Everything Old Is New Again

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Summary

A follow up to "Separation Anxiety" originally published on ff.net as a WIP, then on B&W&R Gilmore Girls fic archive.

Original summary: This story is the follow up to "Separation Anxiety," a sequel, if you will. You don't necessarily have to read all of "SA" to follow this; the last chapter will get you through. It's been three weeks since Rory and Emily came home from Europe and the events of the last chapter of "SA."
"Rory? How much do you love me?"

Rory turned her head and looked at her mother. They were side by side on the floor, flat on their backs. Both had damp washcloths draped across their foreheads and small metal bowls full of ice resting on their stomachs, under the theory that if their cores were cold, the rest of them would cool down as well. It wasn't working—Lorelai pointed out shortly after the experiment began that she on top of being hot, she now had a wet, numb bellybutton as well.

"Why?" she asked.

"Would you do me a favor?"

Rory shifted slightly and went back to staring blankly at the ceiling. "I'm not going to kill you, Mom."

Lorelai’s mouth fell open as she lifted her head to stare at Rory. "I'd do it for you!" she whined.

"You would not," Rory retorted.

"I would, too," Lorelai said, "if you asked me to. I would totally kill you."

"Thanks, Mom. That's a comfort." Rory sighed. "When's Luke going to get here, anyway?"

Lorelai plucked an ice cube from her bowl and began running it along her collarbone. "He said he'd leave as soon as he could get away."

Rory unfolded the washcloth and covered her face with it. "It can't really be this hot."

Lorelai only grunted in reply and was silent a moment. "I can't believe you won't kill me."

"Mom," Rory began; the shrill ring of the telephone silenced her. "I'll get it." She got to her feet awkwardly, trying not to spill the water rapidly accumulating in her bowl.

Lorelai closed her eyes and rested her arms flat at her sides. She heard the screen door shut and a heavy tread cross the floor before his shadow fell over her. She smiled.

"Hi," she said.

Luke squatted down on his haunches and folded his hands. "What are you doing?"

She opened her eyes. "Solving the problem of world hunger."

"How's that coming?"

"Well, so far all I've come up with is that it's hot," she said."I'm trying to cool down," she said. "It's ice."

"I can see it's ice," he said patiently. "You know you didn't have to wait for me to come fix the shower. You could have come to my place—"

"Too far in the heat," Lorelai told him.

"—or gone next door."
She rolled her eyes, set the bowl of ice aside, and put out her hands to him. "Showering at Babette's isn't an option. It'd be like Bill Murray in the Japanese shower," she said, as he helped her to her feet. She gave him a once-over with her eyes. "This is a new look for you," she said, gesturing. He wore a gray tee shirt with the sleeves cut off and what Lorelai guessed used to be cargo pants, grease and paint stained, also cut off and fraying at the knee. "Very redneck handyman. I like it."

"I'm ecstatic," he drawled, and pointed up the stairs. "I'm going to go fix the shower head."

"Dirty!" Lorelai giggled.

"My toolbox still in the bedroom?" he asked.

She covered her mouth with her hand. "Dirty!"

Luke ignored this and started for the stairs. Lorelai followed him, carrying her bowl of ice in one hand, lifting the end of her ponytail away from her neck with the other. He paused on the landing and turned to look at her.

"What are you doing?" he asked again.

"One more of those and you officially use up your allotment for the month," she said. "I'm coming to watch you fix the shower head."

"Why?"

She blinked. "I don't have anything else to do." Off the slightly irritated and disbelieving look he gave her, she shrugged. "I promise I'll be good." She paused, grinned. "And if I'm not, I give you leave to treat me like the bad girl I am."

"Ah, geez."

Lorelai sat on the closed lid of the toilet as he worked, handing him things as he asked for them, watching him. He stopped and stood staring up at the showerhead, his arms hanging loosely at his sides. Without thinking, Lorelai reached out and took his hand, lacing her fingers through his. He looked at her, squeezed her hand.

"Hey," he said.

She tugged gently. "C'mere a sec," she said.

He stepped over the edge of the tub and kneeled in front of her, resting his hands on her thighs. She put her arms around his neck and studied his face a long moment.

"I miss you," she said.

"It has been a while."

"Two weeks!" she cried. "We haven't been alone for longer than five minutes for two weeks!"

Luke smiled. "And a very interesting five minutes the day before yesterday," he said.

"Interesting, but not long enough."

He ran his hands along the sides of her legs, letting them come to rest on her knees. "I know," he said. "Believe me, I know." He sighed heavily.
She smothered a grin. "Someone missing his regular piece of stuff?" she teased, cocking an eyebrow at him.

Luke looked at her darkly. "I would say I'm missing more than that, but comments like that make me question my devotion to said piece of stuff."

"You love it," Lorelai said. She raised one hand and cupped his cheek. "So. What are we going to do about this? Can you stay awhile? I took the whole day off."

He turned his face into her palm and kissed the heel of her hand. "Well," he began.

"Mom?"

"Up here," Lorelai called. "Who was on the phone?" she asked, when Rory appeared in the doorway.


He looked up at her. "Hey, Rory, how's it going?"

"Going hot," she said. "That was Paris, before, but right as we were hanging up Lane beeped in on the call waiting. Brian's little sister's best friend's cousin—"

"Said she saw Ferris pass out at 31 Flavors last night! I guess it's pretty serious," Lorelai said.

Rory shook her head. "Well, that and she's having her bat mitzvah today, and the band her mom hired got food poisoning, so Lane and the guys are going to fill in," she said.

"Lane's band at a bat mitzvah?"

She shrugged. "She said they've got a set list that's pretty user friendly, whatever that means. But they need a roadie, so I'm going to help out."

"Sure," Lorelai said. "You getting paid?"

"No, but free food, so there's that."

Lorelai looked at Luke. "There are few things a Gilmore won't do for free food."

"So, Gil's van is in the shop," Rory said, rolling her eyes for Luke's sake, "and none of the others have a car that's big enough, so I was wondering if I could take the Jeep?"

"The keys are on the hall table," Lorelai said. "When is this thing?"

"This afternoon," Rory said. "Which brings me to my next question." She looked apologetically at Luke. "Lane's too chicken to actually ask you herself, and she's really sorry to cut out on you especially with Caesar being sick, but she needs the rest of the afternoon off and she's willing to work as many doubles as you want to make up for it."

Luke pushed himself to his feet, groaning slightly. "She doesn't need to make up for it, it's fine. When does she need to go?"

"As soon as possible."

Lorelai closed her eyes and dropped her head to one side, her nose wrinkled in an expression of extreme frustration.
"Tell her I'll be there in twenty minutes," Luke said.

"You're the best, Luke," Rory told him. "I'm going to change and head over to the apartment."

Lorelai rose and put her arms around Luke's middle, rested her cheek against his shoulder. "Well, there goes that opportunity," she said.

He rubbed her back. "Why don't we do this," he said. "I'll close up a little early and we can go out somewhere—dinner, movie, whatever you want."

She looked up at him, her smile delighted. "A date?"

"If that's what you want to call it."

"I do," she said. "Come here around seven, seven-thirty?"

"Seven," he said. He kissed her forehead. "I'm going to finish with this shower and go."

"Mom, I'm leaving!" Rory called from the living room.

"Hang on!" Lorelai hollered, leaned up to kiss Luke's cheek. "Be right back." She bounded down the hall and the stairs to the landing. "Babe, I'm going to stay at Luke's tonight, so if you and Lane and everyone want to crash here, do the end of summer sleepover thing, feel free, okay?"

"Thanks, Mom," Rory said, shouldering a small purse. "Have fun—I'll meet you for breakfast at the diner tomorrow?"

"Deal," Lorelai said. "One rule."

Rory smiled. "No boys in your bedroom, I promise."

"Thanks, babe."

Luke was fussing with something on the showerhead when she returned and plunked herself back down on the closed toilet. He looked over at her, a wry smile on his face.

"Awfully presumptuous of you," he said.

Lorelai narrowed her eyes. "Oh, come on. We both know you're a sure thing," she said offhandedly, reaching for her ice bowl. She took the biggest remaining cube she could find and again began running it over her collarbone.

He tossed a rag into his toolbox and stepped over the side of the tub. He glanced at her, his mouth open to speak, but seemed to think the better of it and turned back towards the shower.

"Is it fixed?" she asked.

Luke looked at her over his shoulder briefly before reaching for the taps. "We'll see," he said shortly. He let the tub run a moment, his hands on his hips. Lorelai rose and came to stand beside him, peering around him towards the shower. She absently slid the ice cube down from her neck to the hollow of her throat. Luke hitched himself away from her and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Could you not do that?" he asked.

"Do what?"

He gestured. "With the ice and the neck and the melting," he said.
Lorelai grinned. "Okay," she said simply. She slowly leaned past him to flip the dial that turned the tub faucet off and the shower on, brushing against him as she did. She stood upright quickly as the shower sputtered and began to run. "Excellent," she cried. "Move over, Ty Pennington. I have the world's hottest handyman right here in Stars Hollow." She raised the ice cube she still held to her lips, running her tongue over it before offering it to Luke. "Ice?"

He worked his jaw side to side, eyeing her. "No."

She shrugged. "Your loss," she said. She began to run the ice along her lower lip; she watched him with wide eyes as she did, her expression arch and challenging.

Luke edged past her, throwing his hands up as he went. "Ah, cut it out already, would you? I gotta get back to the diner."

"Cut what out?" she asked, her voice high with feigned innocence.

He sighed. "Lorelai."

"You are so easy," she said. She crossed the small space between them and took his face in her hands. She kissed him, her mouth cold and firm against his. "Hurry up and go away so you can come back."

When the doorbell rang at five after seven, Lorelai was seated halfway up the staircase to the second floor, idly flipping through a magazine. As the afternoon had stretched out before her, she'd been listless and cranky with nothing to do, annoyed with herself. It had been so long since she'd had time like this, time to waste, time when no one was demanding her attention, when she wasn't demanding attention herself, that she felt she'd almost forgotten how to do it.

The last three weeks had gone by all too quickly. Not only was she scarcely able to have a moment to herself, it had been nearly impossible to have one with anyone else. With Rory working odd hours at the Inn, doing grunt work at the Gazette for minimum wage, hanging out with Lane, and rearranging her fall class schedule, Lorelai had very little face time with her daughter. She saw Luke briefly each morning at the diner, but for the most part he worked early and she worked late and those snatches of time were all they had. Things at the Dragonfly were progressing exactly the way they should: they were getting bookings enough to make ends meet, however far the ropes were stretched, and Lorelai was planning four different events for the coming months simultaneously. She felt crazed to the ends of her hair. The few hours of sleep she had every night never left her quite rested; she feared details of her different projects were leaking out her ears as she slept. On top of it all, the inn was chronically understaffed and Lorelai spent more time hiring than she was happy with.

It wasn't the only thing she was doing more of than usual. She had regular meetings with Emily every day in the back office of the inn, discussing the details of the Bedermeier house. Emily took the job much more seriously than Lorelai had intended; she was firm and business-like and consulted her daughter about most major details before acting on her behalf. Lorelai knew she also had daily conversations with Winky, though what they talked about she couldn't fathom. Her mother had made no mention of returning home, though she went with Lorelai and Rory to Friday night dinners. Richard came to Stars Hollow for lunch with her every Wednesday, and Lorelai knew he called Emily at the Inn every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday evening as well. Though she watched Emily carefully, her mother revealed nothing.

She tried not to think about the inn, about her mother, about the all details pressing on her at every moment, and do something frivolous. She'd made herself iced coffee and tried to watch TV, tried to read, took two cool showers when she felt overheated, and eventually gave in. If Luke had come only an hour and a half earlier, he would have found her in the same place she'd been the
last time he arrived, flat on her back on the floor, but with the stereo cranked up and a mix CD full of the Bangles and Bon Jovi and Pat Benatar spinning on repeat, Lorelai singing along at the top of her lungs. When that lost its charm, she took another cool shower, dressed for her date in a thin white sundress, and sat on the stairs to wait. Her promptness at the front door surprised him; he grinned as she swung the door open.

"Hey, gorgeous," she said. Lorelai smiled and leaned up to kiss him hello. "Although the handyman ensemble has its own unique aesthetic, and I am, you know, an enormous fan of the plaid shirt-jeans-backwards-baseball-cap combo, I have to say it: lookin' good, Luke Danes, lookin' good!"

She loved that he blushed slightly at this and averted his eyes. He wore loose fitting khakis she'd never seen before and a light blue button down with the sleeves rolled up and open at the collar. She suspected he'd been shopping in the recent past and hadn't told her, as he'd also acquired several new tees and a pair of jeans that made her thoughts veer towards scandalous when she caught sight of him walking away.

"Back 'atcha," he said, steering her out the door and down the walk, his hand at the small of her back.

"I'm starved. Like, green ghost in Ghostbusters starved. Where are we going?"

He opened the truck door for her. "A place in Woodbury. It's some new Italian restaurant."

"Really? Should we get a bottle of red, or a bottle of white?" she asked.

Luke glanced at her from the corner of his eye as he put his keys in the ignition and threw the truck into gear. "I guess that all depends on your appetite," he told her.

She laughed. "Or, we could just get both, get really hammered, and go to Long Island and crash the car into a tree!"

They battled over the fact that the truck had no AC as they drove to Woodbury, the windows down. Even as she berated his "antiquated vehicular propensities" (eliciting a "Remind me to tell Rory to stop teaching you new words," from Luke), she was grateful for the steady breeze from the open window, relishing the coolness that slid over the back of her neck. She'd never enjoyed the humidity of New England summers, and for the first time all day, she could stop thinking about how bloated and nauseous she felt from the heat. She reached for Luke's hand as they walked to the restaurant from the parking lot.

The restaurant was cool and dim. They sat at a small table in a corner, sharing garlic bread and a bottle of wine. She didn't release his hand as they sat together and talked, waiting for their orders, concentrating on the way Luke ran his thumb lightly over hers as he talked about bagels and lox. She could feel herself unwinding, the worry slowly sifting out.

"I don't think Stars Hollow is quite ready for the whole fish for breakfast thing," Lorelai said, sitting back as the waiter put her plate in front of her. "Holy Baba, that's a lot of food."

"You can handle it," Luke said. "That, and everything else. You can. And you have to know that."

"You're the best," she said. She leaned over the table and kissed him briefly. "You're my Zen master boyfriend."

They lingered over coffee and dessert (for Lorelai), and a last glass of wine (for Luke). The restaurant was close to empty when Luke raised his hand for the bill. Lorelai scraped her fork
across the plate, trying to get the last bits of tiramisu.

"See, the Italians know what they're doing. They put the espresso and the booze right into the dessert. It's like an instant party," she said. She watched him sign the credit receipt, slip his card back into his wallet, a scarred, battered, possibly leather affair that would have made Emily cringe. He gave her his hand as she rose from her chair. "Hey," she said. "Let's just go home, skip the movie."

"You sure?"

"Well," she said, "it would be air conditioned, which would be nice, seeing as your apartment is not only the size of a matchbox, it's also directly above the kitchen and so hotter than a deep fat fryer. However, the theater seats aren't really made for romantic interludes, so to speak, and Bette Davis only knows when we'll have a whole block of indeterminate time together, so, yeah, I'm sure."

They were quiet on the drive back to Stars Hollow. Lorelai sat with her legs tucked up under her, her forehead against the edge of the window. She was drowsy, restful, as she listened to the rush of the wind past them. She smiled sleepily for Luke's benefit, knowing he was watching her from the corner of his eye, most likely thinking the silence wasn't like her. It was something she'd begun to appreciate in the time that had passed since he kissed her that first time: the comfortable easiness of quiet.

Luke let them into the diner and paused at the counter. "Why don't you go on up—I've got a couple things to check on down here."

"Okay," she said, releasing his hand. She kissed the edge of his jaw, just below his ear. "Thanks for dinner," she said. "It was perfect."

She kicked off her shoes and flopped onto the bed. Luke had three stand fans oscillating from different corners of the room along with two enormous window fans working at the highest speed. The curtains billowed out towards the center of the room, making slight snapping noises. Lorelai closed her eyes and listened: the room was full of faint rustling sounds and the hum of electric wind. She felt herself loosening in her joints, in her fingers and her toes, the way she always did when she spent time in this apartment—even when he wasn't there, it was, she thought, a very Luke place and that could almost be enough.

She groaned when the phone rang. She raised her head, listening for his step on the stair; not hearing it before the fifth ring, she sighed and reached for the receiver herself.

"Hello?" She was met by silence. "Hello?"

Someone cleared his throat on the other end. "Yeah, is Luke there?"

"No, I'm sorry, he's stepped out," she said. "May I ask who's calling?"

"Depends on who's asking."

She couldn't keep herself from making a face. "Hey, Jess. It's Lorelai."

"Oh. Right." He paused. "So is he around?"

Lorelai picked up the phone and walked towards the door, dragging the cord behind her. "He's just downstairs. He should be up any minute, though. You want to hang on?"

"Uh, yeah."
"Good." She chewed her lip, stretching the cord to its limit as she angled for a view down the stairs. "So," she said.

"He's a pretty good guy," Jess said abruptly. "My uncle."

"He's the best guy," she replied.

He was silent a moment. "He's been, you know, ah... happy... lately. Which is weird. But he, you know, he, ah, deserves it."

"I agree."

"So, ah..." She heard him suck in air over his teeth. "Thanks?" He cleared his throat again. "And I'm not one to talk, or anything, but—"

Lorelai turned away from the door. "I'm not going to do anything to hurt him, Jess," she said gently. "That's a promise. To him, not to you, but just so you know. I wouldn't."

He seemed to audibly relax. "Good."


She tried not to listen as he greeted his nephew. To avoid the temptation altogether, she grabbed her cell from her purse and dialed Rory's, only to be met by an immediate jump to voicemail. She left a quick message, a request for clean clothes in the morning and a good night before she hung up. Luke still paced, the receiver wedged under his chin and the phone in his hand, bobbing his head as he spoke. She smiled and dialed again.

"Hey, Kelly, can you put me through to my mother's room? Thanks."

She let the phone ring eight times before she pressed the end button, turned off the cell, and threw herself back on the bed. She folded her hands over her stomach and waited, her brow furrowed in thought.

"Talk to you then," Luke said. "Take care." He replaced the receiver and brought the phone back to its place before laying down beside Lorelai. She curled against him, fitting herself under his arm. "Who were you calling?"

"Just making some checking in calls, but there's no one to check in on," she said. "How's Jess?"

Luke wrapped his arm around her. "He's doing okay, sounds like. He's got this new job at a used bookstore, and all these NYU kids are coming through to buy books." He chuckled. "Went on a two minute rant about junior year literature students who still can't pronounce 'Goethe' correctly."

"Wonder where he picked up that tendency," Lorelai laughed.

"Just what are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything," she told him. "I'm outright saying the rant is your trademark—the rant did not exist in its current form until you took it in hand. It's quite an accomplishment."

"You finished?"

She considered it a moment. "I think so." She tipped her face up to him. "He's looking out for you."
"What, Jess? What do you mean?"

She shrugged awkwardly. "He just let me know how lucky I am," she said simply. "Or tried to, anyway. You'd think someone who reads that much would be a bit more adept with the verbal skills."

"He's adept enough when he wants to be," Luke said. "What did he say?"

"Doesn't matter," she said. "It was just—it was nice for you that he said it." She sighed. "God, can you believe the school year's nearly started? Rory's going back to Yale next weekend—it just seems so soon."

"I'm assuming my moving services will be required," he said dryly.

Lorelai smiled against his shoulder. "Don't worry, you'll be more than adequately compensated." She lifted her head. "I feel like this year went by so quickly. Think about it. This time last year, Rory and I were just getting back from Europe. She was leaving for Yale for the first time, going out on her own for the first time. My mom and dad were still together, and Sookie hadn't even had the baby yet. The Dragonfly wasn't the Dragonfly—we hadn't even broken ground. Dean wasn't married yet, and you were."


She gave him a slight squeeze. "And we weren't anywhere close to this," she said with a wave of the hand.

Luke pushed Lorelai's hair off her shoulder, away from her neck. "Or we thought we weren't," he said.

"This, now, is better," she said, tracing the line of his jaw with her fingertip.

He kissed her shoulder. "It is."

Lorelai began to play with the buttons on his shirtfront. "So, it's been a while since we did this—anything new I should know about? Any piercings, body art, anything shaved or waxed or altered in any way, shape, or form?" she asked.

"Perhaps," Luke said. "You ever have anyone tattoo your name on his ass?"

She tipped her head back, her expression thoughtful. "Well, there was that one drunken tryst in Mexico with Patrick Dempsey a few years back," she said. "Does it count if they spell it wrong?"

Luke looked at her. "Patrick Dempsey?"

"Some crushes die hard," she said, smiling.

He laughed, his head falling onto the crook of her neck. Her pulse quickened and her middle tightened as the laughter ended, replaced by the familiar, welcome scratch of stubble against her skin as he kissed her at that place where neck melts into shoulder. She closed her eyes as he brushed his hands across the small of her back and laid her hand on his cheek, bringing his lips up to meet hers, her movements slow and deliberate. This was their dance, she thought, pressing against him till there was no air between them, breathing him in as they kissed in the last of the dying light.

The one evening, she thought later, watching him as he slept, didn't quite make up for the times she'd had to cancel on him in the past weeks or the unsatisfactory snatches of conversation they'd
had between meetings and tours, burgers and pie. She held his hand and stared at the ceiling. Her life was moving at much too rapid a pace; she felt spent, worn. She had never quite recovered from the stress leading up to the opening, and there were so many other things, so many worries.

She turned her head and looked at Luke's profile in the dark. He frowned as he dreamed, drawing his brows down and scrunching his nose. He tightened his hand convulsively around hers, suddenly, grunted. Rolling on her side, Lorelai shifted closer to him, shushing him, placing her free hand just over his heart. His breathing slowed a little, though the frown persisted and he still held her hand a little too tightly. She closed the rest of the distance between them, tucking herself along his side, his arm between them, her chin on his shoulder. She laid her head on his pillow, her face close to his. Her palm pressed flat against his chest, she counted to the rhythm of his heart. She watched him, a painful lump at the base of her throat and her eyes smarting, until she at last fell asleep.

Emily was quick to establish something close to routine when she had fully installed herself in the honeymoon suite of the Dragonfly. She had her breakfast of tea and toast, one poached egg and fruit, every morning at seven-thirty. By eight-fifteen she was at work on whatever task she’d scheduled for herself that day, whether it be picking wallpaper patterns or speaking to landscapers about the garden out back. The remodeling of the Bedermanier house was a fulltime job, one that kept her busy from the moment she folded up the morning paper until she returned to the inn for a light supper. On Wednesdays, she had lunch with Richard; Fridays, she let Rory and Lorelai drive her to Hartford for dinner. On Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays, she knew to expect a phone call from her husband at exactly seven-thirty in the evening. He was as eager to hear about her day and her work as he’d once been to tell her about his own. It was something like courtship, she thought.

They'd ended their conversation later than usual this Sunday, close to an hour after he'd called. Emily found herself listless, tired of the claustrophobic atmosphere of her room and the manufactured hum of air from the unit in the window. She pocketed her key and stepped out into the humid evening to walk the gardens.

There were things she'd done since leaving Richard she never had before. On the trip to Europe, she'd relived every moment of their early marriage, all the while trying not to think of every more recent, more painful moment. She had deliberately put those thoughts to rest when she moved into her room at the Dragonfly, trying to do the thing she'd always done best—finish the task at hand, put the past just beside the present while she dealt with that. Her daily phone calls and conversations with Winifred—at whose insistence she'd begun to unwilling call Winky—made it more and more difficult.

Winky kept Richard fresh in her mind, as she prattled on about her Harry, which she often did when she was particularly tired or in pain. Harry had been taken suddenly, Emily knew, and Winky left bereft, with nothing but scraps of paper and dusty books to heal herself. She'd been reconstructing Harry's life ever since, writing his biography in her head, and in Emily she'd found a fresh ear and someone willing to listen. In turn, she'd asked Emily more questions than Emily felt comfortable answering, many of which she didn't think she knew how to answer at all.

It had been a long time since she'd thought of her mother, wondered what she'd be like were she still alive. Talking with Winky, telling her about Lorelai's childhood and pregnancy, about the time between now and then, it brought Emily back, made her think. Each night before she went to bed, she opened the drawer in her bedside table and looked down at the journal Rory had given her when they returned from Rome. She hadn't written anything yet—when Rory left it for her, she wasn't sure that there was anything to say, but as she moved through her days, making decisions and phone calls and meetings, she thought she felt something stir she hadn't thought of
for years.

She wandered the gardens, unseeing, until she suddenly realized it was dark. She hurried back, chiding herself, feeling slightly foolish for getting so lost in her own reverie. With nothing else to do, she prepared for bed, checked her planner for the following day, and turned off the lights.

She still wasn't used to sleeping alone.

They stopped at a twenty-four hour convenience store on the way home to pick up the necessaries. Soda, things both salty and sweet, trashy magazines, and beef jerky at the boys' insistence. They ordered three huge pizzas when they got to the Gilmore house (courtesy of the emergency pizza fund in the cookie jar on the top shelf in the kitchen) and ate them on the floor in the living room, talking with their mouths full and laughing at each other. Just after one, Brian and Zach left for video games and their own beds. Lane stayed behind, borrowed a pair of pajamas from Rory, and the two of them curled up on opposite ends of the couch, talking when the inclination struck them, silent when it didn't.

"Candle s'mores are the best kind," Rory said. "It's the optimum heat level for toasting to the right shade and level of gooeyness."

"Only you'd make s'mores into a scientific experiment," Lane told her. "But I have to give it to you. These are the best s'mores ever."

She paused, stretching a marshmallow between her fingers. Her voice was lower, softer than usual, and Rory found herself leaning forward to listen. All day, in moments of quiet, Lane's expression had been thoughtful and distant, almost somber, Rory thought.

Lane threw the marshmallow into an empty soda glass before she spoke. "So, Dave called yesterday."

"How'd that go?"

Lane smiled sadly. "Went like always. We talked for, like, ever—and thank God he's got one of those unlimited calling plans, because otherwise I'd be way more broke than I already am."

"What did you talk about?" Rory asked, pouring them both another cup of soda.

She shrugged. "Nothing. Everything. And I love that, that I can talk to him for hours and not get tired of him and not run out of things to say. That we can still talk the way we did when we were just friends, you know?" She sighed. "So, we're winding down, all, 'I should go to bed,' and I've got so much to do this week,' and he pauses for a really long time. And then he says, 'Lane? I don't want you to feel like you can't see other people.'"

"Oh, Lane," Rory breathed.

"And then he said that he didn't want to see anyone but me and he hated thinking about me seeing other people, but he probably wasn't going to be home until Thanksgiving or even Christmas, and he just wanted to put it out there, so I wouldn't feel like I had to wait, or something. And I told him I didn't feel like I had to wait, and I didn't really want to see other people, and I know I'd hate to think of him seeing other people, but if he wanted to I wouldn't blame him," Lane said. "And then there was this really long silence, and I asked him what we'd just decided."

"What did he say?"

"He said that when we're together, we're together, and when we're not..." she trailed off and took
a shaky sigh. "When we're not, we're still us, we're still talking, and we don't have to worry about what to call it."

Rory felt tears pricking her eyes. "Maybe that's good, in a way," she said hopefully. "That way, if either of you do start to see someone else, you don't have to have that conversation where you tell the other person and it feels like a break up, or something—this way even if that happens you can still talk, you know it's not the end of anything."

Lane nodded, drew her knees to her chest. "I know, and I know that's what he wanted, too."

"But that doesn't make it better," Rory said softly.

"Nope."

Rory edged herself across the couch and put her arm around her friend's shoulders. Lane leaned her head against Rory's and drew a deep breath. "You okay?" Rory asked.

"I'm sad," Lane said.

They sat together in silence a long while, Rory's arm around Lane, leaning their heads against each other. Lane surveyed the mess on the floor in front of them.

