His eyes were wary and narrowed one moment, wide and utterly astounded the next when Jess’ fist connected with his face.

“Ow!” They both howled at exactly the same time. Dean because he just got punched obviously, and Jess because he wasn’t expecting it to hurt him so much.
Dean staggered back two steps, sliding down to the floor against his door and holding his jaw in one hand.

“What the hell??”

Jess blinked back the tears suddenly starting to spring up to his own eyes. Talk about truly screwed up timing.

“That’s for being the pathetic wimp that you are, Forester! I knew you were an annoying, pigheaded jerk so far deep in denial that you can’t tell your own face from your ass. But I didn’t know you were such a spineless idiot that you’d rather drug yourself to sleep than face your fears like a man!??”

“…”

Dean just… sat there, staring up at Jess with a blank expression on his face. That perfect chiseled, ‘made by the hands of God himself’ face. Jess swallowed the rest of his rage down, suddenly feeling awkward and at a loss for words because dammit Dean was supposed to fight back. Argue back, say… something. And the fact that he didn’t just pissed Jess off more.

“Who exactly is going to benefit from your relapse into addiction, huh? Your mom? Or your sister??”

Dean stood up then, planting both his palms against Jess’ chest and shoving with all his might. Jess staggered back, nearly slipping on the sprinkler-soaked porch.

“What gives you the right, Mariano? What the fuck do you know about my life???”

Dean had found his temper now, and all six feet and four inches of him were advancing on Jess with a vengeance the shorter boy was strangely delighted to see. This was the passion that’d been missing. This was the Dean he’d been missing.

“So your dad left you, well boo-hoo! My dad’s been gone since before I was born and I had to look out for my mom all my life! At least you had nineteen good years and a family that loves you and wants you around, so stop your freaking whining and grow a set for God’s sake!”

Dean hyperventilated, his eyes screwed up to angry little slits and he clenched his hands into fists. For a moment Jess thought he was going to take a swing at him, but Dean didn’t. He just stood there, looking right into Jess’ eyes as if struggling to understand this unwarranted, out of the blue rain on his pity parade.

“What gives you the right to come into my house and judge me? Who are you, Jess? Why – why are you here at all? Just… damn it, why do you care??”

Jess smiled, and he was pretty sure it came out creepy as hell. Oh well. He suddenly bent forward to rest his hands on his knees, realizing he was out of breath too for some reason, then straightened up and glared at Dean one last time.

“You better sleep-walk your skinny little ass to me tonight, Forester. Because if you take the pills again, I’ll come back tomorrow and make a bigger spectacle of you than I did three years ago.”

Dean looked affronted obviously, and at the same time curious – like he was trying to make up his mind about Jess’ intentions. “If I remember right, and I do, it was me who threw the first punch three years ago. And the last one.”
“Yeah well, the stakes are higher for me this time. Besides with you drugged up to your eyeballs, anyone can take you. Clara can take you.”

“What do you mean stakes are higher for you this time?”

“…”

Jess bit his lip and started to walk away. “Tonight then? Better be there, Forester, or else…”

“Like I’m afraid of you?” Dean scoffed miserably. “Fuck you!”

Jess laughed out loud. That should happen too, soon, if he can help it.

“Get over yourself, Mariano!”

Jess just kept walking, didn’t turn back.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“…”

“I’m not coming to you, you hear me? I’m not coming!!”

***

Midnight struck and the knocks returned.

Jess smirked, more than a little relieved admittedly, and got up from his place behind the counter to open the door.

Earlier that night, he’d convinced Luke to go to sleep.

“You should go to bed. You look really beat, Uncle Luke.”

“Uncle? What are you up to, Jess?”

“Nothing! Look I’ll take care of Dean if he comes in. No I won’t dunk his head in the toilet, or do anything to hurt him, I promise. You just go get some sleep, alright? Trust me!”

“Trust you? With Dean? I don’t think so.”

And that had gone on for about an hour until Luke had finally relented. Of course Jess wasn’t born yesterday. He knew his uncle was crouching right next to his slightly ajar bedroom door, watching his every move.

“Come on in, Dean.”

The boy was sleepwalking, of course, which meant he hadn’t found (or looked for) the pills to knock himself out tonight. Thank God.
Jess led the taller guy in his Smurfs t-shirt and black track pants up the stairs to the bedroom they’d come to share this past week. He heard Luke’s door softly click shut and smiled.

“Here, Dean, come on.” Jess found himself unconsciously mimicking his uncle’s actions.

Putting a hand in the small of Dean’s back, he ushered him gently towards the bed. He pulled the covers back and waited until Dean got in, then he tucked the covers around him and watched as Dean slowly closed his eyes.

“It’s okay, you’re safe here.” He whispered, then quietly backed away and sat down on his futon mattress on the floor.

He folded his knees, holding them against his chest and rested his chin on the back of his hands, watching Dean sleep.

It had been drizzling all night and Dean’s clothes were slightly damp. Jess worried Dean might catch a cold or something but he didn’t dare do anything about it. He knew he’d been partially (or maybe fully?) responsible for freaking Dean out so much that he’d resorted to the sleeping pills. So no, he was not about to do anything to hurt Dean again. Every nerve ending, every breath in his body yearned to reach out and touch the beautiful sleeping boy. But this, after promising Dean that he’d be safe here…

Jess didn’t move from his spot all night.

***
Chapter 7

Five minutes to six in the morning, Dean opened his eyes. Birds were chirping right outside the bedroom window, and muted sunlight streamed in through the panes, throwing playful shadows on his face – the face Jess still couldn’t take his eyes too far away from.

Dean sighed heavily, slowly coming to realize, but thankfully not freaking out this time, where he was this morning. He looked around quietly, sleepily, until his eyes landed on the other person in the bedroom.

Jess was still sitting; leaning against the far wall with his legs stretched out on the mattress before him and crossed at the ankles. He was holding a book, Kissinger: A Biography, that he hadn’t managed to read a word of all night.

Their eyes met, and for a minute or maybe a decade, neither seemed willing to look away. Dean was the first to blink. He sighed again and looked up to the plain white ceiling.

“Bet you stayed up all night just so you could be awake to gloat.”

Jess smiled. “I stayed up all night, alright.”

... to watch you sleep. And wow if it sounded that psychotic in his head, no way was he going to say it out loud.

Dean turned to him, frowning, but he didn’t ask for an explanation. He looked away, maybe disappointed when none was forthcoming on its own, and gulped hard.

“I told you, Jess. I’m not gay.”

Jess frowned impatiently. “Why do we have to be anything at all? Gay, straight, how does it matter? I just want you to be you and that you let me be me. Don’t worry, Forester, I don’t expect anything from you.”

Dean turned to him again. “You don’t?”

Jess shook his head, hoping the other boy couldn’t decipher the sharp trembling in his lower lip.

“And it’s not like you need to be scared of me or anything. Hell, I know if I was stupid enough to try something, you could snap my neck in two like a twig.”

Dean laughed shortly. “Damn right I could, midget.”

Jess smirked, hoping his giddiness at hearing Dean laugh for once wasn’t too evident. “Yeah alright, but no need for personal attacks, dude.”

Dean smiled, and their eyes met again. It was... like getting locked into a trance, unable to leave, unwilling to leave, until Dean pulled his gaze away abruptly. Leaving Jess feeling alone and
distressed like he’d never felt before.

“How long are you here for?”

Jess had decided to stay longer, for obvious reasons. And his partner Dillon had reluctantly agreed. “Two more weeks, I think. Why? Want me to stay longer?”

Dean didn’t respond to the goading. Instead he continued to lie on his back with his hands entwined over his chest, staring up at the blank ceiling.

“You used to hate my guts, man. Wh-what happened?” he whispered, as if he couldn’t believe he was asking this himself.

Jess smirked, and shrugged lightly. “Guess I grew up.”

“…”

“Oh, maybe, you did.”

Dean frowned and turned to look at him then.

“Into your gargantuan arms and legs.”

Jess couldn’t help but laugh at the incredibly shocked expression on the tall boy’s brightly blushing face. Dean decided that was the time to make his swift exit and got out of bed in a huff. Jess didn’t stop him, and was still chuckling quietly when Dean glared at him one last time before pushing the bedroom door shut behind him.

***

Jess fell asleep soon after Dean left, collapsing into a dreamless sleep that didn’t turn him loose until after noon. Luke just shook his head amused and waved him off when Jess said he was going to the book shop.

Luke understood of course. The bookshop was almost like a spiritual retreat for Jess; his haven. It was where Jess would run off to when the turbulence inside him got too much that he couldn’t fight or deny or curse at it enough to make it go away. Instead, he would choose to simply… ignore it. And the only way for Jess to do that was to immerse his mind into someone else’s world.

Fiction or otherwise, a book gave him the reprieve to pretend he was someone else, living someone else’s life. Put himself in someone else’s shoes – some days he chose the shoes of the tragic but eventually victorious hero, some days he’d rather be the bad guy ‘cause let’s face it – there is indescribable freedom in villainy. And then there were days he’d go with the gray characters, or the guys on the sidelines watching it all unfold for someone else; guys free from the moral obligation of having to do something, anything. Nor were they important enough to be judged or debated upon for the choices they eventually made.

Like today. Today he’d rather be the Robert Ross to his Oscar Wilde, watching the love of his life waste away through his self-imposed exile to the last days of his life. Everyone always focused on the celebrity’s suffering; no one saw the pain Ross lived to feel for the rest of his life – knowing that were it not for the exile, he would have never been enough to keep this beautiful, eloquent, way
ahead of his times genius by his side.

The last thing he’d expected to happen at this time was… was something that’d also happened the last time he was here in this book shop, two years ago. But he didn’t get up and run this time like he did back then. He felt no need to.

Rory Gilmore walked into the store and stared at him for a whole minute blankly.

“Jess?”

Jess smirked and stood up from his cozy little spot on the floor. “That is one of my names.”

 Pretending he wasn’t annoyed that his quality alone-time was being intruded upon (in a public bookshop but never mind that), Jess smiled at the tall, slim girl before him. Still beautiful, as ever, eyes still sparkling with the same wit and magnetism he’d fallen in love with years ago.

Rory looked up into his face and smiled brightly. “My God, the prodigal nephew returns and slinks in corners of book shops like he’d never left!”

Jess laughed and took a step closer, wondering if it’d be appropriate to give her a hug. While he was still contemplating the possible consequences in case it wasn’t (propriety was never his strong suit), Rory went ahead and made the decision for him.

She took five odd steps slowly, hesitantly, until she was right in his face and looked up into his eyes expectantly. And so as was expected, Jess wrapped his arms around the narrow waist and buried his nose into the ever sweet-smelling hair on Rory’s shoulder. He took a deep whiff, and for some reason that will never ever be clear to him, he was reminded of… of Dean. Of how soft his hair felt under Jess’ stubbled chin, the fresh minty clean scent clinging to his slender, sleep-heavy body…

Jess pushed away from the hug and from Rory, digging his hands in his pockets and pointedly ignoring the confused look on her face. “So h-how’ve you been?”

Rory pushed a lock of hair behind her ear self-consciously and launched into a long tirade about Yale and semester systems and something about the impact of Elizabethan literature on contemporary English that Jess didn’t bother to keep up with.

“So anyway, wow, look at me go, like I haven’t seen you in years which actually is true, I haven’t seen you in years and I don’t even know what you’re doing and where you’ve been and…”

“Rory stop.” Jess laughed and took a step closer again. He used to adore her ramblings once, now he just found it amusing while part of him longed for the stoic but comfortable silences of a certain Sasquatchian hazel-eyed boy.

“There’s lots to catch up on, I know. How long are you here for?”

“Just a couple of days. I drive back tomorrow.”

“Okay, so how about tonight then?”

Rory looked pleased, more so than Jess expected. “Wanna come over to my place for dinner?”
“How about Sookie’s for a quick bite?”

“Works for me. What time?”

“Eight?”

“Too early, how about nine?”

“Okay, but I have to get back by eleven.”


Jess grinned sheepishly. “Something like that.”

Rory looked at him, as if studying him closely. “Something’s different about you.”

Jess laughed. “Why, because I’m abiding by my uncle’s rules? I guess that is different.”

“No, it’s something else…”

Jess was starting to get really uncomfortable with this line of questioning. And to think this was what he’d have to put up with tonight. He forced out another chuckle and looked at his watch.

“Wow, look at the time. I have to get back and help out at the diner and… I guess, we have two hours tonight to discuss the evolution of Jess Mariano then, huh?”

Rory looked disappointed but nodded. “Right. So it’s a date?”

Jess’ smile faltered for just a second, but then he figured – what the hell. He took the hand Rory held out and shook it like he’d shake a client’s hand in business.

“It’s a date!”

It wasn’t until Rory had walked away and Jess was turning towards the exit door himself that he noticed the tall boy lurking just outside. He caught Dean’s eyes, and they looked… decidedly not happy – yeah, that was all Jess could decipher, before Dean quickly backed out of the shop and strode away.

Jess wanted to call out to him, stop him, ask him how much exactly he’d heard and what exactly he’d concluded. But those freakishly long legs had long disappeared around the corner by then.

***

That night, it wasn’t just drizzling. It was raining shrieking cats and barking dogs.

Jess paced back and forth in the diner again. He was aware of Luke’s bemused eyes following him from one end of the room to the next, but he was just grateful the old man wasn’t saying anything.

“He’ll be fine, Jess.”

Guess he expressed his gratitude too soon. Jess acted like he didn’t know what Luke was talking
about. And Luke just laughed.

“It’s only been… six minutes since Marge called. If he’s not here in another nine minutes or so, then we can panic.”

“In case you didn’t notice, Uncle Luke, it’s a bad storm outside, not to mention it’s pouring like buckets and buckets of iced water.”

“So he’ll be a little drowned, that’s all. This has happened before, you know. The rain doesn’t seem to bother him at all and he walks right over, as always.”

“What will he sleep in?”

Luke’s eyes twinkled. “In the bed, of course.”

“No, I-I meant…” Jess felt his face burn hot and quickly turned away.

He heard Luke chuckle softly again and walk over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder from behind. “How about you let me take care of him tonight, okay?”

Jess heard the disguised order in Luke’s soft voice and nodded. Honestly he was relieved, well, kind of. Maybe.

“Why don’t you tell me how your date with Rory was?”

Jess rolled his eyes. “Why does everyone keep calling it a date? It wasn’t a date.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Dean seemed to think so.”

Jess started. “You… he… did… did he say something to you?”

Luke looked like he was biting another chuckle back. “Kids your age won’t be caught dead talking to me, you know that! I just happen to see things no one else does. Dean didn’t seem as disturbed by Rory’s return last month or even the times she visited before that, not like he is this time.”

Well, Jess thought about it for a second. That didn’t exactly tell him anything. What could Dean be so upset about? That Rory went out on a date? Or that Jess did?

Jess scowled as haughtily as he could manage. “So you’re the resident expert on Dean Forester these days then?”

“Why? Would you like to be one instead?”

Jess gulped and could not meet his uncle’s suggestive gaze any more. Obviously Luke saw more and understood more than he liked to let on. Jess turned away, slightly embarrassed, but deciding not to waste too much breath denying something he would have to eventually admit to anyway.

With a loud put on huff, he started to walk up the stairs when someone thumped the door, at last. He
stopped immediately, cursing his helplessness in the face of those loud, clumsy knocks, then followed Luke to the door (pointedly refusing to look up into his uncle’s eyes again).

“Come on in, Dean.”

The boy was completely drenched from head to toe. Drowned sure was an apt word for how he looked. Not that Dean seemed to even notice. He stood like he always stood at their doorstep, staring down at his bare feet, drenched all over and trembling from the cold but clearly not enough to wake him from his deep, abnormal, sleep. Jess watched from the sidelines as Luke led Dean up the stairs.

“Here, Dean, come on here.” Luke put one hand in the small of Dean’s back and with the other he held the closest shoulder to turn his direction towards the bathroom across the hall from Jess’ room. He flicked on the lights and gently pushed Dean inside. The boy, soaking and dripping wet as he was, left a trail of water so thick all the way from the main door that Jess almost slipped.

“How can he be sleeping through this?” Jess whispered, only to be hushed up harshly by Luke. Luke tilted his head to indicate to him to get lost. And Jess, reluctantly, backed away. Only to go as far as his bedroom door, from where he peeked out – he just had to – he couldn’t get his eyes off Dean.

“All right, kid. Let’s get you into some dry sweats so you can turn in for the night, okay?” Luke spoke as offhandedly as he always did. Not like Dean heard him at all.

All Jess could see was the ramrod straight back, the tight fists hanging deceptively loose by his sides and his head lowered, exposing the paleness on the back of his neck to Jess’ seeking eyes. Jess found himself fixating on the locks of wet chestnut hair curling up on top of that expanse of skin more than he thought was warranted, or healthy.

Luke stood in front of Dean and gently tugged his Smurfs t-shirt off his torso. Dean let the older man raise his arms and pull off the shirt like it was no big deal. And when Luke slowly pulled the pajama pants down the boy’s waist, Jess gasped soundlessly and turned away as quickly as he could. He leant against the wall, needing the support to keep him on his swaying legs.

The brief vision of Dean’s bare back and… backside, the spotless and perfect alabaster skin that looked so sinful and so untouched, so… so unattainable because damn that was Dean Forester in there, not three yards away from Jess. Completely naked.

Jess closed his eyes and pressed the heel of his right hand into the base of his shaft, pleading with his blooming erection to go away. So not the time, so not the frigging time!

Luke already had some of his old clothes handy in the bathroom. He dressed Dean in a pair of sweats, both the top and bottom of which were not long enough, but the waist on the pants was so wide that Luke had to hold it up with one hand as he led Dean into the bedroom. Jess stepped away from the door soon as he heard them approach. He jumped into his floor bed and kept his face buried in the Kissinger book, still on page three since yesterday.

“There you go, Dean.”

“…”

“It’s alright, kiddo. You’re safe here.”

“He’s still shaking. Will you go grab an extra blanket from the closet in my room?”

Jess strode out before Luke could finish the sentence. He came back to find Dean horizontal in the bed, his eyes dropping shut at last. It was still creepy to him how the boy’s eyes stayed half-lidded but open throughout his sleepwalking every night, closing only once his head hit the pillow on Jess’ bed. Luke took the second blanket from him and tucked it around the sleeping boy more… *caringly* than Jess had ever seen his uncle behave.

“Jess?”

“Yeah?”

Luke straightened up to his full six feet height and turned to him. His face was somber and his eyes meant business like he’d never seen before.

“I can trust you with him, can’t I?”

*No. Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.*

***
Morning came all too soon, again, for Jess.

He could have watched Dean sleep for another week at least, and yes he’d come to terms with the creepiness of it by now and didn’t mind it at all. How could Dean operate on just five hours of sleep every night? Why wasn’t he bit more like Jess – lazy and reluctant to leave the comfort of a warm bed until the sun was way up high in the sky? Why was he so hell-bent on being this… fiercely sincere, uptight and responsible, perfect frigging gentleman who always had to do the right thing by everyone, even if it killed himself in the process?

Jess sighed, and turned to lay on his back, still watching, entranced, as the first light of dawn washed the shadows away from Dean’s face. Did he have a right to feel this sense of admiration and pride for Dean? Pride is what you feel for something you own, something that, at least in part, belongs to you, or something you had a hand in creating. So no, of course not.

But he felt it anyway.

The two blankets had obviously become too hot for Dean sometime during the night. So there he was, stretched out face down on the bed, having kicked both off to the floor, one leg stretched to the foot of the bed, the other bent at the knee and pulled up closer into his stomach. His face was turned towards Jess, his mouth slightly open like a little child deep in sleep. One arm was bent at the elbow, hand pinned under his stomach, and the other hand was next to his cheek on the pillow, long, elegant fingers folded softly into a partial fist. His longish hair sparkled in the soft ambient light making Jess ache deep inside. And those eyelashes, long and thick and draped oh so casually over his cheeks… they were going to be the death of him someday. Jess was two hundred percent sure of that.

When Dean stirred, Jess’ first instinct was to go dead limp and pretend to sleep. But Dean didn’t exactly wake up. Instead he shifted and slid in the bed in a way that… dear sweet Lord… the sweats two sizes too large slipped off his waist, exposing more skin than Jess should have the right to witness. “Fuck,” he hissed, closing his eyes but unable to keep them closed for more than a second.

Come on. Obviously Jess was no saint. Hell, far from it. From his spot on the floor, all Jess had to do (and did) was crane up a bit so he could see the exposed contours of Dean’s ass. He could clearly make out the two delicately rising mounds and the tempting dip in between. And of course, that pale white skin… all that… inhumanly irresistible skin…

Jess stood up in a hurry, quite aware by now of his breathlessness and the uncomfortable stiffness in his boxers but ignoring them pointedly to walk over to the bed. He picked up one of the blankets from the floor, sorting it out briefly from the other one and cursing silently under his breath, holding it in both hands before turning back towards the bed.

And that’s when he froze.

Dean’s eyes were open, and they were fixed on his.
“I… I was just…”

But there was simply no way to explain the rush of all his blood to his face now, was there?

Jess turned his face away for a bit and gulped, then quietly, timidly approached the bed. When Dean didn’t scream, or flinch, or give any indication whatsoever that he minded (or even attempt to cover his half exposed gorgeous ass), Jess draped the blanket over the other boy, covering his body from his giant feet all the way up to his chest. Quickly he straightened up and only then did he dare look up into Dean’s eyes.

They seemed… calm, not about to get up and sock the living daylights out of him at all. Maybe he wasn’t quite awake yet.

“Thanks,” he whispered.

Okay, now Jess really knew Dean wasn’t awake yet. Maybe he was sleeptalking too?

Dean turned slowly so he was lying on his back, folded both his hands over his chest, his fingers entwining themselves with the blanket Jess had just provided. And that somehow made Jess feel like he’d accomplished something important. Jess bit his lip and shrugged quickly, digging his hands in his track pants’ pockets, not sure what to do with them anymore.

“Can’t believe I sleepwalked in the rain, again.”

Jess just blinked, mouth slightly agape, not sure he really saw what he thought he saw.

Dean had smiled at him… ever so mildly, if not sheepishly.

Was Dean really actually making conversation with him? He swallowed again, trying to figure out what Dean’s angle was today.

“I didn’t change your… um, you know. If that’s what you were worried about.”

Dean blushed, a soft red coloring his cheeks that Jess found quite endearing really. He shifted uncomfortably in the bed but didn’t try to get up. Instead he looked down at his hands, breaking eye contact which made Jess realize how terribly lost the other boy looked just then.

Way to go, Mariano. How very tactful, as always.

Jess sighed and slowly made to sit down on the bed, besides Dean. Dean noticed but when he didn’t protest, Jess relaxed.

“Did you stay up all night again?”

Jess blinked, thinking fast. “I like to read.”

“When do you sleep?”

Jess smirked. “Vacation, remember? I sleep whenever I want to.”

Dean didn’t quite buy it, that much was obvious. But he seemed to decide not to pursue it, and
instead glanced sideways at the book that lay discarded on Jess’ pillow.

“You and Rory still have that in common, I guess.”

He didn’t look at Jess when he said that. But the soft and clearly despondent tone of his voice made Jess smile, hell it made him – unbelievably giddy with happiness. Someone was jealous alright.

“Yeah well, that’s about the only thing we ever did. It wasn’t enough then, and it sure isn’t now.”

Dean looked into his eyes then, Jess letting him because he wanted Dean to know he was speaking the absolute truth. That he didn’t have any cause to be jealous of Rory. Or any other girl (or boy) for that matter.

Dean suddenly looked embarrassed and looked away quickly.

Jess changed the subject. “Hey, I remember seeing you around with a book hanging out of one hip pocket. So what’re you reading these days?”

“I-I don’t have time for that anymore.”

Of course. How does a guy with three jobs plus doing overtime on weekends find any time for himself at all?

The need to touch Dean hit him then in a short burst of reckless impulse and Jess deliberated for all of a second before deciding – the hell with it. He reached out, with a hesitant hand, towards Dean’s face making damn sure Dean knew it was coming. Placed two fingers on the side of Dean’s jaw, causing the other boy to flinch ever so slightly, but he didn’t protest. Instead he let Jess turn his face back up towards him until their eyes met again.

“What were you doing at the bookshop, then?”

“I, uh, was on my lunch b-break a-and –”

“And you decided to spend it in a book store because you don’t read?”

“Oh, no, Clara, she a-asked me to –“

“Clara asked you to follow me?”

Dean’s cheeks couldn’t have colored a brighter red if he used paint. He pulled away from Jess’ hand and frowned. “I was not following you.”

“Oh, you so were.”

“Was not.”

“Was too.”

“Was not!”

“Was too!”
“What are you, eight?”

“You better hope not, ‘cause that would make you a pedophile, you big stalking doofus.”

“Oh for God’s sake!”

Dean tried to sit up but by this time Jess was practically leaning over him so if he did try, he would only end up bringing his face closer to Jess’ and… he probably wasn’t ready for that yet. Instead he tried backing away, except he was already flat on his back with no more back left to go.

Jess couldn’t help but smile. This boy who had six inches and at least twelve pounds on Jess… watching him pinned to the bed by nothing but Jess’ eyes, barely even squirming (which Jess took to be a very, very good sign), was turning him on more than it should legally be allowed to.

“How can you be so sure I wasn’t following her?”

Ah. Sucker punch.

Jess almost did pull away at that. But then he looked, really looked into Dean’s narrowed eyes. Making up his mind, he bent lower, so low his nose was a few centimeters away from Dean’s. His heart skipped a beat as he watched Dean’s eyes fall to his mouth, the Adam’s apple bobbing resolutely, before he looked up again, staring right into Jess’ eyes.

“If you were following Rory, then you wouldn’t let me do this, will you?”

And just as Dean started to open his mouth to ask “what”, Jess kissed him.

Dean didn’t push him away, nor did he flinch or shrink away or threaten to call the cops on him. Hell, he didn’t even breathe.

So Jess kissed him again. And this time he watched the ridiculously long eyelashes settle down on the ridiculously chiseled cheeks before Jess closed his own eyes as well.

He felt the chest beneath his swell, rising as if struggling to draw breath, reaching upwards to come in searing touch with his body, burning the dark-haired rebel from inside out. His senses soared, even though he still couldn’t believe it, when Dean kissed him back. Dean even lifted his chin up to get better leverage on Jess’ lips like Jess had on Dean’s. Every single nerve ending in his body tingled, and Jess finally let go of the strenuous control that’d been holding his body taut with unresolved tension all night. Hell, all fucking week!

Jess watched helplessly, as his body melted (both practically and metaphorically speaking) into the far-reaching arms that came up and around him, pulling him down into the magnificent form of his one-time arch nemesis. It was surreal, almost too good to be true – Jess was kissing Dean and Dean was kissing him back!

The lips were as soft and pliant as he’d imagined, the strands of hair gliding between his fingers just as silken. Dean’s body was still warm and heavy with sleep, and the strength of those arms around his chest gripping him tight, holding Jess close… God… Dean could have been sucking the very life out of Jess through that skillful mouth and Jess would have happily complied. All he could do was feel… his thinking faculties had almost completely shut down, what with the intense rush of blood to his head, and to his groin…
And Dean was still kissing him back!

When they parted, not because they wanted to but because the lack of oxygen forced them to, Jess sought Dean’s eyes, hoping, not sure exactly what for. Just, hoping. Dean’s face was still red, plush with blood and adrenaline and breathlessness in general. But there was also a playful little smile lurking behind the hesitant quirk of his swollen lips.

Jess couldn’t resist. “So, not so straight, are we?”

Dean’s eyes twinkled, shrugging with his eyebrows. “Bi-curious, more like.”

“Guess I can rest my case then.”

“What case?”

“You saw me coming out of the diner from your grocery store across the street, and you followed me, to the bookshop.”

Dean huffed, an insolent pout replacing the smile. “Why do you always have to have the last word?”

Jess grinned. “Why do you always have to fight me on everything?”

Dean stared at him wordlessly for a couple seconds. Then suddenly, Jess’ world was turned upside down and next thing he knew, he was the one flat on his back on the bed. Dean had flipped him over and changed places almost effortlessly. It was his smirking face now looming over Jess’, his hands still gripped tight around Jess’ wrists, holding them down against the pillow. Nothing but a flimsy blanket separated him from Dean and it simply wasn’t enough to hide the stiffness below his waistline. He knew Dean could feel it too, but still he made no move to get away from it. Instead, he pressed down and rubbed up against the shorter boy with vehemence, giving Jess something else… another source of long, hard stiffness, to feel instead.

Jess gasped, not so quietly.

“I’m not some girl, Mariano.” Dean whispered, voice gravelly and laden with emotions Jess couldn’t quite put a name to yet. All he could do was twist lightly in Dean’s strong (but not forced) grasp of him, testing him.

"I noticed," he whispered breathlessly.

Dean pressed his nose right under Jess’ lightly stubbled chin and breathed deeply, before coming up to gaze almost longingly into Jess’ brandy brown eyes. “I’m not going to make this easy for you. Sure you still want this baggage weighing down on your summer break?”

Jess smirked. “You should know by now, Forester. I like to see you riled up. You’re hot when you’re… difficult.”

He took advantage of Dean’s brief moment of surprise and assimilation, and pushed up with his entire body weight to flip them back into their original position. Dean went there without resistance; his head flopping to the pillow carelessly as he continued to search for God knew what in Jess’ eyes.

Jess swooped down and licked at those luscious lips once again until they parted, letting him into a heaven of sorts that he’d hoped but never really thought he’d actually have. Dean tasted of warmth,
and spearmint and clove, toothpaste of some kind obviously, hint of candy. He was worried about his own bad breath, but Dean didn’t seem to mind so far, so Jess plowed on. He buried one hand in the mop of hair on top of Dean’s head, pulling it back not so gently as if to hold Dean in place. Soon enough, he was rewarded with Dean moaning right into his mouth as Dean-junior jerked excitedly against his thigh.

“Besides,” Jess managed to rasp in between sucking tongue, serving his need to have the last word after all. “Trust me. I’m easy enough for the both of us.”

Dean laughed into the kiss, high-pitched and careless like Jess had never heard him laugh before. It was the most beautiful sound he’d heard in years.

***
Jess peeked out from behind a lamp post and waited for his moment – the perfect moment. And he waited, and he waited.

“Damn it, Dean, come on.” He hissed and looked at his wrist watch, then dug his hands back in his pockets, snarling at the plus-sized grocery store manager in the window.

“For fuck’s sake man, let him go already. It’s his lunch break!”

Earlier that day, Jess had woken up in his bed with a big goofy smile on his face. For a moment he’d paused, the smile faltering, fearing it’d all been just a dream. But then he brought his hand up to the side of his neck and felt the two neat lines of teeth marks there, still there, really there.

Jess could honestly say he’d never felt so utterly pleased with himself all his life.

Sleep evaded him after that, even though it was only nine AM and he’d barely slept for four hours. He stayed in bed anyway, indulging himself, fantasizing of all the things he wanted to do to Dean, all the things he wanted Dean to do to him.

When the clock struck eleven and Luke the wake-up caller from hell had banged at his door for the fiftieth time, Jess finally dragged himself out of bed. Took a long, leisurely shower, threw on whatever clothes he could find that were clean, and decided to skip breakfast. It was nearing lunch time anyway, and he knew exactly what he wanted today.

The company of a certain hazel-eyed boy who looked and sounded (and smelled) unbelievably delectable. Especially more so when he came.

Jess leaned against the lamppost and tried to bite back his grin. A couple of passers-by noticed and gave him weird looks that he easily ignored. He let his thoughts wander back to six hours ago, when he had Dean stretched out beneath him. Those endless legs had spread wide open to make space for Jess to settle between them and grind his own erection against Dean’s hardness over and over and over again until they both came in their pants. Well, Dean came in Luke’s pants of course (which they’d immediately rinsed clean amid a lot of muted giggling) and through it all they’d kissed and sucked on each other’s tongue like their very lives depended on it.

What a glorious start to the day it’d been. Jess couldn’t care less that he looked like a loon, lost in his happy memories, licking his lips as if to try and re-capture the heavenly taste of Dean…

Someone tapped his shoulder from behind and Jess turned about, clearly agitated and in the mood to whale at some poor bastard for not letting him daydream in peace. Only to damn near jump out of his skin at the tall shadow masking the afternoon sun.

“What!” Jess almost stumbled two steps back as the other boy sniggered. God, he looked so… so… edible.

Okay, so maybe he was hungrier than he thought.
He took in the oversized denim blue jacket over a maroon striped turtleneck sweater that did absolutely no favors to Dean’s pale complexion but complimented the long chestnut hair shining in the sun, and brought out the color of his eyes. Jess squashed the urge to pummel his head against the lamppost. Obviously he’d been watching way too many ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’ reruns.

“Wh-where did you come from?”

Dean bit his lip cheekily, and Jess noticed his gaze falling to Jess’ lips instantly.

“The store happens to have a back door, like most four-walled constructions do, apparently. What are you doing here?”

Jess shrugged and flashed him a hopeful little smile. “Thought I’d, maybe, take you out for –“

He stopped just in time to catch the beginnings of a frown on Dean’s forehead, so sharp, that he immediately backtracked.

*I’m not some girl, Mariano.*

And Jess would do well to remember it.

“I mean, I-I was hungry. A-and so… I came by to see if you, uh, wanted to grab a quick bite. Or something?”

He tried to sound like he couldn’t care less but failed dismally.

Dean dug his own hands in his jacket pockets and squinted suspiciously. “So, what, we’re doing the whole dating thing now?”

Jess cleared his throat. Guys date guys too, of course they do. Don’t they?

“I f-figured you might like that.”

“Why bother? I am in your bed every night, aren’t I?”

Jess heard an element of self-derision despite the mocking tone in Dean’s voice, and for reasons he couldn’t explain it stung like a bitch.

“I just wanna spend more time with you while I’m here, and while you’re awake. Is that too much to ask?”

Dean shrugged, looking away briefly. “Just, never took you for the, uh, gay-dating type.”

“Well, I never took you for the promiscuous boy type either, Forester, unless that’s what you’d prefer...” and Jess started to turn around and walk away.

“Wait.” Dean bit his lip again, his eyes playful but still mildly apprehensive.

“I hope you realize that we can’t… I mean, no one can know.”

*About us.* Of course, Jess ignored the faint sinking feeling inside his chest and made a face that basically said ‘Duh’.
“This is Star’s Hollow, Forester. No one knows or cares two hoots about us beyond a little factoid that we both once dated a Gilmore. Far as they’re concerned, we’re just two jilted ex-lovers brooding over a common object of obsession, that’s all.”

Folks would have to be downright stupid to believe that, of course, but far as Jess was concerned, they could think whatever the hell they wanted. Right then, he’d have said anything to get Dean to just be with him. That was all he cared about.

Dean let loose a short chuckle and looked down to the tip of his work boots. Then after a brief moment’s consideration, he gestured with a nod of his head in the opposite direction.

“Come on then. I feel like sushi.”

Jess couldn’t help but smirk triumphantly and he made to follow the other boy in the foretold direction when his feet suddenly ground to a halt, his smirk disappearing just as quickly.

“Please tell me you said Sookie.”

Dean laughed and just kept walking.

“Soo-kie right?”

***

That night, Jess asked Luke to take a break and waited downstairs instead. He waited till two in the morning.

Dean did not show up.

Luke woke up at around that time to find Jess curled up in a sofa chair with a coffee mug and a book in hand. He sighed, rubbing his eyes.

“It’s good that he isn’t here tonight, Jess. He wasn’t supposed to be sleepwalking more than two or three times a week anyway.”

Jess swallowed the little lump of emotion down. “I know.”

He did know that. It was a good thing Dean didn’t show. He was glad about it. He really was. Except… that he was not.

“Don’t know why it’s gotten to be so frequent recently. Maybe he’s really stressed out these days. Or maybe it’s you.”

Jess snorted. “That’d be me, alright. I’m always stressing the hell out of folks around me.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Jess looked up at his uncle then, who was smiling knowingly. Luke put the coffee on and came around to perch on the edge of the table in front of Jess.
“I ain’t your uncle for nothing, kid. I see the way you look at him. And I also see the way he’s starting to look at you.”

Jess felt his face burn and he looked away.

“I don’t think he’s sleepwalking just because he’s stressed. At least not every night. I think, of late, he’s sleepwalking because he just genuinely wants to be here. Where you are.”

Jess couldn’t help himself. “You really believe that?”

He had no way to know how hopeful, how young he sounded in that moment. Luke smiled, his eyes shining with reassurance as he put a hand on Jess’ pajama clad knee and squeezed it.

“I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t. Having said that, we don’t completely understand why Dean sleepwalks some days and why some days he doesn’t. His doctor said there will be nights his body would be really exhausted, or his mind would be passive enough to be able to sleep through the night. And that is a good thing, Jess. It is what Dean needs.”

Jess nodded, blushing at the realization that his uncle could read him like an open book, had been doing so all this while. Luke’s words had the intended effect, and when he went back to bed, Jess did the same. Figured he’d have to wake up earlier than his usual eleven AM if he wanted to see Dean soon as possible.

That night, Jess dreamed of the tall boy stripping down to nothing and slipping into bed beside him. Dean hadn’t been willing to part with his clothes last morning, and Jess couldn’t stop obsessing with the brief but tantalizing glimpses of flesh he’d caught the night before.

In his dream, Jess saw himself pull the naked form of his lover into his arms and just… hold him to himself. He watched his own dream-hands skim over every single inch of Dean’s pale skin, splattered with moles in the most adorable places, feeling intimately the parts that were tanned and yet others painfully sun-burnt from his laborious afternoons spent landscaping. He heard dream-Dean hiss ever so softly every time Jess’ fingers ghosted over the more tender spots, watched him close his eyes and sigh eagerly every time Jess found an erogenous spot to caress.

Jess woke up hard and aching sorely, with a longing in his heart and body so profound, it brought fucking tears to his eyes. He brushed them away angrily, cursing Forester for having this uncanny control over him.

And all this time, his face remained split wide open into a stupidly cheerful grin.

***

Once again, Jess showed up at the grocer’s at exactly five minutes to noon. By the time he made it to his usual spot, Dean had already spotted him coming from the distance, as he stood restocking the exotic fruits aisle by the window. He’d smiled ever so softly but kept his eyes averted and Jess just leaned against the cast iron pillar again and watched.

How could someone look so hot in that ugly green apron? Conversely speaking, how could anyone human make that ugly green apron look hot?
When Dean came out fifteen minutes later for his lunch break, he walked up to Jess directly, wincing slightly against the sunlight.