"They absconded with one of the pizzas," she said, sniffing slightly.

Rory followed her line of sight. "Pizza thieves!" she cried. "Still, there's still half a pie left. You want?"

They pushed off the sofa and shared the remaining pieces, flipping through the magazines as they did. Rory looked up at the clock.

"What time are you working tomorrow?"

"Seven," Lane said. "Why?"

"That's in like, three hours," Rory said. She looked at Lane, her eyes wide as she smiled. "Do you remember when we were eight or nine or so, and all we wanted to do in the world was stay up all night long, and we swore when we were grown ups we'd do it?"

Lane grinned. "I remember. And we were going to climb on the roof when we did."

Rory's mouth fell open. "I forgot that! So, what do you think? Sunrise on the roof?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Lane laughed.

"We need more soda!" Rory said, clambering to her feet. "I know for a fact my mom keeps the fridge fully stocked at all times with Diet Coke, if nothing else."

Lane followed her down the hall. "Hey, Rory?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." She adjusted her glasses on her nose. "It's been a good few weeks, hanging out all the time."

Rory nodded, her expression thoughtful. "I hate to say it, but like old times."

"You sure you have to go back to Yale next week?"
She rolled her eyes. "Believe me, if I could put it off, I would."

"You would not," Lane snorted.

Rory handed her a soda. "Well, no. But—I just hope it's different this year."

Lane linked her arm through Rory's as they headed out to the porch. "You'll be fine. You're Rory."

She smiled. "I guess. I'm just—I'm hoping that works out for me this year." She sighed. "To the roof?"

"To the roof!"

The last weekend of the month had been exhausting. Emily's room at the Dragonfly was no longer available and she had taken it upon herself to move into an apartment above Gypsy's garage, much to Lorelai's shock and chagrin. Emily made the announcement one day and wouldn't listen to any protests, discussion, or wild speculation as to her motives. She simply stated that this was her chosen course of action and she really didn't care to pursue the conversation further. If she wanted independence, Lorelai thought, she was going about it in the most un-Emily-like way possible.

Lorelai had driven her mother and her possessions into town the last Thursday of the month, unwillingly holding her tongue. Emily Gilmore, living in a tiny apartment over a mechanic's shop—it left her depressed for her mother and worried that something beyond the rift between she and Richard was plaguing her. If she kept this up, Lorelai knew Emily would soon become a fixture in Stars Hollow, and she didn't relish the prospect. Not only did she find the concept of her parents separated unsettling in ways she'd never expected, somewhere in the back of her mind she knew that once people arrived in Stars Hollow, they didn't tend to leave. It didn't bode well for either of her parents. (Or her, for that matter.)

Just after she left Emily in the dingy studio, Lorelai drove directly home and began loading the Jeep again with Rory's school things; the Lorelais packed together for two days, and on Saturday, the caravan of the Jeep, Rory's Prius, and Luke's truck pulled up in front of a dorm on the Yale campus. The three of them together schlepped Rory's bags and boxes up two flights of stairs to the long, narrow single room she'd picked in the last year's room lottery. Lorelai dawdled, lounging on the bed after each vehicle was emptied and Luke had left for Stars Hollow alone. She watched her daughter, unpacking her books and arranging them systematically on the bookcase, filling her desk drawers with fresh notebooks, lining up her toiletries on the top of her wardrobe.

Rory paused and gave her mother an irritated look. "Are you going to just loll around or help me out?" she asked.

"Loll?" Lorelai said, giggling. "No, I'm not going to loll." She rose and began rummaging for sheets. "It seems like we just did this."

Rory's expression was thoughtful as she opened the wardrobe doors and began to stack clothes on the side shelves. "You think so?" she asked. "It feels like forever ago to me."

Lorelai snapped a sheet in the air and let it fall across the bed. "Oh, babe, trust me, this year has gone by so quickly, I feel like I can't catch my breath. So many things have happened."

"I guess you're right," Rory said. "When does that happen?"
"When does what happen?"

"When do you hit the point in your life when time seems to speed up? I don't think I'm there yet," Rory said.

Lorelai smiled sadly as she tucked the comforter snugly against the wall. "Don't rush it, babe. You will be. And," she said, shaking a pillow into a case, "the irony of it is that you won't know it until it's happened." She threw the pillow on the bed and turned, her hands on her hips. "So. You want me to stay until you get settled?"

"You don't have to," Rory said. "You should go home, hang out with Luke." Lorelai only smiled in response. "You know," she continued, "your boyfriend? The guy with the hat? Kinda grumpy on occasion?"

"Kinda grumpy?" Lorelai grunted. "Okay. If you're sure."

"I'm sure," she said, gave her mother a gentle smile. "Besides, Paris'll be here soon and the trans-hall communication shall commence."

Lorelai picked up her purse and pocketed her keys, put her arms around Rory. "Call me later," she said.

Rory kissed her cheek. "I will."

Lorelai drove home by herself, lost in thought. It had been a summer of too many things, both good and bad—hurt and change and happiness all at once.

She wondered what the fall would bring.
The first of the month fell on a Wednesday. A convention of bird watchers came to town and filled the Dragonfly, and Lorelai smiled her best plastic smile for them as they trudged through the lobby. In her head she was calculating a flower order for an engagement party the following week and trying to remember which phone call she had to make before three o’clock or else something important wouldn’t happen. The less serious part of her brain was listening to "Pour Some Sugar On Me" on loop and trying to get her to dance while simultaneously choreographing an altogether different sort of dance with Luke as a featured player. The thought dully occurred to her that it was more action than either of them had seen for the last month. She retreated to the kitchen for coffee and something sweet, rolling her eyes.

While her mother was precariously balancing her workload, Rory was still figuring hers out. She wasn't much looking forward to Shopping Week, as her course load for the fall had pretty much picked itself—everything she'd need to take in the next year and a half had a prerequisite, and she'd loaded herself up for them now. She had signed up on a whim for a music theory course as well, but when she returned from Europe, she'd gone through the course guide and discovered Writing 220: Memoir and the Created World. The next three weeks were spent pestering the professor via email to get a seat in the already full class. She'd sent a writing sample and numerous pleas, but Professor Flynn wouldn't budge: there was a waiting list, and Rory wasn't at the top.

She went to class the first day in spite of this and parked herself at the end of the long seminar table, a notebook before her. She doodled as other students meandered in and found themselves seats; she was startled by a touch at her elbow just before the professor walked in. She looked up to see Marty sitting beside her, a goofy grin on his face.

"I didn't know you were in this class," Marty said.

Rory smiled sheepishly. "I'm not, yet."

He was about to reply when Professor Flynn bustled in, kicking the door shut behind her before she installed herself at the head of the table. She called roll and at the end asked if there were any names she'd missed. Rory wasn't tentative—she raised her hand immediately and almost felt compelled to get out of her seat, as though she were at Chilton and required to stand to give an answer.

"And you are?"

"Lorelai Gilmore," she said. "Rory."

Flynn stared at Rory over her glasses a moment. "Perseverance, thy name is Gilmore," she said. "There's still a waiting list, you realize, Miss Gilmore."

"I do," she said. "But I really, really want to be in this class."

"So I see," the professor said. She pursed her lips. "You can stay this afternoon. Come see me in my office tomorrow morning and we'll discuss it."

At the end of class, Rory’s hand was cramped and stiff from freewriting and taking notes, her mind a scattered mess of words and phrases, cracked images and half ideas. Marty walked with her out of the building, enthusing about the class and how great he'd heard Flynn was.
"Where are you headed?"

"Kellynch Hall," she said.

"Hey, me too," Marty said, "third floor."

"Second."

He nodded and hitched his bag up on his shoulder a little. "So, when you get in the class, you want to partner up for peer reading?"

Rory’s mouth fell open slightly as she tried to think of a polite denial. She didn't want to hurt his feelings, and while she knew he was smart, she also knew she was neurotically particular about her writing.

"I don't want to count my chickens, you know? I still might not get in."

"But if you do?"

"Ah, well, then, sure," she stuttered, unable to say no to someone so eager.

That evening, she rehearsed what she would say to the professor, how she would pitch herself and worm her way to the top of the waiting list, what her reply would be to each possible rebuttal. She planned on thoroughly being a pain in the ass; she thought her mother would be proud.

She rapped on the door of Professor Flynn's office just after nine the next morning and stepped in when commanded.

"Ah, Miss Gilmore," Flynn said. Her office was a cube of chaos—books and papers piled everywhere, empty coffee cups and take-out containers, posters still rolled and waiting to be hung, even shoes and jackets discarded and forgotten about. She wore her hair in a high, messy knot and cat's eye glasses. "Congratulations. You just convinced me. You're in."

"I'm sorry?" Rory asked, her brow furrowed. "That's it?"

"You're disappointed? I thought you wanted to be in this class, Miss Gilmore. Very well, that's fine, I can—"

"No," Rory said quickly, stepping forward. "I just—I thought I was going to have to work a little harder than that."

Flynn took off her glasses and squinted at them, seeming to examine their state of cleanliness. "No one else on the list showed up to class, sent a writing sample or pestered me about how important this class was to her, so I thought if you showed today, I'd take mercy on you and let you in." She rubbed her lenses with the hem of her shirt as she spoke.

Rory smiled gratefully. "Thank you so much, Professor Flynn, I can't tell you—"

She waved her hand and put her glasses back on, seating herself behind her desk and reaching for a legal pad. "Then don't. I'll see you in class Friday afternoon."

At the end of the day, after a rather trying dinner with Paris—who was compiling a list of discussion groups and clubs they had to join in the coming weeks, all of which had separate reading lists and presentations on top of her five classes—Rory curled up on her bed with her cell phone and dialed.
He was on his way out the door when the phone rang. She'd told him she didn't need food, that she'd taken care of it, and he'd grudgingly assented until he opened her fridge and saw the dismal state it was in. He stopped, his hand on the doorknob, and sighed before he turned and answered. "Hello?"

Rory furrowed her brow. "Luke?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, it's Rory," she said.

Luke passed a hand over his face, suddenly embarrassed. "Hi, Rory. How's it going?"

"Pretty well—classes have started and so far they all seem really interesting and the professors are cool, so I think it's going to be a good semester."

"Good. That's good."

"I think so," Rory said. She paused, and without meaning to slightly cleared her throat. She winced. "How are you?"

"Oh, you know," he said. "The same."

"Good." She waited, swallowed. "So... is Herself around?"

"Nah, she's still at the inn," Luke said. "You, ah, want me to have her call you back?"

Rory considered it a beat. "Um, you know what? No, that's okay. It's late already and I'm sure she's tired. She's been working so hard lately." She sighed. "Just—I guess tell her I called, and if she doesn't want to call back, I'll just see her tomorrow at dinner."

"Sure, Rory. Have a good one."

"You, too—and Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell her—make her take it easy. Even if it's just tonight."

"I'll try," he said.

They hung up and Luke made to leave again; he was startled to open the door and find Joe standing on the porch, a pizza box on one arm and a large paper bag in his other hand. He smiled broadly at Luke.

"Hey, dude. I bring provisions," Joe said.

"Don't call me dude," Luke said, "and I didn't order this."

Joe shoved it at him. "Lorelai did. It's a Lorelai special. And other stuff, too. Paid for and everything."

Luke tipped Joe and brought the food to the kitchen. He heard her come in a few moments later as he laid things out on plates and poured drinks. She shuffled around quietly, pulling off her shoes and flopping heavily onto the couch. She smiled sleepily at him when he appeared at the end of the hall.
"Hey. Did the food come?"

"Food came," he said. He leaned against the wall. "How're you doing?"

She closed her eyes. "I'm tired. But I'm almost caught up on everything I have to do. Almost," she sighed. "Do you mind if we eat out here? I don't think I can get up again."

A Lorelai special, he discovered, was a pizza with extra everything, hot buffalo wings, and fried mozzarella sticks. The "other stuff" was for him—a green salad with vinaigrette dressing and a grilled chicken sub with extra hot peppers, the things she knew he'd like, or at least eat. They chatted idly as they ate and drank their beer. When she'd eaten her fill, she stretched out on the couch, her cheek pillowed on Luke's thigh as he played his fingers through her hair. He could see she was on the edge of dozing, about to drift off, when he remembered Rory had called. When he told her, she lifted her head to look at him.

"Am I the worst mother in the world for not wanting to call her back because I'm too tired?" she asked.

Luke slid his finger down the side of her face, regarding her sadly. "No."

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Good."

"Come on," he said, rising. He held out his hand. "Let's get you settled, and then I'll go."

She furrowed her brow, pouting. "Go?"

"So you can sleep."

"You can stay and I can sleep at the same time," she said.

"You just said you were tired."

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "Too tired to talk to anyone, even Rory, but not too tired to spend some down time with my fella," she said.

Luke pulled her to her feet and led her to the stairs. "Your fella? What sort of down time are we talking about, here?" he asked, and she laughed.

As she changed into her pajamas and completed her other nightly rituals, Lorelai idly wondered if she should call and check in on her mother. She was, she knew, definitely too tired for that. She felt a slight pang of guilt as she curled up next to Luke and he turned off the light, but she was asleep before she had time to think about it.

Emily was sitting in her new living room, which was also her dining room and bedroom, reading by the light of a very dim bulb. If, she thought, you could call staring blankly at the pages, seeing nothing, reading. Her lunch with Richard that day had been unpleasant at best. She knew telling him she'd moved from the Inn to an apartment in town would be difficult, but she hadn't anticipated the angry glint of tears, the swell of wounded pride. They hadn't spoken much as they ate, and he hadn't stayed long after.

The worst of it, she thought, was that she didn't really care if she made it up to him. Not yet. She didn't know quite what she was waiting for, but she'd know it when it came. Until then, she could be patient. That, at least, was something she was good at.

The rest of the month slipped past all too quickly for Lorelai. She would look at her calendar at the end of every day and run her fingers across the dates and deadlines, the rapidly decreasing number
of days. As September drew to a close, she shut her planner with a sigh and stared blankly ahead
of her a long moment each night. The older she got, she thought, the harder it was to account for
the time that passed.

Time moved more swiftly for Rory and her grandmother. Rory settled back easily into the grind of
study and work, newspaper meetings and Parisian rants; she found a study nook in the library
where she could read in solitude, one with a chair of the perfect level of squishiness and a table to
rest her feet on. Emily’s routine continued very much unchanged, though it had taken her some
time to learn the best way to poach an egg. She worked doggedly on the house, spending her
evenings alone with her thoughts and, more often than not, a glass of scotch. She and Richard
continued their slow, awkward dance, advancing and retreating, advancing and retreating. Friday
night dinners were still Friday night dinners, Stars Hollow was Stars Hollow, and the Gilmore
women still liked their coffee strong and often.
Rory had always felt the month of October belonged to her. Her mother had the first snow of the season, Stars Hollow had every tiny occasion known to man, Paris had election days, and Rory had October. It was the month when the temperature went from simply cool to crisp and chill, a change that begged for cuter clothes and shoes, for smart-looking coats and matching scarves. The leaves turned in October, the entire state resplendent in autumnal colors—yellows and oranges, reds and purples. The air, she thought, even somehow tasted of apples.

Good things happened in October. Her birthday. Halloween. Long weekends. Even, she was enough of an academic masochist to think, mid-terms. The month was a rush of things to do, a month of perfect weather and long walks with cups of hot coffee firmly in her hands. It was the month before November, when the sky turned grey and forbidding and suddenly seemed a pressing weight more than an open expanse of blue. She always felt it was the last present of the year before being suddenly in the grip of winter, the season that seemed the most interminable in New England.

The first this month fell on a Friday. She and Marty had just left class together, as had become their custom, and were headed for the student union for a cup of coffee when Rory's cell began to vibrate in the pocket of her coat. She rolled her eyes apologetically at Marty and explained she was waiting on a call from her mother as she pulled it out and flipped it open.

"Mom?"


"You're not canceling, Mom, please," Rory said. "Dinner with the two of them and you not there? You can't do that to me."

Rory heard her mother hesitantly take a breath. "Actually, it's just dinner with the one of them."

"What?"

"Grandma's not coming, either."

"Mom!" she whined. "I love Grandpa, and I love spending time with him, but with everything going on lately, it's going to be so uncomfortable without someone else there. We'll both be sitting there thinking about why it's just the two of us, and he'll get sad, and I don't want to see that."

Lorelai sighed. "I know, babe, I know. I wish I could do something to help, but I just can't get away tonight."

"Can Luke come?" she asked suddenly.

"Luke? No, honey, I don't think so."

They had reached the student union, Marty patiently silent at her side, staring at his feet as they walked. Rory waved him inside and mouthed that she'd be right there. He nodded and jogged up the stairs and into the building. "Grandpa loves Luke."

"I know, but holy awkwardness, Batman," Lorelai said. "He hasn't been to an actual, real Friday night dinner yet, and I don't think it's exactly fair asking him to go if I won't be there. He's
uncomfortable enough in parentally-based social situations."

Rory allowed herself an irritated, huffy breath and a vicious kick to the sidewalk, knowing she was being more than a little childish and ridiculous. "I know."

"Besides, he's going to be at the house, fixing the porch railing again and making me a late dinner that will probably have spinach in it, because apparently I look like I'm not getting enough iron."

"It's a nice way of telling you that you look tired," Rory said.


She snorted. "Yes, Mom, I'll bring the girlfriend of one of my grandfather's dearest and oldest friends from college with me to dinner. That wouldn't be creepy at all."

Lorelai was quiet, thinking. "Hey, bring Marty with you."

"Marty?"

"Sure. Grandpa met him last year at the game, and he's a really good guy, just a friend, as you say," Lorelai said, in a tone that riled Rory slightly, "so it won't be weird. Tell him it'll be a favor to you. You know he'd go."

"Mom, I told you—"

"I know what you told me," Lorelai said in the same, obnoxiously knowing tone, "and that makes Marty great back up in a situation like this. You two can tell Dad all about your class, and the dorm, and he can tell you really boring stories about back in the day, and Marty will be polite enough to pretend to listen and not to fall asleep in the chicken and mashed potatoes, and you'll have really good cake, afterwards, so no harm, no foul."

"You really think?"

"It's up to you, babe. You coming home this weekend?"

"Would I see you if I did?"

Lorelai was silent a moment. "I'm sorry I've been busy. I can't help it, Rory."

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," Rory replied, chagrined. "I'm sorry. I guess I just miss my mom."

"I miss you, too, babe. It's going to get better soon, I swear. Call me at the inn after dinner, okay?"

She put the phone back in her pocket after hanging up, chastising herself for snapping at her mother. She descended the stairs, looked over the events bulletin board, and checked her mailbox before heading to the basement coffee shop. Marty sat at a table in the back corner, two steaming cups on the table and what looked like a plate of brownies. He was thumbing through a magazine when she dropped into the chair across from him, a weary smile on her face.

"Family drama," she said. "Thanks for the coffee."

He pushed the plate towards her. "I got a couple of those Oreo crumble things, too."

Rory leaned over the table and peered at them. "I love those! Thanks, Marty," she said, helping herself.
"I know you do," he replied. "And you're welcome."

She snuck a look at him as she pinched off a corner of the Oreo brownie and popped it in her mouth, quickly lifting her coffee cup to her lips after so she could continue studying him without being obvious. He'd closed the magazine was attempting to stuff it into his already rather full messenger bag, grunting slightly. She smiled against the rim of her cup and tried not to laugh.

They had been spending a lot of time together since school began. She wasn't quite sure how it happened, or when Marty became such an integral part of her social circle, but the Friday cup of coffee seemed to have become a weekly ritual, as had Marty's presence in Rory's study nook at the library, folded into another chair catty-corner to hers. It had become perfectly natural to bound up the stairs when she was finished with a paper and hand it over to him, or slip it under the door if he wasn't there, and to expect the peculiar rhythm of his knock at odd times in the evening, to see him standing in the door when she opened it, the eraser end of a pencil in his mouth as he studied his own work, always reticent to let it go. They regularly had meals together and Marty had even tempted Rory out a Saturday night or two—the excursions had ended early for Rory, and, as she teasingly pointed out, fully-clothed for Marty.

Paris had been more than irritated and more than vocal at Marty's inclusion in Rory's academic and social life. He was, as far as Paris was concerned, a member of the brainless masses and conversationally bankrupt, incapable of independent thought or action, and countless other things Rory hadn't bothered to listen to. Marty was just another fly on Paris's radar, a Brad ready to be cowed and intimidated. Rory went out of her way not to let it be a bone of contention between them, and her friend seemed at times resigned to the fact that where Rory went, Marty was more than likely bound to follow.

They had their coffee, discussing class and the upcoming midterm, two weeks away. Rory knew Marty could go on at great length about Professor Flynn, he found her so fascinating, and she let him as they put their dirty cups in the bin over the trashcans and began to head back for the dorm. She listened to him prattle on, all awkward enthusiasm, not quite hearing what he said. She hated to admit it, and she knew she wouldn't, but she knew that her mother wasn't entirely wrong.

Marty liked her. She was pretty sure of this, and she didn't think it just narcissism or arrogance—though a possibility, she knew—or miscommunication. He could be earnest and eager by turns, and he could occasionally be irritating in both, but he was always attentive and respectful. She was flattered that he liked her, that he liked her enough for it to be noticeable (and highly mock-worthy for Paris), and more than that she was grateful he wasn't pushing it, that he wasn't being aggressive in any way. He was simply quietly happy to hang out with her.

Rory didn't know if she liked him in—and she could hear the italics, hear them clearly in her head, spoken by Lorelai, an amused smile in her voice—that way. She knew she'd never had a friend quite like him. She further knew that as far as boys were concerned, she'd never really been friends with the ones she'd dated and been with, and she couldn't say that those relationships were in any way successful. She found herself shaking her head when she thought like this, which was more often now than in the first four or five weeks of school, because it seemed so silly. He was Marty. Marty and dating didn't belong in the same sentence.

He left her at her door as usual, giving her the goofy, shrugging wave he always did. She again thanked him for the coffee and said she'd see him later. As she turned her key in the lock, though, she thought better of it.

"Hey, Marty," she called. He turned, his face set in expectation. "Are you busy tonight?"

The dinner had gone better than she expected. Her grandfather had been gracious—Rory had
worried, when he opened the door to find her standing there with a boy beside her, how this was going to work. How would she reintroduce Marty? How would she tell him that her mother and grandmother were skipping out on him? How upset would he be? Would he be able to hide it?

As they settled themselves at the dinner table, she found she had underestimated them both. Richard took the news in stride, as though this was something he'd expected, something that happened often enough to be incidental, though Rory thought she detected a slight flicker in his eyes before he spoke. He remembered Marty, shook his hand, offered him a drink, and Rory had to keep from snickering as her friend politely turned it down on the premise that he wasn't yet legal, only to be reminded that Richard knew his reputation as "Naked Guy." Marty took the cocktail gratefully then, smiling in a bashfully self-deprecating way. Conversation went smoothly throughout the meal; Rory thought she hadn't seen her grandfather quite this at ease since before the fallout with Lloyd and Digger, and Marty acquitted himself rather well. Rory was surprised to find how articulate he could be when the occasion called for it. When she said goodbye to Richard at the door, he gave her the grandparental hug she loved, her cheek squashed against his shoulder.

"That's a fine fellow, there," he whispered to her.

"He's just a friend, Grandpa."

"A fine friend, then," he said, letting her go. "I will see you next week. Marty, it has been quite a pleasure."

The drive back to Yale had been slightly uncomfortable at first. Rory didn't know quite how to explain why Marty's presence had been so necessary at the dinner. She hadn't told him before, not wanting him to be self-conscious, thinking about her poor, heartbroken, and pitiful grandfather. She stuttered her way through a few sentences about her grandmother being away and her mother being busy and wanting to cheer up her grandfather and...

"Rory," Marty interjected. "It's fine. You don't have to tell me family stuff."

She nodded silently. They spent the rest of the drive joking about the guys living on Marty's floor who were pledging fraternities and were told not to shower for three weeks. Marty's next door neighbor's girlfriend dumped him at the end of week two, but Marty told Rory he was fairly sure it wasn't much longer than the pledge had gone in the past without bathing.

Rory called home soon afterwards, splayed out on her stomach on the floor of her room. Paris was on the bed, angrily channel-surfing, viciously punching buttons and barking at the television.

"No, Mom, it was fine—it was actually sort of fun," Rory said. "Grandpa was great."

"And Marty?"

"Marty did pretty well," she said. "How was your night?"

Lorelai chattered on a moment, her mouth full. She tilted the phone away from her lips a moment and Rory heard her hollering at Luke. "This is really good, Emeril, but I think more cheese next time!" Rory giggled. "Calzone, if you can believe it," Lorelai said. "Spinach and ricotta or some such stuff." She paused to take another bite. "So, I know a Lorelai who has a birthday coming up."

Rory sat up. "Oh, Mom, you don't have to—I mean, with the inn and everything, don't make a big fuss. I've got class that day, and—"

"I think that sounds about right," Rory said. "Night, Mom. Say hi to Luke for me."

Last year had been so full, she thought, so overwhelming, she hadn't quite had the time to enjoy herself when she studied. Every moment she spent over her books had felt frenzied and uncomfortable—she was determined not to let it happen this year and she took to her books before midterms with a joyful zeal she hadn't felt in some time. She was going to do well, and she knew she was going to do well, and knowing that made it easier to cram the corners of her brain with as much information as it could hold. The midterm for her memoir class was the only one really troubling her. For two weeks she wrote and rewrote, pestered Marty with new drafts, inserted and cut, reinserted and rearranged, read and reread to the point that she had entire passages memorized and she would hear them as she laid down each night to sleep.

The day before it was due, she went to Marty's room to give him back his own essay and get back the latest version that she'd given him the day before. She let herself in when he called for her to come in and without ceremony threw herself on the bed.

"I think I might have to just staple a bunch of blank sheets together and write 'I love puppies' on the top one in crayon and hand that in," she said flatly.

Marty swiveled in his desk chair and handed her a sheaf of papers. "You're being too hard on yourself," he said. "I think it's great."

"You're biased," she shot back. "Professor Flynn is predisposed to think it's hack work."

He rolled his eyes. "I still think it's great, and so will Flynn. And your last one was really good," he told her. "I liked the whole fire motif. Solid," he said. He cringed. "Pretend I didn't say solid, okay?"

Rory giggled. "Done."

They handed the paper in on Friday; the Wednesday class following, Flynn handed back the drafts, her expression grave. Rory watched her as she circled the table, slamming the essays face down on the table. She wore a bright red sweater, slightly askew, and her glasses were hanging from an ornately beaded rope around her neck. She was one of the younger professors in the department, and Rory had always marveled slightly that someone so messy and careless in her looks could still look so forbidding and, occasionally, elegant.

She regarded Rory with her lips set in a hard, grim line. "Try again, Miss Gilmore."

Flynn returned to the head of the table as Rory turned her paper over. She hardly heard the professor condemn the entire class for lazy writing and offer them a revision period of two weeks; the final grade would be an average of the two drafts. Her eyes were fixed on the C minus staring at her from the head of the first page. A C minus. The story of her life had earned her a C minus. Her throat burned and she felt a hot rush of tears that she had difficulty biting back.

Rory ducked her head and avoided Marty's gaze as she hurried out of class, mumbling something incoherent about being late for a meeting. She allowed herself a good, solid cry for a few moments when she got back to her room, curled around a pillow. The paper that she had slaved over, the one that told the story of how she came to be, how she was born, how her mother had taken her to a potting shed and turned it into a home, all that, and the work and the time, only worth a C minus. It wasn't even average—it was a degree below average. It was average with a minus after it. Which meant that she was average, worse than average—mediocre. She was mediocre. Mediocre Rory Gilmore, failed memoirist. Smell the failure, she thought.
It wasn't until after dinner—a pizza she ordered in and almost an entire two liter bottle of Diet Coke—that she could flip through the paper and read the comments scrawled in the margins and on the last page. With a sigh of trepidation, she sat at her desk and placed the paper before her to turn the page.