“Hey,” Jess said.

“Hey yourself.”

“How about a hot dog today?”

Dean laughed. “Sure,” and Jess thanked the stars his boy was not a sushi freak every day of the week. Once every now and then, he could deal with.

After a quick bite during which they ended up talking of everything and nothing at all, they went walking round the corner before it’d be time for Dean to return to work.

“So, sleep okay last night?”

Dean smirked. “I was wondering how long you’d be able to keep it in.”

Jess winced sheepishly. “I missed you.”

Dean didn’t look up or respond, watching the ground intently. But Jess saw his Adam’s apple bob once.

“I don’t know exactly. The pattern is… there is no pattern, I think.”

“Yeah, no, it’s cool. I just… I hope you’re not taking the drugs again.”

“God, no. My mom would kill me,” and that’s when Dean looked up at Jess, his eyes twinkling. “If you don’t first.”

Jess bit back a smirk and lowered his eyes just as Dean did. They walked in comfortable silence for a while.

“Do you think you could, maybe, take the rest of the day off today?”

Dean grimaced. “I don’t think so, Jess. I’m sorry.”

Jess gulped down his disappointment and shook his head. “It’s alright, no problem.”

“You know how it is, right?”

Dean sounded worried, even though he probably hoped it wasn’t too obvious. Jess smiled at him, his best reassuring smile that rarely ever got used.

“I do. And I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. I know how important your working these jobs is for your family.”

Dean nodded and looked away.

“Hey, Dean?”
“Yeah.”

“Do you ever, like, regret quitting college to come back to Stars Hollow?”

Dean thought about it for a minute as they rounded a corner and walked past the grocery. They still had a few minutes of lunch break left.

“Some days, yeah. Some days I fear I’d be stuck working dead-end jobs for scraps for the rest of my life. And that if I’d just held out another two years in school somehow, I might have been able to get a better job – like a ‘white collar’ position somewhere to support my family, you know?”

Jess just bit his lip and nodded.

“But then I remember the mortgage and the thought of my mom and sister losing the house just kills every shred of personal ambitions I ever had. Not like I had much to begin with.”

“…”

“My dad didn’t just abandon us, Jess. He betrayed our trust. He made some really bad investment decisions and not only did he lose all our family’s savings and our college funds, mine and Clara’s, he also left behind a huge debt to repay that puts everything we’ve ever owned at risk.”

Dean paused and took a deep breath, as if to compose himself.

“That’s why I came back. I’m going to do everything in my power to protect my family, make sure my mom doesn’t have to suffer any more, and Clara gets to go to whichever college she chooses. I can’t abandon them like he did. It would destroy my mom, this time for sure.”

His heart ached for the bitterness in Dean’s voice. Clearly this guy was having a greater impact on Jess than he’d anticipated. Not only could he empathize, he also found himself actually angry and hurting for Dean. Jess didn’t know how to respond. Funny how he never fell short of words when they were arguing. Kicking himself mentally, he tried.

“White collar jobs are so overrated,” he mumbled almost as if to himself, and tried to turn the conversation to something more objective and less… well, emotional. “If I can help it, I’d rather do my own thing, be my own boss and be answerable to no one but myself, you know.”

Dean scoffed lightly and looked sideways at him. “Yeah, I heard. Construction for corporates?”

Jess grinned. “Yep. So far so good. We’re actually planning to expand pretty soon.”

“You’re a lucky man.”

“Lucky? I worked my ass off to set it all up, man.”

“Of course, I didn’t mean that. But tell me something, do you work as many hours as I do?”

Jess gave it a thought. “Probably not.”

It was Dean’s turn to smirk. “Dude, that sounds lucky enough to me.”
And without waiting to let Jess think of a smart comeback, he picked up pace and started to head back to the store. Jess followed quietly, for once letting Dean get the last word in, although fact was – he really couldn’t think of anything to say right then.

In truth he’d never thought of himself as lucky ever. For as long as he could remember, he’d always been unhappy with everything around him, and angry at pretty much everyone that passed through his life. It had never been this easy – not until he managed to reach closure with his mom and they went their separate ways, and he became old enough to strike out on his own, do his own thing. Which he did, luckily he ran into his buddy, Dillon, and things worked out better than either of them had ever expected.

_Luckily, yeah._

Maybe Dean was right. Maybe it was time he stopped bitching and whining about the things he couldn’t have, and start being thankful for the things he _did_?

Once they reached the front door of the grocery store, the boys stopped and looked at each other for a couple of seconds. Jess found himself drawn to the magnetic eyes again, unwilling to let go so soon. But Dean cleared his throat and gestured with a tilt of his long neck to convey a wordless goodbye. Grudgingly, Jess nodded back, then watched as Dean walked back to wrap up his first job of the day.

As much as he respected Dean’s work ethic and sincerity with which he was supporting his family, Jess didn’t like how much that boy worked. To work hard is not a bad thing, hell it’s an honorable thing, but what good was it if it started to take a physical and mental toll on the individual? Besides, wouldn’t working _smart_ be a better option, if there was one available?

Jess did a quick approximate math in his head to calculate how much Dean might make right now from his three jobs in this little town, versus how much Jess was making right now from just one full-time job in New York City.

It was nowhere near comparable.

Dean was back in his apron by now and glanced up once through the glass window to find Jess still standing where he’d left him. Jess thought he might have detected a little blush in the beautiful face before it turned away, and it brought a smile back to his own.

And it occurred to him then – Jess would give anything to see that face every single day for the rest of his life.

He stood there for another few minutes, then making up his mind, Jess flicked open his cell phone and started to walk to the book store. His partner, Dillon, should be on his own lunch break right now. Good time to catch him before he got busy again.
Chapter 10

Chapter 10…

Jess couldn’t believe what he’d gotten himself into.

Here he was, in the middle of the night, halfway up the tree that flanked the Forester house, sweating profusely from running all the way from Luke’s and now climbing this tree that was damn near impossible to climb.

“You can do it, Mariano. Come on…” he hissed to himself, and hauled his weight up another branch until he was almost three-fourths of the way there.

Please let that be Dean’s window, Lord, and not his mom’s. Or his sister’s.

Someone up there heard him, because when he finally made it up to the window ledge, he sighed with absolute relief. It was a guy’s bedroom alright, and right next to the window stood a low bed with a tall figure stretched out diagonally across it. Dean lay face down, his shoes and tattered soil-ridden jeans still on, like he’d walked in from work and just dropped like the dead.

Jess sighed, and once again prayed for cosmic assistance as he tried the latch. Once again luck favored him (Jess was a believer now and forever from this night on) and the window slid open soundlessly.

He crept in, knocking a decorative lamp or something to the carpeted floor and the soft thud almost gave him a heart attack. He waited for footsteps running up the stairs, or women screaming, anything.

Nothing.

Jess exhaled in relief, then quietly closed the window behind him. He crouched up beside the bed, next to Dean’s face that lay turned his way.

“Dean…” he whispered, so low he could barely hear himself. But he loved saying it nonetheless, his beloved’s given name, loved the thoughts of adoration it conjured in his mind, how it rolled off his tongue so sexily.

How could Rory have let go of something so precious? Jess shook his head, feeling sorry for the girl and thanking his own stars over and over again. Quietly, he also thanked his partner, Dillon, for convincing him to spend a part of his break with his uncle Luke in Stars Hollow. Of course the fact that he ended up spending all of it here and even took additional time off was all thanks to this amazing man sleeping before him.

Dean’s mouth was slightly open, again, one hand curled up right under his chin as if he were holding a microphone in his dreams. His hair was all over the place, as usual, and Jess couldn’t resist reaching out to stroke it softly. Gently he pushed a few stray locks behind Dean’s ears, so they wouldn’t block his view of the chiseled face anymore. And God those lips! How could he possibly be expected to just watch from a distance, when he could reach out and actually touch them, the impossible softness of them? Would it really be so hard to believe if he couldn’t stop himself from
kissing them?

Dean woke up then, at the first feeling of pressure against his lips. He stirred and Jess pulled back ever so slightly, not all the way though. Part of him felt guilty for disturbing Dean’s much needed sleep, but Jess just missed him so much. Dean hadn’t shown up at the diner for two nights straight.

Dean’s eyes slid open at last and a second later, he jumped.

“Wh-Wha…? Where…?”

“Shhh,” Jess put a hand on Dean’s cheek, his thumb coming to rest on top of his reddened lips. “You’re in your own bed. You didn’t sleepwalk, relax. I came to you.”

Dean frowned. “H-How?”

Jess grinned. “Perfectly planted tree right next to your window, that’s how.”

Dean just gawked at him in silence for another few seconds. And then together, as if in perfect synchrony, they both started sniggering. Dean shushed him hurriedly, just in case his family woke up.

“The door!” He hissed, and started to get up.

Jess pushed him down. “I’ll get it.”

Quickly he padded over to the bedroom door that was only slightly ajar and clicked it shut. Then he turned to find Dean sitting up in bed, watching him carefully. The room was mostly dark with a dim yellow night light still on by the other side of the bed, enough to allow Jess to see Dean’s face. His eyes were no longer heavy with sleep but were instead bright with excitement, and hope and… a little something else.

Jess practically ran back to the bed, straddling the taller boy’s torso without asking for permission and capturing Dean’s lips with his own. Dean put his arms around Jess, wrapping him up and holding him close as he surrendered to the invasion of his mouth happily. Jess leaned down with his entire body weight until Dean understood and lay back down on the bed with the shorter boy still on top of him. And still they continued to suck at each other’s tongue like it was the last time they’d ever be together.

The thick denim of two pairs of jeans wasn’t enough to keep their arousals hidden from each other. Soon Dean started to thrust upwards with just as much force as Jess who was grinding down. Their erections slid against each other in perfect alignment, the two bodies moving together in musical harmony, back and forth, up then down, urging each other deeper and deeper into a pleasurable state of masculine bliss.

Jess had never felt this raging lust for anyone else ever before. It overwhelmed his senses, captivated his body, mind, heart and soul, until every thought and every sensory perception that did not somehow revolve around Dean, ceased to exist. Part of him, a very tiny, miniscule one, wondered if this… rabid, out-of-control obsession with another person qualified him to be clinically insane. The rest of him couldn’t care less even if it did.

It took superhuman strength to wrench himself away from the kiss (and the humping) but he had to, or he was sure he’d die.
“Dean, let me in…”

Dean paused. “What?”

Jess looked into his eyes, licking his lips every now and then. “I wanna be inside you, Dean, I wanna die inside you. Please…”

He bent lower to lick at the long column of Dean’s gulping throat, until he reached the crook of his neck, where he closed his teeth around it and bit down, hard.

“Stop”

“…”

“Jesse, no…”

Dean whimpered softly as Jess continued to leave his mark on the boy’s neck, reaching down with a hand to fondle his generous package.

“Jess… stop!!!” Dean suddenly hissed sharply, making Jess pull away and frown, only for Dean to shove him hard until he fell off the bed and to the floor with a loud thud.

“Owww!!!” but he still had the sense of keep his voice down even though Dean seemed to have no such compunction left.

“What the hell, Forester???”

Dean sat up in his bed. “I told you not to treat me like a girl, Mariano!”

“Wha-? I didn’t…”

“I wanna die inside you?!!!??! What the fuck kinda crazy chick-lit line is that? And then you tried to give me a fucking hickey?!?!?”

“Okay so the line’s a little corny. But what the fuck’s wrong with a hickey?? Everyone gives everyone hickeys! Hell you gave me a hickey!!”

“No I didn’t!”

“Yes you did.”

“Did not.”

Jess threw his hands up in the air, in no mood to do this with Dean again. “Dude, seriously?”

Dean folded his arms and his legs, pushing them underneath himself. “Well I don’t want a hickey, you idiot! What if someone saw it? What if they found out about us?!!!?”

Jess huffed and got back up on the bed, sitting on the far edge seeing how Dean had crawled up to the other end as far away from Jess as possible.
“Okay, I’m confused. What are you upset about, exactly, Dean? One thing at a time, please?”

“…”

“Dean?”

“I don’t know, okay! Just, I think you should go.”

“Go???” Jess panicked. “No, no, no… not until you tell me what’s going on in your head. Come on, Deano, talk to me.”

“Don’t call me Deano.”

“Whatever. Forester.”

Dean glared harder. Jess sighed, putting a hand up in placation, wondering why they always ended up arguing so much, even in what was supposed to be a romantic setting.

“Sorry. Dean.”

Dean pulled a pillow to his chest and hugged it hard. He seemed breathless but he continued to glare at Jess almost petulantly, and Jess, wheezing a little himself, continued to keep his distance.

“What… what did I do wrong?”

“…”

“Dean, talk to me, man.”

“I told you, not a girl,” he whispered quietly.

Jess laughed. “I know that, idiot. It’s part of why I like you so much.”

“…”

“You’re a virgin, right?”

“Noooo.”

Jess rolled his eyes. “You know what I mean.”

Dean didn’t respond. Jess bit back a smile.

“Okay, so let me tell you something you already know, genius. Gay sex goes both ways. We can do whatever you want, however you want it. You can be inside me too, you know. I like it both ways. God knows I want to do you more than anything I’ve ever wanted all my life, but I would never force you if you’re not ready. I can wait.”

“Wh-what if I’m never ready?”

Jess shrugged. “Let’s put it this way. Seven years ago was the first time I kissed a boy and I swore to myself then I’d never do it again.”
“…”

“I was a kid, give me a break.”

“Go on.”

Jess leaned back and relaxed. “Ten months ago, I was sitting in a Starbucks in Stamford, and I found myself staring at this guy across the room… at his mouth. I-I just, couldn’t stop staring.”

“…”

“… Took me awhile to let go of my… my fears, I guess, but once I did, it just opened a whole new world of possibilities. I didn’t think I’d start liking guys more than I like girls but I changed. My point is, things change over time, Dean. And… even if they don’t, with you, it doesn’t change the way I feel about you right now.”

Dean looked into Jess’ eyes, as if trying to decide if he believed Jess or not. When he still wouldn’t say anything, Jess forged on.

“You know we don’t have to start with the big stuff. We could always do other things, and that way also find out if you’re likely to, you know, like it.”

“How?”

“Trust me?”

“Not at all.”

Jess mock-scowled at which Dean chuckled, his petrified expression softening ever so slightly. He shrugged. “Okay, wh-what did you have in mind?”

That had to be good enough. Jess climbed up further on the bed. “Lie down for me.”

Dean narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously.

“Please? Just trust me, okay? If you don’t like it, I will stop. I promise.”

“You stop when I say stop. I shouldn’t have to repeat myself.”

Jess put on his best, most sincerest face. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Dean still pouted but put the pillow down. Jess moved closer. “Okay, come on here.”

He tugged at Dean and made him stretch out on the bed face up. He could feel Dean’s body shake a little and he stroked his flanks lovingly, trying to reassure him.

“It’s okay. Close your eyes.”

“No.”

“It’ll feel better, I promise.”
Dean closed his eyes reluctantly. Jess had a feeling Dean wasn’t a complete novice and he definitely knew what was about to come, which made it slightly easier for him to proceed.

“I’m going to take off your pants.”

Dean trembled, and Jess shushed him quietly.

He took his time with it. There was something so surreal, so incredibly hot about stripping those ugly, shapeless work clothes that hid Dean’s magnificent body. He drew it out for as long as he could, caressing Dean all the way down his flanks, over his jeans and once they were off, over his boxers. Dean bunched up the bed sheet in his fists by his sides, and he bit his lip to keep from making any sounds he’d be embarrassed about later.

“Boxers now,” he waited for Dean to bolt, who didn’t.

Encouraged, Jess put his fingers inside the waistband and gently peeled the fabric down. Dean trembled some more, but at Jess’ insistence, managed to arch his hips up long enough for Jess to be able to push the boxers down. Jess took both his pants and boxers off and dropped them to the floor, then spread Dean’s legs to make space for himself where he sat back on his haunches.

Of course Dean had no way to know, but spread out, open and vulnerable like he was right now, Jess thought he’d never looked so incredible, so... ethereal. The shaft was already at half-mast (which made Jess smile), beautifully long and slender, a healthy pink far as he could guess in the dull glow of the lamp. It was lightly framed by a small bush of downy hair above it. The balls lay heavy and hairless, the skin soft like velvet to the touch and made Dean shiver visibly when Jess casually stroked it.

“So beautiful,” he whispered with reverence, watching Dean’s clothed chest rise and fall shortly.

Between the V of his spread legs lay the secret temptation that called to Jess like water to a man stranded in a desert dying of thirst. It took all of his determination and mental strength to not plunge in right there and then.

“You’re perfect, Dean. So absolutely God-like perfect…”

Dean moaned softly, but kept his eyes shut tight. Jess pulled a tube of lubricant out of his jacket pocket (Nothing wrong with always being prepared, is there?) and squirted some out on two fingers of his right hand.

“Here we go,” Jess murmured softly. “You have to relax for me, okay?”

He waited for an answer, and didn’t start until Dean had curtly nodded. Dean gasped at the feeling of the first finger, dipped in the cold slick, prodding at his entrance. In his shock he spread his legs further open even as his internal muscles clamped up.

“Shh, relax baby, it’s just me…”

Jess quietly celebrated the fact that Dean was too distracted to protest the almost reflexive little endearment. He was patient and persistent, waiting for Dean to calm down before pushing in again. After a few more stops and starts, Jess’ second knuckle was in. When he started to wriggle inside, Dean gasped louder.
“Ahh! Oh God…”

“How does that feel?”

Dean spoke in minced words, as if to hold back other sounds he didn’t want to make. “Like… like… I don’t know. Full, I guess.”

“Wait till we get to the good part.”

And Jess started to push his second finger in. Dean twisted his face to one side and stuffed a fist into his mouth. Jess smirked and with his free hand grabbed Dean’s already rapidly rising erection by the base. Dean moaned deep in his throat.

“Shhh, keep it down, or your mom will come checking on you.”

Dean whimpered miserably at that and tried to gag himself, which only made Jess laugh. By this time both his fingers were all the way in, deliberately curling upwards. He started to twist around to find the sweet spot that could make Dean scream the roof of his house down. And when he found it, Dean nearly did.

Dean pulled his pillow from under his head and put it over his face instead, hiding the bright hot blush rising to his cheeks along with muffling his moans with it. Jess chuckled and continued to tickle and scratch at the little nubbin of pleasure inside Dean, making him writhe harder against him. He also kept fistng the shaft until it started to leak precum, and then he continued until at last Dean let go, releasing his pleasure right into Jess Mariano’s waiting hands.

His own erection strained against the restraint of his jeans and Jess moaned, but he decided to wait. This was Dean’s night. He needed to make sure Dean was taken care of first.

“With me, dude?” He asked a minute later, when Dean’s chest wasn’t heaving as hard anymore and his moans had petered away and his erection now lay completely satiated, still cradled gently in Jess’ left hand.

Dean eventually emerged from behind his pillow, suddenly conscious of his nakedness and lifted his legs to get around Jess and push them back together again, forcing Jess to shift to one side on the bed. Getting with the program, Jess pulled up the blankets and without waiting to be asked, he covered Dean up till his waist with them. Dean quickly grabbed hold of the fabric, wringing his fingers into the frayed edge like he did few days ago at the diner. He looked up into Jess’ face then, with eyes hesitant and blown wide open, still breathing hard and audibly so.

“Guess its safe to assume you’re gonna like it then, huh?”

Dean bit his lip, looking away until Jess held his face by the chin and made him meet his eyes. “Dean… talk to me, man.”

“I… I, can we just… not tonight?”

Jess smiled. “Whatever you say.” And he bent lower, making his intent crystal clear. Dean understood and craned up slightly, indicating his consent.

They kissed. Again and again and again, before curling up around one another and settling in for the
night. Dean rested his chin on top of Jess’ head and Jess entwined his legs with Dean’s longer ones tightly. They stayed like that, quiet, resting, listening to the other’s heart beating.

“Um, Dean?”

“Yeah, Jesse.”

Obviously, Dean had chosen his own endearment for Jess, the sheer nonchalance of it making his spine quiver. “Think you’re up to… maybe returning the favor?”

Dean pulled away, looked into Jess’ eyes and smirked.

“Thought you’d never ask.”

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Chapter 11

Chapter 11…

They settled into a routine.

Jess would meet Dean for lunch, and leave him to his three hundred thousand jobs the rest of the day. He would hit the bookstore instead and read for free until the owner started to frown, or help Luke at the diner till it closed and then he’d wait for Dean to show up, sleepwalking at night. If he didn’t, and he didn’t three out of the next five nights, Jess would trek out around midnight, climb up the tree and into Dean’s bedroom instead.

Most nights they would make out for awhile and then go to sleep, nothing more. Dean would always be too incredibly exhausted for anything more than that anyway. God knows he tried, but Jess couldn’t bring himself to torture the poor kid when he’d really rather just curl up around Jess and sleep. Besides, Jess guessed, Dean still wasn’t completely ready to go all the way, not even when Jess offered to bottom first. So he waited patiently, trying to ignore the little niggling at the back of his head reminding him that his days were running out fast, and he’d have to leave soon.

Most mornings, Jess would be his creepy obsessed self and prop his head up on one elbow to watch Dean sleep. He couldn’t believe how much this guy had come to mean to him in a span of just three weeks. He wondered if the process of breaking a thirteen-year old’s solemn pledge, in other words, the process of him embracing his sexuality, had really started back when he’d first met Dean. Maybe that’s why there’d always been this heavy-breathing, chest-thumping, overly macho friction between the two, besides the obvious reason aka the Gilmore girl. Jess shook his head, reminiscing the way they used to be. Clearly, Dean had started to work a charm on Jess way back then. Too bad Jess took so very long to realize it.

One of those mornings when Jess was sneaking back into the diner from Dean’s, Luke caught him. He was sitting downstairs with a mug of coffee and a newspaper, ever so casually, like he always got up at five o’ freaking clock every morning.

“Didn’t know this sleepwalking thing was contagious.”

Jess scratched his head, unable to think of a good way to explain this. Instead he just smiled sheepishly, but Luke did not look amused.

“I’m guessing Marge does not know about you spending the night under her roof, does she?”

“Duh.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t be doing this, Jess.”

Jess sighed helplessly. “Come on, Luke. Night’s the only time I get to see him. The guy has three jobs and no time for me all day!”

“All the more reason to let him sleep, Jess. Or do you want him to start sleepwalking again?”

Jess relented reluctantly. “No, of course not.”
“Look, Jess, you know I’m not against the two of you being together. I just don’t think it is right for you guys to be… you know… doing it under Marge’s very nose because she’s not going to be very happy when she finds out about it. And trust me, if you move with the same degree of stealth in her house as you do sneaking in here, she will.”

Jess just rolled his eyes in response. Luke exhaled in equal irritation and stood up understanding that no matter what he said or believed, Jess was only going to do whatever he pleased. He hesitated for just a second before changing his pressure tactics, starting off on the safe sex lecture that Jess really did not want to hear.

“Look I know you’re an adult…”

“Then treat me like one, Jesus!!”

Of course, Luke was persistent, like he could be when he’d made his mind to get onto his nephew’s nerves. Jess groaned and cursed and stalked back to his bedroom and slammed the door shut behind him.

Luke just shouted out the rest of his lecture through the door.

***

That night, a little after eleven, the door bell rang. Jess came bounding down the stairs where Luke already was, still cleaning up after a really hectic day. The older man looked at him quizzically before going to get the door.

“Dean?”

“Uh, hi Luke…”

“You’re… not… sleepwalking.”

Dean flashed him a quick shot of his brilliant thousand watt smile. “No sir, am not.”

Luke paused, and no one spoke for a whole five seconds. Jess just watched, waiting at the last step of the stairs.

“Then, what are you doing here, Forester?”

The smile vanished. Only to be replaced by fumbling nervousness. “Ah, well, uh, I figured… i-if I don’t sleepwalk tonight and if you don’t want Jess to come over then… uh…”

“You figured I would just let you sleep over? Seriously?”

Dean threw Luke his classic lost puppy dog eyes that no one in the world could possibly resist. Jess had never been prouder of his boy. He tried to bite back his smirk as he watched his uncle make no effort to contain his exasperation, nor mask the fact that he’d already caved. Luke did follow it up with a lot of huffing and puffing about everything and nothing consequential. What could he say anyway? They were both consenting adults, and Luke was nowhere near homophobic.

“Yeah, alright.” He grunted at last and went back to his cleaning, not looking up as Dean thanked him quickly, then hurried up to where Jess stood grinning like a loon. Luke pretended he did not see
Jess holding out his hand and he pretended to not see Dean taking it either, as together they bounded up the stairs to their bedroom.

Once the door was locked, it didn’t take long for them to lose their clothes and fall into bed with a soft thud. They knew they could be as loud as they wanted in here, but kept it down with due consideration to the man downstairs who’d been nothing but outrageously kind and forgiving to the both of them.

The night progressed steadily from cuddling and kissing to handjobs to blowjobs (Dean had developed quite a skillful mouth over the past few days) and back to kissing and cuddling and now they lay spent on the bed. Dean lay on his back, with his hands clasped under his head, and Jess lay with his head pillowed on Dean’s chest, one hand still gripping Dean’s balls, rolling and squeezing them on occasion. At first Dean had laughed and complained that it tickled, but then he’d let Jess play on, seeing how Jess refused to relinquish his hold on the family jewels anyway.

“You know, in a way, this is an experiment my doctor had suggested some time ago. To see what happened if I go to sleep at Luke’s. Do I still get up and sleepwalk? And if yes, where do I go instead?”

"Is that what you told your mom about tonight? That you're conducting an experiment?"

Dean just sniggered and Jess joined in. Feeling drowsy, he nuzzled lower into Dean’s stomach. “Well, you’re not going anywhere. Staying right here, with me.”

Dean chuckled, and Jess felt the body beneath him vibrate with it but he didn’t let it shirk him off. “Getting bit possessive already, are we?”

“Mm-hmm…” was all Jess could manage. He did tighten his hold on Dean’s scrotum as a response though, making the other boy shiver and sigh helplessly.

“Jesse?”

“Hmm?”

“Why don’t you insist on… you know?”

Jess opened his eyes. “On what?”

“O-On us, you know, having sex? It’s not like we have all the time in the world.”

Jess looked up at Dean, resting his chin on the flat and ridiculously firm stomach instead. “You think you’re ready?”

Dean thought about it, and timidly shook his head.

“Then we wait. For as long as it takes. You can always do me first, you know. I told you, I’m easy. It’s you who’s insisting on going first.”

“That’s because you want it more. Don’t you remember what you said – that cheesy line from a soft porno flick?”

“Hey!”
Dean snorted, then quickly sobered up. “Point is, you asked for something and I want to be able to give it to you first, before asking back for it.”

“And who’s doing the cheesy harlequin lines now?”

Dean just laughed, and Jess pulled himself up to plant a quick peck on Dean’s lips in appreciation. “Baby, I won’t even pretend to understand your fuzzy logic. Just know that I can wait. Okay?”

“But for how long? You’ll be gone soon. In, what, three days to be exact?”

*Ah. About that.*

Jess bit his lip, then rose and slid to one side of his lover’s frame. He propped himself up on one elbow and looked down into Dean’s face, no longer sleepy. “Dean, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this for some time now.”

Dean frowned. “What is it?”

Jess tried to bite back his excitement, but he was sure it shone through his eyes. “Come away with me.”

“Wh-what?”

“I spoke to my partner, Dillon, and it’s all been discussed and agreed. You know we own a small construction business in Queens and we’re trying to land some of the landscaping contracts, which you have experience with, so it’s a good fit! It’ll pay you three times what you make working your three jobs here if not more, I can guarantee you that. Well, maybe not in the beginning but that’s fine – we can start you off on a sizable advance until the thing takes off. And we could really use another partner, especially someone as hard working and – “

“Wait, wait… WHAT?”

Jess looked up into Dean’s eyes; he was now struggling to sit up, so Jess let him and followed suit. “What’s wrong? Aren’t you excited?”

“Excited?!?!?” Dean looked mad. Why the hell did Dean look mad?

The taller boy suddenly got up and out of bed and started to dress himself. “How could you… how could you think I’d let you treat me like some fucking charity case, Mariano? Don’t you think I get enough of that already?”

“That’s not what I – “

“Oh did you think I’d just jump up and down with joy at the prospect of being kept like a fucking whore?”

“I’m offering you a fucking job, genius!”

“And when exactly did you decide to branch out into landscaping?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”
Dean scowled miserably. “Every-fuckin-thing!!”

“Damn it, Dean! Why do you always have to fight me on stuff so hard? Why can’t we for once talk about shit like normal people?”

“That’s rich, coming from you, Jess. You’re the original street fighter of Stars Hollow, remember?”

Jess lost it then. The notoriously short temper he was holding down burst through to the surface because why should Dean get to spew all the venom after all?

“You know what? Forget it. Forget I offered you your only chance to get out of Hells Hollow and actually do something more substantial with your life than stocking groceries.”

“Well, that’s awesomely generous of you, but, no thanks.” Dean suddenly turned away as if… as if to hide his face from Jess. “I gotta go,” he hissed and picked up his jacket and shoes.

And now he was leaving. Jess felt his gut clenching with a fresh bout of despair and helplessness. He was getting really sick and tired of watching Dean walk out on him over and over, and over again.

“Where do you think you’re going? You know you’ll come sleepwalking back to me anyway.”

And that was somehow an even harsher thing to say, but Jess realized it half a moment too late. He recognized that subtle slump in the lean shoulders, and immediately regretted being the one to put it there. Again.

“Dean…”

Don’t go. Please stay. I’m sorry…

But his wounded pride would let him say none of that. Dean practically dashed to the door then, opened it and stepped out. Jess heard his footsteps storming down the steps and out the main door.

He couldn’t have stopped Dean from leaving that night. Even if he’d tried.
Chapter 12

Jess wasn’t going to give in first, not this time. That’s what he told himself over and over again. Why should he always be the one to knuckle under and apologize for what wasn’t even his fault? He won’t. He just *fucking* won’t.

Ten minutes to noon, Jess found himself parked at his usual spot by the lamppost, waiting for Dean to come out on his lunch break.

And of course, Dean decided today was the day he was going to skip lunch and work right through the half hour without a break.

Jess sighed, ran a hand through his black wavy hair and turned around to leave. Only to find himself unable to take a single step. Cursing himself, cursing Dean, and even Dillon for convincing him to take a break from work, he stepped into the store.

Dean was busy re-labeling the Indian and Chinese aisles. He didn’t even look up but it was obvious he could sense Jess was there. The tall boy sat crouched on one knee on the floor, looking down at his clipboard with deadly concentration, pretending he was still completely alone.

Jess walked slowly, carefully, glad the store was nearly empty this time of the day. He was barely a yard away from Dean when he stopped, shifting from one foot to the next.

“Alright, I was an ass.” Jess managed to mumble.

Dean paused, just for a second, then continued working as if he didn’t hear anything.

“And I’m sorry for that.”

“You’ve been saying that a lot.”

But Dean still wouldn’t look up.

“But I’m not sorry for the job offer I made you.”

Dean twitched a little at that but gave no reaction otherwise. Jess waited for a few seconds, then exhaled loudly. “I have something for you.”

“I don’t want it.”

Jess bit his lip, gulping down the howls of frustration lodged in his throat. He pulled a blue file out from behind his leather jacket, he’d had it tucked in his belt, and now he held it out at nose level with the crouching boy. Right in his face.

Dean flinched away. “What is this?”

“It’s the business plan Dillon has been putting together for you these past few days. With pretty close to accurate figures and everything about how the business splits up three-way, landscaping
Dean’s eyes went wide as he looked up into Jess’ face at last. He looked down at the file within his reach but didn’t reach for it still. And when he didn’t say a word, Jess carried on. He was nervous and desperate, worried that Dean was going to misread his intentions again.

“Just to be clear, I don’t do charity and I don’t pay for sex. I plan to, sometime in the future, but this is definitely not it…”

“You plan to pay for sex?”


Dean waited a whole three seconds before cracking a soft smile which he quickly tucked away and stood up. He still wouldn’t take the file, not even to look at all the numbers Dillon and Jess had toiled over all damn night.

“You still haven’t answered my question.”

Jess huffed, remembering the inane argument from last night. “Look, Dillon and I had talked about it in passing last year, about the shit-loads of money in corporate landscaping we could be making if we just had the manpower and some basic know-how to do it. But nothing came out of it until I talked to you and realized how good you are at this stuff.”

“I don’t know all that much.”

“Stop short-selling yourself, Dean, you know enough! And damn it, why aren’t you just happy you’re being offered an opportunity of a lifetime here, man?”

Dean grimaced and swallowed visibly, then looked away for a second as if to compose himself. When he turned back towards Jess, he was still his old, stubborn, distrusting self. “Look, even if I believed you, which I don’t, I still can’t do this. My mom and my sister need me here.”

“It’s not like you’ll be gone to the other end of the world, Dean. You’ll just be one state away, that’s like… a three-hour bus ride tops. You can come back every weekend if you want. I’ll drive you if you want.”

Dean kept shaking his head fervently. “But, Jess…”

Jess couldn’t be stopped anymore. He closed the distance until he could grab Dean’s arms just above the elbows and unintentionally attempt to shake him.

“It’ll be perfect, Dean! You can stay with me, I got a loft with an extra bedroom and a great view of the docks. Uh, kind of. You don’t have to pay any rent and I can give you a ride to work so you can save loads on the commute too.”

“…”

“Okay fine, you can pay rent. Happy?”

Dean was still frowning as he pulled away from Jess’ hands.
“And remember you said you have all these ideas for landscaping that your boss keeps shooting down? You can do your own thing with this new thing, man. It’ll be yours! All yours!”

Dean started to wheeze. Jess realized his voice had gotten louder and louder with every word and a couple of patrons of the store had started to stare. Dean saw it too, and flushed red with what was quite possibly mortification. He grabbed his jacket, donning it over his goofy green apron and stepped out of the store. For once the manager did not stop him, and Jess hastily followed him down the street.

“Wait, Dean…”

“…”

“Dean, stop! Don’t you dare walk away from me again.”

But when still Dean wouldn’t respond, Jess couldn’t help the loudness of his words that followed next.

“What’d I say that’s so damn wrong?”

Dean suddenly stopped and screamed back. “NOTHING, okay? Nothing’s wrong. It’s all right, in fact, it’s…”

Jess waited with bated breath.

Dean’s face crumpled as he crossed his arms to hug himself and looked away. ”It’s perfect,” he murmured miserably.

All Jess wanted to do was grab the boy and squeeze him to his chest hard until neither of them could breathe. He wanted to kiss that misery clean off his boy’s gorgeous face and he wanted to protect him from whatever it was that was giving him so much pain. And he wanted to do it right here, in broad daylight and clear sight of everyone around.

A couple of cars honked at them until they realized Dean had halted right in the middle of daytime traffic. Startled, Dean quickly moved back up to the pavement and ducked into a narrow back alley where no one could spot him. Except Jess, of course, who followed until they both found some semblance of privacy.

“Dean, talk to me, man.”

Dean gulped and scanned his surroundings blankly.

“My mom’s not going to like this…”

“What, you trying to have a life of your own for once?”

“…”

“Is that all? Is that why you’re turning me down?”

Dean glared at him. “It’s one of my reasons, yeah.”
Something didn’t seem right. Jess narrowed his eyes and took another stab in the dark. “Or are you worried she’d find out you’re gay?”

Dean huffed. “Jess…”

“Just tell her we’re friends. It’s a stretch given our history in this town, sure, but if lying is what you need to do, then do it. I don’t mind.”

Dean sighed and looked away. A teenager passing by the little alley glanced sideways at them. She looked him up and down and flashed an ‘are you crazy to be seen like that in public?’ look. Dean scowled back at her but reached behind himself to get rid of the apron. He rolled it up in one hand and turned to face Jess.

“Look, I just don’t think it’s a good idea to leave them alone so soon…”

“It’s been over six months.”

“You’ve got an answer for everything today, don’t you?”

“I’m not letting you chicken out of this one, Dean. Give me a good reason and I’ll back off, I promise.”

Dean shook his head and started to walk back to the store. But Jess wasn’t having any of that. He ran up to block him off, standing right in Dean’s path. In his face.

“You’re just being a sissy little wimp again, aren’t you? You’re afraid everyone will find out you’re queer?”

Dean exhaled irritatedly and flung his hands up in the air. “This is why I can’t come with you, Jess. Because of your stupid temper and your caustic tongue and the fact that you seem to get off on hurting me.”

Jess stopped short. “I don’t…”

“Why do we always end up arguing and misunderstanding each other, Jess? You were right to ask me that last night. Why can’t we seem to have a normal conversation like everyone else? Why don’t you get me? And why don’t I get you?”

“E-everyone argues, all the damn time. That’s all me and Rory ever did – fight. But that does not mean I didn’t…”

love her.

The words froze on Jess’ tongue as his brain caught up with the implications. He stopped. Dean waited.

But Jess didn’t complete that sentence.

Seconds ticked away in silence, as Dean still waited. His eyes seeking, searching - they tended to do that a lot - but for what, who knew. Finally he seemed to give up, and Dean abruptly laughed, cynical and curt, the expression on his face dismal and dark with something Jess could only describe as… pain.
“Look, Jesse. What we had these last three weeks… it was great.” Dean’s eyes teared up. “It was… intense, and hot, but let’s face it – it wasn’t enough. Intense and hot won’t last us forever.”

No, you don’t mean that… Jess didn’t realize he didn’t actually manage to say the words out loud.

Naturally, Dean continued. “You don’t wanna be stuck in a situation where we’re business partners who can’t even stand the sight of each other. And I… I can’t afford to take too many risks at this point. I got debts to pay, man. I have to take care of my family.”

Jess Mariano was no optimist. But he sure had a mean streak of stubbornness. And so far he’d held on stubbornly to his belief that he could change Dean’s mind, that he could convince Dean to come to New York with him. Fact he’d held on to it so hard, he’d refused to look at the alternative at all.

Until now, when it hit him suddenly, like a ton of bricks crashing down on him out of nowhere: Dean was breaking up with him.

A second later, he felt a curious burn behind his own eyes and was horrified to realize what it was. Jess looked away suddenly, using the reprieve to collect himself.

“What about you, Dean…” he whispered. “Who takes care of you?”

His question was met with absolute silence behind him. Jess gathered his guts and turned back to face the boy who’d come to mean so much to him, even though he couldn’t still bring himself to admit that.

Least of all to Dean.