The marginal comments were mostly good. Strong image. Good. Is that what you want to say here? Nice rhythm. This is almost funny, here—did you want it to be? Rory snorted. There were other things, circled words and WC in certain places, sentences with squiggles underneath and question marks, but the most oft repeated comment, she found, was Is this really you?

Miss Gilmore, she read, this is an absolutely satisfactory piece. It is well-written. It is insightful. Your structure is sound and works quite well for the story you've chosen to tell. It is, altogether, a very nice essay about your mother.

However, the act of writing memoir requires a little more. Where are you in this piece, Miss Gilmore? How does this story make you feel, as you read it? How has it shaped you? Changed you? While it is evident that you respect and look up to your mother (who sounds like an interesting woman and a great subject for some other essay), there's very little emotion in this piece. Where are you? How is this story about you? Write your own story, Miss Gilmore. Revise this—take what you have and really think. Where's Rory in this? What's her part of the story? There's more to this birth than the facts, and that's what we want, Miss Gilmore.

You're capable of better than this. You need to be invested, or else you cannot expect your readers to be.

Tell the story you meant to tell, Miss Gilmore, not the one you think you should. It's in there.

-E. Flynn

She stared blankly at the space in front of her for a long time after reading this. Eventually, she took the paper and slipped it in her desk drawer and slowly closed it shut. Mechanically she began to move around the room, picking up her trash, stacking her books, clearing her bed of the pile of clothes that accumulated there earlier in the day. When she tucked herself in and turned off the light, she stayed awake, flat on her back, her hands folded on her stomach as she stared at the ceiling.

You're capable of better than this, she thought. Mediocre.

The Friday following, she drove home to Stars Hollow, the radio on a classic rock station, turned up as high as she could stand it. Her doors were shaking slightly. She didn't really want to be going home. Her mother had called her at four in the morning, as was the custom, and Rory had struggled through the phone call not to cry, not to choke out the whole story. She had listened to Lorelai talk about meeting her beautiful baby girl, a painful lump in her throat. How, she wondered, could tell her own history with so little emotion as to elicit the response you need to be invested, or else you cannot expect your readers to be. Her mother could do it far better than she, that was clear. It was the last thing she wanted to tell Lorelai, and it was the only thing she could think of. Wasn't she invested? Wasn't her whole life about being invested? Hadn't that story made her who she was?

She pulled into the drive behind the Jeep. Dusk had started to fall and the house was dark and uninviting; Rory shivered and drew her jacket closer around her as she made her way up the walk and the porch steps, both brightly littered with fallen leaves. The door was unlocked when she let herself in.

"Mom?" she called, wandering from the living room to the kitchen. She turned on the lights and
helped herself to a Pop Tart before she went to her room and collapsed on the bed. There was a note on the pinned to the pillow.

*Hey, my birthday girl—crazy day today at the inn, so I'll just meet you at Luke's—seven sharp! Lots of love, Mom.*

Rory shoved a piece of Pop Tart in her mouth and turned her head to look at the clock. Five thirty. She wrinkled her nose. An hour and a half and she was in a mood she'd just keep stewing in—the solution, she decided, was perfectly obvious.

Five minutes later she was under a pile of blankets on the couch with a carton of ice cream and a box of cookies, *What Not to Wear* on the TV. She smiled to herself as she placed a small scoop of ice cream on a cookie and crammed it into her mouth with some difficulty. She wasn't Lorelai Gilmore for nothing, she thought.

Rory took her time walking to town in the rapidly falling dark, kicking at leaves and fallen acorns in her path. The evening had a biting chill to it and a wind that smelled of coming cold and vaguely of smoke. The closer she came to the center of town, the cleaner the sidewalks became, the more heavily decorated for the coming holidays were the lampposts and mailboxes and the odd stump here and there. She wondered, as she neared the diner, if she could ever do this place justice on the page, the crazy beauty of it.

She paused on the threshold. The diner was bright and noisy, overcrowded. She drew a heavy breath before pushing the door open and letting herself inside.

Lorelai stood in front of the counter, leaning back on her elbows and facing the rest of the diner. Beside her was an enormous four layer cake, Rory's name spelled out on the side, a letter on each layer. The entire room was decked out in streamers, the Yale school colors, and along the counter and a row of cheap card tables under the front window, a buffet of assorted Luke specialties and Sookie delicacies. It was, Rory knew, a Lorelai Gilmore party. The usual suspects were assembled—Miss Patty, Babette and Morey, Jackson and Sookie, Kirk and Lulu, Lane and her band mates, her mother, Luke, her grandparents, even Paris, and hiding in the back corner, Marty. Rory's breath caught in her throat and her eyes smarted.

It was deafening as they shouted it in unison: "Surprise!"

Rory heard, and promptly burst into tears.

Lorelai was quickly at her side, her arms around her daughter. "Hey, hey!" she softly, smoothing Rory's hair with one hand. "I know you said you didn't want a big fuss, but it's your twentieth birthday, I wanted to commemorate it!"

Rory took a huge gulping breath and shook her head, unable to speak. "Okay," Lorelai said, leading her through the crowd to the back stairs. "Dig in, everyone! Let's get this party started! The mommy and the birthday girl are taking a moment alone, we shall return shortly!"

Rory let Lorelai push her up the stairs and into a chair at Luke's kitchen table. She sat beside her and leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She took Rory's hands in hers and watched her, waiting. Rory sniffled and tapped her toes against the floor, trying to collect herself, appreciating the understanding silence and the warm pressure on her hand.

"Okay," Lorelai said, after a moment. "Want to tell me what that's all about?"

Rory rolled her eyes. "Oh, nothing. I'm sorry. I didn't—I wasn't expecting the big gathering, and —"
"Hence the surprise part," Lorelai interrupted.

She bit her lip and looked her mother in the eye. "It's a school thing, I had a paper, I worked really hard, I was—it was disappointing, I guess. I let it get to me and I shouldn't have."

Lorelai studied her daughter with an expression of amused sympathy on her face. "A paper? This was about a grade on a paper? Oh, Rory," she sighed. "At least some things never change." Rory shot her a filthy look and she squeezed her daughter's hands, chastised. "I have complete and utter faith that you'll bounce back from this paper and your GPA will thrive to the point that it will take over campus and consume the entire Yale populace, growing exponentially like the Blob."

Rory snickered. "Thanks."

"You okay?"

"I'm okay."

Lorelai leaned forward and kissed her daughter's cheek. "Happy birthday, babe."

When the descended the stairs and reentered the diner, the room again erupted in a cry of "Surprise!" and Rory feigned shock, laughing. She sat at a table in the middle of the diner, wearing a plastic tiara and wielding a pink wand with a giant glow-in-the-dark star at the end. Luke kept her plate full and her coffee cup topped off. Lorelai sat beside her, filching fries off her plate and whispering to her throughout the evening. Rory was content to sit and let the party move around her, listening to the stories and the chatter and the low buzz of music in the background.

The presents aspect of the party wasn't bad either—a cute tee shirt from Lane, books from nearly everyone, a spa weekend from Emily, a scarf and hat set from Sookie and Jackson, a check from Richard, a thin, delicate silver chain from Lorelai.

"It's an anklet," she said. "I know seasonally, an anklet isn't exactly the best gift, but you could always wear it as a bracelet—or wear it when you get all fancied up. Anklets," she said wisely, "are sexy."

Rory smiled. "I love it. Thank you."

Lorelai reached behind her and brought out a moderately big box, put on the cleared space on the tabletop. "This is from Luke," she said. "Consider them theme presents."

In the box was a small wooden chest with three drawers and a top that opened up to reveal a network of tiny boxes. The top was carved with a floral design, and the insides of the drawers were all neatly lined with felt. Rory's mouth fell open. "Oh, my God, it's beautiful," she said. She looked up and glanced around to find him. "Did he make this?" she asked her mother. Lorelai nodded. "It's great. Where is he?"

"He's probably hiding in the kitchen," Lorelai whispered. "He's embarrassed."

He came out for the cutting of the cake, just before Rory blew out her candles. She smiled at him and thanked him with a bashful shrug. He stood off in the corner by the door while her friends sang her happy birthday, Marty hanging back beside him. Rory rolled her eyes at Marty, biting her lower lip; he inclined his head slightly in response.

When people began to drift home, she found him sitting on the bottom step of the back stairs. She invited him out for fresh air and together they went outside and dropped onto the front stoop.

"Thanks for coming," she said.
"It was nice of your mom to invite me," he replied. He sighed. "Look, I'm sorry. About the paper. I feel like—"

Rory sat up straight. "Oh, Marty, that's not—you shouldn't apologize for that. I wrote it, I earned the grade. And we can rewrite it," she said hopefully. "I mean, at best, I can still get at least a B."

She paused. "I really wanted to do well, you know?"

"Yeah," he said. "I still liked it."

They sat in silence together a few moments. Rory closed her eyes and listened, hearing the muffled sounds of the party behind her and the rustle of the wind pushing stray leaves on the pavement. The breeze was cold on the back of her neck, and she shivered. Marty seemed to start at this; he cleared his throat and shifted.

"Hey," he said. "I, ah—I got these for you." He handed her a small box.

Nestled inside on a bed of cotton were two tiny tear-drop earrings, winking at her as they caught the light from the streetlamp above. She inhaled sharply and lifted one out to study it. "Marty, these are—you didn't have to do this."

He shrugged. "Yeah, well."

She turned to look at him, studied his profile. "Thank you," she said, her voice level and sincere. She leaned close and gave him a dainty kiss on the cheek.

Marty turned red to his ears. He opened his mouth to speak when the door opened behind them and Lorelai popped her head out.

"Hey, birthday girl," she said. "Get your butt in here for pictures."

"Pictures?" Rory echoed.

"And, I think it's that time," Lorelai said.

Rory's face broke into a sly grin. "Dance party?"

"You know it," Lorelai cried, reaching down for both their hands. "Come on, you two."

Later that night, Rory burrowed under the blankets on her new bed, yawning sleepily as her mother wandered around the kitchen, making coffee. Her gifts were piled haphazardly on the big desk in the corner, her new anklet and earrings already inside the jewelry box Luke made for her. She hugged her pillow, thinking. She was staring so intently at the picture of her and Lorelai taken on an October day so long ago she couldn't remember, the one with the happy and serious smiles an old man had once called a blessing, that she didn't see her mother come to stand just in the doorway.

"Good birthday, babe?"

Rory nodded, yawning again. "Thanks for the party. I'm sorry about the whole crying thing."

"Hey, it was your party. You can cry if you want to," Lorelai said. "How are you doing, sweets? Everything okay?"

Rory thought about it a moment. "Everything's okay."

"Good. But you know, if everything weren't okay—"
"I would tell you," Rory said. "You don't have to worry about me."

"I will always worry about you," Lorelai said.

They both heard the distinctive sound of the front door opening, and Rory saw her mother's body language change—she stood straighter, tucked her hair behind her ears, smiled softly. Rory couldn't help but giggle, and at the same time feel a slight, warm, tugging pain in her chest. She was happy that her mother was happy, and she couldn't call what she was feeling jealousy, exactly. It was something less bitter than jealousy—envy, perhaps, or regret.

She spent more time at home in the next two weeks than she had since leaving for school, rushing back to Stars Hollow after her classes were over and leaving early in the morning, working at the large desk Luke set up for her over the summer. She spent her evenings before a confusion of papers and pens, writing by hand and piecing bits of story together with scissors and tape, her face set in an expression of supreme concentration. She emerged occasionally for food—one of the more pleasant side effects of having Luke practically living there was the constant source of things to eat.

She didn't bother knocking, the day before the paper was due. She simply slid a copy of the essay under Marty's door with a purple Post-It on the front that said, "come find me." Three hours later, he tapped softly on her door. She couldn't quite read his face, which was unusual, as she opened the door and let him in. He was quiet a few moments, rolling and unrolling the essay in his hands.

"Marty, if it's bad, just tell me," she said, exasperated.

He looked at her solemnly. "It's fantastic."

"Be serious," she said.

"I am. Rory, this is—this is—" He sighed. "It's really great."

"Yeah?" she asked, pleased.

"Yeah. It's—it's different, for you," he said. "A departure. I like it."

Rory threw herself on the bed and stared at the ceiling. "You know, I almost don't care if Flynn likes it."

"Really?"

She turned her head and looked at him. "Almost."

They didn't get the paper back until the last class of the month. Rory had tried not to dwell on it after she handed it in, but the words stuck with her. She heard them as she walked around campus, when she sat down to study, when she looked at her mother across the table at Friday night dinner. That last, she thought, might be the hardest.

Flynn again walked around the room, slamming the papers down on the tabletop. She paused at Rory and tapped her finger on the last page. "Better," she said.

Rory let Marty walk her back to the dorm, bypassing the Friday coffee break. She wouldn't look at the paper until she was safely in her room, wrapped in a blanket at the edge of her bed. She made Marty read the comments to her.

"Miss Gilmore," he read. "The pieces of the story that you retained from the earlier draft serve you well here. This is a tightly constructed, well-written piece. Better than that, it's your story now."
Well done." He looked up. "You got an A."

Her eyes widened. "Shut up."

"You did!" He turned the paper around so she could see. "She liked it."

Rory fell back on the bed, howling with delight. "Oh, Marty, I could—I could kiss you right now!"

He laughed, embarrassed. "Well, that would be okay with me."

She sat upright, her face flushed, her eyes shining. "Tomorrow night, I'm taking you out to celebrate. We'll go to dinner, my treat. I know it's sort of silly to be so excited about this, but—I just—I worked so hard on that, and I'm so proud of it, and I just—"

"I know," he said simply. "I get it."

Rory smiled at him, warmly. "You do, don't you?"

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Lorelai Gilmore

Writing 220

Suppositions

I've heard the story every year since I can remember, at the same time every year, in the exact same words. I have heard about my mother's big fat stomach and her swollen ankles, throwing the ice chips, swearing, and more than anything else the incredible pain of labor.

She talks about the pain, the horrible, wrenching pain, and all the people she thought were supposed to help her carrying on as though there was nothing out of the ordinary about a girl being in that much pain. As though there was nothing out of the ordinary about a girl being in that much pain from labor, a sixteen year old girl who had plans for her life. As though there was nothing out of the ordinary about a girl being in that much pain, alone.

I think she must have been scared. That's a part of the story that never gets told. There are other parts, too, left out year after year, but they're there beneath the silliness and the happiness that things turned out the way they did. Those are the parts that existed on the periphery of my life, growing up, parts of who I am and where I come from that I've never looked at too closely.

I was not supposed to happen. My mother, Lorelai Victoria Gilmore, was supposed to go to Yale and fulfill her potential and be brilliant at whatever she did. She would have been, too, I've no doubt. Wherever she went, whatever she did, she would have brought color and words and life with her. But I happened, and plans changed, and people were hurt.

My first memory is of sitting on the lawn behind the inn where my mother and I grew up. I may have been two or three, she eighteen or nineteen. A wedding had taken place just at sundown and the bride and groom were posing for pictures in the rose garden. The photographer was rushing to catch the last of the light, arranging the couple more haphazardly than he would have had it been afternoon and time enough to think about the fact that these pictures would live on a mantel until death did they part. The yard was lit with white lights. We sat back in a lawn chair in front of the shed that we lived in, Lorelai holding me on her lap, her chin on my head. I remember that she sighed—she had been telling me a story, and she stopped, suddenly, and sighed, watching the
bride and groom together, laughing with each other as the flashes popped. Soon after that the music began and Lorelai danced me around the yard, hugging me to her hip, and she was laughing, too.

It's always been a happy memory, a pretty snapshot of the time we spent at the inn. The fairy twinkle lights and the warm night and the music and me and Lorelai together the way we always were. But I wonder, too—was she lonely, then? Holed up in a potting shed with a toddler and no friends to speak of, broke and working long hours cleaning toilets and changing sheets—sometimes I think the idyllic memories I have are the ones she wanted me to have, more than anything.

I think about her now, as I'm older at this moment than she was back then, and I wonder what I would have done. I would have been frightened, having another person growing inside me who would depend on me and expect things of me, facing the fact that nothing would ever be the same again, knowing that I wouldn't get to be the kid I was trying so hard not to be. I would have been angry and hurt, with the names being called and the insults handed out like pennies in a tip jar, no thought in it, just dropped with a thud alongside all the others, with the disappointment in the air so heavy it condensed on the wall like humidity. More than anything, I wouldn't know who to blame, and it would eat at me.

When something goes wrong, it's a natural instinct to attach blame, to assign the fault. Christopher slept with Lorelai and got Lorelai pregnant and ruined her life and it's his fault she won't be the person she's supposed to be. Lorelai slept with Christopher and got herself pregnant and ruined his life and it's her fault he won't be the person he's supposed to be. Lorelai and Christopher slept together, and the baby happened. Because of the baby, Lorelai won't graduate high school and Christopher won't go to Princeton. The baby is the reason. The baby is to blame.

I wasn't supposed to happen, I know that. My existence is owing to carelessness and bad judgment. The life I have is rooted in pain and anger, disappointment and resentment, confusion and self-righteousness. My mother suffered, in those early years, though her stories are full of garden parties and the fun of making do, long summer nights outside and winter evenings by the big fire in the parlor of the inn with hot chocolate and fat melting marshmallows. She was only as old as I am now—at twenty, I don't always know who I am or what I want or where I should be; I want to be ten years old again and I want to be thirty and get it over with all at the same time; I want to do the things I want to do and not the things I need to do; I want to live full-stop. I can't quite imagine being Lorelai Gilmore back then, being this maelstrom of contradicting notions and half-thought out ideas, having a little person with big, serious eyes, waiting for me to decide what would happen next, knowing that from here on out, it wouldn't really matter what I want or who I feel like I am today, because from here on out, I am not the most important person in my life anymore.

I wasn't supposed to happen. Lorelai Gilmore was supposed to graduate at the top of her class and go to Yale and be brilliant at whatever she did. She would live up to her potential, and it would all be worth it, whatever that "it" really is.

But Lorelai Gilmore did graduate at the top of her class, and she's at Yale and she's trying to be just a little bit brilliant for a moment at a time, every now and again. She gets to do the things the other Lorelai didn't, to be the irresponsible, angsty, immature girl the other Lorelai never did. I can't make up for the life that my mother didn't get to live, though I think sometimes I've tried. I carry her name with me everywhere I go and I live a life that she made for me. I am the expectations. I am the punctuation at the end of the sentence.

What about the life that's mine? Is this it? Do I remember what I remember? Is this moment my decision or someone else's? I close my eyes and think and this is what I know, the things that
I was supposed to happen, but I did. I am a thing that went wrong. I'm looking now, for the right way to be, for the right path to take towards a future of my own making. I want to look back and see the twinkle fairy lights, remember the smell of roses on the wind and the taste of sugar as we danced, and know that those things are true and right and we were happy and always had been and always would be. I want to think my mother never cried, thinking of me. That I'm not to blame. That could she have seen both lives at once, the one she was meant for and the one she got, that she would have chosen this one without so much as a blink of hesitation.

Every year, I hear the story of how I came to be—I hear the good parts, though they start in blinding pain and frustration. I want the end to be something different.

The end, I hope, won't be anyone's "supposed to" but my own.
November

Chapter by lulabo

Chapter Notes

Original notes from ff.net:

A/N 2: There are a few references in here to happenings in "Separation Anxiety." If you haven't read it and don't want to, you won't miss anything too important. The chapters that I'm drawing on are "Sunday Night," "Long Time Coming," and "Back at the Beginning Again."

Disclaimer: This is the chapter that was the initial idea for the story, the spark that made me want to write this sequel in the first place. I've been working on it for some time and there's just one thing I need to unequivocally state: I wrote this without knowing what was going to happen in 5.3, "Written in the Stars." Anything similar to that episode is purely coincidental, and my beta can vouch for that. I freaked myself out a little when I watched the episode and am now attempting to fine tune my psychic powers in the hopes of winning the lottery. So, I'm under no illusion that any of these characters belong to me, and it's really just a show of love for Amy Sherman-Palladino and her big ol' creative brain that I'm writing about them at all.

Lorelai pulled the Jeep into the drive and killed the lights, sighing as she turned the key and slid it out of the ignition. She sat a moment, the keys in the palm of her hand, and stared dully ahead of her. Hers was the only house in the neighborhood still lit, the porch lights on and a lamp glowing behind the curtains in the living room. She opened the car door and swung her legs out, shivering at the bite in the air, wincing when her feet—in their oh, so perfect, oh, so cute, oh, so cheap black stilettos—hit the gravel. She hobbled up the drive and the porch stairs and let herself in, surprised to find the door unlocked.

Once inside, she toed off her shoes and allowed herself a moment to adjust to the flat surface of the floor beneath her feet. She looked down and wiggled her toes. "Sorry, little piggies," she whispered. Dropping her purse and tossing her keys on the desk at the end of the hall, she immediately reached for the bowl of leftover candy and helped herself to a handful of mini Butterfingers and Snickers and Mounds. She crossed the room to the stairs and sat on the landing as she tried to strip the wrappers from the candies as silently as possible, smiling to herself as she did, stealing glances at him as he snored.

Luke sprawled out on the couch, his bare feet up on one end and an arm hanging off the side, the other thrown over his forehead. His flannel was unbuttoned and open, the tee shirt underneath hitched up a few inches above the waist of his jeans. Lorelai shoved a Mounds in her mouth and stretched. She didn't want to wake him just yet—it was her fault he was sleeping on the couch in the first place, passed out with the lights on and a magazine open on his chest.

She'd padded into the kitchen that morning just after seven, pouting. She hadn't expected to see him there, holding a spatula and hovering over a pan on the stove. Rather than say anything, she went to him and leaned against his shoulder, rubbing her face against the soft flannel of his shirt like a kitten begging to be petted. Luke put his arm around her and lightly patted her rear as he
kissed her good morning.

"Is it morning?" she asked. "Because it feels too early to be morning."

"It's morning," he said. "It was nearly morning when you got home last night, too."

"I can't untangle that sentence without caffeine, Luke."

"I put the coffee on for you." He handed her a mug and turned her towards the coffee maker. "I just meant you were home late. Again."

Lorelai poured herself coffee and held the mug to her chest, breathing in the steam. "I couldn't get away."

"I know." His voice was flat.

"And we spent time together when I got home," she said cautiously.

"Yes, we did," he replied, in the same even, inscrutable tone.

She pouted and sighed, let her shoulders slump. He wasn't going to give anything away, and she was too tired to wheedle with him. "Not that I'm not ecstatic to see you," she began, and he grunted a little.

"I can tell," he said.

"But," she continued, throwing a look at him, "didn't you leave, like, two hours ago?"

"I did," he said. "But I came back."

Lorelai hoisted herself up onto the counter and sipped her coffee. She rested the top of her head against the cabinets and took a deep breath. After a moment, she again drank from her mug, watching Luke over the rim. "I'm glad you did," she said. "C'mere." He eyed her warily but came as commanded. She put her coffee down and cupped his face in her hands, leaned forward and kissed him. "Good morning," she said. He blinked. "I'm on a five minute delay," she said. He smirked and returned to the stove. "Good morning and Happy Halloween," she said. "I almost forgot. I should get the candy out before I go to work."

"Candy?" he groaned. "You know what you're doing giving them candy, don't you?"

"Transforming them into Satan's minions?"

"You're contributing to a national epidemic," he intoned, gesturing with the spatula. "Give them apples! People used to do that all the time, give out apples. And pennies. Apples and pennies."

Lorelai laughed. "Luke, I cannot give the trick-or-treaters apples and pennies. Not only will I be branded the mean lady, trick-or-treaters will never come to my house again."

"That's a bad thing?"

"It's a bad thing," she replied. "And watch that French toast, buddy—I expect quality food in this kitchen, you know." He snorted as he turned over the toast and opened his mouth to speak again, but she continued. "Apples and pennies, really. I'd totally be the mean lady. Or at the very least, I'd be known as Taylor Doose's bitch." She slid off the counter and stood next to him. "And if I'm going to be anyone's bitch, I'd rather be yours."

"That's quite possibly the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me," he drawled. He sighed. "I hate
"That's quite possibly the sweetest thing anyone's ever said to me," he drawled. He sighed. "I hate Halloween."

"Here we go," she said, smothering a smile.

"What? It's a stupid holiday! Giant corporations make millions and millions of dollars on these teeny-tiny candies that are ridiculously overpriced, and, in their individual wrappers, also ridiculously wasteful. Not to mention the cavities, the greed, the gluttony—no wonder childhood obesity is on the rise, we're practically begging kids to stuff their faces with this crap!" he ranted, turning the toast. He pointed the spatula at her again. "Type A diabetes! Fat kids on Oprah, crying and crying and crying! And still we give them candy because, hey, Halloween's fun and it's only one night in the year, and besides that it's tradition and—"

Lorelai swatted the spatula away and kissed him squarely on the mouth. "I love you, you know that?" she said. "But I'm not giving out apples and pennies."

He slid her French toast and a few pieces of bacon he'd been cooking alongside it onto a plate and handed it to her. "You just want to eat the leftovers," he said sullenly.

She grinned and fetched maple syrup and utensils before she sat, waiting patiently at the table while Luke poured himself a bowl of Grape Nuts and a glass of juice. When he was seated across from her, she cut into the toast, focusing intently on her plate. What she was going to ask him to do would be tantamount to red hot needles under his fingernails, she knew, and she hated to do it because she knew that he'd say yes.

"Are you going to be busy tonight?" she asked, her voice over-casual.

Luke paused, the spoon halfway to his mouth. "Why?"

Lorelai shrugged with one shoulder and again hacked viciously at the toast on her plate. She popped a piece of bacon into her mouth and spoke around it, reaching for her coffee cup. "Well, we have that scary corporate party at the inn tonight—why these people want to have a costume party and on a Sunday night when they know they have work the next morning is beyond me, but I'll take the fee anyway—and I don't know how late it's going to go or how long I'm going to have to be there..."

He sighed, and she peeked up at him from beneath her lashes. "Again," he said. He dropped his chin to his chest and closed his eyes, his expression beaten. "And you want me to be here for the trick-or-treaters."

"It's either that or leave the bowl on the porch with one of those 'Take one! Be considerate!' signs, and I really don't want to do that because you know the Banyon boys will just swipe the whole bowl and I'll run out in the first fifteen minutes and I'll be known as the mean lady and—"

"You really don't want to be the mean lady, do you?"

She swallowed the bite of toast in her mouth and looked at him with wide eyes. "Why? Do you?"

He returned her look levelly, shaking his head. "I'll do it." He stirred his cereal. "But you owe me."

"Several times over," she said. "Don't worry," she went on, extending her leg under the table and running one foot up the back of his calf, "I'll make it worth your while. And I give you permission to tell the kiddies to brush their teeth and have their candy x-rayed at the police station, or whatever it is they do when they're looking for glass in the chocolate." She leaned over the table and kissed him again, gently biting his lower lip. "I really appreciate it, Luke. Really and truly."
He'd been gruff and taciturn when she said goodbye to him at the door as he went back to the diner, but he'd put his arms around her when she kissed him and returned the kiss in a way that made her want to restrain him bodily from leaving the house without a very extended trip back to the bedroom first. She'd been forgiven, however grudgingly. She thought of it now, sitting on the stairs, polishing off the last of her candy, her elbows on her knees, and chastised herself. He was far more patient with her than she could ever be with herself, let alone anyone else, and the past weeks had been unfair to him.

There were other things, too—this last week, as they got closer to the end of October, the more anxious he seemed. He both snapped more and was quieter than usual. She could tell he was tense; she wasn't entirely sure it was all her fault. If there were other things, he wasn't telling her, and right now she could only see herself to blame. She rose and brushed her hands on the back of her dress as she descended the stairs.

She maneuvered into position on the couch, kneeling with his legs between hers, and lowered herself onto his chest. When he opened his eyes, they were nose to nose. Lorelai smiled and kissed his chin.

"Having a good sleep?" she whispered.

"I was," he replied. "How did it go?"

She shifted slightly and placed her hands flat on his chest. "It went really well. They'll be back," she said.

"That's good."

"It is good," she echoed. "But I am really, really glad to be home."

"That is also good."

He raised his head a little and kissed her, reaching up with one hand and loosening the clip that held her hair back. Lorelai heard the hitch in her throat as her hair cascaded around them and she felt Luke lightly kneading the small of her back with his fingertips. He shifted them both so she was caught between his body and the back of the couch and he no longer had to support her entire weight. Lorelai put a hand to his cheek and deepened the kiss, fitting her body against his, forgetting that her every joint ached with weariness as her skin flushed with heat and wanting. When Luke broke from her, they were both breathless; she kept her eyes closed, listening to him as he tried to slow his heart.

"What time is it?" he asked, leaning his forehead against hers, pushing a lock of hair off her cheek. She opened her eyes and blinked lazily.

Lorelai didn't answer immediately, just stroked his cheek lightly with her thumb. "A little after one?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?" There was an edge to his voice, a razor-fine sharpness that stung.

"Luke," she said, pulling her hand back. She wriggled, angling for more room. She reached for the hand resting heavily on her hip and held it in the both of hers. "I know, and I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," he sighed. "I didn't mean to be a dick."

"You're not being a dick," she said. She looked him full in the eyes as she squeezed his hand, her own eyes bright. "It's me—I'm—I feel badly and I'm defensive, and..." She trailed off. "Are you
okay with this? This whole ships passing in the night and eating breakfast together thing?"

He cleared his throat. "No," he said frankly, "but there's not a whole lot either one of us can do about it."

"It won't always be like this," she said.

"I know," he replied. "And right now I'll take what I can get."

"Glad to hear it," she said, and teasingly kissed him again.

"You've been in the chocolate," he accused.

She shrugged awkwardly. "I admit nothing," she said. "So. When you say take..."

Luke arched an eyebrow and got to his feet, pulling Lorelai with him. She giggled, laughing harder when he grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her over his shoulder, climbing the stairs. She slapped his ass with both hands, unable to catch her breath as she asked, "Is this trick or treat?"

He didn't answer, just unceremoniously deposited her on the bed and took off his flannel. "I'm guessing treat," she said, still laughing as Luke pulled his tee over his head. "But Luke, I hope that when the kiddies came you were a little less friendly because that could cause some serious problems in the neighborhood."

"Nah," he said, standing above her before he eased himself onto the bed, pulling her to him. "I saved the good stuff for you."

She closed her eyes and tilted her head back as he trailed kisses down her throat. "Way better than apples and pennies," she said.

The first week of the month had almost passed without incident at the inn, which Lorelai thought a nice change. Luke, however, had gone from slightly anxious, snappish, and quiet, to full-out bristly, combative, and silent. She was careful not to let him see her watch him, to speak and tread lightly, at the very least to try and bite back the withering retorts she'd stockpiled to the various and sundry grunting complaints he'd made since the start of November.

She lay awake Friday morning, her hands folded on her stomach as she stared at the ceiling. Luke had gone just before five, as usual. Lorelai had sat up in bed and hugged her knees to her chest, playing with the hem of the sheet. She watched him as he pulled his jeans on over his hips and reached for his shirt.

"You okay?" she asked, sweeping her hair off her face. "You were sort of restless last night, all kicky."

He looked over his shoulder at her. "Sorry if I kept you awake."

She shrugged. "Oh, I'm not worried about me. Rory used to come sleep with me all the time when she was little, and while she's not known for her athletic tendencies in her waking hours, she's quite the soccer player at night." He didn't respond. "You, though, you're more of the dead to the world, sort of sleeper—I have, in fact, been tempted to hold a mirror over your mouth to see if you were still breathing, but the snoring is usually a giveaway. So, I'm just wondering, with the moving around and the sighing and the general, all-around wakefulness, if all is well in Whoville."

He put his hat on and made for the door. "Go back to sleep," he said.

"What?" He spoke harshly. "I'm late."

"You're not late, you're leaving five minutes earlier than usual," she pointed out. He bounced on his feet, his hands jammed in his pockets, not meeting her eye. "Would you come back for a minute?"

His jaw tensed. "I don't have time, Lorelai, for the stop and go game."

"The stop and go game?"

"You tell me to wait, I wait," he said, gesturing with his hands from one side to the other. "You tell me to wait again, I wait. And we do this over and over and over—"

Lorelai frowned, sitting back slightly as though he were standing too close and his voice was too loud, though he remained rooted to his spot in the doorway. "I'm trying to talk to you," she said. "Would you just sit down for a second?"

"I don't have a second."

"Luke, I—"

Luke adjusted his hat and jutted his chin out. "I don't want to talk," he said.

"Would you just—"

"I don't want to talk," he said, biting out the words. "There's nothing to talk about. So stop bugging me about it, go back to sleep, and let me get to work."

Lorelai stared at him blankly for a beat. "Fine," she said coolly. "Forget it. I'll see you later." She dropped her head to her pillow and turned her back to him. He left without a word.

She sighed, now, and rolled herself out of bed. She found a note on the fridge when she went foraging for coffee: "call me." She crumpled the paper in her hand with a sigh. It wasn't until she was sitting in the chair behind her desk in the inn's back office, a cup of coffee steaming at her elbow and an enormous blueberry muffin heavily buttered beside it that she called. As the phone rang, she reached for her day planner.

"Luke's."

"Hey," she said. "You said to call."

"I need to know if you're working tonight," he said.

"Uh-huh," she said vaguely. She hadn't really heard him; she was too busy counting. "Shit," she whispered. "Holy fuck."

"What?"

She lifted her head and stared blankly ahead a moment. "Nothing." She swallowed, tasting bile at the back of her throat. She closed her eyes and took a breath. "I have to go," she said firmly, though her voice sounded thin to her own ears.

"Lorelai," he began, lowering his voice. "About—"

Lorelai pushed her plate away and covered the top of her mug with the palm of her hand, letting the steam warm her skin. "I can't talk to you right now, okay? I have to go," she repeated, though she wanted him to soften his voice, to be kind; she knew he'd give back as good as he got. She felt
shaky, faint.

Luke cleared his throat. "Fine. Go, then. I still need to know if you're working tonight."

"No," she said. She paused, looked to the ceiling as she spoke. "You want me to come for dinner?" She waited, almost holding her breath, giving him the moment to fold.

"I'll have to check my reservation book."

Lorelai snorted. "Okay, then," she said sharply. "I'll see you."

It took her a moment to get her bearings after hanging up, but once the moment was over she went into full-out planning mode, swallowing the muffin and chugging her coffee as she rearranged her schedule for the next two days and made a few phone calls, told Sookie she had to run out for the day on some business for Winky and Emily, and rushed home to change before turning the Jeep towards Hartford and driving as fast as she dared. Her appointment in the city wasn't until four, but there were things she needed that she wouldn't get in Stars Hollow—solitude, distance, privacy, anonymity. She wouldn't be looking over her shoulder in Hartford, knowing that others knew what was going on, that it would get back to him before she had the chance to work through it, figure herself out. Hartford seemed the better option.

She parked outside Neiman's and strode quickly through the store, not seeing any of the things she'd normally stop and linger over, but made straight for the drugstore in the mall proper. She shoved her purchase into her purse as she searched for the restrooms, her cell phone in hand. Without thinking, she dialed.

"You better not be calling to cancel on me again."

_What is it with people this week?_ Lorelai thought, sighing. "Hey, babe. Nice talking to you, too."

"Hi, Mom. Are you? Calling to cancel?"

"I forgot it was Friday, to be honest. Probably, yes, canceling. It's—I have some stuff going on."

"What stuff?"

Lorelai pushed the door to the ladies room open and locked herself in a stall. "Just some stuff." She shook her head as she looked around her. _And again_, she thought. Her eyes burned as she pulled the pharmacy bag from her purse.

"Everything okay? And where are you? You're all tinny."

"Everything's okay. I'm at West Farms."

"The mall?"

"Yeah, I had some things to pick up, it's nothing." She hoped being all tinny masked the tremulousness she heard as she spoke. "I just wanted to hear your voice," she said. "How are you?"

"Good, everything's good. Hey, I'll call Grandpa and back out for the both of us and he can take Grandma out. Marty and I were talking about going to the movies, anyway," Rory said.

Lorelai smiled softly, her eyes filling. "Good. I think that sounds like a plan," she said. "Give me a call tomorrow morning, okay?"
"Sure. You sure everything's okay?"

"I'm sure," Lorelai said. "Later, babe."

She pressed the end button and let herself choke out a frustrated sob before she bit her lips together, shook herself, and stood upright. This was not the place to do this, she knew, brushing angrily at the tears welling over. The thought occurred to her that this was the one time anyone could consider her coffee intake a plus: having to pee all the time really expedited the whole process. She had to laugh, if only a little, as she tugged down her jeans. Her hand shook as she opened the box: her very insides were quaking.

The last time she did this, both tests in the pack had been positive, and she'd done it in the third floor girl's room during fifth period. She'd never before had such a strong reaction to doing well on a test, and she wasn't sure what she was hoping for now as she waited, the tests lined up side by side on top of the toilet paper dispenser. She closed her eyes and waited, thinking. She had the Go-Go's stuck in her head: "head over heels no time to think, feels like the whole world's out of synch..."

"Right, no time to think," she said aloud, startling herself and cringing at the slight echo. She squared her shoulders and reached for the first test.

She bit her lip as the tears began to fall faster. She tried to breathe, but the tightness in her ribcage was too great; she had to lean against the door of the stall for support. She felt lightheaded, suddenly weak. A half-formed thought, not quite close to words, crossed her mind that happiness like this was painful, that she was about to break open.

But in nearly the same instant her hands went cold and clammy. She couldn't be. Could she? She wet her lips and shook her head—she couldn't. It had to be wrong, she'd know otherwise. It was wrong, it couldn't be anything but wrong. She took the second test and tried to focus, slightly startled to realize she had tears in her eyes. She drew a shaky breath, reading the second result.

She'd never before so literally experienced the sensation of her heart sinking in her chest. When she stepped out of the stall and met her reflection in the mirror, what she saw there—a pale, sad face full of uncertainty and disappointment—almost sickened her. She went straight to the food court.

There were three things she didn't want to do in the next few hours: think, stand still, or cry. She ate her cinnamon-sugar pretzel as she walked, sucking down an iced coffee with it so quickly she gave herself a headache. In this situation, she decided, she had one option and one option only. So she shopped.

While Lorelai busied herself wearing out her plastic, Luke stomped around the diner, a scowl on his face. If she was pissed at him, she had every right to be; he'd made an ass of himself this morning and been unkind. One more reason, he thought. Fucking November.

It wasn't that bad things happened in November—rather, nothing good ever seemed to come out of it. It was an unhappy month right down to the weather: this was the time of year that the ground froze and the cold turned sharp and stinging, the leaves were down and everything in and around Stars Hollow was devoid of color save the paper decorations for the succession of holidays to come. Just to get out from under the utter depressing weight of this month, the Christmas season started earlier and earlier every year, and Luke had no doubt that there would come a day when the Christmas wreaths were hung in town the morning after the jack-o-lanterns were disposed of. Under Taylor's vigilant eye, they were trashed November first, each and every year.

Luke sat heavily on a stool in front of the counter and passed a hand over his face. He just hated
November. He didn't sleep well, never had, during this time of year—the nights seemed interminable and when he woke for work the sky was too dark for him to feel that morning itself would ever come. November was a month of disappointments and bad decisions, missed calls and cards, and more beer than was reasonable.

It was this time last year that Nicole walked back into the diner and introduced the idea of dating their way through marriage; at this time, during the bleakest month, his resolve was nearly nonexistent. So he'd agreed. He'd gone along with it, the way he'd gone along with the townhouse and the move, said okay because she'd asked, said okay even though he hadn't been entirely sure, even though there had been some part of him that really didn't care what happened anymore, that felt like he'd given up.

He hadn't really noticed that things with Nicole weren't going well until the yelling started. Before that, he had been so uncomfortable with the whole arrangement he did his best not to pay attention to what was really going on with him, with Nicole, with the both of them together. He hadn't seen he wasn't being exactly fair, and he knew that now—it didn't excuse what happened in the end, nothing could, but he had closed himself off, shut down on her. He couldn't blame Nicole for that. It wasn't her fault: she wasn't Lorelai. Lorelai was the one person he'd never been able to hold back with, though he'd tried, and in the end, she was the one he told his stories to. That was just the way it was, the way it had been. She was, though he'd never really given it much thought, his best friend.

It made him smile a little and helped him rise from his seat, took the sting away from the moment he took his calendar down and belatedly flipped from October to November. The reprieve didn't last long—when Kirk came in for lunch, he immediately asked Luke if this would be the year of Thanksgiving decorations at the diner.

"What makes this year any different from every other one?" Luke asked shortly.

"This year you're with Lorelai," Kirk said, as though this explained everything.

"No decorations," he replied, walking away.

Luke considered calling her cell, but if she really was pissed, he'd have to let her come to him. And when he gave in and did call, the guilt sticking in the back of his throat, he got her voice mail immediately. He hung up; he hated leaving messages. But as mid-afternoon stretched into late afternoon and early evening, he found himself watching the door, waiting. When the dinner rush had nearly ended and he was in the midst of bussing tables, the bell over the door rang and she came in only to hang back by the front window, her arms crossed over her chest. Luke left the dishes on the counter for Caesar and crossed the diner. He put his hands on her shoulders and lowered his head to look her in the eye.

"Hey," he said gently. "You okay?"

She smiled a bit too brightly. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just—can I go upstairs?"

"Sure. You want something to eat?"

She looked at him. "What do you think?"

Luke squeezed her shoulders. "Go on up. I'll be right there."

When he bounded up the stairs, a plate of chicken fingers and chili cheese fries in one hand and a
cup of coffee in the other, Lorelai was sitting on the bed in the dark, her legs folded under her. When he turned on the light and came to sit beside her, he saw her cheeks were wet with tears. She brushed at them hastily with the backs of her hands, a sheepish expression on her face.

She shook her head, and when she spoke, her voice was uneven, gravelly. "I am being so stupid right now, you have no idea."

Luke looked at her, puzzled. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

Lorelai raised her head, turning to look him fully in the eye. She smoothed her jeans and wiped her nose with the heel of her hand. She sighed. "When we were on the phone, this morning? I was going through my date book, and I realized: I'm late."

"Late for what?"

She laughed, a little, a teary, choked laugh, and looked at him. "Late, Luke. Late, late."

His eyes widened and he felt himself turn pale, his jaw go slack. "Oh."

"Yeah," she said. She sighed. "I called the gyno right away and made an appointment, and then I drove into Hartford as soon as the mall was open and bought a home test. Did it right there in the public restrooms." She laughed again, a sound that tore at his heart. "The first test was positive."

"Positive," he echoed. He felt the sensation of warmth spreading through his body, his face flush with heat.

"But the second test," she said. She took his hand in hers, tracing patterns over his skin with her fingertips. "The second test was negative. And I knew, and I should have known before, so it was ridiculous—moronic, idiotic, even, to let myself think for even a second..."

Luke closed his eyes, took a breath, and opened them. "Knew what?"

"I'm not." She bit her lower lip as her eyes filled again. "I'm not."

He swallowed thickly and covered her hands with his own, looking down at their entwined fingers. There was an odd, sinking feeling in his chest, a pain like disappointment. She wasn't, he thought—and immediately he went cold, his head snapped up, and his hands tightened fiercely about hers.

"Is anything—"

"No," she said quickly. "I'm—the doctor took a look and everything's in proper working order down there," she said. "I—I've been so busy lately, I messed up with the pill pack and then forgot about it and if you don't take them the right way it can make your cycle off, so really, it was my fault." She looked at him and loosened one of her hands, reached up and put a hand to his face. Her eyes spilled over as she studied him a moment, silent. "I don't know why I'm so upset," she said, dropping her hand and pushing herself off the bed. "I mean, it's not as though I can't—and we haven't even talked—and I always thought that if—that if this happened—I'd be—oh, I don't know, I'd be—I wouldn't do it like before, things would be different and I'd—or we'd—and it would be different, and I just..."

Luke remained seated, finding it hard to breathe, unsure of his limbs. She trailed off and hugged herself, a rueful, sad smile on her lips.

"For the split second after I saw that positive test, I was really happy," she said. She looked at her feet, shaking her head. "But then—oh, then, the happy part sort of stopped." She swept her hair
out of her face, looked around her unseeingly. "I walked around the mall all day. I didn't know what else to do, so I—I walked and I shopped and I ate and—I guess it's just—it's just the possibility, you know? Thinking about it, thinking about... lots of things." She spoke softly, pacing a few steps. "I know I didn't lose anything, but—"

Luke was on his feet with that, closing the distance between them and putting his arms around her. She leaned into him and pressed her hands against his back. She pushed her cheek to his chest, heaving a sigh. He rested his chin on her head, stroked her hair, tried to think of the right thing to say. But the right thing was elusive, and so he was silent as he had been while she tried to talk it out.

"Just the possibility," she said again. "I'm such an unholy mess, Luke."

He held her more tightly, cradling her head in one hand. "Hey, I love this unholy mess," he said. Her laugh was looser, this time, less aching. He leaned back a step. "You're okay?"

She propped her chin on his chest and smiled up at him, her eyes closed. "Yeah, I guess. I'm okay. It's—it's been a weird, weird day." She paused. "And can I tell you how much I hate going to the gynecologist?"

"I'd really rather you didn't," he said, snorting.

She rolled her eyes and leaned against him a long time, letting him rub her back, listening to the rhythm of his heart.

"Hey," she said, at length. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You okay?"

Luke looked down into her upturned face; the pain in his chest was different, a fluttering, welcome one. "I'm okay."

She got up on tiptoe and kissed him then, a gentle, languid kiss; she reached up with one hand and pulled him closer, tugging at the hair peeking out beneath his hat. He held her to him, lifting her almost off her feet as he did. She broke the kiss and laid her cheek against his.

"Luke?" she whispered.

"Yeah?"

"If my chili fries are cold, will you get me more?"

He pulled back and just brushed his lips against hers. "No."

She insisted that he go downstairs and finish closing up while she ate her dinner, and he reluctantly left her alone. When he returned, he heard the shower running. He took the opportunity to change the sheets on his bed and listen to the nightly news on the TV. The bed made and weighed down with extra blankets, he took off his shoes and socks, his hat, tossed his flannel in the hamper, and pulled his tee shirt over his head. Lorelai, now standing in the doorway of the bathroom, steam billowing behind her, whistled at him and clapped her hands, cat-calling.

He looked over his shoulder at her, fully intending to give her a withering frown. She leaned on the doorframe, wearing an old baseball tee of his with sleeves that covered her hands and a hem that fell to her mid-thigh; her damp hair was piled in a messy knot on the crown of her head, and
she was fresh-faced and rosy from the hot water. Only her eyes gave away the stress of the day, still red-rimmed and slightly puffy. Looking at her, smiling at him with her hands clasped in front of her, he couldn't manage the frown—he winked at her, grinning. "Sassy!" she laughed.

Luke changed into an ancient pair of pajama pants—"plaid flannel, Luke Danes? Shocking!"—and stretched out on the bed, a book in his hand, while Lorelai rooted through his pantry. He didn't protest when he heard her slip out and down the stairs to the empty diner, only shook his head when she returned with a plate of pie in one hand and a half-eaten donut in the other. She sat at the foot of the bed and made herself comfortable. "What are you reading?" she asked.


"Looks like it's seen better days," she said. The book no longer had a front cover, the spine held together with duct tape. "How long have you had it?"

He shrugged. "A while." She cocked an eyebrow. "A really long while. It was my dad's." Lorelai nodded her head, picking at her donut, murmuring softly in response. He sat up. "So. What do you want to do, you want to watch TV?"

"You're reading," she said. "Yes, but it's not really a group activity."

"You don't have to stop just because I'm here," Lorelai said. She began in on the pie. "I don't really feel like doing anything, anyway."

"You're just going to sit here and watch me read," he said flatly. "You could read to me."

"Read to you?"

She giggled. "Yes, Luke, read to me. It'll be like the olden days, before the invention of the television or the radio, when couples used to sit in their rockers by the fire and the women would knit and the men would read the newspaper to them and the coyotes would howl and—"

"There are coyotes?"

"Of course there are coyotes," she said, in a tone that told him this was perfectly obvious. "We're in the days before technology. You should feel right at home."

Luke studied her a moment, his eyebrows lifted in an expression of disbelief. "All right, I'll read to you," he said. He settled himself back on the pillows, one arm folded behind his head. He cleared his throat, at which she snorted laughingly. He ignored her. "On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales," he began. "Summulae what?" she asked, putting the plate on the floor and crawling across the bed.

He sighed. "You want me to read to you or not?" he asked. Lorelai curled up next to him and
He sighed. "You want me to read to you or not?" he asked. Lorelai curled up next to him and placed her head in the hollow of his shoulder; she folded her knees up to her chest under her shirt as she settled in. She angled her neck to look up at him and bit her lips together, her expression purposefully innocent. "Okay then. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, it was Court Hand and Summulae Logicales..."

Later, when they'd turned out the lights and put the book aside, when they lay together under the covers and held each other, Luke played their earlier conversation in his head. She had done all the talking; he had only watched her, listened. There were things he should have said, he thought, necessary things. Lorelai stretched, yawning.

"Hey, love," he whispered. "You awake?"

"I'm awake."

He cleared his throat. "About before," he said, taking her hand, lacing his fingers through hers. "I know we haven't... talked about, you know, certain things. But if—if you want to talk about—about those things? We can—we can do that."

Lorelai tapped her fingers against his hand. "We don't have to," she said, after a moment. "Okay," he said slowly. "But if—"

"Luke," she said gently. "I mean we don't have to. We haven't talked about those things, you're right. But I think—it's okay," she said. "You know?"

He ran his thumb over hers. "I guess, yeah." He took a breath. "I'm sorry about this morning," he said. "This isn't—it's not a good time of year for me."

Lorelai dropped a kiss on his shoulder. "Maybe this year will be different," she said. "You could have told me, you know. You didn't have to be the major domo of assholes."

"I know."

"Just don't go all Archie Bunker on me again."

"I was not Archie Bunker," he said.

She began to giggle. "Ah, geez!" she chortled.

"That," he said flatly, "is a terrible impression."

"Boy, the way Glen Miller played..." she sang.


She laughed so hard she nearly rolled off the bed, and he couldn't help but laugh with her.

They seemed to have struck an unspoken agreement not to discuss the almost-incident. He didn't ask how she was feeling as often as he wanted to, and she didn't ask what was going on in his head when he looked particularly pensive. There were moments it sat between them, the proverbial elephant in the room, moments when they didn't ask each other if this had been a good thing or a bad thing, if it was something worth being confused about, if it was anything at all or just another hurdle in the succession of obstacles they'd already jumped.

_Fucking November_, Luke thought. Any other time of the year, maybe they would have talked about it—maybe they would have gone over all the important things, what it meant, why it meant
what it did, how it changed things, if it he could have battled with her as to why she hadn't told him the moment she thought it was a possibility, and she would have gotten angry and told him she didn't want to get his hopes up or unnecessarily freak him out without knowing anything for sure, and they both would have apologized and at least they'd have talked about it. They could have had a conversation, given the discussion a handle, a name, he thought, but because it was November and they weren't talking about it, the whole almost-incident remained an "it," a nebulous, fraught "it."

He wondered if he was making too much of it; things seemed to be going, at the very least, okay. Lorelai called during the day, attempted to tease him out of whatever foul mood he was in. She came home earlier, had dinner with him each night. He kept waiting for the sinking feeling of foreboding to ease up. He wanted to believe her, that this year might be different, but he wasn't holding his breath. All he wanted, he thought, was for the fucking month to be over.

Liz's card came three days early. She enclosed photographs of her cart, she and TJ standing and mooning around in Renaissance garb, and promised a phone call soon and a real present the next time she saw him. It was an improvement on last year, when the card had been five days late, and the year before, when the card came in October.

The day before the day itself, a small package arrived in the mail, wrapped in brown paper. He carefully cut the tape and folded back the paper to find a used copy of *Empire Falls*. On the inside cover, in Jess's spiky scrawl, he read, "Read this." He turned the book over and read the description on the back cover, grunting as he did. *Very funny,* he thought.

Lorelai breezed in at seven, an overnight bag over her shoulder. She was flushed with cold, smiling broadly. She leaned over the counter. "Feel my face," she commanded. He cupped her cheeks in his hands as he kissed her hello in the deserted diner. Her lips were frigid and he sucked air in over his teeth, hissing slightly at their touch. She laughed in response, raising her eyebrows. "Cold, huh?" She leaned close again to return his kiss. "What's a girl have to do to get service around here?" she asked.

Luke lay awake most of the night, thinking. Last year, he'd spent his birthday with Nicole. She'd given him a card and a watch—the watch he only wore when he went out with her, too fancy for the diner and too cumbersome for real life. The year before that, he'd spent his birthday alone, so thoroughly cleaning the diner that it smelled of lemon antiseptic solution for three days. The times before that he'd already forgotten, written them off as days just like any other. In the past, he'd always hoped she'd say something, hoped that she'd know, though he hadn't told her. He never realized he had been hoping for it until the day went by and he went to bed disappointed that Lorelai hadn't wished him a happy birthday. No one else in town had, either, but he could almost be relieved for that. She never forgot; she just didn't know.

There were a lot of things she'd never known since they time they became friends, all things he'd never told her. The myriad of disappointments he'd had over Lorelai Gilmore, he thought, had been his own doing. Silence had its good points and it had served him well—most of the time. But all the times he felt his heart drop, his throat close with disappointment, however he'd ignored it, had been because he'd been too content to hold his tongue, too used to being overlooked. Pain and loss were things he understood and so he waded through loneliness, holding his shoulders back defiantly.

He turned on his side and studied her as she slept, her arms wrapped around a pillow. He put out a hand and brushed the hair off her face. She murmured something unintelligible and sighed heavily, releasing the pillow and rolling onto her back. He had trained himself over the years not to think about what he didn't have—it could have been a hell of a long list, and there was very little point in expending energy on it. But there had been moments, before, when the gentle tug in
his chest suggested to him there was something better than what he had.

Lorelai snored, inhaling sharply through her nose, making a sound so great she woke herself. Luke choked back a laugh as she peeked over at him to see if he had heard.

"Oh, shut it, Burger Boy," she muttered, rolling back towards him and flinging her arm across his middle. He ran his hand the length of her arm and closed his eyes, her shoulder warm beneath his palm.

She still had her arms firmly about him when he woke at his usual time. He tried to gently pry himself away, but she only tightened her grip. "Don't even think about getting out of this bed," she said, her voice froggy with sleep.

"I have to go to work," he told her.

Lorelai lifted her head and turned her face up to his, her eyes still firmly buttoned shut. "No, you don't."

"Lorelai."

"Luke," she returned. "This is your birthday, and you're sleeping in." He opened his mouth to speak, but she held up a hand in rebuttal. Impressive, he thought, given her eyes were still closed. "There's no use arguing. You're staying right where you are."

"I am, am I?" he asked, smiling.

She yawned and let her head fall back to his chest. "You bet your fucking ass you are. I'm getting my way," she said. "And then I'm going to have my way with you." She paused. "Well, it is your birthday, so I suppose I could let you have your way with me."

"I'm just going to—"

"You're not going to do anything," she said. "Lane and Caesar have the diner covered today. You won't even so much as touch a spatula or any other cooking implement or wait on anyone."

"So you're not planning on eating today?"

"Luke!"

He rubbed her back. "I'm sorry," he said. "Go back to sleep."

She pouted. "Better fucking believe it."

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

"I don't kiss my mother with any mouth," she said. "Are we shutting up now?"

He kissed the top of her head. "Shutting up."