Dean stood looking down at the tips of his shoes, his hands buried in his jacket, the rolled up apron still tucked in the crook of his left arm. When he looked up, Jess felt his heart shatter to pieces inside his chest.

“Today’s Friday. You’re leaving Sunday, right?”

Jess swallowed hard, and merely nodded. He didn’t break eye contact with the other boy, as if daring him. To what, he wasn’t quiet sure yet.

Dean heaved a giant sigh. “I wish you hadn’t brought this up at all, Jesse.”

“…”

“Let’s just… let’s just forget all of this and… make the most of the time we’ve got left, alright? What do you say?”

He looked… hopeful, Jess thought, sardonically.

It’s ironic how you could hope for something so desperately and yet dread it at the same time as well. It’s really not as rare an occurrence as one might think.

Jess looked down at the blue file still clutched in his right hand. Poor Dillon, he’d canceled a date last night to finish this before morning, because Jess had asked him to.
He cleared his throat threatening to clog up. “I don’t think I can do that.”

“…”

“I’ll… see you when I see you.”

And that was it. Jess flung the file towards the nearest trash can without looking at it again, put his hands in his pockets and walked away. He kept walking, even as he felt Dean’s eyes boring into his back, suppressing the urge to break into a run, until he’d turned the corner. And that’s when he took a moment to turn around.

He turned just in time to see Dean walking away in the opposite direction.

Those were the last words Jess Mariano ever said to Dean Forester, that summer of 2006.

***

Dean did not sleepwalk that night. Jess went out anyway, just to be sure. He drove to a friend’s party somewhere in Hartford, and stayed there till five in the morning.

He didn’t show up on Saturday night either, even though this time Jess stayed in, staring at the same word in the same sentence on the same page of the stupid Kissinger book all night.

At three in the morning, Jess couldn’t stop himself.

He got into his sneakers and ran all the way to the other side of the town, and stood under Dean’s window until dawn broke. He didn’t dare climb that tree or enter that room. A part of him was glad the lights were out and that Dean seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Another part was bitter and disgruntled that he could still sleep without a care while Jess stayed up restless and miserable all night, tears streaming down his face because for once, he was letting them.

His head felt light, his heart heavy and sinking to the very bottom of the gaping hole of his stomach. His eyes were swollen and his body protested being held upright when all it wanted to do was curl up like fetus in a dark little corner and never see the light of day. He felt like he was stuck in a horrible nightmare he couldn’t escape. Jess was the sleepwalker tonight, except he was wide awake and utterly miserable while he was at it.

Sunday morning rolled in, and Jess packed up all his stuff and threw it in the back of his beloved Buick. He turned back to his uncle Luke, who stood with his hands in his pockets and a forlorn look on his face, waiting to hug his nephew one last time before he left. Jess welcomed the stronghold of his uncle’s embrace, and let his deadweight rest against the older man for a second, just a second. Then he broke away and with one last parting smile, they said their (manly) goodbyes.

Jess got into the driver’s seat and adjusted his mirrors, hoping to catch a glimpse of a tall, lanky twenty year old somewhere… sneaking behind a lamppost maybe, hesitating to wave goodbye.

He didn’t see anyone.

Three hours later, he was back in Queens. Back to his old life.

It was as if the summer break had never happened.
Chapter 13

Time passed slowly, excruciatingly so, in quiet disconcertedness.

Dillon told Jess that it’d pass, that Jess would get over it, man he had to, sooner or later. Jess had been waiting three months, five days and a few hours now. Not happening so far.

And it wasn’t for lack of trying, at all. Jess had not called Luke since he left. The couple of times Luke’s name flashed on his cell phone’s display, he didn’t pick up. He didn’t call back either. He threw away the Kissinger book because the smell of the several years old, slightly musty paper had turned into a full sensory reminder of all the nights he’d stayed up watching a beautiful boy sleeping peacefully.

And it wasn’t that Jess was moping around, being useless around the loft or at work. Fact he’d never been as productive as he was since he came back, throwing himself and everything he had into the business with absolute vehemence. It obviously had seemed to be working for… Mr. You-know-who. Jess just followed his lead and did his best to exhaust himself completely and utterly, just so he could sleep like the dead at night.

No ethereal visions of almond-shaped eyes blinking open lazily in the early morning sunlight, no floppy sandy hair curling at the base of a slender pale-white neck, no swollen red lips twisted into mischievous little smirks teasing him. None of that fucking bullshit.

And yet, Jess couldn’t understand why he sometimes woke up to a damp pillow under his face. It wasn’t like he could ever remember any of his dreams.

***

Twenty-three year old Dillon Matthews made it his life’s mission to set Jess up, with girls first and later boys too… sometimes one of each within the same night.

At first Jess resisted – which apparently just served as a blatant admission to the fact that he wasn’t doing as alright as he’d have his friends believe. Eventually he gave in, and went out with (and rejected, or got rejected by) random folks for awhile… until he met Seth.

Seth was two years older to Jess, a fresh college graduate now working as a management trainee with Goldman Sachs. And boy did they work him hard.

He was tall too, about six feet one with chestnut hair (close cropped, not long and goofy like in Jess’ dreams) and had gorgeous blue eyes (not hazel). He was smart and well-read, and had a killer sense of humor. He had none of the airs one would associate with an Ivy Leaguer but most important of all, he didn’t seem to take life too seriously.

Easy kinda guy. Like Jess.

He was pretty resilient to what had once been described as Jess’ caustic tongue, and was both emotionally and intellectually mature enough to match Jess wit for wit, giving back just as good as he got. It never actually felt like they were arguing, even when they were arguing.
Jess loved that.

Course love was too strong a word to use. And being in love was not even in question. Come on, they’d only been out like eight times in three weeks. Too early for sentimental nonsense like that, obviously.

Like it’d been too early back in summer with Dean, right?

Three months, five days and nine hours.

The more he chided himself for keeping count of the days and freaking hours like a chump, the more he did it anyway. It was this pathetic counter ticking away relentlessly inside his head that drove Jess to see Seth more. He was the only one talkative enough and distracting enough to be able to drown the damn thing out, if only for a little while. Seth was, in a lot of ways, similar and yet the exact antithesis to Forester. The differences Jess enjoyed; the similarities he tried his best to ignore.

It was a mildly chilly Saturday night in October, and Jess was accompanying Seth to one of his friends’ house party in the Upper East Side. They took the subway, fully intending to get smashed so neither of them would be in a position to drive later.

“You sure you want me there?” He asked for like a hundredth time.

Seth, for the hundredth time, chuckled and shook his head in exasperation. “You’ll be fine, Jess. Come on, it’s just a bunch of guys from school.”

School being Yale, to be exact.

Jess wasn’t one to be intimidated by smart folks who went to college. Hell, he could bet he was better read than the whole bunch of them put together. But he sure wasn’t about to let his guard down around them prissy yuppie rich-kid types, just in case.

“Admit it. You just wanna show me off as your latest nubile conquest to your greasy old class of 2006.”

Seth laughed, a sparkling laughter that reminded Jess of another set of muted sounds of amusement that always had to be hushed up quickly so they wouldn’t wake anyone in the middle of the night. It pained him to realize he never did hear this kind of loud, full-blown, carefree, bellowing laughter from Dean. Like, ever.

***

As expected, the Upper East Side mansion they entered was humongous and grand. The party was in full swing up on the terrace. Much to Jess’ chagrin, Seth had conveniently neglected to mention the theme of the night: Cigars, Sake, and Sushi.

A brief (too long) round of introductions later, Jess slipped away from Seth’s side as tactfully (not) as he could. The future investment banker frowned, not liking the sudden emptiness in his hand that’d been clutching at Jess’ arm. But he knew Jess well enough to let him be and turned his attention to catching up with some of his old posse.

Jess strolled around the terrace for a bit, and nearly jumped with joy when he found a tub on the far
side of the banquet table filled with ice and generous amounts of beer. He cracked one open and took a long, satisfying gulp before leaning against the table. That’s when he took the time to look around the terrace: everyone had stuck to the night’s dress code of all black, including Seth and himself. Everyone, that is, except one – a tall girl in a wine red knee-length dress and recently shortened, dark hair – the girl who was looking right back at him with bright, piercing eyes.

In hindsight, he probably should have expected to run into Rory Gilmore at this Yale reunion party. He’d never have showed up if he had, obviously.

“Small world,” she drawled as she walked up to him, smiling.

Jess smiled back shortly and they clanked their beer and wine glasses together, making a toast to… whatever it was Rory rambled on about for the next forty seconds and Jess made no attempt whatsoever to pay attention to.

“So, you’re here with Seth?”

Jess took a swig of beer and looked Rory in the eye, waited for her to say whatever she had on her mind.

“I’d heard rumors…”

“Yeah, well, now you know.”

Jess threw the empty bottle of beer and picked up another, wishing she would just go away.

“Relax, Jess, I think Seth’s great, and you two look good together. Of course, it doesn’t surprise me that you managed to move on so fast.”

Jess rolled his eyes. It had been three years since they broke up, for God’s sake. Who did she think she was?

“What do you want me to do, Rory? Pine and brood over you for the rest of my life?”

Rory scoffed, the light in her eyes dimming momentarily before she looked away and at the crowd milling about on the mansion terrace.

“I wasn’t talking about me.”

Jess started.

“Stars Hollow is a small town, Jess. And I mean small. Tiny, miniscule, microscopic in fact. People talk. Especially when you make no attempts at discretion whatsoever.”

“…”

“Did you really think no one noticed the daily lunch dates and the clumsy scaling of trees to climb into bedroom windows in the middle of the night?”

“I… I didn’t…”

“That one’s got way too many problems for one person to handle, really.”

Jess looked away, clenching his fists trying to gulp down the sudden burst of rage in his gut along with the beer. But he kept his mouth shut.

“I mean, seriously. The boy leaves a perfectly good seat in college, granted it’s only State-U but it’s a degree right, to do what? Pay off his dad’s bad debts so his mom and sis don’t have to lose their home?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, of course! Can’t blame him for trying to cash in on what he does best. Manual labor is all he knows. Never did give himself a chance to learn any better, did he?”

Jess was starting to lose it. “That’s always been your problem, Gilmore. No one is ever rich enough or smart enough or classy enough or freakin’ white collar enough for you.”

“Look who’s talking! You’re the one who’s found all of that and more in Seth Meyer there, heir apparent to Meyer & Shaw Holdings, Incorporated.”

Alright, so he could see why Rory, or anyone really, might arrive at that wildly inaccurate conclusion. Jess did not care to explain to her that Seth was a fiercely independent guy and wanted nothing to do with his dad’s investment firm. He was too ruffled by the insinuations directed at Dean instead, more than he’d like to be.

“So that’s what you’re riding me about? You want Seth now?”

“Why not? You left that overgrown bag of issues behind for Seth, didn’t you? Hell I don’t blame you at all, Jess. If I heard it right, and how could I not, my mom was right there in the store two aisles down when you put your incredibly lucrative business proposition before Dean…”

Jess’ eyes went wide. “Lorelei was there?”

Rory blinked once in affirmative. “But hey, about your business plan… did the big dumb oaf get it? Of course not.”

“Shut up, Rory! You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Oh really? Enlighten me then!”

Jess barely kept himself from smashing the bottle of Sam Adams into the girl’s face.

“I sprang it on him out of nowhere, he was taken aback. And it’s a big decision, he… he just didn’t know how to react! And… he’s got all these responsibilities. Maybe he needed time to think about it, maybe he needed to speak to his family first and… and think about it. He’d only like, really known me for less than three weeks! Someone like him, with so many people depending on him, he can’t afford to take too many gambles right now. And, I mean, come on – I’m Jess Mariano! How could he trust me blindly? I gave him no reason to… to…”

“…”

Jess caught himself in the middle of his frantically defensive rant and suddenly halted, to finally look
up at Rory. Her eyes were sparkling with sympathy.

Jess felt out of breath, out of sorts, like he’d been running uphill after something and he couldn’t even remember what it was anymore. He turned, walking away despite his legs that felt like they were turned to lead, dragging them until he reached the end of the terrace and leaned against the far railing. He still couldn’t breathe.

Rory approached him slowly from behind.

“Why did you walk away, Jess? Why didn’t you give him another chance?”

To be honest, he’d been asking himself that question for three months, five days and… eleven hours now. Why did he let his stupid pride get in the way of the only thing that had grown to matter to him so much?

“He said… he said it wasn’t enough. What we-we had, it wasn’t enough for him to… go changing his whole life for me.”

Tears filled his eyes but he squeezed them shut, not willing to give in to his pent-up emotions of loss and desperation yet. Not yet.

Rory heaved a long sigh and came to lean against the railing, her shoulder grazing soothingly against Jess’. He still didn’t know why she was doing this, why she was here talking to him about Dean at all.

“Wish it were that simple, huh? Life would be so awesomely easy if we just… knew what we wanted from it. I don’t know about you but by the time I figure stuff out, it’s usually too late. Life moves on, leaving me behind.”

He found himself leaning his weight against Rory, his thoughts circling inside his head around one singular, vivid image.

“H-How is he?”

Rory shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

“Sleepwalking still?”

“Sleepwalking still.”


“He can’t anymore. Well, some days he tries.”

Jess froze. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“Luke didn’t tell you?”

Jess tried not to think of the multiple phone calls he’d deliberately missed. “Tell me what?”

Rory bit her lip and looked down at her shoes.
“Dean doesn’t sleepwalk to the diner anymore.”

***
Chapter 14

** Stars Hollow. Twelve days ago…

Margaret Forester sat in her kitchen at the far end of the table, a tall mug of black coffee cooling between her hands.

She’d forgone her heart meds last night for this, they often made her drowsy and lethargic and unable to get out of bed in time. It was bad enough she’d developed the habit of staying up late to make sure Dean slept the whole night through, or if he started to sleepwalk, she’d know it and be able to call ahead. But that also meant she had a lot of trouble waking up in the mornings.

So here she was, waiting downstairs for about half an hour now, dead intent on catching her son before he left. Marge was not going to miss him again, not today.

Footsteps came bounding down the stairs, light and swift, considerate of the hour (too late, too early) as always. Over the past ten months, Dean had mastered the art of floating in and out of this house like a ghost.

“Mom?”

He frowned as soon as he spotted her, path diverting towards the table instead of the back door.

“You’re up early. Are you okay?”

“I’m alright, sweetie. It’s you I’m worried about.”

Dean halted mid-step. Marge watched as he sighed and looked back longingly towards the door. She knew this was going to be difficult, but she hadn’t even begun and already the lost look on her baby’s face was shattering her resolve.

“Luke told me. Last night when you left and I called… he-he told me everything.”

Now he really looked miserable. Dean adjusted the lapels of his jacket as if to have something to do with his fidgeting hands.

“Dean, I am your mother. You know I will always love you and support you in whatever you do, no matter where it takes you.”

“…”

“And if that means –”

“I’m not going anywhere, mom.”

“But, sweetie, if that is what you want –”
“I made my choice.”

Dean’s eyes hardened with a bitterness she’d never seen before, not even when George left, leaving the weight of the world on his young son’s shoulders.

“And even if I wanted to take it back, I… I can’t. It’s too late for that.”

He didn’t wait for her to ask anything more after that. Abruptly he turned around and made for the door.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

Marge waited for the door to close before she gasped and set the mug down on the tabletop with a loud thump. She pushed her instinctive (and selfish) reaction of relief down, wondering what she could do, what she could say to convince Dean that it was okay. That she didn’t want him to sacrifice every single shred of happiness for this stupid house. She’d never liked it all that much anyway.

But something told her it was not in her hands anymore. It probably never was.

***

They once told him no Stars Hollow story was complete without a Gilmore (or two) playing a pivotal role in it. They didn’t have to be in every frame, of course, even though sometimes that’s what it felt like and annoyingly so. But even a cameo by a Gilmore, apparently, went a long way, so they said.

They weren’t wrong.

Rory offered to drop him home, but Jess refused, he could take the subway and get back much faster anyway.

She grinned coyly. “Guess that means Seth is available now, huh.”

Jess grinned back, recognizing it as only half a jibe. “Only if you grow a dick sometime soon.”

Rory sighed. “For him, I almost wish I could.”

“Haha.” Which reminded him - Seth. Jess winced, feeling guilty for ditching him like this, though not quite enough.

“Um, Rory, could you…?”

“I’ll let him know you had to leave. You do the explanations yourself tomorrow, or whenever.”

“Fair enough. Thanks.”

“You do realize what you’re giving up, right? The man’s about as perfect as they come.”

Jess kissed her on the cheek and lingered for as long as was appropriate. “I never was much for perfection, Gilmore. You know that better than anyone.”
Rory couldn’t decide if she was offended or flattered. Instead she just waved him goodbye and watched him leave with a strange yearning in her eyes that she didn’t quite understand herself.

***

It was nearly eleven when Jess finally made it back to Queens and to his beloved car. And then he drove like a madman. Traffic was thin this time of the night and he might as well floor it all the way. The only thing stopping him was the fear of getting pulled over for speeding. And he couldn’t take that risk – nothing could stop him from getting to Stars Hollow tonight.

He plugged his hands-free into one ear and dialed the diner’s number.

“ Took you long enough,” were the first words out of his uncle’s mouth. Jess couldn’t have regretted ignoring him more if he tried.

“I’m so sorry, Uncle Luke.”

There was a huff and a grunt on the other end of the line and Jess smiled. No other words were needed. He could hear the older man’s forgiveness in the sounds alone.

“You on your way back, then? Rory called. She told me you guys talked.”

“I’ll be there in about an hour. Is… Is Dean…?”

“Marge hasn’t called yet. He’s been sleepwalking for three nights straight now and starting to look like death warmed over. I’m thinking he’s going to be sleeping through the night tonight.”

Jess was relieved to hear that. “Good. Good. When did… uh, since when?”

“Since when do you think, dumb-ass?”

Jess’ hands gripped the steering wheel so tight the veins under his alabaster white skin started to bulge.

“Keep talking to me. Please…”

It always did seem to calm Jess down, someone’s voice (preferably a loved one) filling the void, even if it were nothing but absurd and pointless rambling. Luke sighed, Jess heard a chair shifting, and then the deep voice on the other end began.

“The first time it happened was, I think, two days after you left. Around midnight, Marge heard the door open in the middle of the night and like she’s done every night that she’d heard that noise before, she picked up the phone and called me. I, as usual, went downstairs and waited for Dean to show up, only he didn’t. Guess I dozed off in my chair and when I woke up, it was already four in the morning. Figured maybe Dean woke up on his own sometime on his way and turned back – that happens sometimes – when he stumbles up hard enough against something or someone.”

Jess bit the inside of his cheek and forced himself to concentrate on the road. The thought of Dean wandering alone, in a cold dark night, completely oblivious of his surroundings and potential dangers, vulnerable… it still made his blood boil like nothing else.
Meanwhile, Luke continued. “I didn’t want to disturb Marge, but just in case, decided to text her asking about Dean. Marge didn’t see the text until she woke up much later. She went to Dean’s room to check, but he was back by then. Face down on his bed but his clothes were damp, and there were muddy footprints on the carpet, that clearly meant he’d been out and back.”

Jess frowned. “So no one figured it out?”

“Not until it’d happened three times in a row. I got sick of getting out of bed and waiting for the boy who never showed up. And I was starting to suspect something was wrong. So one night I got out of the house soon as Marge called and started walking down the path that Dean would ordinarily take to get to the diner. Ten minutes later, I found him.”

“Sleepwalking?”