When he woke again, weak shafts of early morning sunshine filtered through the blinds. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked around. He was alone in the bed, Lorelai's pillow bunched up next to him where she should have been. He threw the sheets aside and sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and reaching for a pair of pajama bottoms. After a quick trip to the bathroom, he padded into the kitchen and stopped dead in his tracks. He watched a moment, shaking his head, before stalking up slowly behind her and putting an arm around her waist.
Lorelai turned, startled. She wielded a spatula in one hand, the other hand on her hip. Luke peered over the top of her head to the pan on the stove. She leaned up and kissed his chin.

"Hi," she said. "You managed to sleep until ten after seven, I'm very impressed. Go sit down."

The table was set with the plain white Corningware he'd been using forever, the carton of orange juice beside his plate. He sat and poured himself a glass as Lorelai poked at her concoction. He wondered what he was going to have to choke down smiling. After a moment, she turned around, working her lower lip between her teeth. Her face was still creased and pale with sleep and her hair slightly wild, tumbled about her shoulders; she wore one of his flannels, buttoned, with the sleeves pushed up over her wrists. She shifted on her feet, her expression a mix of disappointment and irritation.

"Okay, so the idea was to make you an omelet, which devolved into scrambled eggs with spinach and feta sort of mixed in, but now the eggs are green, and while I'm sure Dr. Seuss would be delighted by that, I'm thinking it's a little too disgusting to actually serve, plus the spinach itself is no longer green and the cheese is sort of just sitting there in these big lumps, so—"

She waved her hands as she spoke, the sleeves of the shirt loosening and flapping as she did. He sipped his juice, trying to maintain his composure and leave her with the semblance of dignity.

"You want me to make something?" he asked.

Lorelai narrowed her eyes. "No," she retorted. "I'll just go downstairs and order for us, bring it back up." She immediately made for the door.

Luke rose. "You're not going down undressed like that, are you?" he asked.

She stopped, her hand on the doorknob. "I've got my good undies on," she said, lifting the hem of the shirt. "See? Days of the week."

"Today isn't Tuesday, Lorelai."

"But the Tuesday ones are the cutest," she said. Off his look, she rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll call Lane and have her bring something up, okay?" He rose as Lorelai made for the phone, but she altered her path and took his wrist, dragging him behind her as she walked back towards the bed. "Stay there," she said.

He dropped back to the pillows as she spoke to Lane. This, he thought, was certainly a change. He sat up again as she came back, carrying a large wicker basket, draped with cloth, the phone balanced precariously on top. He reached for the phone as she eased her burden onto the bed.

"It'll be a few minutes for the food, so these are going to have to wait," she said.

"What's in there?"

Lorelai tipped her head to one side and smiled. "You'll see."

They ate at the table, Lorelai nearly giddy with excitement as she watched Luke, her eyes alight with anticipation. When she remarked that birthdays were the best, he couldn't help but grunt slightly.

"They are," she said. With that, she took his hand and led him back to the bed. "So, presents. I don't have a card, because I know how you feel about greeting card companies, and I didn't wrap anything because I know how you feel about wrapping paper and trees and conservation and all that beardy-weirdy-hippy-dippy stuff. And I knew if I asked you, you'd say you didn't want
anything, and then you'd say you didn't need anything, so I went ahead and did the best I could." She threw back the swath of fabric that had hidden the presents.

It came out without thinking, before he'd even registered the contents. "You didn't have to get me anything," he said.

She knelt behind him, her arms around his neck, resting her chin on his shoulder. She bumped her forehead lightly against his. "It's not about 'have to,' Luke. Just look at your presents."

The first thing he pulled out was a toaster: it was a basic, four slot toaster, nearly identical to the one he'd been using for years except for being slightly bigger. Lorelai pointed at the box and showed him the slots were slightly wider. "So you can do the bagel and lox thing," she said. "See?"

The rest of the presents were smaller—a wallet, thinner than his current one, very plain and serviceable black leather; a short stack of soft cotton shirts in a variety of colors; a gift certificate to a bait and tackle shop in Woodbury; an apron with the words "Quiche Me Quick!" on the front; several DVDs and CDs.

Luke sorted through the stack of music and movies, his mouth agape. Lorelai pointed at each one. "That one is Jimmy Buffet and all these country music singers, so it was obviously made for you. I have no idea who any of these other people are, but the kid at Best Buy was really, really excited about them and said you just had to have them, too. Country music attracts the weirdos," she said teasingly. "And, just for respectability's sake, The Who, so that people will think you're cool." He remained silent, shaking his head slightly, so she continued her commentary with the movies. "Pretty in Pink, I think, should speak for itself, purely a sentimental choice, and, bonus, on sale. The Hustler seemed like something you'd like, and you can't get The Hustler and not get The Color of Money, so there's that. And, to make it sort of a theme thing with Paul Newman and a little bit of Redford for good measure, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and The Sting."

He opened and closed his mouth several times, staring at the array of presents spread across the bed. He looked at Lorelai, beaming and proud of herself, kneeling beside him in a shirt he'd worn a hundred times before without seeing the blue undertone of the plaid that made her eyes all the more bright in their could see her expression fall a little as she studied his face and found his eyes slightly tearful.

"It's all returnable if you don't like it," she said softly, stacking the presents back into the basket.

Luke shook his head again wordlessly and, placing his hand on the back of her neck, drew her towards him. He kissed her, his other hand finding the small of her back as he pulled her closer until she fell into his lap. He held her to his chest a long time, hoping that kissing her, kissing her this way with his arms tight around her until there was no breath left between them, would tell her what he felt better than he could ever do with words. At length, he rested his forehead against hers, his eyes closed.

"Lorelai, this is too much—you shouldn't—"

Lorelai climbed out of his lap. She held his face between her hands and kissed his eyes. "I have a lot of birthdays to make up for," she said simply. "Hang on."

Luke rubbed his eyes as she scrambled off the bed and put the basket in the corner by the window. He drew a shaky breath and slid across the bed until his back was flat against the wall, his legs straight out in front of him. Lorelai disappeared around the corner a moment and came back bearing a plate with a small cupcake and a single candle in it, already lit. She carefully climbed onto the bed and sat on his lap once more, straddling him.
"Carrot cake, compliments of Sookie," she said. "Make a wish." He glanced at her briefly before he leaned forward and blew out the candle. She put the plate on the bedside table and ran her hands down the outsides of his arms, the expression on her face coy. "So, there's one more present, but you do have to unwrap this one."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

She laced her fingers through his, holding both his hands tightly as she bent and playfully, gently bit his lower lip, her eyes fixed on his.

She smiled. "Me."

Luke remembered, as Lorelai played kisses, light and soft, across his chest, his abdomen, as she teased her nails across his skin, the things she told him that summer night on her lawn, days after the town meeting that had changed everything: *I feel like I'm going to break open all the time... I love you so much, and I feel like I can't hold it all in... With you? I'm enough. I'm more.*

He closed his eyes and gripped one of her hands in his. Maybe, he thought, he could stop waiting for the bad—maybe waiting for the bad was just his fear that he didn't deserve this, that the wellspring of feeling within was more than he should have, more than someone else could have for him. He understood, now, more than he had, what she meant.

After, both spent, Luke held Lorelai close, absently smoothing her hair away from her forehead. She dozed, her head pillowed on his chest. She sighed and murmured something incomprehensible.

"What's that?"

She lifted her head and smiled sleepily, her eyes half closed. "The presents. Good?"

"Good," he said. He put out his hand and cupped her cheek, running his thumb along her lower lip. "I think I like the toaster best."

She leaned into his hand. "Funny," she drawled, closing her eyes. "I'll have to try harder next time, make myself a little more indispensable than an appliance."

"You're pretty indispensable as it is," he said. "One thing."

"Hmm?"

"I don't have a DVD player."

Lorelai sat up, drawing the sheet around her. "I know. But I do. Why, you want to watch something? I thought maybe today we could do something—you've got me all day, whatever you want to do, I'm up for it." She considered this. "So to speak."

Luke's lips twitched as he tried not to laugh. "We don't have to do anything," he said. "Watching movies, that's fine with me."

She furrowed her brow. "But it's your birthday—don't you want to do anything special?"

"I'm going to spend the day with my girl," he said; "that's special enough for me."

He turned his face towards her. The painful, pleasant pressure in his chest, seeing her this way, diffused through his whole body. He ducked his head, pushing his chin to his chest, suddenly embarrassed, overwhelmed. His voice was gruff when he spoke. "I love you back."

They eventually got out of bed and dressed, emerged from the apartment holding hands to the utter amusement of every person in the diner. Luke rolled his eyes and led the way out. The sky was a brittle, dim blue; the air smelled of wood smoke and cold. They walked to Lorelai's house, battling over the thickness (or lack thereof) of Lorelai's coat and the need for a scarf in this type of weather.

"I just wish it would snow, already," Lorelai said. "It's starting to feel like White Christmas around here without the heat wave, just the lack of snow. So really, it doesn't feel like White Christmas at all." She paused. "Snow. Snow. Snow. Snow. Snow! It won't be long before we'll all be there with snoooow," she sang, her voice husky.

"What is that?"

She gasped. "Bing Crosby! How can you not know—"

Luke cut her off, putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close to kiss the crown of her head. "You are all kinds of weird," he said.

At three o'clock, they were part way through their movie marathon and an enormous order of Chinese food. Lorelai sat with her back to the end of the sofa, her feet in Luke's lap. She clacked her chopsticks at him.

"Gimme a piece of that General Tso's," she said.

He handed her the carton and reached for another for himself. "Woodcock is a really unfortunate name," he said. "Worse than Blaine."

"Okay, so thus far the list of forbidden names includes Blaine, Woodcock, Fredo, or anything used in The Lord of the Rings," she said around a mouthful of chicken. "I added that last one, but good to know."

Luke rubbed one of her feet absently. "You just can't have a Fredo in the family," he said.

"Well, you can," Lorelai said, "but really, it's just mean. We kept ours locked in the attic for years until he pulled a Mrs. Rochester and tried to set Emily's bed on fire and then jumped out the window into the neighbor's pool." She shook her head. "Alas, poor Fredo. Never stood a chance against the bottom of an empty below-ground."

Luke chuckled and stretched. He was about to speak when the phone rang. Lorelai lifted her feet from his lap and made to get up, but he stopped her. "I'll get it. I have to use the facilities, anyway," he said.

"Luke, just say you have to take a piss and get it over with," Lorelai said.

He eyed her darkly as he picked the portable from the base. "Hello?"

"Luke? Hey, it's Rory."

"Oh, hey, Rory, how's it going?"

"Pretty well," she said. "You?"
"Pretty well here, too," he replied. "You want me to put your mom on?"

"I was actually calling to say happy birthday to you," Rory said. "So: happy birthday!"

Luke looked at the floor, working his jaw, his free hand on his hip. "Thanks, Rory. Good of you to remember."

"Well, you never forget," she said. "I got something for you, too."

"You didn't—"

"It's in my room," she told him.

Luke glanced at the couch to find Lorelai peering over the back at him, her expression gleeful. He gave her a questioning look and she shrugged, spreading her hands, but the grin on her face gave her away. She got up and followed him to Rory's bedroom; a small box sat on the wide desk he'd built.

"You find it?" Rory asked.

"Yeah," Luke said. "You want me to open it now?" When she answered in the affirmative, he picked up the box and lifted the lid.

Inside, he found a silver keychain, a thin, flat disk engraved with elegant script on either side. He squinted to better read it: "little bit country" on one side, "little bit rock and roll" on the other. He snorted. Behind him, Lorelai giggled.

"Thanks, Rory. It's... very sweet of you," he said.

Lorelai hung on his arm and pointed. "See the key?" she asked. "Now you don't have to break in when you want to fix things that are already broken, therefore cutting your fix-it time in half."

"We should have given you the key about a hundred years ago," Rory chimed in. "But now you have it."

He nodded. "Thanks," he said again. "It's great."

"Good," Rory said. "Well, have fun tonight, it's your birthday and you deserve it. Say hi to Mom for me."

"Take care, Rory." He hung up and leaned against the counter, his expression suspicious. "She says hi. She also says to have fun tonight. What's tonight?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Lorelai asked. "The keychain was all her idea, by the way."

"And the key?"

Her expression was hard to read. "Unanimously approved once motioned for."

They finished the movie and Lorelai reached into the birthday gift basket to produce the worn and beaten *The Once and Future King*. She handed it to Luke, waiting expectantly. He thumbed over the pages and stretched out along the couch, putting his arm out as Lorelai pushed her way in beside him, her head on his chest.

"Where were we?" he asked.

"The wars were finished."
He nodded and began to read. Just when he was beginning to tire from reading aloud, his tongue thick for lack of water, Lorelai sat up. She kissed him lightly and rose, pulling him to his feet.

"Go home," she said. "I'm taking you out, Birthday Boy, so you need to do whatever it is you do when you get all fancied up for going out with the ladies."

"Where are we going?" She shrugged in reply. "You have to tell me where we're going so I know what to wear."

Lorelai grinned. "You're such a girl," she teased. "Upscale casual, how's that for you?" She turned him towards the door and gave him a little push. "Be back at six thirty sharp."

Luke did as he was told, jogging home for a shower and what he thought passed for shaving. He dressed in a black sweater and black pants, taking his leather coat out of the closet for the first time in the season. He spent a few moments transferring the contents of his old wallet to the new and filling his new key ring before leaving. He pulled the truck into the drive a few minutes early and sat, staring at the keychain a moment as it swung from the ignition, before he took his keys in hand and stepped out of the cab of the truck.

Lorelai stuck her head out the window of her bedroom, her hands on the sill. "You're early!" she bellowed. "You know better than that!" He spread his hands, shrugging. "Come in, then, I'll be right down."

He didn't think the door was locked, as he was the last person to leave and he certainly hadn't locked it, but he used the new key, just because he stood in the living room, hands in his pockets, remembering the first time he did this, how Rory let him in and Lorelai thundered down the stairs, yelling, unaware of his presence, the awkward exchanging of compliments. He grinned to himself as he heard Lorelai banging around the bedroom, thinking that some things never changed.

She was slightly breathless when she appeared on the stairs, wearing a red slip of a dress and a black cardigan, her hair loose, falling around her face just so. She tripped her way down the stairs and kissed him hello, immediately reaching to thumb away the trace of gloss she'd left in doing so. He was about to ask where they were going again when the doorbell rang.

"Ah," Lorelai said. "Watts is here."

"Watts?"

He helped her into her coat just before the door, and she smiled. "Watts," she said.

Kirk stood on the porch, looking purposefully somber in a black suit and tie, his shirt painfully white, and a driver's cap on his head. Past him, idling in the drive behind the truck, was a black sedan. Kirk gestured for them to walk towards the car, saying, "this way."

"What the hell is this?" Luke asked under his breath.

"I asked Kirk to play driver for us for the night," Lorelai said. "Like in Some Kind of Wonderful. You know, Watts, Mary Stuart Masterson, best gal pal to Eric Stoltz helps him woo another girl, drives them around on a dream date. Kirk is our Watts. Except that the evening, hopefully, won't end with you chucking me for him and the two of you making out in the street."

Kirk hurried to open the door for them and wished Luke a happy birthday just as Luke ducked into the car, his tone funereal and serious. Kirk closed the door behind them both and got into the front seat, grinding the ignition as he went to start the already running car. He apologized profusely as he backed out of the driveway and began to drive.
"We're going to Hartford?" Luke asked.

Lorelai looked at him, her eyes wide. "What, you think I'm going to take you to the diner and then we'll go to the movie at the library?" she asked.

A slow smile spread across his face. "We're going to Trumbull Kitchen," he said.

Lorelai nodded. "We're going to Trumbull Kitchen."

Kirk dropped them off in front of the restaurant, confirming with Lorelai that she had his cell number and would call him twenty minutes before they wanted to leave so that he could come back from wherever he'd be driving in circles and pick them up. The restaurant was warm and dim when they stepped inside, busy but not overcrowded. Lorelai stepped towards the hostess.

"I have a reservation for two under the name Luke Gilmore?" she said.

The hostess looked down. "It should be just a few moments, they're clearing the table right now," she said. "Would you like to sit at the bar, have someone come over when the table's ready?"

As they walked to the bar, Luke's hand at the small of Lorelai's back, he leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Luke Gilmore?"

She laughed. "Luke is easier than Lorelai," she said.

"Got that right," he muttered agreeably.

Lorelai leaned over the bar, trying to get the bartender's attention. "I thought it was funny," she said. "What do you want?"

"Whatever you're having," he said. "Nothing fruity."


He shook his head and put his arm about her waist, drawing her to him. She fit easily into the curve of his arm, leaning against him slightly, her hands on his chest. He bent his head to speak and Lorelai suddenly balled her hands into fists, gripping his sweater tightly. He furrowed his brow. "What?"

"Nicole," she whispered, her lips barely moving. "Shit. She saw me. She's coming over."

"What?" he asked, when he heard a voice behind him.

"Lorelai, hi."

Her hair was darker, and if possible, she was thinner now than she'd been the last time he'd seen her. The look on her face didn't change when she saw him, though she immediately reached for the man beside her, looping her arm in his.

"Luke," she said. "Nice to see you."

"Hey, Nicole," he said.
Nicole looked up at the man standing beside her. "Mark Richardson, Lorelai Gilmore—her father's a business associate of mine. And this is Luke Danes," she said. "An old friend."

The man had been staring hard at Luke since he first turned around, and realization seemed to strike him as Nicole spoke. His face broke into a wide grin and he put out his hand. "Butch," he said. "I knew I recognized you!"

Involuntarily, Luke shook the proffered hand. "I'm sorry, I don't—"

"Butch Danes!" the other man cried. He pumped Luke's hand up and down vigorously, a toothy smile on his face. "Man, it's been forever." He turned to Nicole. "Butch and I pledged the same frat together back at Trinity."

Nicole looked at Luke, her expression disbelieving. "You went to Trinity?"

Lorelai covered her mouth with her hand, trying not to laugh and failing miserably. "You were in a fraternity?"

Luke looked at Mark, his eyes narrowed as he thought back. "Tricky?" he asked.

"Hey, he remembers!" Mark exclaimed. "That's me, I'm Tricky." Again, he looked at Nicole. "This is unbelievable. Butch and I were housemates our junior year—well, housemates if you could call it that, the guy never slept in the house more than two or three nights a week, always heading home for—where, again?"


"Stars Hollow, right," Mark said. "This man was a master with the keg," he continued. "And kicked some serious ass at midnight baseball."

Lorelai snorted. "Oh, I'm sure. This man got his degree in beer, baseball, and econ."

"Lorelai, I hear wonderful things about the inn from your father," Nicole said abruptly. "He says it's just fabulous."

"Oh, I'm sure those were his very words," Lorelai said, tipping her head to one side. "He's biased, but thank you. Though I'd like to say I did it all on my own, I did have a lot of help."

"I'm sure you did," Nicole said. She looked to her date. "Lorelai owns an inn."

"Impressive," he said. "And you, Butch, what about you?" He paused. "Goddamn, Butch, is it good to see you. You were the Friday Late Night king, those last two years."

Luke smiled tightly. "Wish I could say I remember that," he said, and Mark laughed. "I own a diner back home. You—you were, what? Political science? What are you doing now?"

"Lawyering, like Nicole here," he said. He shook his head, his hands on his hips. "God, has it been forever."


Mark was about to reminisce his way through an awkward silence when the hostess approached. "Gilmore, party of two?"

"That's us," Lorelai said brightly. She slipped her hand in Luke's and drew him away from the
bar, taking her martini in the other hand. "Order the chocolate cake," she said to the other couple, "it's fabulous."

"Hey, Butch, so good to see you," Mark said. "You should come to the next reunion."

"Yeah, I'll try and do that," he replied, following Lorelai's lead. He glanced at Nicole and just barely nodded his head. "Take care," he said.

Nicole watched them go, calling Luke's name just as they were about to turn the corner away from the bar. "Happy birthday," she said.

Lorelai squeezed his hand as they followed the hostess to a table near the back of the restaurant and sat down. Lorelai folded her hands on the tabletop and fastened her eyes on Luke, waiting.

"I'm fine," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

She tucked her hair behind her ear and opened her menu. "Okay," she said. "Order anything and everything you want—tonight's dinner is on my dad." Off his look, she shrugged and sipped her drink. "I told him it was your birthday, he wanted to do something nice, so he told me to pick a restaurant and he'd take care of the bill. Which means it's a three martini night for Lorelai." She perused the menu a moment before peeking up at him through her lashes. "Friday Late Night king, huh? Master with the keg?"

He glowered at her beneath lowered brows. "We're going to start with this, now, huh?"

"I just find it fascinating, Luke Danes in a fraternity. It's so unlike you," she said. "The whole nature of a fraternity is community and brotherhood and male bonding and back slapping and grunting—well, I'll give you the grunting, but the keggers and theme parties and—"

Luke shut his menu with a snap. "I pledged when I was a sophomore because it was a way to free beer, okay?"

"Didn't have anything to do with the hot coed action?" Lorelai asked, her voice wheedling.

"Ah, geez," he groaned.

They ordered and Lorelai attacked the bread basket with gusto, pausing only when she realized that Luke wasn't eating. She swallowed thickly and wiped her hands on her napkin. "Talk to me," she said. "You're all silent with the thoughtful face."

He shook his head. "It's nothing." She waited. "I just hate that Tricky guy. He was an ass when I knew him at school, he's probably still an ass."

"Luke," Lorelai said gently. "Do you want to go? We can go, if it's going—"

Luke hitched his chair closer to Lorelai's, cupping her knee with his hand. "I don't want to go. She's not my business anymore," he said. "It shouldn't matter who she's here with."

"It's okay if it does."

"No, it's not," he said. "I'm here with you. I could give two shits about anything else."

"How eloquent," Lorelai said. She leaned close and kissed him lightly. "So, I want to know more
about this fraternity thing. Are we talking, like, *Animal House*-type fraternity? Were you Bluto? Or, or, are we talking more like *Dead Poet's Society*, underground secret meetings and poetry and unintentional homoeroticism? Did you have a secret handshake?"

She was halfway through her second martini when she began to study him again. He could see her working on the question, dipping her finger in the fondue and crumbling breadsticks on her plate. He cleared his throat. "What?"

"Can I tell you something terrible?" she asked. "About before?" Luke sighed and closed his eyes, nodded his head. "When she asked me about the inn, I really, really wanted to say something about how involved you were in getting it going—say something really catty like, 'Couldn't have done it without this one here.'" She took a swig of her drink. "I didn't because I knew you'd turn three shades of red and your head would probably pop off for a whole multitude of reasons, and I like your head right where it is." She considered it a moment. "Even if she'd been anyone else, I probably wouldn't have said it anyway, as much as I'd want to. You're all Boo Radley about things like that."

"I'm not Boo Radley," he said.

"You're a little Boo Radley."

"If you start calling me Boo, I'll—"

"You'll love it, is what you'll do," she said. "More drinks."

The evening turned out to be a four martini night for Lorelai, a three martini night for Luke. They passed on dessert and called Kirk. While they waited, Lorelai asked Luke what he wanted to do next.

"What are my options?"

"Whatever you want," she said. "We could go to a movie, go *clubbing*"—she laughed at this, snorting—"go bowling."

"Bowling? And where would we go bowling?"

"The twenty-four hour Bowl-o-rama."

"Where is there a twenty-four hour Bowl-o-rama?"

"On the Berlin Turnpike," she said.

"There is not."

"Is too," she said, and they continued to battle over it until Kirk pulled up to the curb and got out of the car to open the door for them. "Watts, tell Luke about the twenty-four hour Bowl-o-rama on the Berlin Turnpike."

"If you go at three in the morning you get your pick of the lanes. You can even use two at once."

"See?" she said triumphantly.

"Well, I don't want to go bowling," Luke said. "I just want to go home."

"You heard the man, Watts!" Lorelai said. "Home!"
He didn't notice where they were going on the ride back to Stars Hollow, so busy was he watching Lorelai as she regaled him with a story about an ill-fated bowling expedition she and Rory took when Rory was five; she was curled in the opposite corner of the backseat, her shoes on the floor and her feet tucked up under her, her head tipped back against the seat and her eyes closed. She opened one eye and looked at him, suddenly silent.

"And that's the end of the story," she said. "You weren't listening at all, were you?"

"Nope," he said, grinning.

It wasn't until the car pulled to a stop that Luke realized they had ended up somewhere other than home—either his or Lorelai's—and he sat up, confused. Lorelai slid across the seat towards him and pushed him out the door Kirk held open, putting her hands out to him. He glanced about as he helped her out of the car and she struggled to her feet.

"What are we doing at the Dragonfly?" he asked.

Lorelai took him by the hand and led him down a gravel path, waving to Kirk over her shoulder. "Thanks, Watts!"

"Where are we going?"

"Nowhere."

"Well, good." He paused. "How much did you have to pay Kirk for the chauffeur service?"

"A free dinner of his choosing with Lulu at the inn," Lorelai said, coming to a halt outside a squat, dimly lit building. "You, sir, are currently standing at the threshold of the Luke Danes Vacationer's Getaway Bungalow."

"Excuse me?"

Lorelai took a key from her purse and unlocked the door, ducking inside. "It was Rory's idea," she said. "This used to be a cold house or a pump house or a storage house or something that ends in house when the whole place was originally a farm. We were talking about it one day, that I hated to waste the space, and Rory reminded me of the tool shed we lived in when I first came to Stars Hollow, so we started to renovate in the early fall." She gave Luke's hand a tug. "We had to dip into the money we're using to pay you back, so we're naming it in your honor. Come in already."

It was a low-ceilinged, small square room. The furniture was spare—a queen-sized bed with small tables on either side, an armchair in one corner, a tiny tea table with matching chairs in the other. He could see where they'd partitioned off part of the building for the bathroom just beyond. Lorelai turned on the lights, and he blinked, adjusting to the sudden warm brightness. The décor was subdued, navy blues with pale blue accents. She dropped on the bed, toeing her shoes off with difficulty.

"Oof," she said. "I think I might have maybe had too much to drink, before."

"I think you might have maybe too," he said, coming to sit beside her. "I think maybe I might have maybe had too much, myself."

"You? Master of the keg?" she giggled. She kneeled behind him, putting her arms around his neck as she rested her cheek against his, her chin on his shoulder. "What do you think? Worthy of the Danes name?"

"I can't believe you did all this and I didn't know," he said. "And more than worthy."
"Good. Otherwise, we'd have to knock the whole thing down and start over and that would just
be a tragical waste of money and labor." She clambered off the bed and made for the small table in
the corner. "Come here."

He obliged and looked down as he stood beside her. There on the table was a tiny layer cake and
a set of dessert dishes and silverware. Lorelai unsteadily lit two candles as she spoke.

"Now, fantabulous as the cake at Trumbull Kitchen is, this is a Sookie St. James special, and
therefore one of a kind and unique," she said. "And redundant, also. It was made specially for you
on your birthday, so after you blow out the candles you're going to help me eat the whole thing."

"What's the logic of the two candles?" he asked.

"Well, thirty-eight is too many, so three plus eight is eleven, which is still too many, so one plus
one is on, make a wish and blow them out."

"I already made a wish this morning."

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "Make another one, then."

She served them and they ate facing each other on the bed, their knees touching. Luke worried
over the bedspread, but Lorelai waved the concern away saying that she had a fabulous dry
cleaner who could handle anything and if there was a room that could stand a little roughing up, it
was the Luke Danes Vacationer's Getaway Bungalow. She told him clean clothes for tomorrow
were waiting for him in a bag in the closet and there was a toothbrush for him in the bathroom. He
decided not to ask about the former as he cut into his cake.

"Black forest cake," he said, looking up at Lorelai. "I actually like this."

She nodded. "Well, it's the only remotely sweet thing I've ever seen you eat in the history of our
acquaintance—" He grunted at the use of this word. "—so I thought, what the hey."

They finished the cake together, Lorelai helping Luke by feeding herself from his plate. She sent
him for his turn in the bathroom first, and when he emerged, she was leaning against the
doorframe in a short, satiny robe. She leaned up and kissed the edge of his jaw, telling him she'd
be right out. Luke pulled back the covers on the bed and stretched out, his hands folded behind his
head. The room, he thought, was just what he would have wanted: no frills, no flowers, no knick
knacks. He smiled lazily at Lorelai as she came out of the bathroom, her face scrubbed clean of
make up, her eyes heavy-lidded with liquor. The pajamas were fancier than she usually wore with
him—a periwinkle camisole of satin and lace. She turned off the bathroom light and padded over
to the bed, where she crawled up beside him and rested her head on his abdomen.

She sighed, closing her eyes as Luke combed his fingers through hair, stroked her head. "Hey,"
she said softly. "Was it weird for you? Seeing Nicole?"


Lorelai played with the hem of his boxers. "Did you love her?"

"Lorelai."

She lifted her head, propping her chin on his stomach. "I'm just trying to understand," she said.
Her words were slow, deliberate.

"I don't really want to talk about this," he began.
"I mean, Rachel, I got," she continued. "She made more sense—she was all natural and easy-going and wholesome and low hot, too. I mean, I don't swing that way, but if anyone could even tempt me into switching teams—"

"And I just went to a very interesting visual place," Luke said.

"Oh, don't get too excited. She just—I get that. Nicole, I don't get. She's not—she's the complete opposite of Rachel, she's so buttoned up and waspy..."

Luke rubbed his eyes. "She was a good person," he said.

"So did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Love her," Lorelai said. "Did you?"

He averted his eyes a moment. "Did you love Max?"

She dropped her head again, pressing her lips to his stomach. "Point taken." She placed her hand heavily on his thigh. "I guess we don't make much sense, either. If you didn't know," she added.

"If you didn't know," he echoed.

Lorelai pushed herself up and sat astride him. She shook her hair and attempted seriousness. "Okay, Luke. Tell me something, in all honesty."

"Tell you what?"

She took a breath. "Am I better in bed than Nicole?"

"Lorelai!"

"Oh, come on!" she whined.

"That is not something you talk about!"

She arched an eyebrow. "I'll tell you."

"You'll tell me what?"

She placed her hands on his chest and leaned forward, her hair falling around her face, just brushing his cheeks. "Every time I'm with you? That's the best sex I've ever had."

"Every time?" he asked, teasing his fingers under the hem of her camisole.

"Well, except for that one time."

"Which time?"

She smirked. "Joking. So, tell me." She sat back and shifted her weight in a way that made it difficult for him to concentrate.

Luke sat up quickly and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against him. She gasped sharply, her eyes shining. "Let's just say Rachel should be so lucky," he said, his voice hoarse.

"So not an answer," she told him, rolling her eyes. "Okay. All the women you've ever slept with
on an island, engaged in a game of sexual Survivor, and it's up to you to choose the last woman standing. Who's it going to be?"

"What do you think?" he asked, tightening his hold on her.

"I think I want you to tell me," she said.

Luke kissed her then with the overflow of feeling he’d experienced all day, with his eyes closed, with his hand flat on her back and her body fitted perfectly to his. Lorelai didn't open her eyes when he broke the kiss, her breathing ragged. He put his mouth to her ear.

"Being with you?" he said. "I can't remember being with anyone else."

Lorelai shifted her weight again and he leaned back, pulling her down to the pillows. She wasn't quite prepared for this, and as they fell, her forehead knocked against his. Lorelai yelped and released him, putting a hand to her temple. They lay beside each other a moment, tangled up in each other, her legs still around his waist, his hands still on her back. He chuckled and rolled over, propping himself up on his forearms to hover just above her. She smiled ruefully at him.

"That hurt," she whimpered.

He kissed her forehead and mumbled an apology against her skin. Lorelai placed her hands on his chest and pushed at him slightly, raising herself on her elbows as he sat up. She watched him, a slightly still drunken hitch to her laugh, as he fumbled with the bottom of her camisole. The giggle ceased as he worked it up over her hips and slid it up her chest and over her head. He lowered his head, brushing kisses along her collarbone. She turned her head, her eyes closed, and let her hands rest on the back of his arms. When things had reached a rather fevered pitch, Lorelai suddenly laid her hand against Luke's cheek and murmured his name.


He paused, tried to focus. Her eyes were fixed on him, her lids heavy, her face flushed. He pressed his cheek into her hand.

"Wait?" he asked.

"I want to tell you something."

"Now?"

"Do you remember our first time together?" she asked, shifting slightly.

Luke swallowed, closed his eyes as he tried to reign himself in, as he sought coherent thought. "Yes."

"You promised me something," she said, again adjusting her position.

He held his breath. "I did."

She ran her thumb over his cheekbone. "Look at me." He opened his eyes. "I want to promise, too."

"Lorelai," he began, but she cut him off, shaking her head.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said. "I promise."

With that, she kissed him, repeating her words, her mouth against his. She closed her eyes and
tipped her head back, deepening the kiss. She tasted sweet, he thought, like always.

Luke couldn't tell how much time had passed when Lorelai draped herself across him after, murmuring against his chest.

"Luke?"
"Hmm?"
"I'm sorry."
"What for, love?"
"All the birthdays before."

He squeezed her shoulder. "I know."

"So, I win Survivor."

"The tribe has spoken," he said. "You win."

"Excellent. And Luke?"
"Yeah?"

"Next year, let's go bowling."

He ran his fingers along her spine. "We'll negotiate."

"We will," she said. "But I always win."

"You do, huh?"
"Yep."

They fell silent.

"Thanks for today," he said, after a time. "Today was good."

"Good."

He cleared his throat. "I love you, you know that."

"I do. I love you, too."

When Luke woke the next morning, more rested than he'd felt since the month began, the plan was already fully formed. He called Jess and made arrangements, figured out Lorelai's work schedule and picked a day, asked Lane and Caesar to take over for him, and got Rory's cell phone number. He had his keys in hand, on his way out the diner, when he stopped to speak to Lane and the plan went awry.

"So, I don't know—probably won't be back until after dinner, but—"

dinner?"

He stuttered a moment, his hands on his hat. "Going down to see Jess," he said. "Just for the day."

"New York, really?" she said. "Want some company?"

His mouth fell open. "You're working today."

"I switched with Michel for Sunday so he could have brunch with his mother," she said slowly, perplexed. "I won't infringe on your, you know, whatever time with Jess—you do your thing and I'll shop. I have some things I've been wanting to do in the city..." She trailed off, seeing the look on his face. "Never mind. It's—I can go some other time, take Rory in for the day."

"No," he said. "It's—you and Jess, I—" He stuttered, seeking an excuse, any excuse. "I don't—and it's—you know, with Jess and—"

"Jess and I have an understanding," she said. "If that's what you're worried about, I can promise you to be on my best behavior."

"You're not the one I'm worried about," he muttered. He passed a hand over his face, shaking his head. He should have known something would happen. _Fucking November_, he thought. He didn't know how to say no, not to this. He looked at her, sipping her coffee, waiting for him to speak. After a moment of hesitation and with no other pleasant alternative offering itself up, he asked, "You ready to go now?"

"If there's a Danish in a to-go bag, absolutely."

The drive wasn't long; traffic was light. Lorelai walked Luke through the Thanksgiving plans at the inn—they had guests, but none dining there, and so she and Sookie were planning a modest dinner for their immediate families. "Let's just pray my mother decides that'll be the day she tries tranquilizers."

Luke followed the directions Jess had given him to a large, ramshackle building with a sign over the door, paint on wood, reading "Bibliophiles."

"Apt," Lorelai said.

He was on the third floor, sitting atop a ladder, reading a paperback, his chin tucked to his chest. There were few people in the store, milling about in different areas, but none where Jess had chosen his perch. He raised his head at Luke's call, his expression still when he saw his uncle and Lorelai both. He climbed down the ladder and put out a hand to Luke.

"Hey," he greeted him. "Lorelai."

"Hi, Jess," she said. "How are you?"


"Oh, I'm just tagging along for the ride," she said. "I'm going to go do some damage to the company credit card, let you two do your thing." She looked at Luke. "I'll meet you at the truck at what, three? Four?"

"Three's good," he said.

She nodded to Jess. "Good to see you."
"Nice seeing you, Lorelai."

She squeezed Luke's hand and made her way out, weaving between customers as she descended the stairs. Jess looked quizzically at his uncle and tapped him on the shoulder with the edge of the book he still held.

"She know?"

Luke shook his head. "She ambushed me," he said. "I didn't know what else to do. I panicked." He stood with his hands on his hips and looked around. "So this is where you work."

"This is where I work."

They were silent a moment. "You doing okay?" Luke asked.

"Like I told you the last time I talked to you, approximately a day and a half ago, yes, I'm doing okay." He shoved the book in his back pocket. "But thanks for asking. C'mon, let's get this over with." Jess spoke to a few people on his way out, said he'd be back later, and led Luke outside, both striding purposefully down a side street. "I'm not helping you pick anything out," Jess said. "I'm just the tour guide."


Jess shrugged. After another moment of silence, he rubbed his chin and spoke. "She's going to say yes."

"How do you know?"

"I know." Jess said. "I know because I know." He ducked his head and fixed his eyes on the pavement. "She basically told me."

"When did you talk about this?" Luke asked, panic rising in his throat.

"Not specifically," Jess said. "Just—I know. She made you a promise. She's going to say yes."

Luke thought about this and smiled slightly. "She did promise," he said, more to himself than Jess. "Huh."

"I told you."

He looked at his nephew from the corner of his eye. "You did," he said. "So did she."

They found the shop with little difficulty. Jess hung back in the door while Luke went through the merchandise. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, only that when he saw it, he'd know that it was the one. After an hour and a half of huffing and groaning, rubbing his eyes, pacing between display cases, and scratching his head, he found it in the corner by the door.

"Whatta ya think?" he asked Jess.
Jess looked at him. "I'm not help—"

"Would you just look at the damned thing?"

He leaned over the case and nodded once. "That's Lorelai, all right."

The two Danes men spent the rest of the afternoon walking around, eating hotdogs and talking occasionally, until three o'clock rolled around and Luke found himself leaning against his truck, waiting. Jess stood with him, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, rocking on his heels. Lorelai teetered towards them fifteen minutes later, laden with bags. Jess immediately went to help her, taking an armful from her. She turned wide eyes on Luke and raised her brows.

After loading things into the cab and goodbyes and parting shots, Luke turned the truck towards home. Lorelai stretched, yawning.

"Seriously, they should make shopping an Olympic sport. I would kick some ass at Olympic shopping—I'd be the poster girl, I could retire after my huge win and live off the endorsement deals for the rest of my life." She closed her eyes. "So what did you two do all day?"


"I hear that's a popular activity in New York these days," Lorelai said archly. "Hey, what do you say to a detour into New Haven for an hour or two? I haven't had Rory to myself—so to speak—in a while. I'd love to pop—"

"Sure," he interrupted. "New Haven."

Lorelai's smile was both amused and questioning. "You're all weird today. Someone put arsenic in your hat?"

"What?"

"King George—never mind. I'll call her."

Rory was waiting for them outside her dorm, hugging her coat about her. She pointed them towards a coffee shop nearby; she and Lorelai walked before Luke, leaning against each other, arm-in-arm. Luke had to keep himself from walking too quickly, from bouncing on his toes—he felt jittery with anticipation, his hands didn't order anything with the Lorelais, afraid he'd spill all over himself. He sat at a table by a window as they waited on their coffees and carried them over. Lorelai placed hers on the tabletop and paused, her hand on the back of her chair.

"I have to go to the ladies'," she said. "Rory?"

"I'm good," Rory said, wincing as she sipped her coffee.

"Be right back."

Luke leaned forward, his hands folded and his elbows on his knees. "So," he said.

"How's the diner?" Rory asked. "The coffee here? Not as good as yours."

"Thanks," he said. "Diner's good." He stared at her blankly a moment. His throat hurt, the pressure of his pulse was so great. He reached into his pocket and removed the purchase he'd made earlier, sliding it across the table to Rory.

She looked down at it and back up at Luke, her mouth hanging open. "No," she said,
disbelieving. She grinned broadly. "No!" She fairly jumped out of her chair and threw her arms around Luke, who awkwardly returned the embrace. "Really? Like, really, really?"

"Really," he said. "That okay with you?"

Her smile was tearful as she sat back down. "That's more than okay with me. Can I?" she asked, gesturing. He nodded and Rory opened the small box. She took a breath. "Luke, this is perfect." She handed it to him and gestured for him to put it away. "She's a fast pee-er," she said. She bit her lower lip. "This is a really, really, really good thing."

Luke felt some of the tension drain from his shoulders, the constriction in his throat lessen as he put the box back in his pocket. "Yeah?"

"A really, really, really good thing," she said again. "When?"

He saw Lorelai emerging from the restrooms, stalking across the shop. She paused to peruse the pastries on the counter, and he spoke to Rory from the side of his mouth. "Not sure. Sometime soon."

Lorelai dropped into her seat, tucking her hair behind her ears. "Substandard crullers," she said. "What's up?"

Rory's game face, Luke thought, was terrible. She bit back a smile and shook her head mutely. Lorelai looked from her daughter to Luke, bewildered. He shrugged in reply, his lips pursed tightly together.

"I feel like those people on *What Not to Wear* right before Stacey and Clinton show up with the camera crew and ambush them," Lorelai said. "Something going on I should know about, you two? What's with all the beaminess and the barely suppressed glee? Did they finally make you the queen of Yale?"

Rory shook her head. "I'm just in a really good mood," she said. "Happy to see you."

Lorelai grinned. "Oh, babe, I'm happy to see you, too. So, my dear heart, tell me: how's Marty? And when are you finally going to admit that he's your boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend."

Rory rolled her eyes and Luke let himself breathe a sigh of relief. He sat back in his seat and listened to the Lorelais as they chattered on until their coffee cups were empty, several times over.

The rest of the month did not, as Luke expected, plod slowly by, but went at its own reasonable pace, each day a little colder than the last. The sky was a hard gray arched above Stars Hollow; the town still waited patiently for snow. Lorelai lamented she couldn't smell it, the wind wasn't right, the cold was too cold. Luke stared at his calendar each day, tabulating how long he'd have to wait, how many days, how many hours, how many minutes, before he could turn the page and be done with it, let Fucking November end.

Thanksgiving was a noisy, boisterous affair with Sookie, Jackson, and the baby, Rory and Lorelai, the grandparents, Lane and her band mates and Mrs. Kim, and Luke, bristling that Sookie wouldn't let him carve the turkey. After the meal, Luke and Lorelai returned to her house in the falling dark, Rory and her grandparents trailing behind. It was late when Richard and Emily left for their separate abodes. Luke jogged up the stairs and turned on the taps in the shower, tugging at his tie.

He had only just stepped under the water when he heard the door open and immediately shut
again. He jumped with a yell when Lorelai’s face appeared around the edge of the shower curtain. She grinned.

"Can I come in?"

He stared. "What about Rory?"

"Don't ever, ever say that to me while you're naked again," Lorelai said, closing her eyes. "She went over to Lane's. Now. Move over, I'm coming." She stepped into the tub and immediately stuck her head under the water, soaking her hair. She squinted at him. "Well, you don't have to stop just because I'm here," she said, stepping aside to share the water. "Carry on. This isn't a sexy shower."

Luke reached around her for a bottle of shampoo and poured a generous amount in his hand. "Turn around," he said. Obediently, she did, and he began to wash her hair, his fingertips rough against her scalp. She leaned her head into his hands.

"God, you do that so good," she said. "You have the best hands. Ever."

He grinned. "So, that a typical Gilmore family holiday?" he asked. "This is what I'm in for?"

She swiped at the soap falling in her eyes. "No, that was nowhere near a typical family holiday. Way more people, way more food, way more talk, and laughter, which is new, and general, all-around good cheer. Not a Gilmore family holiday at all. Mom did get a few of her digs in, but overall, that was the most pleasant Thanksgiving I've ever spent with them. Much more Norman Rockwell with the Chinese food than, like, Ordinary People. And they seemed to be enjoying themselves." She paused. "Mom and Mrs. Kim really got along."

"So, is that a good thing, then? The whole new holiday celebration?" he asked, pulling her back slightly to rinse the shampoo out of her hair.

She angled her head and looked up at him. "I think it's a really good thing. Maybe next year, Liz and TJ and... everyone... can come."

"Maybe," he said. He put his arm about her, drawing her in, her back flush against his chest. He rested his chin on her hair. "Maybe."

Luke found, in the next few days, he wasn't quite holding his breath anymore. He waited, still, for the month to end, for December to announce itself and flounce into town wearing the white shawl of early winter snow. He looked forward to the first, as he always did, but not with the grim determination to simply survive, to get through the month without breaking anything, killing anyone, setting fire to any buildings, or throwing rocks through Taylor Doose's front store windows. In the last days, when the holiday had passed and preparations for the next were fully in swing, he looked over the month gone by, thought of what he'd gained, what he'd learned.

He lay beside Lorelai, her face slack with sleep and a curl falling over her forehead. "Maybe this year will be different," she had said. Damned, if she hadn't been right. He rolled onto his side, pushed the errant lock of hair away, and put his arm around her, settling closer to her as she slept. He just touched his lips to her hair and closed his eyes.

It was something else she had said, another thing she'd gotten right: this, he thought, was better.
Emily couldn't stop the planning. She would have called the printers about the invitations by today. Tomorrow, she would have overseen the unpacking of the decorations; she would have remembered, halfway through the organization of the ornaments, to call the caterer. She would have had lists by now—lists of gifts, of people to send Christmas cards, of functions, of charitable donations...

She would have bought a new dress. She would have made sure Richard had a new suit. There would be candles in the windows and a wreath on the door. The holiday china would sit on the sideboard in the dining room, and the house would smell of ginger...

When she met with Tom at the work site, he'd told her there was no need for her to spend the day—it was cold, he said, and they were only doing construction, and he had her cell number if he needed her. She should go, he said, enjoy the sunshine, however cold the day. She walked to her car, clutching her purse, her face set in a frown. There were no meetings, no people to meet, no phone calls to be made. But the planning continued in spite of this.

The thought of returning to the apartment was unappealing at best. Gypsy had developed an annoying habit of singing Beach Boy songs while she worked, and her nasal, tone deaf crooning echoed beneath the floorboards of Emily's room. During the day the place always smelled of exhaust and grease, and Emily had avoided spending time there during the daylight hours as much as possible. As she turned her car toward the road, she sighed. She might as well go, she thought; she'd be as welcome there as anywhere else.

Michel was on the phone when she entered. He immediately put the potential guest on hold and exchanged air kisses with Emily before directing her to Lorelai's office. Emily walked smartly to the back of the building, the click of her heels on the shined floor an oddly soothing sound. She didn't bother knocking, as the door was ajar, and stepped into her daughter's office.

Lorelai sat behind the desk, one elbow on the desktop, her forehead leaning against her palm. She took even, deep breaths, her eyes closed. There were mounds of paper work before her and a mess of boxes in one corner. The rest of the room was warm and soft—a couch, oak furniture, sconces that matched those in the rest of the inn. Lorelai slumped forward on her desk, letting her head fall to her arms.

"Lorelai, are you sleeping?"

She made an indeterminate noise, jumping in her chair. She put a hand to her throat. "Holy George and Martha, Mom," she cried. "You scared me half to death!"

Emily dropped to the couch, crossing her legs. "Yes, well, if you weren't sleeping on the job—"

"I wasn't sleeping on the job," Lorelai replied. "I was... meditating." She sighed and rubbed her temples with the tips of her fingers. "Not that it's working." She looked at Emily. "What can I do for you, Mom?"

"It's Thursday," Emily replied. "We have lunch on Thursdays. I realize it's rather early, but—"

"It's Friday, Mom." She said it gently, the look in her eyes both sad and worried.

It was a look too close to pity, Emily thought, and made no effort to conceal the irritation she felt
"It's Friday. The day after Thursday," she said. "As in, today not being Thursday, but Friday."

"I heard you," Emily said. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Lorelai replied. "I was going to call you yesterday when you didn't show, but then there was this whole linen crisis and I just... I forgot," she said lamely. "I'm sorry." Emily kept silent, smoothing the fabric of her skirt. "Mom, are you okay?"

"I'm just fine, Lorelai," she said. "Well. Are you free for lunch today?"

"I guess," Lorelai said vaguely. She rubbed her eyes.

"Lorelai? Is everything all right with you?" Emily asked. She studied her daughter as Lorelai rose and walked around to the front of her desk. She seemed worn, tired. She kept one hand to her temple, absently rubbing her fingers in small circles, as though massaging away a headache. She was slightly more rumpled than usual, her tone distracted when she spoke.

Lorelai drew a long breath. "Yes. Fine. Everything is fine. I'm just—oh, I'm having a day, that's all." She looked at her mother. "Where would you like to go for lunch?"


She sat on the edge of her desk, hugging herself. "Nothing. It's—Luke and I had a little... thing... this morning."

"A thing," Emily said flatly. "You had a thing."

Lorelai let out a strange, barking laugh. "Yes, a thing. I said things, he said things, I believe silverware was used as projectile missiles..." she trailed off.

"And what was this thing about?"

"You want to hear about the thing?" Lorelai said, skeptical.

Emily lifted an eyebrow. "What was this thing about?" she asked again.

Lorelai propelled herself off the desk and began to walk around the small room, waving her arms and spinning circles on her heels as she spoke. "Oh, nothing, really. Neither of us got much sleep last night—" She stopped and looked at Emily, who didn't react. "—because Luke has a cold and he was coughing, so he was up and I was up because he was up, and then he went and got out of bed at the normal time to go open the diner anyway, so then—"

"Lorelai, take a breath, please," Emily said, rolling her eyes.

She narrowed her eyes as she continued. "I told him he shouldn't go to work; he said he had to go to work. Then he tripped over something on the floor and made some comment about me occasionally picking up after myself. I said that it's my room in my house and I can keep it however I want to, which apparently was particularly offensive and he went all Marcel Marceau on me." She returned to the chair behind her desk and threw herself into it. "I told him he obviously had something to say, to which he replied that he didn't realize there were property rules in this relationship and I then made the mistake of asking him if his name was on the mailbox."

"That wasn't especially kind of you," Emily said.
"No, I know this. So he went off on a diatribe about the diner, or something—I don't know, something about changing the name from Luke's to 'Luke's and Luke's Alone Until Lorelai Decides It's Hers, Too.'" She tossed a look at her mother, daring her to comment. "Then I got out of bed and went to make coffee because I can't fight with him before I've had coffee—"

"Of course."

Lorelai ignored her. "But when I get to the kitchen, there's no coffee. He comes in to get a glass of juice, and I tell him we're out of coffee. And then he points at me, and he's all 'no, we're not out of coffee, you're out of coffee,'" she said, her voice husky and low, a poor but fairly amusing imitation of Luke, Emily thought. "'Because nothing here is mine.'" She sighed. "And then with the yelling and throwing and the slamming of doors."

"And that's how you left things," Emily said.

"That's how we left things."

"Well," she said, "you were both tired, and it was early, I'm sure it's not as bad as all that."

Lorelai fidgeted. "No, probably not. We've fought before, we'll do it again, but currently, we're not speaking to each other."

Emily rose and shouldered her purse. "Then this is the perfect opportunity to remedy the situation. Let's go to lunch."

They were silent as they walked—their cars left behind at Lorelai's insistence—to the diner. The cold was bitter, with an odd metallic taste that only soured Emily's mood further and seemed to make Lorelai draw into herself, clutching her coat about her. It still had not snowed; the ground rose up in angry cracks and breaks, the soil a frozen crust along the edge of the sidewalks. As they edged closer to town, Lorelai muttered something about spring paving and town revenge against frost heaves.

"That's never been an expression I enjoy," Emily said. "Frost heaves—it sounds rather vulgar, for some reason."

"Yeah, okay, Mom," Lorelai replied, snickering.

"I see, so you're the only one allowed to make such observations?"

Lorelai spread her hands. "I can't help it if I have a talent, Mom."

They entered the diner and seated themselves at a table near the front door. Lorelai sat with her hands folded in her lap, staring blankly ahead of her as Emily perused the menu. Luke strode over and, without being asked, overturned the coffee cups and filled them from the pot he held in one hand. He waited, his hand on his hip.

"You shouldn't be working," Lorelai said immediately. "You're sick. Serving food? Not the best idea."

"I'm not serving food," he said. "I'm taking orders. Lane and Caesar are serving food. That okay with you?"

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "Whatever."

He ignored this. "What'll you have, Mrs. Gilmore? The usual?" he asked.
"Yes, I think the usual would be fine," she replied. "Lorelai?"

Lorelai tilted her chin away from Luke as she reached for her coffee mug. "French dip," she said. "Fries."

Luke cleared his throat and stood a moment, looking hard at Lorelai. Emily watched them, Lorelai determinedly keeping her mouth shut, her lips pursed together, Luke stiff and tense, flushed with anger. After a moment, he silently turned and disappeared into the kitchen.

"Oh, really, Lorelai," Emily said. "You're behaving like a child."

"Well, if I am," she said, "I'm not the only one." She set her cup heavily down and crossed her arms over her chest, sitting back in her chair. It was a familiar posture—Emily had seen her daughter sit this way at dinner after dinner when she was a child, pouting over whatever delicacy had been served that night.

Moments later, Luke reemerged from the kitchen and again came to stand over their table. "Lorelai," he said, his voice slightly hoarse. She made no reply, and he rolled his eyes, sighing heavily. His breath caught in his throat, and he raised his arm to muffle in his elbow the angry cough it produced. His shoulders shook with the force of the cough and when he'd quieted, he passed a hand over his face, his expression weary. "Lorelai."

She turned in her chair and looked up at him, her brows drawn together and her face set in hard lines. "What?"

"Would you come upstairs with me for a minute?"

"Why?"

"You know."

"Do I?" she said. "Humor me: tell me why."

Again, he cleared his throat, both in frustration and discomfort, as though he had something lodged in his windpipe. "To continue our earlier discussion."

"Discussion?" Lorelai laughed. "Discussion? Were we having a discussion? Funny, I don't remember having a discussion with you this morning, Luke. No, I wasn't having a discussion, I was having an argument, and that's not really something I care to pursue at this juncture, so—"

"Oh, for crying out loud, Lorelai! Would you just come up the damned stairs with me for five minutes?" he bellowed.

"Well, when you ask so nicely," she shot back, "how can I possibly refuse?"

The diner had fallen silent. The couple said nothing, regarding each other, their breathing exaggerated and uneven. Luke jutted out his chin, working his jaw, and coughed; Lorelai averted her eyes. She shook her head slightly and stood. "Fine," she said. "Whatever. I have to pee anyway." With this, she stalked towards the stairs and noisily led the way up to his apartment.

Emily sat alone, sipping her coffee. The apartment upstairs was quiet. Moments later, Lorelai appeared on the stairs, gesturing to her. She rose and met her daughter by the door.

"Mom, Luke's burning up and he's not looking so good," Lorelai said, clearly irritated. "Can you do me a favor, run to the pharmacy and pick up some stuff?"
"What stuff?" Emily asked.

"You know, NyQuil, that menthol vapor cream stuff, ginger ale, tissues..."

When Emily returned from her errand, she went up the stairs and let herself in. She paused unnoticed in the kitchen, arrested by the tableau before her. Luke sat on the bed, his face pale and miserable. Lorelai knelt before him, tugging at his shoes.

"Okay, Meathead," she said.

"I thought I was Archie," he said. "Can't be Archie and Meathead."


"You say it all the time!"

"I know I do, but I'm still pissed at you and I therefore don't want you making use of my catchphrase."

Luke watched her as she pulled at his flannel shirt, trying to work it off his left shoulder. He made no move to help her. "If you're so pissed," he asked, "then why are you still here?"

"Because you're sick," she said. "Arms up." He obliged and she pulled his tee shirt over his head. "You're sick and you can't take care of yourself."

"Can too," he said feebly, punctuating this with an enormous sniffle and another weak cough.