“Yeah, only he deviated from his usual course right in front of my eyes and started walking towards the…”

Luke stopped suddenly, like he was sensing Jess’ distress from over the phone. “Jess? You okay, kid?”

Jess bit his lip, for fear he might just start bawling.

“You know why he goes to the bus station, don’t you?”

It took Jess more than a few seconds to bring himself to respond. “I told him it’s a three hour bus ride, tops. To Queens.”

Luke didn’t respond.

Jess stared at the winding I-95 ahead, it was the same road he’d taken three months ago to come back to the city. The familiar sensation of going home hit him then, calming him, the thought of seeing Dean again bringing a tiny smile to his face.

Even if it’s for a little while, even if Dean sends him packing all the way back to Queens all over again.

“What does he do? I mean... there?”

“Think he just... sits there. Like he’s waiting for morning, for the first bus to take him someplace away from his worries. Until something or someone wakes him, or he snaps out of it himself. Usually it happens at the first light of dawn, and then he runs all the way back home.”

*Shaking himself apart and not just from the cold.*

Jess remembered those nights Dean would walk into the diner, into his bedroom, unaware that he had company. The nights he wouldn’t stop trembling from the cold miserable rain outside long after they’d tucked him into bed. Most of all, he remembered the crestfallen look on his face each morning when he’d realize where he was, and couldn’t wait to get away from it all.

“A cop car does the rounds there pretty much every night now, thanks to him. Some days they pick him up and bring him back. But they’re getting sick of it, I think. One of those idiots suggested to
Marge that her son be institutionalized.”

“Fucking bastard, whoever that was I’m gonna…”

“Maybe he’s right, Jess.”

Jess lost it. “How can you say that?!?! He’s sleepwalking, not hurting anyone for God’s sake!”

“Yeah but he might end up hurting himself one of these days.”

Jess squeezed back his tears desperately.

“Don’t give up on him, Uncle Luke. Heck you never gave up on me. And Dean happens to be a good man, better than I’ve ever been all my life. Surely he deserves a break more than I ever did!”


Jess sat up straighter in his seat, throwing caution to the wind and really stepping on it. Half a minute later, Luke came back on and he sounded in a hurry.

“That was Marge. Dean’s heading for the bus stop again.”

“…”

“I’m going over now. Jess, you there?”

Jess’ hands shook along with his voice, even as his foot on the gas took on a whole new life of its own.

“I’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

There was a soft pause on the other end. “Alright. Drive safe, Jess. He’ll still be there, waiting.”

*Like he’s waited for three months, five days and… thirteen hours now.*

***
Chapter 15

See that’s the thing with really, really small towns and their even smaller bus stations. No security. Who the hell would ever want to vandalize a transit bus stop anyway, right?

It was close to one o’clock on a Thursday night and naturally (for Stars Hollow) the place was absolutely deserted. Jess parked his Buick and practically ran through the perfunctory gates to get to the other side that had three small terminals for buses to board and alight from, right next to each other.

He spotted Luke first.

The older man stood with his feet set apart, his hands in his denim jacket pockets and his cap turned around, at one end of the farthest terminal. It was the terminal for buses going to New York.

“Lu-” but he couldn’t finish, as his eyes followed Luke’s line of sight to find what his uncle was keeping a close watch on.

Dean Forester sat perched on the farthest waiting bench at the terminal, arms crossed tightly in front of his usual gray t-shirt clad chest, legs in black sweatpants pushed together, bare feet fixed on the cold, frosty ground. He was hunched forward, his head lowered into his lap. He was ‘sleeping’, of course, but Jess could see his eyes were still half open, partially hidden by the long auburn locks curtaining his face. The eyes were why strangers didn’t recognize him as a sleepwalker.

Jess felt a fresh string of tears welling up in his eyes, and he didn’t seem all that inclined to stop them anymore. He felt Luke’s wary eyes on him as quietly, wiping the wetness of his face with his jacket sleeves, he moved toward Dean. From a corner of his eyes, he spotted Luke turning away, heading back to the parking lot.

Dean was still his long, lean, wiry self, shuddering now and then from a nip in the wind while he just sat there in his sleep clothes and no shoes. Jess hated that part the most. He couldn’t possibly carry on like this when in a matter of days it’d be the thick of winter and snowing everywhere. He found himself walking in a hurry, his feet carrying him closer to the subject of his dreams. And then he was sitting right beside Dean, on the bench, inching closer.

“Dean,” he whispered softly. To which, of course, he got no response.

The face was paler, thinner, lips chapped and pink from the cold. His slender but toned muscles bulged at his arms in stark contrast with the susceptibility of his pose. Jess drew closer and shrugged out of his long black jacket, gently bringing it around Dean’s shoulders and draping it there. He also left his right arm there, wrapped around the other boy, squeezing his frame closer to his own.

Maybe it was the warmth of the jacket. Or maybe it was the string of feather-light kisses Jess couldn’t help but press into the side of Dean’s face, kisses filled with sheer desperation to hear Dean’s voice. Maybe it was his forehead that came to rest on Dean’s shoulder, just for a little while, mouth pressing another long, urgent kiss into his collarbone. Who knew.
Jess felt the body in his arms suddenly stiffen then relax, slowly rousing from a deep sleep. He raised his head and looked up into the angelic face, eyes still brimming with tears.

Dean’s own eyes blinked a couple times, narrowed one second, and went wide the next… realization dawning of where he was, what he was doing (again), and – when he finally looked up and around himself – who he was with. So many shocks all at once, Jess thought it was a damn miracle the boy hadn’t passed out already.

“Welcome back…” he whispered, just as Dean continued to stare at him listlessly, seemingly petrified in his place.

“I’m dreaming,” Dean whispered back. And Jess chuckled ever so softly.

He looked right into Dean’s widening, waking eyes and lowered his mouth to the other’s in slow motion. When Dean still didn’t react (or jump away), he pressed his lips against Dean’s, sealing the truth with a kiss that was gentle yet frantic, and very, very real. Neither closed his eyes.

When Jess pulled away, it was to bring his other hand up to Dean’s face, push the wild strands of hair behind his ear and caress his cheek lovingly.

“Looks like we’re even.”

“…”

“You just admitted you’ve been dreaming of me too.”

Dean seemed to come back to himself at that. When he froze up, Jess feared he was going to pull away, and found himself holding on to the boy with more ferocity that might have even hurt but he didn’t care. He didn’t want to let go. Not again.

*Never again.*

“Looks like you missed the bus,” he murmured, willing the love of his life to hear it for the joke it was supposed to be, and not anything else. “May I give you a ride?”

Dean’s face, while still pale and stricken, looked like he couldn’t decide if he should react with a scowl or a smile at that. His crystal clear irises still seemed forlorn and so far, far away. He looked away, suddenly, hugging himself tighter and pulling away just enough to make Jess lose his grip around him. At least he didn’t walk away on him again; Jess could live with that for now.

“Why did you come back, Jess? I was just starting to…”

“What? Get over me?”

“…”

“Looks like you’re not having any better luck than me, Forester.”

Dean swallowed and looked back at Jess, his eyes questioning, hoping, but he didn’t say a word.

Jess exaggerated a sigh of exasperation. “You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”
“Fine, let’s talk. Don’t blame me if everyone calls you the girl in this relationship later.”

Dean cracked a smile at last. It was more of a smirk, actually. “With this height and your name? I doubt that very much, Mariano.”

Jess smiled, leaning in tentatively because he didn’t want to scare Dean away again. And when Dean stayed, he pecked at Dean’s willing lips again, stealing a quick kiss before pulling up to look into the blown, hazel pupils.

“I love you, Dean Forester. I have loved you since the moment you climbed into my bed and went off to sleep in my arms forgetting all your worries and burdens of this world.”

Dean went deathly still.

“I never felt like that before… never felt… responsible for someone else, you know? And… I liked it.”

“…”

He didn’t know if this was what Dean needed to hear from Jess, the one *reason* that could help sway his earlier decision. But it was all Jess had to offer and he could only hope and pray that it was enough. Jess swallowed nervously and meanwhile Dean just continued to look, well, terrified.

“You left, Jess…” the words were softer than a whisper, quiet as silence itself.

Jess straightened up, hearing the sadness in that meek reprimand loud and clear.

“I know, and I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I have a freak of a temper, and I’m sorry I said those things to you. It is all I’ve been all my life – a naturally sharp tongue and an unhealthy obsession with Oscar Wilde – that’s all I *got*. Guess I was always too damn weak or short or young or helpless to do much of anything else.”


Jess chuckled softly, and so did Dean. “Smart-ass. But see that’s what you do to me! You make me feel helpless, Forester. You make me go weak in the knees, and every time you turned me away, I wished I was old enough that testosterone would cease to be such a dramatic problem.”

Dean really laughed then, a hot pink blush returning the color to his face as his eyes lowered into his lap and still he laughed. The careless laughter was like music to his ears. Jess could listen to that delicious sound on an endless loop forever.

“I am sorry too,” Dean suddenly said, slipping it in abruptly at the end of a chuckle and again blushing brightly. “I… I’m always testing you. Trying your patience, your… your feelings. Guess I have trust issues, which isn’t surprising under the circumstances and something you should know. If you don’t already.”

Jess smoothed the wild locks back from Dean’s face again. “Honestly, Dean, I love that we’re so different most of the time, it makes for interesting conversations. I mean, what’s the point to talking if you agree all the time, right? And I really don’t mind the uh, *occasional* exchange of heated words
between us either. You know I love to see you riled up.”

Dean made a face at that and tried to pull away, and of course Jess wouldn’t let him. “But I promise
to try and keep my mouth shut every time I think I’m about to lose it. Or at least stop before it goes
too far, before I end up hurting you.”

Dean smiled. “You’d do it for me? Change your fucking personality type over, just for me?”

And that was the sixty four thousand dollar question, wasn’t it. Jess smiled, never before feeling as
sure in his life, as he did right this very moment.

“I thought I could forget, Dean, thought I could live without you but I was wrong. There is no
forgetting and no getting out of this one. This one… this is it for me, for this lifetime. With or without
you in it.”

“…”

Jess licked his lower lip before biting down on it. A part of him was surprisingly – calm, calmer than
he’d expected, that and content. He’d meant every word of what he said to Dean. For the first time,
in his entire life most probably, Jess was not being selfish. For once he was okay with bidding
farewell to someone important to him if that was really what they wished, without a shred of
embittered resentment behind it. Course he couldn’t deny that another big part of him was still
hoping… and it’d likely never stop.

“Say something, Dean.”

Dean stared straight into his eyes like he was struggling with something else and wondering if he
should let Jess in on it or not. Jess waited patiently.

“Wh-what if I sleepwalk in Queens?”

The hopelessness in Dean’s eyes clawed at Jess’ heart, at his very being.

“What happens when it all gets too much to handle for you? ’Cause you know it will, Jess. I’m…
I’m not an easy guy to love.”

Dean looked away, already starting to pull further apart. Jess just sighed and held on tighter, refusing
to let go.

“I told you, Forester. I’m easy enough for the both of us.”

Dean smiled, despite himself, shaking his head for all he was worth. Jess went down on his knees in
front of the taller boy. Dean was hunched as it is so Jess could be on his knees and still look Dean in
the eye. He grabbed his face in both his hands, not letting Dean look away or shake his head
anymore. Tears brimmed in the slit-shaped eyes that he didn’t bother to hide from Jess anymore.

“Let me be responsible for you, Dean. I want to! I miss that feeling so much.”

“…”

“I miss you.”
Because Dean couldn’t turn away, he just closed his eyes for another endless period of time that Jess didn’t think he’d see the end of in this lifetime. He squeezed Dean’s left hand in both of his, holding it close to his heart without even realizing it. And then Dean heaved a huge sigh and turned his gaze back up at him.

Jess felt his heart skip a beat. It was judgment time.

“On one condition. Actually, two.”

“Anything.”

“I will pay my share of the rent.”

Jess blinked. He’d been expecting so much worse, like, no ‘coveting my ass’ or something. He raised his eyebrows then furrowed them and finally, just shrugged.

“Fine by me. What’s the second condition?”

Dean narrowed his eyes. “I get thirty percent.”

“What?”

“Your business case - you split the landscaping three ways – forty, forty, twenty, right? I figured, if I’m doing the bulk of the work, I should get a bigger share. I want thirty-five, thirty-five, thirty.”

Jess took his time pulling his jaw back up and shut. “You read it?”

Dean smiled sheepishly, hugging himself a little against the sharp cold breeze. “I dug the file out from the trash later that night.”

Jess couldn’t help but smile back. A strong gust of wind pushed against him and he spotted Dean shivering. Without missing a beat, he tried to pull the jacket that he’d draped earlier on Dean’s shoulders, closer around him. That’s when Dean realized it was there and Jess caught a slight annoyance creeping up in the other boy’s face that stopped him short.

“No treating Dean like a girl…”

He backtracked and held the jacket out instead for Dean to accept, or reject, if he so chose to. Dean took it with a little smirk and pulled his long gangly arms into it.

“So it’s a deal, then?”

Jess chuckled. “Come here, you.”

With that he pulled Dean’s face down so he could seal their new partnership with a thorough, passionate kiss. And this time Dean gave back as good as he got, bringing his own arms around Jess’ torso and pulling him upwards from the ground.

Dean Forester didn’t sleep the rest of the night. Instead he spent it all in the back of Jess Mariano’s car, parked at the bus station with the heater on, making out like there was no tomorrow. Feeling each other’s bodies from heads to toes, cherishing every touch, every kiss, every pleasure and relief-ridden sigh that they drew from the other boy’s body. And they talked, and talked… confessing to their worst fears and immediately (in retrospect) laughing at them, planning what they would tell their
families and friends, regretting the three months they lost but not so much because they knew they had the rest of their lives to make up for it.

“Jesse?” Dean whispered shyly, some time just before the break of dawn, his mouth pressed into the crook of the other boy’s neck, his arms wrapped snugly around Jess’ waist.

“Hmm…”

“I love you too.”

Jess couldn’t have gone to sleep even if he wanted to. He couldn’t risk waking up only to find this had all been nothing more than a dream. And if this was a dream, he never wanted to wake up.

***

The next morning, Dean took his boyfriend (now that it was officially official) to meet his mother and sister. Then they talked for a really long time, most of which Jess spent pacing outside in the foyer, giving the Foresters some privacy as they conferred in the living room by the furnace.

By afternoon he was all packed and ready to start a new life - a better life, filled with more prospects and less loneliness – only three hours away in Queens, New York. Clara couldn't have been more excited and happy for her big brother. For a thirteen year old, she sure saw and understood more than folks usually gave her credit for.

Even his mom, Marge, complied faster than Jess had expected her to. With slightly limpid eyes but a bright reassuring smile on her face, she helped Dean pack, striding around the house gathering his stuff and voicing explicit parental instructions for his new life at the top of her lungs all the while.

By afternoon after one final family lunch, to which both Jess and Luke were invited and they gladly joined, Dean bid goodbye to Stars Hollow once and for all.

Course he would be back two months later for Thanksgiving. Armed with a check made out in the name of the bank, with an amount large enough to ensure the Foresters did not lose their house for the foreseeable future.

Neither Marge nor Luke was surprised to hear that Dean Forester did not sleepwalk in Queens.

*Not until eight months later.*

***
Chapter 16

Eight months later. Queens, New York.

Dean emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of steam, toweling his hair dry, completely oblivious (or pretending to be) to the effect his six feet and four inches of naked perfection had on his boyfriend.

How the hell did I get so lucky? Jess Mariano thought to himself, and softly smiled.

Sitting cross-legged on his side of the bed, he’d been going through some official documents on his laptop when he was oh-so-inappropriately distracted. His hungry eyes stayed glued to Dean’s subtly swaying hips, his super-tight backside, and corded thigh muscles from one end of their bedroom to the other.

“Freshen you up?”

Jess blinked. “Huh?”

Dean chuckled and turned towards him, pulling a pair of sweats up to his disproportionately narrow waist. Not that Jess minded the anomaly one bit.

“I’m going to get myself some tea. You want?”

That’s when Jess remembered the empty mug he was still holding in one hand. “Oh, um, no thanks. I’m good.”

His eyes twinkled as they met his lover’s and Dean, getting the hint, ambled his way to the bed first. By pressing a chaste little kiss on the lips and quickly backing away, he left Jess in greater torment than ever before. Jess just sighed and waited for him to get back from the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, he was pouting hard enough to make his face hurt. Stupid chamomile wouldn’t take this long to brew. He suspected Dean just liked to keep him waiting, just another of his ways to get Jess riled up and damn it, it always worked.

When Dean returned at last, Jess kept his anti-glares on and his nose buried (figuratively speaking) in his new proposal document. The taller man took a seat beside Jess on the bed facing him, sipping his tea. When still Jess wouldn’t look up at him, he leaned in and tried to kiss his boyfriend again. Jess deftly moved away.

“Dude, you’re still drippin’. Watch the laptop, will you?”

Dean grinned coyly. “Playing hard to get, are we?”

“Nooo. Trying to get some work done, so please…”

“Put it away, partner. It’s my turn to take care of you tonight.” Dean’s bedroom voice was soft and guttural, and it always managed to slither its way down Jess’ spine, wrangling it from the inside out. “And I intend to honor my end of the deal, whether you like it or not.”

Jess couldn’t help but surrender when Dean left his cup standing on the bedside table, moved the
laptop to one side, and sexily crawled up to straddle Jess’ thighs. He lowered his face just as Jess craned upwards and their lips met, reliving the first time they’d ever kissed each other. Jess never could tire of this taste of Dean… the way Dean’s wanton tongue snaked into his mouth, entwined itself with Jess’, sparking a thousand flames in the back of his throat.

The laptop toppled over and off the bed, suddenly startling Jess out of his stupor.

“Let it be…”

“Wait, the proposal for Seattle, let me just save it.”

“Seattle?” Dean frowned, pulling back a little to put some distance between his and Jess’ face. “I thought Dillon was doing that meeting?”

Jess winced softly. He was hoping to break it to his boyfriend the next morning. Guess now would just have to do. “Uh, looks like I will have to. Dillon can’t make it. You know, with the new baby, and Allie needing all the help she can get…”

Dean’s eyelids fluttered as he shifted to sit on his side of the bed and leaned against the headboard. He bit his lip for a second and then cleared his throat. “Uh, alright. Yeah that’s… yeah. You should go.”

Jess smiled. *His brave little boyfriend*, who by the way wasn’t little by any stretch of the imagination. But after eight months of living together, and getting to know each other through good times and bad - there was very little Dean could hide from Jess inside that hyperactive head of his.

“So h-how long will you be gone?”

“Five days. I fly Monday morning.”

“This Monday?”

Jess nodded, still studying Dean closely just as the other man still avoided direct eye contact. He just kept nodding, incessantly, as if trying to convince himself it was really okay.

“Dean, you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

Jess braced himself. But it had to be done, and done now. “But I’ve asked Rory to stay over just in case.”

“What?!” Dean’s neck practically snapped towards him, utterly shocked and affronted. “What the hell, Jesse?”

“It’s just a precaution, babe.”

“For what?”

Jess rolled his eyes. “You know what.”

Dean pouted hard as he looked straight into Jess’ eyes. “I don’t need a babysitter, Jesse. I can take
“I know you can. But like I said, it’s just a just-in-case type of thing, alright?”

Dean was still agitated. “But why? I haven’t sleepwalked since I left Stars Hollow, man.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t been apart from you in all this time either,” Jess added quietly.