"Yes, but you won't," Lorelai told him. She pulled him to his feet. "Come on."

Emily set the pharmacy bag down heavily on the table. "Here's everything," she said.


Lorelai gave him a sympathetic pout and put a hand to his cheek. "Poor thing," she said.

Emily handed her the dosage cup. Neither Luke nor Lorelai paid her much attention, save a grateful smile from her daughter. She let herself out, easing the door shut behind her. She heard them squabbling as she left.

"Would you just take your damned pants off?"

"You're just trying to get me into bed."

"Yes, because you're such a sexy beast right now. In fact, the menthol vapor cream isn't for your cold, it's for—"
Emily walked herself back to the inn and her car. There would be no Friday night dinner, as Richard was out of town on business—charity work for his mother's foundation, set up posthumously—for several weeks, and Rory was in the midst of preparing for finals. She decided a manicure and pedicure in Hartford might help her mood. She didn't hold out much hope it would quiet the list-making voice still ticking off tasks of Things To Do in her head.

After a brief telephone conversation with Rory a few days later, she decided to drive out to New Haven and treat her granddaughter to a cup of coffee and a short study break; Rory had sounded distracted and tired, and grandparental comfort might help. Emily was herself looking for anything to fill the day, finding her normal activities dull and wearying. The list-making was now accompanied by odd pangs in her ribcage. She parked near Rory's hall and walked across the lawn, catching sight of her granddaughter coming towards her from another walkway. Rory hadn't seen Emily—she was caught in conversation with a tall, dark-haired young man who seemed vaguely familiar. He said something that made Rory laugh, throwing her head back and shoving him a little. She leaned forward to catch her breath, looped her arm through the young man's, and looked about. Her face broke into a wide smile, seeing Emily, and she dropped her companion's arm to wave.

The Gilmore women hugged hello, Rory squeezing Emily tightly. "I'm so surprised to see you here!"

"I thought I'd drop in for a mid-afternoon coffee, seeing as we didn't have dinner last week and you've been working so terribly hard on finals. Do you have the time?"

"Of course, Grandma," she said. "Always." She started, remembering herself. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. You remember Marty, right, Grandma?"

Emily put out her hand. "Oh, yes. Marty. Nice to see you."

"How are you, ma'am?" he asked, shaking her hand.

"Very well, thank you."

Rory turned to Marty. "I'm going to go," she said, "but we're on for later." She gave him a significant look, Emily thought, and an encouraging smile.

"Great," he replied. "Let me take your bag so you don't have to drag it around." He reached for Rory's satchel as he spoke, though she protested. He shouldered it and squeezed Rory's elbow, nodding ever so slightly. He smiled at both Gilmores. "Rory, I'll see you later. Mrs. Gilmore, really nice to see you."

Emily managed to hold off until they were seated in a café, cups of coffee before them, before she asked. "So, this Marty," she said. "He's your boyfriend?"

Rory squirmed. "Well, no—not technically." Emily's eyebrows rose. "We're sort of in a pre-dating holding pattern."

"I'm sorry?"

She sighed and spun her coffee cup. "We spend most of our free time together. And it's great. Grandma, I can talk to him about anything. We just sit around, talking for hours. About nothing. Or we don't talk at all, and that's fine, too. It's—it's really sort of amazing." She paused. "Lane was telling me this summer about this boy she dated, how they would talk on the phone for hours on end and she never felt nervous or strange and she never ran out of things to say to him... I've never really known anyone who I had that with all at the same time—not a boy, anyway. I just—"
"it's so comfortable."

"But you're not dating."

"I haven't had the best luck in that area," she said. She peered at her grandmother over the rim of her mug. "And he knows that—not, like, specifics, or anything, but the gist. He's been patient. I just don't want to ruin anything."

"And you like him," Emily said.

"Very much," Rory said. "He's—he's such a dork, Grandma, but he's very—" She stopped. "He's Marty. That's the only way to describe him. He's just Marty."

Emily's smile was sad. "That's lovely for you, my dear."

Rory shrugged shyly and changed the subject. They chatted idly for a while longer, talking about Stars Hollow, about the Dragonfly, about Luke's raging cold and Lorelai's dogged insistence he see a doctor, his equally dogged resistance to medical attention. Emily dropped a few bills on the table and rose, saying she should go. She leaned forward and dropped a kiss on Rory's cheek, giving her a hug. Rory held onto her a moment, hesitant to pull away.

"Grandma?" she asked. "Are you—how are you?"

"I'm fine, Rory," Emily replied. "Why do you ask?"

"You just seem—not yourself. I'm worried about you."

Emily touched Rory's cheek with the back of her hand, her eyes soft. "You don't need to worry about me, Rory."

"I do, anyway." She bit her lip. "I hate to see you so sad. Are you sure you don't want to go home? Home, home?"

Emily studied Rory a moment. "I don't know," she said. "I should let you get back to your studies. Say hello to Marty, and I'll pass along your get well to Lorelai the next time I speak to her."

She didn't drive to Stars Hollow. She impulsively pulled off the highway at the Hartford exit and found herself soon sitting behind the steering wheel, parked in her driveway, staring up at her house. Keys in hand, she stepped out of the car and walked up the front path slowly before she slid her house key in the lock and turned. She had expected to find it resistant, to squeak or be sticky; she was relieved that it turned easily and the door opened before her the way it always had. She put her purse on the hall table and went up the front stairs, sliding her hand along the banister as she went.

The staff had been given leave during Richard's absence, she knew. He wasn't expected home until just before Christmas, and until then the house would, for the first time, be the only one in the neighborhood not decorated for the season. Emily rounded the top of the stairs and immediately went to her bedroom. Without thinking, she kicked off her shoes and undressed, reaching for the bathrobe that still hung in the closet. She showered in her own shower, using the soaps and shampoo that still sat on the shelf in the wall. When she was done, she sat before her vanity and combed her hair with the silver comb from her wedding set.

Emily thought about the lists her mind had been making without her permission, about the pangs in her chest. She thought about Richard, away now during what had always been one of the busiest times of the year, and the afternoons she'd spent alone in his absence. She thought about her apartment over Gypsy's garage, about Stars Hollow, about Lorelai and Rory and the things
she'd seen in the past few days. She thought about sleeping in her narrow bed by herself. She stared at her reflection until she realized her eyes were no longer focusing properly. She then rose and reached for the telephone.

"Lorelai," she said. "I'm going to need your help on a few things."

The next two weeks were a flurry of activity, for which Emily was grateful. It felt normal, natural, to be making decisions, to be overseeing details, to be directing things for herself, in her own house, for her own sake. She had enjoyed working for Winky, and when the holidays were over, she'd continue to supervise the renovations to the house in Stars Hollow; working for Winky, however, wasn't this satisfying. She could now go to bed at night and know she'd sleep without the help of a glass or two of scotch.

Lorelai asked her, the Friday before it was all to begin, what the difference was, what made this so important when she'd done it all a hundred times before.

They were at the table in the dining room, grouped together at one end, Emily at the head and Rory to her immediate right, Lorelai at her left and Luke beside her. Emily sipped her wine and wiped her mouth primly with a napkin.

"I did it before because I had to," she said. "Because that was my job. It was expected. It was what I did, and it was, at times, all I had."

Rory put her hand over Emily's, sighing, "Oh, Grandma."

She smiled and squeezed her granddaughter's fingers. Lorelai gave her an appraising look.

"But now you're doing it because you want to?" she asked.

"Because I want to," Emily echoed, "and because I can, and because I'm not doing it for anyone else's sake, because it's fun—" Luke snorted, receiving an elbow to the ribs from his girlfriend. "—and because—because I have... there are things I need to prove, now, too."

Lorelai studied her a moment longer. "I don't give you enough credit, Mom," she said. "Excuse me?"

The others all looked at Lorelai, who shrugged as she cut into her chicken. "I don't," she said. "And I'm sorry for that." She paused and looked up. "You—you've changed, that's all."

Emily dropped her eyes, uncertain of how to reply. She wanted to say she wasn't so sure, that what she'd thought she'd been mourning was not really what she had missed. She thought he'd taken away from her all the things that made up her life; she left thinking she could replace them. But her life was more than the bare things she did, the acts of planning and hosting and smiling at parties. She had never loved those things—she had loved being needed, being depended on. She didn't know if Lorelai was right, if she'd changed, but there were things that seemed not to matter anymore, so she only said thank you in response and asked if anyone was ready for dessert.

Richard came home the following Friday. From the bedroom window, Emily saw the car pull into the drive and Richard climb out. She put her earrings in—the pearls he'd given her when Lorelai was born—as she watched him look up at the house, his mouth agape. It made her smile and quicken her movements: a dab of scent behind her ears, at her wrists, a flower on her shoulder. She heard the front door open as she slid her feet into her shoes.

He stood in the foyer, still dumbstruck, when she stopped at the top of the stairs. The banister was garlanded with holly and evergreen, and the rest of the house was turned out in the best of their
Christmas decorations, the tree in the corner of the parlor to his right. The entire house was lit up with the candles in the windows and was full of warm smells: mulled wine, apple tarts, ginger. He watched as a small staff bustled past him in uniforms of black and white, all blatantly ignoring him as they went about their work. He started when he heard Eartha Kitt singing silkily in the background.

"Santa Baby, put a sable under the tree for me, been an awful good girl, Santa Baby..."

Emily descended the stairs, unconsciously patting her hair into place. "There you are," she said. "We expected to see you hours ago. Why hasn't anyone taken your coat yet? Kelly, come take Mr. Gilmore's coat and briefcase."

He was speechless as she helped him out of his coat and linked her arm companionably through his, led him away from the door and towards the dining room.

"You'll probably want something to drink," she told him. "But please, Richard, don't eat anything now, there will be plenty when guests begin to arrive."

"Guests? Arriving? Emily—" he said, looking down at her.

Sookie appeared in the doorway between the dining room and kitchen, a bowl in her arms. "Emily, would you like to try the mousse?"

Richard thought her smile luminous as Emily replied. "No, dear, I'm sure it's perfect. Could you have someone bring my husband a glass of port?"

"Sure thing," Sookie said. "Nice to see you, Richard."

Richard replied vaguely as he looked around. The dining room was set with a buffet along the side, the table decorated with white and green tapers, holly, and mistletoe. He looked down at Emily.

"Are you having a party?" he asked, utterly confused.

She laughed. "Yes, Richard. We're having a party. Christmas is a week from tomorrow, or have you forgotten?"

"No, I've not forgotten," he said. A server approached with a port glass, and he accepted it, still looking slightly stunned.

"Come, now," Emily said, tugging his arm. "You need to start getting ready. I've laid out your suit, it's been pressed, and I have your shoes and tie ready as well."

He followed her up the stairs, clutching his glass, thoroughly baffled. When they reached the bedroom and he saw Emily's things—her lotions and creams and slippers and the book on the bedside table—scattered about, a lump formed in his throat and he felt unsteady on his feet. He sat heavily on the bed beside the suit, holding his drink on his knee.

"Emily," he said, a tremor in his voice.

"Drink your wine, Richard, and we'll get you dressed," she said, crossing towards her vanity. The waver in his voice caused her hands to shake and she suddenly realized she was dangerously close to tears.

"Emily," Richard said again. "Please come sit by me."
Without thinking, she obliged, sitting on top of the freshly pressed suit. Richard drew a breath, staring before him as he spoke. Though they'd shared countless meals and talked hours on the phone in the past months, though they'd been alone and in company together, they'd not been this close to each other physically in a long time. In the time since Emily left, she'd let Richard do his best to win her over, to woo her and court her—he was attentive and respectful and kind and interested in the things she did. He'd made her laugh. It was when he was gone that she remembered the things that made her go in the first place. And it was when she lay down to sleep at night in her bed above Gypsy's garage, dulled by scotch, that she remembered the way she felt now, sitting beside him, her skin humming.

"Emily. I have not apologized—"

"There's no need, Richard."

"But there is," he told her. "There are things I would like you to know."

She put her hand on her knee. "I already know them."

He covered her hand with his own, rubbing his thumb over hers in the familiar, practiced way he always had. "But I need to say it," he said.

She nodded. "As you like."

"I have behaved very badly, Emily. I was—my pride was terribly bruised at being forced out of the company. Jason's business proposal seemed ideal: I could get back a bit of what I'd lost, I could work, I could be useful again. But I neglected to consult you because I believed everything I did was for the best—and, I must say, because I knew you would not approve of certain things."

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"And it was wrong of me. It was very wrong to shut you out of my work life—I didn't realize how very much my work was becoming my life. I can give no excuse for Pennilynn—" She stiffened at this, and he squeezed her hand ever so slightly. "I can give no excuse for many, many things. I also cannot tell you how incredibly foolish I know I have been, nor how much I regret all of it." He shook his head, as though chastising himself. "Can you forgive me, Emily?"

Emily looked at him, her eyes full. "Oh, Richard," she sighed. "There's nothing to forgive."

"But there is. I want you to know—"

She touched his cheek with the back of her hand. "There are certain things that don't need to be said."

"You are very wise, Emily," he said, a sigh of relief in his voice.

"Yes, I am."

He chuckled. "You are also far too good."

She dropped her eyes. "I don't know—" She paused. "Well, if you like, yes I am." She smiled, her hand still on his knee.

Richard folded her in his arms and whispered in her hair. "I've missed you. I should have—"

"Perhaps," she said, her cheek on his shoulder, "but what's passed is passed." She pulled back. "We really don't need—we know what we need to, now, I think."
He pursed his lips together as he nodded. "I love you very much, Emily."

"And I love you," she said, tearing over.

They were quiet a moment, Richard holding Emily close, his hand on the crown of her head. He smelled the same, he felt the same—only thinner, now; she thought, as he bent his head to kiss her, that he looked the way he always had, only softer, somehow.

They parted, both laughing and crying. He told her things would be different; she said she knew. He told her he was glad she was back; she said the same to him. He pointed out that she was sitting on his suit; she replied it wasn't her favorite and was far too formal for the party anyway, so screw it.

"Such salty language," Richard said.

Emily arched her eyebrow at him as she handed him a clean shirt and a sweater. "I have been living over a garage," she said. "Who knows what other dreadful habits I've picked up?"

At this he hugged her again. "Oh, my dear."

Emily watched him as the guests arrived—first Rory, with Marty in tow, both ready to celebrate the end of finals; Lorelai and Luke, finally over his cold (and, as Richard mentioned, rather dapper in a dark blue v-neck sweater, making Emily peal with laughter); Lane and her mother and the ever-present band mates, joined by a tall, gawky-looking boy who lit up when Lane looked at him, her hand in his; Jackson and Davey; Gypsy ("Pigtails, that is a new look for you," Emily said; Gypsy pointed and said "Lady, you're the only one who gets away with things like that."); Tom and his jolly little wife.

They were a motley crew for an Emily Gilmore party, but as the drinks went around and the hors d'ouvres were passed, Emily felt herself relax in a way she never had before at one of her own parties. Conversation was easy, and not only that, it was interesting. There was no one there she'd have to force herself to talk to—no stuffy businessmen with their plastic trophy wives, no socialites or gossips. Richard put his arm across her shoulders and squeezed her as they walked to the dining room for the buffet.

"This is a lovely party," he said.

"I quite agree."

The dinner was excellent and casual and loud and people knocked elbows and clinked glasses and china as they ate and talked and drank. Lorelai had organized a Yankee swap without Emily's knowledge and insisted that after dinner the gifts be exchanged. Emily ended up with a Pee Wee Herman yo-yo. And though she was tired and had the hint of a cough, Lorelai corralled the guests into the back parlor with the hardwood floor, turned up the stereo, and commanded dancing to the unconventional Christmas music she'd brought. She waved to her parents as she danced with Luke, her eyes laughing.

When Rory kissed her grandmother goodbye at the door and dragged a slightly tipsy Marty out to the car with her, it was close to one in the morning. Emily turned and found Richard deep in conversation with Luke by the stairs. Lorelai stood beside them, yawning. She caught Emily's eye and sauntered over, clutching the Mary-Kate Olsen doll she'd won in the swap.

"Looks like it all worked out," Lorelai said. "You two seem good." Emily shrugged one shoulder in reply. "I'm proud of you, Mom. I know it wasn't easy, coming back here."
"It was harder, the staying away," Emily said. "I should really thank you, Lorelai."

She narrowed her eyes, grinning. "For?"

"I've learned a great deal, watching the way you live your life," Emily said. "It's a very fine life."

Lorelai nodded, a watery smile on her face. "Thanks, Mom. It's good to see you back home." She looked over her shoulder at the men. "I think things are going to be different this year."

Emily put her arm around her daughter. "I think they will be, too."

Lorelai pulled Luke away from her father, complaining that she had a tickle in her throat. Richard and Emily saw them out, Richard's arm around his wife. "I think I'm about ready for bed," he said.

Emily only laughed.

The day after the party, Lorelai called and suggested Christmas dinner the following week in Stars Hollow. Rory was home, she said, and Luke would cook; all they'd have to do is show up. She accepted the offer, thinking she'd have her Christmas meal at someone else's table for the first time in forty years. They came midmorning on Christmas Day; Emily didn't ring the bell, letting herself and Richard in.

"Hello?" she called out.

Lorelai raised one hand over the back of the couch and waved. "Here," she croaked.

Emily rounded the couch to find her daughter under a mound of blankets, crumpled tissues everywhere, her nose red and swollen. She smiled feebly. "Merry Christmas," she said, her voice raw and throaty. "Luke gave me his cold." She coughed. "Worst present ever."

Emily leaned over the couch and touched Lorelai's forehead. "Do you have a fever? You're awfully warm."

She shook her head. "No fever. Just grossness." She peered around Emily. "Hi, Dad."

"Hello, Lorelai. Bit under the weather?"

Both Emily and Lorelai gave him the same withering look.

"Ah, yes. Where's Rory?" he asked, patting the lapels of his sport coat.

"In the kitchen with Luke. He's teaching her to cook," Lorelai said darkly.

Richard grinned. "I might just have to see that myself."

Lorelai snorted a laugh that turned into an ugly cough. From the kitchen, Luke bellowed, "Drink the ginger ale, Lorelai!"

"It's flat!" she whined.

"Drink it anyway!"

She pouted and did as she was told, making a face. Emily perched at the end of the couch.

"Neither of you have a very good bedside manner," she said.

He looked at Lorelai. "You take your ibuprofen?"


Emily twisted to look at him. "Has she been sick long?"

"She’s just getting over the worst of it," Luke said. "The beginning of the week she was a mess, but she’s in fine form now. Would have been easier on herself if she’d slept all this week."

"She’s sitting right here!" Lorelai cried, pointing at herself. "I'm fine! And you're just trying to get back at me," she sulked to Luke.

Emily lifted a lock of hair off Lorelai's forehead. "You never have been a very good patient," she said.

Rory's voice was frantic as she called from the kitchen. "Luke! The thing! It's bubbling!"

"Ah, shit," he muttered, turning on his heel. Richard followed him down the hall.

Emily watched them go, looking around. "Lorelai, why on earth do you have two trees?"

Lorelai glanced about vaguely. "Oh. I thought Luke would hate a real tree because he's all environmentally save the trees and all that, so I got a fake one. And he knows I love tradition and thought I'd hate a fake tree, so he went and cut down a real one. It was very 'Gift of the Magi,' but we both got to keep the stuff."

Emily shook her head. "Wonders never cease."

It was a quiet, pleasant holiday. The gifts were opened—books for Rory, a bracelet matching the anklet Lorelai gave her for her birthday, a scarf and hat and glove set; a beautiful purse and set of earthenware bowls for Lorelai, as well as a snow globe from Luke ("Because of the no snow yet," she cooed. "Luke, you're the girliest boyfriend ever. I love it."); a butcher block and a set of kitchen knives for Luke; professionally photographed portraits of the Lorelais for the grandparents among them. Emily misted slightly at these, and Lorelai grinned.

"And here Rory wanted to get you the Kama Sutra," she said.


The dinner was simple, turkey and stuffing, cranberries, rolls. They laughed at how inordinately proud Rory was of the twice baked potatoes. The pumpkin pie was less of a success, but Luke had made another and a cake as well. They took the coffee and dessert into the living room, where Richard had built a fire, and lounged about watching one of the new DVDs Lorelai bought Luke. Richard and Emily sat together on the couch, Rory in one of the armchairs, chatting quietly on her cell phone. Luke and Lorelai lay stretched out on the floor in front of the fire, Lorelai wrapped in an old flannel of Luke's and a blanket, curled against his side and her head pillowed on his chest. He dozed, his arm around her. She watched the movie, playing with the buttons on his shirt, breathing noisily, occasionally coughing; when she did, Luke just raised his hand and stroked the hair away from her forehead, his eyes still closed. Emily watched them, her eyes full. Richard held her hand as they walked to the car.

"She seems very happy," he remarked.

Emily buckled her seat belt and leaned back in her seat. "She is happy," she said. She sighed and turned her face to Richard. "He's very good for her—they don't let each other get away with much, I believe."
"That's not very surprising."

"No," she said. She paused. "It's what you need, isn't it—someone who makes you be better, who makes you try? Someone without whom you'd be a poorer individual?"

Richard took her hand. "I suppose it is."

She squeezed the hand that held hers. "Let's go home, shall we?"
Lorelai liked to keep most of the lights off at night after the guests had gone to sleep. She left only the small, green-glass lamp on the reservation desk lit, the hall lights, the sconces in the stairway at their lowest setting, and along the floorboards, night lights. It gave the entire inn a soft, warm glow. She curled into the corner of the sofa, staring out the window just behind her into the frigid darkness outside. This was the reason she'd always loved the hospitality business—the sense of being hugged and held close to something safe and comfortable against the dreariness of two thirty-three AM.

She blinked slowly and drew a deep breath. There was nothing left to do. She'd balanced her books three times already, cleaned her office and desk drawers, reorganized the reservation desk (delighted with the knowledge that Michel would emit a pissed screech when he discovered this come morning), and eaten half of a log of ready-made cookie dough. She folded her arms over the back of the sofa and rested her chin on her wrists. It might come tonight, she thought, or early in the morning—soon, she knew. Her entire body felt poised and waiting the way it always did before the first snow of the year. The air in the afternoon had been just right, tasted of snow, and the cold smelled softer somehow; everything was still and holding its breath, she thought. \textit{And about damned time, too,} she thought. \textit{Stupid freezing rain and sleet. Most depressing weather ever.}

Tossing away her blanket, she padded across the parlor in her sock-feet, running her hands through her hair. She'd put on a fresh pot of coffee earlier and it would have not only perked by now but also sat long enough to get good and strong. The kitchen was cold, its surfaces gleaming by the hard outside lights as she hurried to pour herself a cup and return to the front of the inn. The kitchen, at night, had always given her the creeps. Back in the days when she had been the night manager at the Independence, she'd come prepared with thermoses of coffee rather than venture into the kitchen; she knew it was an irrational fear, probably instilled by something Emily had said to her when she was young about knives in the dark, but the knowledge didn't slow her steps any as she made her way back down the hall. She had never much enjoyed working at the Independence at night—the front room always had a large, cavernous feel, lonely and too open. Mia gave her the promotion just after Rory had started school, and she spent the afternoons and early mornings with her daughter, at night tucked her into the big fold-out couch in the manager's office to have her nearby, and slept in the potting shed during the day. She didn't do it long, but Mia had insisted on the formality before promoting her to running the desk in the daytime. She remembered breathing a sigh of relief the morning after her last night shift, and taking Rory to breakfast at Luke's. And here she was again.

She cradled the coffee to her chest, breathing in the steam. Her throat was still slightly sore, and she hadn't been quite able to shake the loose cough she'd developed over the wanted nothing more than to be curled up in her own bed beside Luke, listening to him snore softly while she waited for the snow to begin. But three days after Christmas, the Dragonfly's night manager had quit—her husband had received a promotion and they'd be moving to Boston shortly and she couldn't even give them the two weeks' notice they needed to hire someone new. The holiday week had made it impossible for them to hire anyone decent, and so Lorelai and Michel took over the duties, turn about. And then, just days after New Year's, the chows came down with a mysterious illness and were vomiting every few hours and Michel could find no one to sit with them in the evenings, so Lorelai was on her fourth consecutive night of sitting up alone in her inn, waiting for the sun to come up.
There was a stack of books in her office on loan from Rory's room, but she'd been too listless for reading. With the mood she was in, the only thing she really felt like doing was calling Rory, but Rory was on her last week of sleeping in her own bed before winter break was over and it wasn't fair to wake her daughter just because Lorelai herself was bored.

Television was out of the question as well, she knew, and she settled back against the couch cushions with her coffee, drawing her knees up to her chest. She rested her chin on the rim of her cup and settled for quiet thinking. *Really, there's no other alternative,* she thought, *short of waking up Luke and hello to the horror of that phone call. Hi, honey, I'm bored. What are you doing?* She snorted. *Honey.* She tested it out in her head, *Luke, honey?*, and shuddered. He wasn't a "honey." She added it to the list she was slowly compiling of rejected terms of endearment for Luke; anything with a diminutive or related to food wouldn't do. It had been bothering her since New Year's Eve.

It had been a bitterly cold day. Luke had gone out early and opened the diner, served the early morning customers, run to the market, and come back just as Lorelai and Rory were dragging themselves out of bed, yawning and bleary-eyed.

"Looks like I'm just in time," he said, coming into the living room, his arms full, just as Lorelai descended the stairs from her bedroom. He kissed her hello when she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Looks like you're far too perky," Lorelai mumbled, shuffling after him to the kitchen. "Tell me __"

"There's coffee," he said. "Rory up yet?"

"I'm up," Rory called, emerging from her bedroom. She slumped in a chair at the kitchen table and yawned. "God, I'm tired."

Lorelai hoisted herself up onto the counter, muttering an agreement in reply. They were quiet as Luke made them coffee and poured, as he mixed batter in a bowl and heated a skillet on the stove. Rory rubbed her eyes and reached for the sugar bowl, dumping large spoonfuls into her coffee cup.

"Remind me why I volunteered to go tonight?" she asked.

"Because you're a good friend," Lorelai said. "It's a very big gig for Lane—New Year's Eve, a bar in Hartford, Friday night..."

She dropped her head to her arms on the tabletop. "I know. But it's going to suck. It's going to be all sweaty and drunk people and kissing and we'll be right next to the speakers the whole time."

"Some day, I want someone to explain the whole New Year's Eve celebration to me," Luke said. "Talk about a stupid holiday."

"Don't start," Lorelai moaned, banging her head against the cabinet. "It's too early for a Luke Danes rant of the holiday kind."

He looked at her darkly. "Get off the counter and sit. Your pancakes are almost ready."

She slid off the counter and sat beside Rory. They huddled close, Lorelai's arm draped across Rory's shoulders. "If it makes you feel better, babe," she said, "I'm going to be doing the exact same thing—drunken, sweaty people kissing all over the place and me not participating because I have to run the damned party."
Rory rested her head against her mother's shoulder. "New Year's Eve is only fun when you do it at home—"

"—with Dick Clark—"

"—and Mallowmars—"

"—like in When Harry Met Sally—"

"—and fuzzy pajamas—"

"Good times," they sighed together. Luke arched an eyebrow at them as he placed their plates in front of them.

Lorelai reached for the bottle of syrup he'd put on the table. "Oh, don't look at us like that. We have our rituals."

"The only really good New Year's Eve party is the one in When Harry Met Sally," Rory said.

Lorelai pointed her fork at her. "When Harry shows up, and he's all 'I love you,' and Sally's all, 'I hate you, Harry, I really hate you!' And then they make out."

"Which is kinda gross, considering it's Billy Crystal," Rory added.

Luke stared at them. "I'm getting tired just keeping up with this train of thought."

"Oh, you are not," Lorelai said. "You're just feeling left out because you've never seen the movie."