Dean flinched and looked down at the back of his hands, skin still wrinkled from his long hot shower. “Think maybe you’re giving yourself way more credit than you deserve, Mariano. Co-dependence is a pretty serious allegation, you know that right?”

There was no bite in the words or the tone even though it was clear Dean hoped there’d be some. Jess rubbed his brow with two fingers, leaned back against the headboard and sighed.

“I hate it when you call me Mariano, you know that.”

Dean just glared at him briefly and looked away, keeping to the very edge of his side of the bed, his legs folded under him.

“There’s something you should know. Something I’ve been keeping from you for… for awhile now.”

Dean turned back to him at that. “What is it?”

Jess couldn’t help but wince guiltily, his courage suddenly shriveling up under the sharp gaze Dean had him fixed with. “The last time you sleepwalked, was not eight months ago.”

“…”

“It was one month and six days ago.”

“What??”

Dean jumped out of bed and stood with his hands fist by his sides. Jess exhaled nervously and continued. “You have been sleepwalking pretty much once every month since we got back to Queens.”

“…”

“I’m sorry I kept this from you but… do you remember how conscious and freaked out you were about sleepwalking when you first got here? Hell you were stressing yourself out so much, it was scaring the hell out of me, Dean.”

Dean got a lost, faraway look in his eyes at that. At least it replaced the betrayal and hurt from about a second ago. Jess could live with that.

“That first couple of nights, you sleepwalked because you were stressing about sleepwalking, itself.”

“…”
“Obviously, I couldn’t tell you. It would only have made things worse. After a week went by, you started to believe that you were going to be fine after all, and your stress levels really did go down. And then you really did stop sleepwalking and started sleeping soundly through the night.”

“…”

Jess was the one freaking out now. Not because he thought he was in the wrong, hell he would have done anything to help Dean relax, even if it meant fibbing a little. But it was Dean’s lack of reaction that kept gnawing at him.

“Say something, please.”

Dean took his time processing the facts in silence. After a couple of minutes, he sighed and heavily let his weight drop back onto the bed. He sat hunched, one feet still planted on the floor and the other folded under him.

“I guess I get why you had to keep stuff from me in the beginning.”

Jess started to exhale in relief.

“But you said I’ve been sleepwalking almost once every month. Why did you lie to me about that?”

“Same reason, sweetheart. I didn’t want you worried anymore than you already were.”

Jess sat up on his haunches and slowly inched closer to his boyfriend. “Every time you’re stressing out about something at work, you sleepwalk. And a couple of times, I think you were just missing or worried about your family.”

“Wh-what do I do?”

“Nothing much. If it’s about work, you get out of bed and go to the study and stand in front of your drawing board for awhile, until I come and get you. Or you go and sit in the kitchen with the phone in your hand, like you’re waiting for a call or something.”

“So, I’ve never tried to leave the loft?”

Jess let out a short, grateful, laugh. “Not yet, thank God, no. Imagine how I feel every night it happens - I go from panicked to relieved to fucking ecstatic that you’re still here… and that I haven’t run you off just yet.”

Dean smiled a little hesitantly and lowered his eyes. Jess understood his dejection though. He put a hand on Dean’s shoulder and squeezed gently.

“I’m sorry, baby. I know you must feel like this is a setback. But it’s really not that bad. All we have to do is stick to our routine like we have and take the right precautionary measures, and we’ll be just fine.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “I’m drinking the stupid chamomile every night and doing the stupid yoga every morning, aren’t I? What good is it if I’m still going back to my zombie act once a month?”

Jess took Dean’s face in both his hands, pulling the boy closer to himself very insistently. “You’re down from twelve times to once a month. It’s working alright. Now if I can just get you to shut that
wired brain of yours down once in awhile and stop thinking so damn much…”

Dean snorted, almost without intent, and looked up through the curtain of his auburn bangs half-shielding his face. Jess could already see the forgiveness and the acceptance pooling in those glittering eyes, the anger and self-derision from before abating slowly. It made Jess want to crush his boyfriend to himself and never let go.

“So, are we good?”

Dean huffed, the action inadvertently blowing a stray lock of hair out of his face. “If I don’t actually leave the loft, I see no reason for Rory to come stay here while you’re gone. I can stay on my own too, you know.”

Jess rolled his eyes. “Do you remember the purple bruise on your right shin from three months ago? You were telling me how you couldn’t remember where you got it from?”

Dean squinted at him suspiciously. “Yeah?”

“You knocked it against the coffee table that, for some reason that I can’t remember, was out of its usual place that night. You walked right into it but still didn’t wake up.”

The pout returned, harder this time.

“And God knows what you’d do when I’m in Seattle. What if you tried to go to Grand Central or something?”

“That’s ridiculous. I would never do that!”

Jess tilted his head to one side and smirked. “Uh-huh. Like I’ve never woken you up at a bus station before.”

Dean flushed slightly but he was smiling. “Yeah, whatever. Why can’t I come with you instead?”

“Because you got that Chase bank project to wrap up, that’s why. Like you could ever bring yourself to leave one of your clients hanging, ever.”

They both knew that, and it was a rhetorical question anyway. This time when Dean pouted, it was impossible for Jess to keep his hands to himself anymore. “Oh, Good Lord! Come here, you.”

Dean snorted and slid over to his boyfriend, bringing his arms around Jess just as Jess snuggled up into his chest. They kissed and made up, Jess quietly asking for forgiveness once again and Dean complying with a further deepening of their passionate lip-lock. Moments later, they found themselves in their usual position - stripped naked and flat on the bed lying on their sides facing each other, limbs entangled into an unrecognizable mess just the way they liked it.

“Dean…”

“Hmm?”

Jess pressed his mouth against Dean’s closest ear and whispered something that made Dean’s face blush the darkest shade of red. He looked up into Jess’ eyes and smiled. “Changed your mind again, I see?”
“I’ll let you pamper me tomorrow, sweetheart,” Jess maneuvered Dean until he was lying flat on his stomach, the sight of his gorgeous ass taking Jess’ breath away. “Tonight, you’re mine.”

Dean chuckled huskily. “Aren’t I always?”

**

Jess grabbed the slim hips and pulled them towards himself. Dean happily complied, spreading his legs to make space for Jess and propping himself up on his elbows and knees. The posture pushed his luscious bottom upwards, open and jiggling ever so slightly in open invitation. Jess slid his right index finger down the enticing crack, taking his time to tease the sensitive flesh, exacting revenge for when Dean had made him wait earlier.

“Dude, c’mon…” Dean moaned.

Jess planted a playful smack to the right cheek. “All in good time, sweetheart.”

After what must have felt like a small eternity, Jess asked Dean to pass him the jar of slick from their bedside table. Dean fumbled for it and threw it back over his shoulder, almost like a projectile aimed at Jess’ head.

“Dude!” Jess exclaimed, catching it just in time with his free left hand.

“Get on with it, asshole! Before I change my mind.”

Jess sniggered at what he knew was an empty threat. Dean wasn’t going anywhere, he had his gorgeous lover by the balls, literally.

Dean whimpered his loudest when Jess grabbed them, rolling and squeezing it to his heart’s content. At last, he took mercy and opened the jar of water-based lubricant. He dipped three fingers into it, coating them generously. No need to take it too slow, Dean was loose enough post their Hi-honey-I’m-home quickie couple hours ago. The tall figure writhed and rubbed his face in his pillow, pleading soundlessly for Jess to put something inside him. So Jess did.

Plugging the gaping hole with all three fingers at once, Jess lowered his face and licked over the soft pink handprint he’d just left on one butt cheek. For the next few minutes, he held still and let Dean rock back and forth, fucking himself on the triad of digits inside him. Dean reached out with one hand to fist himself as Jess continued to fondle his balls for him as well.

“I’m dying here, Jesse. Please… come on…”

Jess squeezed harder, making Dean mewl, and then he started to move his fingers, twisting and curling until he found what he was looking for and went to town on it. He let Dean’s sounds and curses and pleas for mercy guide him, slowing down or speeding up in his bid to milk the prostate for all it was worth.

“Ah, Jess, I’m gonna…”

That was his cue. Jess suddenly stopped, pulling his fingers out. And just as Dean started to crane his neck to grunt out his annoyance, Jess bent down and closed his mouth around the hungry orifice. All of Dean’s protests melted into another string of wordless moans and he buried his face back into his
pillow, backside arching up into Jess’ face with shameless abandon. Jess proceeded to jab his tongue in and out, reaming his lover’s ass, kissing it in that ferocious and most decadent French variety ever.

He lost track of how long he let himself indulge in this other taste of Dean, sometime during which, one of his hands made it down to his own boner. And Jess jacked himself off in perfect synchrony with the tongue-fucking of Dean’s ass.

Sooner than he’d have liked it, Dean’s long frame started to rattle and shudder in a very familiar way.

“God!! I can’t… Oh God I can’t…”

“Then don’t, baby, let go, I got ya…”

Jess closed his left hand over Dean’s still fisted around his rock-hard erection already wet with precum. One tug was all it took, and Dean came with a loud scream that echoed for quite some time through their small but comfortable-sized Queens home.

Jess smirked (victoriously) watching the rest of Dean’s body flop bonelessly to the bed while he continued to hold the slim hips and ass up in the air. He pressed soft feathery kisses into the hot, sweaty skin, licking up and down the hairless crack almost mindlessly. He could feel the strong post-orgasm quivers rack Dean’s spine, could practically hear Dean’s heart racing away, until Dean eventually (grudgingly) descended from his heightened state of sexual euphoria.

“With me, babe?”

Dean just groaned, his eyes drooping already.

“My turn?” Jess asked, mock-timidly, to which Dean snorted and craned his neck to look back at him.

His mouth was open, panting, his lips twisted up into a sated little smile. “Do you even have to ask?”

Jess smiled and stroked his boyfriend’s flanks. No, he didn’t need to. Jess knew (or rather used to know) men who didn’t like being fucked after they’d already climaxed. But Dean wasn’t one of them, luckily. He just turned over, his movements languorous yet graceful, and spread his legs around Jess’s crouching form once again. Jess didn’t waste any time, quickly slicked himself up and sank back into the inviting depths of his lover with a long-drawn sigh.

“Come here,” Dean ordered, and Jess lowered his upper body into the waiting arms with pleasure. Dean wrapped him up tight, bringing both his arms and legs around the dark-haired man and closed his eyes.

Jess took his time, once again, making passionate, heartfelt love to Dean. He planted his palms flat on both sides of Dean’s head for leverage, starting at a leisurely pace and slowly picking up strength and speed with every thrust.

“I love you, you know that right?” He whispered, for what had to be the nine hundred millionth time in the past eight months. Three words that just automatically fell out of his lips every time he so much as thought of Dean. He couldn’t help it, really.

Dean opened his almond eyes, just barely, and flashed his beautiful toothy grin. “I know.”
And that’s all he said, letting his head fall back, his eyes closed and his mouth wide open as Jess continued to pound into him with relish.

**

Monday came all too soon for Jess. He’d been acting nonchalant about the Seattle trip all weekend for Dean’s benefit. But fact was, he was really losing it inside. What if Dean couldn’t handle the stress of being apart for so long? What if Rory turned out to be one of those people who slept like the dead? What if Dean got himself stuck in their freight elevator, the one they took to get up and down their loft? God, what if he got out on the streets in the heart of downtown Queens, New York?

“Relax Jesse,” Dean smirked as he bent down to kiss Jess goodbye. “I’ll be fine, I promise.”

Funny thing was, Dean did look more relaxed about it than Jess expected him to be. Since the night when Jess revealed the truth about Dean’s sleepwalking, the man had gone from denial and momentary anger, straight to a serene acceptance that no one thought he was capable of. Guess they really did underestimate his bag-boy sometimes.

“I know, you’ll be fine alright. Rory is coming this evening. You have her number, don’t you?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good. Don’t forget to drink your chamomile before bed.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Have a good trip, Jess.”

“And remember to lock the doors and get Rory to hide the keys from you, okay?”

“Bon Voyage, Jess.”

“And don’t work too late ‘cause you know when you get too tired you--” Jess was interrupted mid-tirade by Dean planting a big, noisy kiss on the lips.

After which he grinned all too brightly for Jess’ liking. “Go away, Jess.”

Jess sighed and picked up his bags, then kissed Dean again, gentler and lingering this time, before getting into his cab waiting to take him to the airport. He watched as Dean stood on the sidewalk and waved him goodbye, wondering what storm was brewing behind those outwardly calm hazel eyes.

**

The meetings were going well. Which was quite a surprise actually, considering Jess was constantly distracted by thoughts of his boyfriend back home.

He called again as soon as his last meeting of the day ended.

“Dude, seriously? We talked fifteen minutes ago!”

Jess winced against his cell phone, painfully aware that it was still only Monday. He was walking back from the prospect’s office to his hotel ten minutes away.

“Sorry. Thought you might wanna know how my meeting went,” he said, pretending to be hurt by
Dean’s tone of exasperation.

Dean capitulated. “Oh right, I’m sorry. How was it?”

And now Jess felt guilty for making Dean feel guilty for nothing. For the next few minutes they talked business, Jess elaborating needless details just so they could be on the phone a little bit longer. When he finally ran out of things to say, he’d also reached his hotel where he kept hanging out at the foyer, fearing he might lose the connection in the elevator.

“So anyway, how was your day?”

An amused huff came from the other end. “Didn’t get much done.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you kept calling every hour, that’s why, sweetheart.”

There was no bite in the words, but Jess sulked anyway. “Well, excuse me for missing my boyfriend, my partner, the one and only love of my life.”

Dean laughed. “Now look who’s having co-dependency issues?”

“Whatever, did Rory call? What time is she coming home?”

“She’s already there. Now if you let me go, I could wrap up some paperwork and head home myself?”

Jess squinted. “You don’t miss me at all, do you?”

Dean laughed again. “Nada. Not one bit. Gotta run, babe. Talk to you after dinner, okay?”

Jess wasn’t ready to let go just yet, but conscious of how ridiculous that was, he wisely held his tongue. Reluctantly he signed off with his usual ‘I love you’ (to which Dean responded with his usual ‘I know’) and they hung up.

Jess immediately dialed Rory instead.

**

Jess couldn’t sleep much that first night. He paced back and forth in his hotel room, tried watching TV (a social practice he absolutely detested), wished the hotel gym wasn’t out of bounds this time of the night and worked some more on his proposal. He spent quite some time cursing Dillon for making him come to this business trip, even though he knew it was a decision made in mutual agreement. He almost wished this prospective client would just tell him off tomorrow so he could cut the trip short and return home. Hell he even went out for a walk in the middle of the night, making sure he had his cell phone with him all the time. He hadn’t unpacked at all, and had an open air ticket on him all the time, making sure he was ready to leave at any fucking moment, whenever that call came.

It never did. Not on Monday.

And then not on Tuesday either. Or even Wednesday.
“So you’re really okay?” Jess inquired into the phone on Thursday evening for like the hundredth time.

He was walking back to his hotel again and utilizing the time to check up on Dean, as he’d done every hour of every single day this week.

The laughter on the other end both comforted and annoyed him, just a bit. “Yes, I’m fine, Jesse! Really, Rory doesn’t have to do anything at all. I’m sticking to my routine and I haven’t stayed late at work once in three days. See? I can take care of myself, you know.”

Jess pouted, not even sure why anymore. There was silence for a couple seconds.

“Jesse?”

“Hmm..”

“I do miss you.”

At that, Jess swallowed softly.

“And I do love you, so very much.”

“…”

“Jesse?”

Jess found himself torn between laughing like a lunatic and bawling like a baby. Resolving to do neither, he bit down hard on his quivering lower lip. “Yeah, I know babe, I know you do.”

The voice chuckled. “Then will you stop acting like a whiny little bitch and just be happy for me already? Jeez, you really do have some heavy duty co-dependence issues, man. We gotta get us into couples’ therapy when you’re back.”

Jess felt a soft giggle tickling at the back of his throat, struggling to escape. God, he really was being such an idiot. He’d been so sure Dean wouldn’t be able to handle being apart from him this long. And he’d been so consumed by worry about it that he totally overlooked his own desperate need to be with Dean all the fucking time.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such a jackass, sweetheart. You know I’m really, really happy you’re not sleepwalking, don’t you?”

“I know. You’re just having a tough time being so far away from home.”

Jess smiled at the softly murmured words. Home. Yes, that’s exactly what Dean was to him now.

“But hey, it’s only a matter of two more days, right?”

Jess sighed happily, as he came to a halt at a red light, waiting to cross the road. “That’s right. This time tomorrow I’ll be on a flight home. Man I can’t--”

Jess paused, his train of thought interrupted by a face suddenly materializing from the crowd and
coming to stop bang in his line of sight.

“Jess.” It wasn’t a question. The tall auburn-haired young man looked right at him with wide, pleasantly surprised eyes. “Jess Mariano.”

That voice, that face… Jess hadn’t seen this man in… wow, over seven months.

“Seth?”

**

Jess called back soon as he reached his hotel room. “Hey, sorry, I ran into an old friend.”

“Yeah, I heard. So… who is he?”

“Oh, you know Seth, I told you about him didn’t I?”

The answer came after a long pause. “Yeah, yeah you did. Wh-what’s he doing in Seattle?”

“He lives here now. Still with Goldman, moved to the Seattle office to be close to his family, least that’s what he told me.”

“Awesome. That’s… yeah, awesome.”

“Yeah, hasn’t changed one bit.”

“So, you guys hanging out tonight, or something?”

Jess started. There was something in the voice on the line, a tremor he recognized and didn’t like the sound of one bit.

“Baby. No. Stop. It’s not like that.”

There was no response but Jess could clearly envision Dean’s face, pouting hard.

“He had other plans tonight and even if he didn’t and even if we had hung out, I swear to you we’re just friends now. There is nothing, absolutely nothing between us! And it’s all pointless ’cause I’m not hanging out with him anyway so…”

“…”

“Oh good Lord, come on, Dean.” Jess winced unhappily. “You trust me, don’t you?”

Dean sighed sulkily. “Whatever, I gotta go.”

“Dean, wait, listen…”

The call dropped and Jess was left holding a dead cell phone to his ear.

“Fuck.”

**
Figures that Rory Gilmore would be around to bear witness to another groundbreaking chapter in this incredible against-the-odds love story. And why not? After all, if it weren’t for her, Jess and Dean would never have met in the first place. And maybe, just maybe, if it weren’t for her, they wouldn’t have rediscovered each other again either.

Taking a week off from school wasn’t difficult. She wouldn’t have refused anyway and it didn’t hurt that Logan was off gallivanting in Europe all month. What did turn out to be surprisingly difficult was having Dean hang about her, his classic puppy dog eyes filled with stars… except those stars weren’t for her anymore.

*Vanity.* What can you do, right.

Days were easy. Dean, always the early riser, would be up and about at an ungodly six AM. He’d work out (they had a home gym set up in what used to be a storeroom now converted to a study) and do his Yoga (which apparently helped a lot). He’d then shower and make breakfast for himself and Rory, even though she rarely ever got out of bed until nine at least. And he would leave for work at eight sharp; took him twenty minutes to walk to the office space that the business partners Matthews, Mariano and Forester shared, up on Steinway Street.

The first day, Monday, she honestly did try to get up early. She remembered groggily kissing Dean goodbye, and someone cracking a joke about a parallel universe where this could have really been them. As in, *them,* together. No, she doubted Dean’s capability to put his foot in his mouth like that. Must have been her. Luckily, she also remembered Dean laughing and kissing her one more time before grabbing his jacket and heading out.

Nights, now that was a different story. Jess had mentioned the chances of Dean sleepwalking were strongest in the first two hours of his going to bed. So she made it a point to keep herself awake, for those first two hours *at least.* Even asleep, her mind would subconsciously be on high alert - listening for creaking floorboards and checking for the key under her pillow. So long as the outer door remained locked, Dean couldn’t leave the apartment. At least that much she could guarantee.

It’d been eight months since a recurrence, far as she knew, least none that Jess and Dean were talking about anyway. Cynic that she was, she found it hard to believe that love alone could’ve miraculously cured Dean of his ailment. But one could argue that the stability of being in a relationship, (relief of finally coming out, maybe?) and gradual lessening of his financial burdens had lightened his mental burdens and hence the sleep disorder. That she could believe.

But if that were true, then by the same logic, who was to say Dean wouldn’t start sleepwalking again while Jess was out of reach? For the first time in their relationship they were spending a night physically apart. What if this ripple in the so far calm waters of Dean’s life was large enough to take away his sense of security?

That’s why Rory was here, obviously. She didn’t mind staying up late, watching over Dean (from the far distance of the second bedroom, of course). Almost felt like she owed it to him somehow. And she could always sleep all day to make up for it.

Thankfully, Monday night went by without any incidences, and so did the night after that.

Tuesday, Rory decided to pay Dean a visit at his office. And what an interesting outing that turned out to be. She found out that business was booming, especially the landscaping contracts were raining down on them like crazy and they actually had to turn some away for shortage of resources.
She noticed Dean was still a very hard worker, unwilling to compromise on perfection or customer service. And she also noticed how Dean got an unusually large number of calls on his cell phone.

She watched, delicately sipping on her Irish latte, as Dean sighed in exasperation every time his phone buzzed. The first couple of times he’d smiled, that coy little expression one gets only under the influence of love, or some really high quality weed. But as the day progressed, his irritation at the frequent interruptions grew. Still couldn’t bring himself to not pick up though. Rory smirked and left her charge to his devices, heading out for another bright, sunny day of Manhattan shopping.

She wondered if she was ‘babysitting’ the wrong man in this relationship. Dean seemed to be doing just fine. It’s Jess she was getting more worried about.

**

Wednesday night was… well, let’s just say it could’ve been better. Rory really should have minded her own damn business. Or at least not have gotten out of her room and tiptoed out to Dean’s and once there, she definitely should not have softly pushed the door ajar to peek inside.

The noises that had her ears pricked up were coming from Dean’s room alright. But not because he was sleepwalking, or preparing to start sleepwalking.

Rory stood in her spot frozen…the door knob clutched tight in one hand, all her body weight still balanced on her toes. Dean was on the bed, his half-naked body dimly silhouetted by a night lamp beside the bed. There was enough to see and where there wasn’t, she couldn’t help her hyperactive imagination filling in the details. She should have closed the door, retreated to her room but she couldn’t. Hell, she couldn’t even take her eyes off the sleeping figure writhing in his bed.

His chest was bare, and a sheet flimsily covered his lower torso up to his waist. She could see the protruding hip bones arching up and away from the bed because of whatever was being done to Dean in his dreams. One hand rose up his chest to circle and tweak a dark nipple, while the other hand caressed its way downwards and disappeared under the bed sheet. Dean’s head was thrown back, his eyes closed, but his mouth fell open around a soundless moan. That’s when Rory blinked, and forced herself to look away from the intense eroticism unfolding before her. Gulping hard, not acknowledging the sudden rush of blazing heat in her cheeks, Rory turned and quickly scampered off to her room, locking the door behind her.

The next morning she woke up to have breakfast with Dean, but she couldn’t meet his eyes. Nor could she keep the sly little smile off her lips.

“What?” Dean asked, his curiosity piqued, his voice high-pitched over the ruffling of the newspapers he’d been reading.

“Nothing!” Rory smirked again, wondering if she was blushing, mumbled something about a much-needed shower and escaped.

**

Thursday morning, she talked to her mom on the phone for two hours and eleven minutes. Lorelei Gilmore wouldn’t be satisfied until she’d heard, debated, analyzed and summarized every single, miniscule, juicy detail of any given conversation topic under the yellow sun. And especially so when it came to Jess, and Dean, and Jess and Dean together. It was very disturbing, really.
“So who do you think bottoms?”

“MOM!!”

“What? It’s a perfectly legitimate question? Two guys, equally hot, equally broody and equally masculine in that hot-headed reluctant nouveau-gay sort of way. It’s not cut and dry like Ellen Degeneres and Portia DiRossi, you know?”

“I can’t believe you’re having me speculate about my two ex-boyfriends’ love life.”

“Even T.R Knight and Mark Cornelson, the babyface isn’t fooling anyone there. No sir!”

Lorelei’s disembodied voice was way too cheerful and nonchalant for this line of conversation. And it was infectious.

“Well what about Neil Patrick Harris and David Burtka? You can’t quite tell there.”

“Sure you can.”

“…”

Rory waited. “Well?? Which one’s which?”

This time the pause only lasted like half a second. “Okay, maybe you can’t. But you can definitely tell with these two jokers. I bet it’s Jess.”

Rory rolled her eyes. “Mom, I really don’t think this is an appropriate subject for us to talk about especially since I’m sitting right here in their kitchen in their apartment that they live together in and I think it’s Dean.”

“Dean? Really? Why?”

“Just a hunch. With everything I’ve seen and heard and from everything I know of the two boys so far.”

“It’s the sad puppy dog eyes, isn’t it? Yeah, you never could resist those, except when they’re sad, kicked and angry puppy dog eyes like Jess’.”

Rory chuckled. No one knew her better than her mom obviously. She bit into a mint chocolate and decided to go with the flow. Not like she could deter Lorelei from a subject once she’d latched onto it.

“I think he likes that he doesn’t have to be in charge for a change, you know? The weight of the world isn’t on his shoulders anymore, that he has someone to share it with and someone to bear it for him when he needs a break. He never had that before. Tall big guy like him, everyone just assumes he can take care of himself.”

“Good point, deep and insightful. Except Jess’ story is just as heartbreaking if not more. The rebellious bad boy act to disguise the orphaned and lost little boy inside? It’s classic fuck-me-to-an-inch-of-my-life syndrome!”

“Sometimes I can’t believe we’re related.”
“Shut up, you were created an exact mirror reflection of me, Lorelei Gilmore.”

“Except a mirror reflection isn’t exact.”

“Exactly! Boy am I glad you don’t agree with everything I say - just thinking of twenty years of phenomenally dull conversation is making me want to blow my brains out.”

“What if they switch? Equal partners, that’s possible, right?”

“Sure, but that’s just anatomy, sweetheart. There’s this typical dynamic between these boys. You would know if you’d seen them arguing at the grocery mart last summer. Dean had that former teen rebel practically wrapped around his little finger.”

Rory sighed in exasperation. “Can I go now?”

“Fifty bucks says Dean’s the top.”

“You’re on. Talk to you later.”

“I want proof, of course. And details. Lots and lots of details!”

*Of course.* “Goodbye, mom!”

Rory hung up and shook her head, grinning away (and maybe blushing a little too) about this intriguing train of thought her mother had left her with today.

**

Thursday night was when it happened.

Rory couldn’t be sure what brought it on. Far as she knew, Dean had been sticking to his carefully constructed routine all week - exercising in the morning, returning from work no later than seven, and drinking that deceptively mild chamomile. What she did notice was how Dean’s mobile rang twice but he didn’t pick up. He’d never ignored one of Jess’ calls before.

“Everything okay, sweetie?” She ventured over dinner - Japanese takeout. She’d given the man his space and time but no longer could she stand Dean’s silence and her own endless monologues anymore.

“What? Uh, yeah. Of course.”

Rory sighed. “Okay. Honey, at this stage of our relationship, I think it’s time I let you in on an important secret.”

Dean smiled, used to Rory’s jokes about their current live-in arrangement by now. “What’s that?”

“You’re a terrible liar.”

He chuckled, not looking up from his rice bowl. “Thanks. I know. Jess reminds me all the time.”

“And yet you keep trying.”
He sighed, looked up at her once and grimaced. “It’s nothing. I’m just… tired, I guess.”

“And in no mood to let your boyfriend dirty-talk your ear off tonight?”

“Something like that.”

Rory lost her confidence when he wouldn’t look up at her again, basically signaling an end to the conversation. She did manage to ship him off to bed early (“Didn’t you say you were tired? Off to bed with you now, young man.”) to which Dean meekly protested (“So you’re my mom now? Whatever happened to our parallel universe of domestic bliss?”). By ten, they’d both retired to their respective rooms.

It was two minutes to midnight. Rory was deeply engrossed in Faucult’s Pendulum (for a third time) when the sounds started. At first she wondered if she was about to walk into a replay of last night. But the noises were louder tonight. And then she heard what distinctly sounded like a door creaking open and threw the book and the covers aside.

“Oh, hell no.”

She pulled open her bedroom door and for a second she froze again. Rory had never seen Dean, or anyone really, in such a state. Dean, dressed in just a pair of sweatpants, stood straight and tall, his eyes half open and fixed at a point on the floor just ahead of his bare toes. He walked as if in a trance, crossing the distance from his bedroom to the living room before she could get her own two socked feet to move. The first thing she did was flick all the lights on, not that it was going to be that easy, but just in case.

“Dean?” Her voice couldn’t be more than a whisper, as if she was almost afraid to wake him.

He didn’t listen, obviously, and steadily moved towards the outer lobby. At least that door was still locked. Question was, did Dean in his current subconscious state remember that?

She intercepted him halfway, putting a tentative hand on his arm. “Hey, you’re sleepwalking. You have to turn around and go to bed now, okay?”

But her plea was bluntly ignored. Dean just kept walking with Rory hanging off his bicep, unable to make him stop.

“Dean…” still not sure what she was supposed to do, she let him go, at least for now.

She contemplated going back to get her phone and call Jess. Or maybe Dillon, he lived three blocks away, maybe he would know what to do or could come and help. Meanwhile Dean had already made his way to the door. Once there he started to twist the locks open.

Rory felt her heart pounding in her chest, and she dashed to her room to find her cell phone. She was still going through the contacts when the noises in the lobby got louder. Quickly she made the call but when she got no response after four rings, she gave up. Phone still clutched in her fist, she ran back out to where Dean was.

Two locks and the safety chain had all come undone and now he was busy trying to get the third and final dead bolt open. Which wouldn’t work because it needed a key (still safely ensconced inside Rory’s pillow and Dean didn’t know that), but he kept yanking at it anyway.
“Dean, stop it! The door's locked, it won't open!” At least this time her voice was louder and it seemed to work for a second when all of Dean's frenzied activity suddenly stopped.

He suddenly turned around, and without waking up or acknowledging Rory's presence, he started walking back but not to his bedroom. Instead, he headed for the study. Rory was torn between confusion and relief, although something told her this wasn't over yet. She tried calling Dillon again.

“Hello? Hey, Dillon this is Rory. Dean’s friend from Connecticut? I was at the office earlier this… yeah, yeah. I-I need your help…. no, yeah he’s… he is… Oh my God!!!!”

The conversation forgotten, Rory gasped in horror at the tall figure heading back her way. Dean had a crowbar in his hand. And yes, he was still sleepwalking.

No one told her he could get violent!

Quickly she counted her odds. She knew this might get really, really bad if she wasn’t able to wake him up. And on the other hand, she could stay safe herself if she let Dean leave this apartment tonight. But God only knew what dangers she'd be letting him walk into, alone and vulnerable. And then there was this promise she'd made to Jess.

“Dean, wake up!! Don’t do this!!”

Gathering every single ounce of courage she had, Rory stood in Dean’s way, getting a hold of the crowbar herself. The man was obviously much stronger, and much more driven at the moment. She hoped the struggle would jar him enough to break him out of this trance. But sleepwalking Dean still refused to give up the weapon and furiously pulled to get it and himself away from the girl.

Rory was starting to lose the fight for the crowbar as expected, which prompted her to resort to something (more) desperate. Hooking her left foot behind Dean's right leg, she stopped pulling at the crowbar, letting go of it completely. Remember what happens when you play tug-of-war and the other guy or team suddenly lets go? The momentum of Dean’s own strength sent him teetering backwards. Just to make sure, Rory planted both her palms on the bare chest and shoved with all her feminine might. Dean tripped over her foot, his hands flying up to his sides but helpless to stop the nasty fall.

He fell back on the wooden floor with a loud echoing thump, the loudest possible. For a second Rory’s heart stopped, fearing she might have miscalculated and Dean might just hit his head and die. But the floor was clear and Dean landed on his butt, thankfully, just at the doorway between the lobby and the living room.

“Dean!!” She screamed her loudest, in nothing else but outright panic. And this time it worked, or maybe the fall did, who knew.

Dean Forester blinked, his so-far blank and expressionless face abruptly coming to life. The first emotion that flittered over his face was genuine befuddlement. Rory could only imagine what went through the boy’s head as he struggled to understand where he was, what he was doing here, why he held a crowbar in his hand and why his ass hurt so damn much.

“Rory? Wh-what…”

Realization dawned then, with a sudden vengeance and his face crumpled into a painful mix of
shock, guilt, gut-wrenching misery, and absolute embarrassment.

“Oh God…”

All of her own hysteria melted away immediately. “Dean, it’s okay…”

Rory took one step towards the man still half-sitting half-lying on the floor but Dean flinched away so hard that she halted.

And then they both got their second big shock of the night.

Like peripheral hearing or something, Rory had noticed the tenants downstairs yelling up at them to ‘keep it the fuck down’. The duo had obviously made a huge ruckus by this time. Following which, she heard footsteps frantically running up the stairs but hadn’t had the time to process that yet. And then there was this furious jangling and clicking noise outside their door and half a second later, it flew open with a crash that was five times louder and made the neighbors ten times more livid.

“Jess?!?!”

Rory couldn’t believe her eyes. And apparently, neither could Dean.

Jess left his bags outside the apartment and ran in, making a mad dash to his boyfriend still on the floor, now with his face buried in his hands.

“Hey, hey… it’s okay, it’s okay baby, I’m home. See? I’m home.”

Rory closed the door, and leaned against it, suddenly exhausted. Keeping her distance, she quietly witnessed the tremendous love her two exes had for each other.

Jess knelt beside Dean and pulled his boyfriend’s upper torso into his arms, letting Dean bury his face in his chest instead. Dean curled up his endless legs, almost as if he was trying to become as small and invisible as possible, hiding in his lover’s embrace from a world full of prying eyes.

“I’m sorry… I’m so sorry…” he whispered, and Jess just held on to him tighter. He kissed the top of Dean’s head over and over, rocking his lover back and forth, rubbing his back in long, firm and loving strokes.

“It’s okay, baby. Nothing to be sorry about. It’s all good, see?”

Jess turned towards Rory, his eyes questioning the presence of the crowbar by Dean’s side but also extremely apologetic, as if he already knew the answer. Rory just shook her head and smiled. No harm done. I’m sorry, she tried to convey, wondering what else she could have done to prevent this from happening. Jess continued to hold his boyfriend, kissing every inch of his angelic face and whispering soft words of comfort in his ears.

“I hate this. I hate myself,” Dean whimpered, his voice muffled in the collar of Jess’ shirt.

“Stop that.” Jess almost reprimanded him at that. “I don’t wanna hear you say that ever again, you hear me?”

“…”
“I love you, Dean. I love everything about you. And dude if it weren’t for your sleepwalking, we would never have hooked up, remember? Far as I’m concerned, it’s the best thing ever… for the simple reason that it brought you to me.”

Dean wasn’t convinced. “I could’ve hurt Rory tonight.” And he still couldn’t bring himself to look at her.

Rory had to interject now, before it was too late. “Hah, in your dreams.”

Dean winced and Jess turned to glare at her, and that’s when she realized she’d put her foot in her mouth again. “I didn’t mean… I just meant, you could never hurt me, Dean. Trust me, I almost ended up killing you tonight, if anything, I should be apologizing to you.”

And now Jess was really frowning at her. Funny how they still understood each other without even using any words. Right then, Jess’ eyes were sending a clear directive that said ‘We’ll debrief later’ and Rory just bit her lip and shut up obediently.

“You did great, Rory. Thanks,” he said out loud, before turning back to smooth Dean’s hair out of his face and wiping his tears. “For everything.”

Rory nodded wordlessly.

“As for the… uh, rest of it, I’ll make an appointment with Dr. Reeves tomorrow, see what he thinks.”

While Jess soothed away the last of Dean’s laments and self-deprecations, Rory called Dillon again, who was already on his way. She told him to go back to his wife and newborn kid, that Jess had everything under control. Which, by the way, she still didn’t get.

“Jess? Aren’t you back early?” She asked after hanging up.

Dean stopped sniveling and looked up at Jess too. The two men shared a knowing look which deliberately excluded Rory of course, and then Jess smiled.

“Because my baby missed me after all, that’s why.”

Dean snorted and twisted his fingers in the lapel of Jess’ jacket.

“Yeah, my spider sense was tingling all day. And maybe… just maybe,” Jess squinted mischievously, “I missed him too. Hell I was losing my fucking mind out there.”

“What about the meeting?” Dean asked.

“The deal’s done. I figured the rest was just a formality, nothing we can’t do by phone and fax.”

There was something the men weren’t telling her, but it was probably none of her business and she decided not to pursue it. Straightening up, she headed back to her room. She’d definitely earned a good night’s sleep and was keen to get to it like yesterday.

“Well, I’ll leave you boys to the rest of your long-awaited homecoming ritual or whatever it is you plan to do. I’m going to turn in.”
She started to walk away when Dean’s soft voice stopped her from behind. “Rory?”

“Yes Dean?”

“Thank you.”

She grinned and curtsied at him, making him smile at last, and then she turned to walk away again. On her way over, she caught some of the conversation that followed… peripheral hearing of course, not like she was snooping or anything. Not at all.

“Ready to move this to the bed now, babe?”

“In a minute, I’m comfortable here.”

“Okay.”

“So I guess you didn’t get it on with your oh-so-perfect ex after all, huh?”

“You remember why I thought he was perfect back then, don’t you?”

“Nooo…”

“Jerk, of course you do. It’s because he reminded me so much of you. Now why would I want a cheap imitation when I have the real thing right here, huh?”

“You can have him, I don’t care.”

“Oh really?”

“Sure. Rory and I shared perfect domestic bliss all week, think there might still be something there.”

“Just for that, and for hanging up on me and not taking my calls from the airport, you’ve earned yourself a nice long spanking, Forester.”

Rory slid her door shut, for real this time, pretending not to notice the blazing heat turning her cheeks a peculiar shade of red. She’d seen and heard enough. Least for the night. She looked at the cell phone still clutched between her fingers. It’d be so hard to wait for morning to tell Lorelei all about their big scary adventure tonight. So she didn’t.

“Hey mom? … Hi! … Yeah, sorry, I couldn’t wait. Were you up? … Oh, alright … Um, nothing urgent … yeah everything’s fine. Everyone’s fine. We had a little bit of a scare tonight but … no, no, Dean’s okay … mom really … yep it’s all good. It’s all under control … Oh, by the way, you owe me fifty bucks.”

*** END ***

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