The party at the inn that night was for a group of old college friends, all in their forties now, who had rented out the entire place for the holiday and left the kids at home. They wanted a party with streamers and confetti and whistles, cheesy eighties music and finger foods and lots and lots of booze. Lorelai had hired a bartender for the night and cleared out one of the parlors for a dance floor, set up a buffet and coaxed some of the wait staff into walking around with trays. It was a loud, boisterous group, all shitfaced by ten thirty. Lorelai surreptitiously set the clock back five minutes as she made her rounds, checking to see if anyone needed anything, if there was enough champagne, if anyone looked especially close to vomiting or passing out. When the clocks in the inn read ten to midnight, she slipped out the back door to have a moment to herself.

She stood on the back porch, shivering slightly. She hadn't bothered with a coat and the night was cold enough to break glass; the satiny tank she wore with her good black skirt wasn't made for warmth, she knew, but she didn't care as she hugged herself and breathed deeply. The air tasted of ice. She started slightly and turned at the touch of a warm hand cupped on her shoulder. Luke grinned at her, standing just behind her. He was in typical Luke garb—scarf, baseball hat, army jacket, jeans. He gave her a quick once over before opening the front of his coat and pulling her to his chest, wrapping her inside the jacket with him.

"Not the best idea you ever had," he told her. "But it looks good."

"I know," she said. She rested her chin on his chest and looked up at him. "But I didn't know you were coming."

"That was sort of the plan," he said. "It's almost midnight. It's New Year's. Thought I'd ring it in with my girl, surprise her." He paused. "You know all your clocks in there are wrong."

She smiled as she turned her head, laying her cheek to his shoulder and huddling closer, wrapping
her arms around him under the coat. "Yes, they are. I did that on purpose. Have the real midnight to myself and then go in and have it again with them."

"Sneaky," he said.

"Clever," she replied. "So the man who needs New Year's Eve explained to him turns out to be a sentimentalist about the holiday after all, huh?"

He shrugged. "I don't know about that." He reached up and pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. "I just wanted to see you."

"Either way, I'm glad you're here," she said. "Is it time yet?"

Luke checked his watch. "Another minute or two. So," he said, "that movie was... eh, I don't know. Didn't do much for me, and the party looked boring. The speech was pretty good, though. I liked the scene with the sandwich."

Lorelai looked up at him, mystified. "What the hell are you talking about, Danes?"

"You know, with the friends who get together and then the guy is an ass and he goes to the party and says all that stuff about how he loves the girl for all these dopey reasons—"

"You watched When Harry Met Sally didn't you?" she asked. He didn't reply, just made a face.

Just as Lorelai opened her mouth to speak again, the timer on Luke's watch went off, the mechanical beep harsh in the stillness. She leaned up to him, pressing her hands against his back to maintain her balance as she touched her lips to his and kissed in the new year. He tightened his arms around her while he returned and deepened the kiss. She pulled away reluctantly to catch her breath, slowly opening her eyes.

"I love you," she said. "Happy New Year."

Luke brushed a kiss on her forehead. "Happy New Year, Lorelai."

She disentangled herself from inside his jacket, gasping slightly when the cold hit her bare shoulders once more. She put her hand to his cheek and pulled him down to her for another brief, soft kiss. "I have to get back inside," she said quietly. "But I'll be home by dawn."

He caught her hand and held it to his face, kissed her palm. "I'll be waiting," he said, speaking into her skin. He let her go and leaned in for a last kiss. "Night, love."

Lorelai stood in the doorway and watched him jog away before she turned and walked swiftly back to the main room; she felt flushed through her entire body, as she always did when he called her 'love,' warmed through by the way he dropped his voice and spoke the word so low. It was a name he only ever called her after the sun had gone down, when they were in the dark together alone. As she walked down the hall, she wondered why she didn't have her own handle for him, a private name that belonged only to them. The crowd stood before the clock on the mantel, their glasses raised as they counted down. "Ten, nine, eight..."

Amidst the kissing and hugging and laughing when the hands on the clock met at twelve, Lorelai felt a tap at her elbow. She turned to find Derek holding her cell phone. He held it out to her.

"It was in the kitchen, ringing," he said. "I thought you'd want it."

She smiled gratefully. "Thanks, Derek." She flipped open the still ringing cell. "Hello?"
"I think I just made out with Marty!"

Lorelai furrowed her brow and stepped away from the party to the back hall. "Rory?"

"What do I do?" she asked, breathless and frantic.

"Back up a second, babe. You think you just made out with Marty? You're not sure?"

She could hear the heavy thump of bass in the background and the hum of drunken revelry in the bar as Rory spoke. Her daughter's voice sounded thick and strange.

"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know," Rory groaned.

Lorelai furrowed her brow. "Have you been drinking?" she asked gently.

She heard Rory hesitate. "Some."

"Well," she said, sighing and closing your eyes, "you're entitled—it's what you do when you go out at a bar... Marty drinking, too?"

Rory snorted. "Naked Guy, Mom, remember?"

"Who's driving home?"

"Brian, Mom. He doesn't drink," Rory said. Lorelai could hear the "duh" in her voice. "Wish I didn't," she said, sounding close to tears. "Oh, Mom, what's going to happen now?"

"Rory, babe, I can't tell you that if I don't know what happened before," she replied, carefully.

Rory drew a shaky breath. "Marty met us at the bar—he took the train in—and Zach got us in and told the bartender we were with the band, so we got free drinks—"

"What were you drinking?"

"What?"

Lorelai smiled a little. "What... were... you... drinking?" she asked slowly.

"Oh. Uh, rum and Coke? And cranberry and vodka?" Rory said. "Why does that matter?"

She shrugged. "I was just curious."

"Anyway," she said. "We were just sort of hanging out and listening to the music and dancing and drinking and then they did the countdown thing at midnight and we hugged and kissed each other's cheeks because that's what you do at midnight on New Year's, and—"

"Rory, honey, slow down," Lorelai said. "Where is Marty now?"

"In the bathroom," Rory said. "Can I please finish?" Lorelai said nothing. "Thank you. So we were hugging and then we were kissing and I don't even know how and then we stopped and it got very weird and he went to the bathroom..."

"Did he kiss you or did you kiss him?"

Rory sighed. "I told you," she said impatiently, "I don't know. I didn't know we had started until after we were already in the middle of it!"
"How long were you kissing?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said, and Lorelai couldn't help but smile at the utter confusion and desperation in Rory's voice. "It was just... I don't know."

Lorelai bit her lip. "Well, hon, I don't know what to tell you. Was it good?"

"Was what good?"

"The kissing. Good?"

"Why do you think I'm freaking out?" Rory asked at a hysterical pitch. "It was amazing!"

"Really?" Lorelai asked. "Because, Lord love Marty and all, but he doesn't look like he'd really know what he was doing in that area—"

"Mom, you are so not helping!" she cried.

"Sorry, I'm sorry! But babe, I'm really not seeing the problem, here."

Rory let out a gusty sigh. "Mom. The problem is that I like him. A lot. And he's this really good, sweet, amazing guy."

"Still not seeing—"

"Because whenever the kissing starts, that's when things get confusing and everything starts to go wrong and I like him too much to be kissing him!"

Lorelai bit her lips together, trying not to laugh. "Oh, babe," she said. She paused. "Is he still in the bathroom?"

"He's either too embarrassed to come out or he's puking," Rory said. "Either way, not looking so good for the rest of the night."

"I have to agree with you there," Lorelai replied. "But listen, babe, I think you need to take a couple of deep breaths and calm down. Remember why you started liking him in the first place," she said.

Rory was quiet a moment. "Because he's—because he doesn't expect anything from me," she said, at length.

"Except that you be Rory," Lorelai said. "There you go. Don't worry. He'll come out of the bathroom eventually, and there'll be a few minutes of awkward silence until he makes a dopey joke and you'll laugh, and tomorrow you'll figure out what you're supposed to do next, okay?"

"Mom?"

"Yeah, sweets?"

"I really wish we hadn't been drunk."

"Oh, I know, babe. I know. You call me when you get back to Lane's tonight, okay? I don't care what time it is."

"I will," Rory said. "Happy New Year, Mom. I love you."

"Oh, back at you, babe. I'll talk to you soon," Lorelai said.
She crept into the house just after six. Luke was in the bedroom, stretched out on top of the covers, his hands folded behind his head. Lorelai stood in the doorway a moment, trying to decide if he was sleeping. He wore his flannel shirt, unbuttoned and minus the perpetual tee underneath, and she could see his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm beneath it. She stepped into the room, her heels clicking slightly on the floor, and he immediately turned his head and opened his eyes.

"Hey," he said, sitting up.

She gestured for him not to get up as she wriggled out of her skirt. He ignored her and rose to draw back the covers on the bed. "You haven't been awake this whole time, have you?" she asked, pulling her shirt over her head.

He shook his head. "Nah, just off and on."

Lorelai pulled on pajama pants and a tank top and climbed into bed. Luke followed suit, taking off his jeans and sliding beneath the covers beside her. She curled herself around a pillow and yawned. Closing her eyes, she squirmed to find the most comfortable position, settling herself close to Luke, her back to him. He spooned against her, his hand on her hip and his chin on her shoulder.

"My daughter," she told him, "is in love."

"Hmm," he responded, rubbing his thumb reassuringly against her hip.

Lorelai angled to look back at him. "That's all you have to say? 'Hmm'?"

Luke closed his eyes and buried his face in her neck. She shivered at the scratch of stubble on her skin, drawing his arm more tightly around her. He tangled his legs with hers and sighed as he hugged her to him. "Good for her," he said, muffled slightly against her.

She considered this. "Yeah," she said. "I think so, too." She paused. "Hey, what was with the getup, before?"

He furrowed his brow, puzzled. "Oh. I took a shower when I got back from the inn," he said. "Had a pair of boxers in the laundry room but no shirt, so..."

She twisted to look back at him again. "You know you can leave anything you want here," she said. "I mean, I know I'm very Jessica Simpson with the closets and the dresser and everything, but—"

"Thanks." He lightly pressed his lips to her shoulder. "Go to sleep."

"And if you wanted—"


She nodded and rested her head back on the pillow. "Good. Are you staying today?"

"I'm staying," he said. "It's a holiday. We're closed. You?"


"You said that already."

"And yet. Happy New Year."
He kissed her temple. "Happy New Year, love," he replied. "Now go to sleep."

She'd drifted off smiling. When she woke early in the afternoon, she was alone. She sat up and blinked in confusion, looking around her. The door was closed; she strained to hear signs of presence in the rest of the house. Shrugging when she heard none, she slipped out of bed, jammed her Hello Kitty slippers on her feet, and headed for the bathroom. A few moments later, she descended the stairs to be met by the nasal twang of country music and distinctive cooking-smells. She wandered down the hall and paused by Rory's door, leaning against the doormframe. Luke sat at the kitchen table, his chin propped on his fist and his brow furrowed in concentration, reading.

"Hey," she said.

He looked up. "You're up," he said. He rose and crossed the small distance between them.

"I am up," she replied. She stood on tiptoe, steadied herself with her hands flat on his chest, and kissed him briefly. "What's cooking, good looking?"

Luke took her hands in his, rubbing his thumb over hers. "That pasta-casserole thing you like."

"Oh!" she cooed. "Did you make the cheesy bread, too?"

He kissed her forehead and pulled her into the kitchen. "You think I don't know what's good for me?" he asked. He pushed her gently into a seat. "It's cooling—too hot to eat right now. I can put coffee on."

Lorelai rubbed her forehead and yawned. "Please do." As he checked on the food and made her coffee, she reached for the book he'd been reading. "What's this?" she asked, holding it up. "Nobody's Fool? I thought this was a Paul Newman movie."

Luke looked over his shoulder. "Yeah, it was Jess's Christmas present to me. Gave me a book by the same guy for my birthday, too."

"And how is Jess?" Lorelai asked.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "You really don't have to ask if you don't want to know," he said.

"I want to know," she told him, her tone offended. Off his look, she spread her hands. "I do!"

"He's fine. Really likes working at that bookstore, and he's in some management position so the money's not too bad and he gets a discount."

"So he's pretty much died and gone to heaven," Lorelai said.

"Pretty much. And he met a girl."

She couldn't help snorting slightly. "Oh, really?"

Luke ignored the bemused disbelief in her voice. "She works at one of those makeup counters at Saks, apparently. And she's a student, a playwright, or something. Goes to the New School."

"James Lipton," Lorelai said. "I wonder what her favorite word is. And if she can get me free samples." She paused. "Maybe—" she began, and stopped when the CD in the stereo moved to a new song.

"I'll never forget the first time that I heard—"
"Oh, God," she moaned. "Luke!"

"—that pretty mouth say that dirty word..."

"What?"

"Luke, I hate this song."

"Why?"

Lorelai wrinkled her nose. "It's so condescending. Oh," she said, dropping her voice, "my girlfriend is so cute when she messes things up, which is all the time and I'm the man and I never mess anything up and—"

"That's not what he's saying."

"The whole thing is a list of times she tries to do nice stuff for him and she messes up and how absolutely adorable it is, and as a woman, I find that mildly insulting."

Luke pulled her to her feet and put an arm around her waist, taking her hand in his free one, forcing her into a slowly, lazy dance. Lorelai rolled her eyes but leaned into him. She slung her arm around his shoulders and let her forehead rest against his cheek.

He whispered into her hair, teasing. "It's about how you love someone, warts and all," he told her, "especially when she's doing something with you or for you that just shows you why you fell in love with her in the first place."

She tilted her head back to look at him. "And why is that?"

Luke studied her, his eyes soft. "What choice did you have?"

Lorelai grinned, closed her eyes, shook her head. "You're cheesier than that bread you make, Luke." She released his hand and clasped both hers behind his neck, pulling him closer. He rested his forehead against hers. "I kinda like it, though." She kissed him lightly. "Rory's not going to be home for a couple of hours," she said hopefully, raising her eyebrows, her chin against his.

"Oh?" he asked. He held her close, pressing his palms against her back. "And?"

She bit his lower lip. "Mean," she said. She dropped her hands and let them settle on his chest as she played with his collar. "You found a shirt," she said.

"Nah. I did a load of laundry, washed it while you were asleep."

Lorelai concentrated on the buttons of Luke's flannel a moment. She worked her lower lip between her teeth, thinking. She raised her eyes to him to be met by a questioning look.

"Luke, come and live with me," she said.

He averted his eyes immediately and she felt him tense. She pulled her hands back and made to step away, but he kept his arms firmly locked around her. He sighed, passing his eyes over her face, scanning her features, before he returned her gaze fully. "Let's talk about it when you get someone settled for nights at the inn, huh?"

She nodded. "Oh. Okay." She turned her cheek, her eyes stinging.

She tipped her face to his again. "No, you're totally right. You're right. It'll be better then, things will be settled. It's good." She closed her eyes rather than watch him react to the shrillness in her tone, the words stumbling over each other as she spoke.

He kissed her briefly and tangled a hand in her hair as he massaged the base of her neck. She relaxed against him a little, letting him rub away the disappointment.

"You want to eat?" he asked.

Lorelai laid her hand against his cheek. "Uh-uh," she said. "Take me upstairs."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You want me to take you upstairs?"

"Oh, don't be cute," she said. "Kiss me, take me upstairs, and worship my body to express your total adoration of its glory."

Luke chuckled. "My crazy girl," he said, his mouth against hers. He did as he was told, kissed her right there in the kitchen, cradling her head in his hand as he slid the other under the hem of her tee shirt, kneading the skin on the small of her back. He broke the kiss and, before either of them had caught their breath, put one arm firmly around her waist as he reached down and caught the other behind her knees, grunting as he lifted her to carry her up the stairs. She looped her arms around his neck, laughed as he deposited her on the bed.

Lorelai thought about it now, smiling to herself in the dark. She put her empty mug on the floor beside the couch. She lay down, pressed her cheek to the couch cushions, and closed her eyes. Luke, she thought, pulling a blanket down over herself, was the best kisser. He knew just how tightly to hold her, just where to put his hands, how much pressure was just enough, when to pull back. He had the best mouth, the best lips, warm and soft and all the better for the way his beard could be so rough against her skin. He had the best hands, not too rough and calloused or too smooth and soft, and they fit just so at her waist, at the base of her neck. Being the best kisser with the best hands and knowing her so well, knowing just where to drop a kiss and to trace circles on her skin with his fingertips...

She touched her lower lip with the tips of her fingers, remembering. She hadn't exaggerated, the night of his birthday.

They didn't often talk about sex. It was almost a relief: she liked that he didn't need her to boast to him about his physical prowess and that he never leered at her about her own. She wasn't surprised he wasn't chatty during the sex itself—being Luke, he wasn't known for his loquaciousness in most social situations and sex wasn't any different—and was thankful that he wasn't. It was, she'd always thought, the one time, the one activity, during which she was more than perfectly content to be silent and hold her tongue. So to speak, she thought. She loved that Luke didn't feel the need to narrate the whole experience, the way Max had—Max, who had a speech for every occasion, had been hyper-verbal in he never checked in, the way Jason had, always asking for status updates, needing validation at every moment. When he spoke, it was all breathless incoherence, pleas and I love yous and love and her name, and those were the things she returned. Moments like they'd had that night of his birthday, when she'd stopped him and told him she wasn't going anywhere, were rare, and she preferred it that way. Luke was eloquent enough without words, she thought.

Lorelai burrowed into her blanket further. Though she was dressed warmly in a thermal long sleeved shirt and fleece pants and the afghan was heavy, she shivered, thinking of the way he breathed that word love when they were together that afternoon with the curtains closed against the gray day outside, the way he'd run his thumb over her lower lip and whispered in her ear as she turned her head, arched her back to be closer to him, the way the word made his voice catch
and her chest ache.

Had someone else called her this, she knew, it would have grated on her nerves. Someone like Max, she knew, could only sound like he was trying too hard, and it would be cloying and awkward; worse yet, guys like Christopher or Jason would have only made it seem condescending and cheap.

A year ago, she thought, if someone had told her she'd be sitting in the front parlor of her inn by herself in the dark and the middle of the night, contemplating the fact that Luke Danes called her "love" as though it were the most natural thing in the world when other men would have only pissed her off in doing so, she would have brushed it off with an uncomfortable laugh and a roll of the eye. It then would eat at her for the next forty eight hours while she pretended not to think about it and in the process would end up picking a fight with him to make herself feel better and only succeed in making both herself and Luke miserable. But a year ago, she thought, he'd been with Nicole and she'd been with Jason and both she and Luke together worked at deliberately misunderstanding their relationship—still just friendship, but not friendship, fraught as it was with passive-aggressive jealousy and the tension of mixed messages and closeness that was both a little too close and not close enough.

It wasn't entirely fair, Lorelai knew, to compare the past and present. She hadn't been friends with the men in her life before, not the way she had been with Luke. Even Christopher, she thought, was different. That wasn't a relationship either of them had had to try very hard for—it was one they grew up with. Her friendship with Luke was one that she'd sought out though she'd never given much thought to why. Probably, she thought, because the idea of someone not finding my bullshit utterly and completely fascinating confounded me to the point I had no choice but to wear him down and make him like me.

Fair or not, he invited comparison: he was so unlike anyone she'd ever been with. He wasn't smooth. He didn't flatter her just to please her—didn't pander to her to keep her interested. They had all been nice guys—Chris, the first time, and Max, also the first time, and then Max and Chris again, Alex after them... Jason, not so nice, in the end. She'd liked them all, loved the attention, loved being pursued. And there'd been at least a bit of a spark with all of them—it wouldn't have been worth it without it. Sparks, she thought, swirling the coffee in the oversized mug, but not connections.

She was probably giving Luke a little too much credit: that he understood her so well had more to do with the fact that they'd both managed to entangle themselves so completely in each other's lives for the better part of ten years than anything else. Even so, he'd challenged her, he gave back as good as he got, he stood in her driveway and waved shovels and yelled at her, pushed back when she pushed first, never let her get away with the easiest answer. When he did give in, it was never with a wink and a chuckle and affected amusement—he did it in the most Luke-like way possible. It reminded her of something Winky told her the first time they'd sat and talked; she had been telling Lorelai about her husband Harry, and she'd said, "It was easy. Even when it was hard, it was easy."

That was the difference, she thought. It was comfortable and he fit. They squabbled and baited each other, the way they always had; she asked too much and he was too silent, and they more often than not held onto their own private hurts until they came to the breaking point. There were things they didn't talk about. Lorelai thought about that night in Luke's apartment, that night she'd come to him and they hadn't talked about the tests she took in the mall still hadn't talked about "those things," as he'd called them. There were moments, pauses in her days when she'd stopped to take a breath and rest and grab a cup of coffee and let her mind wander, that she'd come back to "those things" and felt slightly restless, slightly regretful that she hadn't taken up the offer to talk about it. During those moments, she'd sigh and push the thought aside again.
She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. She couldn’t keep doing that, she knew—eventually it would have to work itself out. But there were more interesting things to think about now. This matter of nicknames, she thought, was going to needle her until she figured it out. She closed her eyes and began to run through the list again. *Sweetie, honey, darling, dear, baby, sugar...*

Lorelai sat up, suddenly, a pricking sensation at the back of her neck and goose bumps raising on her arms. Her fingers and toes began to tingle and she felt the familiar looseness in her joints return as she swung her legs over the side of the couch and slid across the slick wooden floor to the window. She cupped her hands around her eyes and peered out into the yard, squinting.

It had begun to snow. Big, fat flakes sifted slowly through the thin light coming from the lamps on the porch, whirling softly in the breeze. Lorelai beamed, smiling broadly as she skipped back to her office. *Enough with the freaking stupid sleet and slush we’ve had all winter! Glory, glory, hallelujah, bring on the white stuff!* she thought. She jammed her feet into boots and wrapped a scarf around her neck. She struggled into her jacket and pulled her hat down over her ears as she wound her way down the hall towards the front door, reaching into her pocket for her gloves. She paused, one hand on the doorknob, finding only one. *Glove gnomes,* she thought, *always stealing just the left one.* She shrugged and put on the right hand glove as she let herself out.

The front yard was entirely still as the snow fell. Lorelai hugged herself, bouncing on her toes as she stood on the top step and listened to the particular kind of silence that only belongs to snowy nights. The porch light opened the lawn out before her, creating a circle around the front of the inn that dissipated into complete darkness and gave Lorelai the sensation of absolute safety. She took a breath and closed her eyes—there was nothing about this moment she didn’t love, every single year. The stillness, the smell of the cold, and the tangy taste of air, all of it together gave her an utterly peaceful feeling she couldn’t replicate on her own. Her mind moved so quickly, the words never ceased, but when the snow came, she felt herself slow, felt restful.

She opened her eyes slowly, unsurprised to see Luke emerging from the darkness into the yard, a cardboard carton holding two paper to-go cups and a paper bag in his hands. She smiled, descending the stairs to meet him. He was bundled in his army jacket, a red wool scarf peeking over the collar and a gray wool cap on his head. He cocked an eyebrow at her as he approached, the expression on his face one of bemused tolerance.

"How did you get here so fast?" she asked.

He leaned towards her and kissed her lightly. "I was up."

Lorelai closed her eyes and rested her forehead against his. His skin was cold. She thought she felt a slight tremor in his hands as he held the coffee and baked goods.

He handed her the paper bag. "Here. Donuts. And the one with the white top is yours."

She opened the bag and looked inside. "What’s that? A corn muffin?"

"That’s for me."

"And what are you drinking?" she asked, taking her coffee and leading the way to the porch stairs to sit.

He sat beside her. "Hot cider."

"Learn to live a little, Luke."
Luke watched Lorelai pick through the donuts he'd brought as she sipped her coffee. He gripped his cider in his hands, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. "What have you been doing all night?" he asked abruptly. Lorelai darted a glance at him, surprised. His voice was overly loud, his tone a little too tense.

"Thinking," she said slowly, around a mouthful of chocolate donut. "And drinking coffee."

He snorted. "Right. And how's that going for you?"

She shrugged. "I have yet to reach my threshold." She handed him the corn muffin he'd brought for himself. She studied him as he pulled off his gloves and separated the top of the muffin from the bottom. He concentrated on crumbling it into pieces rather than actually eat it. She smiled. "You didn't have to do this, you know."

"What?"

She spread her hands. "This. Wait up because I told you it would snow, bring me coffee and donuts, all of it." She lowered her eyes and pulled at the fingertips of her glove. "You do too much for me."

"Well, I love you," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. "And I know how much you look forward to this."


Luke took a swig of cider. "So, what have you been thinking about?" he asked. The hitch in his voice was now unmistakable, she thought. He cleared his throat, and she decided to let it pass.

She stared out over the yard. She turned her coffee cup in her hands, not really wanting to answer. *Gee, I was thinking about you and all the other men I've been with. Wanna hear the list? And then I started thinking about "those things."* The thought made her smile drop; she shoved half a donut in her mouth to avoid replying.

"Nuffin'," she said through her full mouth. "Nuffin' a aw."

He laughed. "Okay, then."

Lorelai swallowed and turned to look at him once more. He seemed pale, though she thought it might just be the quality of the light coming from the porch lamps and the brightness of the snow falling. He caught her eye and furrowed his brow.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

She wanted to inch even closer to him, to rest her head on his shoulder and tuck her forehead against his neck, to hold her coffee and breath him in and enjoy the snow. But the questions were bubbling up within her now, the questions she'd squelched repeatedly since before his birthday. She spoke before she realized it.

"I'm really good at avoiding things, you know?"

Luke cleared his throat once more. "And what specifically are you avoiding?"

She chewed on her lip a moment. "The thing we haven't been talking about since November."

"Oh. That." His face fell.
"Yeah. That." She drew her feet up a step and leaned forward to her chin on her knees, balanced her coffee on the toes of her shoes. She shut her eyes once more, squeezing them tightly closed. "Never mind."

She jumped when he rested his hand on the small of her back. "No," he said. "If this is bothering you—"

"I wouldn't say it's been bothering me," she told him, "except... it's been bothering me, a little."

"So, we should talk about it," he said thickly.

Lorelai tipped her head to look at him, her expression pained. "I don't mean to ruin this—I mean, you went out of your way and—"


"I will," she said.

They were silent several long moments.

"Luke? If I really had been—been pregnant... would you have asked me to marry you?"

"Yes," he said. He waited a beat. He was tentative as he spoke. "Would you have said yes?"

She hesitated. "No."

He turned to look at her. "No?"

She twisted awkwardly where she sat. "Not right away."

"Why the hell not?" he asked, his mouth hanging open. His voice, his expression were both a mess of emotion, confused and hurt and pissed all at once. Lorelai felt her chest tighten, a sharp pain behind her ribs, seeing the vulnerable brokenness in his eyes. She reached for his hand, and though he resisted, she linked her fingers through his.

She spoke slowly, studying their entwined fingers. "Because I wouldn't want to say yes if I thought you'd asked me because you felt like you had to."

Luke made a noise of disbelief. "You know—"

"I know," she said. "But if I had come to you and said, 'Luke, I'm pregnant,' and you'd said, 'okay, then, will you marry me?,' I'd have—I'd have gotten angry. I'd have thought you didn't want any of it, that you felt obligated—"

"You know me better than that," he said, drawing his hand back and rising. He began to pace. "Don't you?"

Lorelai clutched her coffee in both hands and drew into herself, shuddering with cold. "Of course. But—it would have—can you see it from my perspective? That it wouldn't have felt like that was what you wanted?"

He sighed. "I guess. I don't—I don't know. But if you'd said no—"

"You'd have done what?"

He looked at her sadly. "I would have—I would have thought you didn't want any of it, either."
The baby, me..."

"Don't you know me better than that?" she cried.

Luke stopped pacing and threw his arms out, leaning forward slightly. "I do, but you ask someone to marry you and her immediate response is no? Might make you question yourself."

He paused and looked down, putting his hands on his hips. Lorelai watched him, her eyes filling, as he slowed his ragged breathing and attempted to calm himself. When he looked up at her, his carefully neutral expression stung her slightly. He kept his tone deliberate and even.

"What if I asked you now? Would you say yes if I asked you now?"

Lorelai's mouth fell open. She widened her eyes and a rush of heat swept through her. "What?"

Luke averted his eyes and began pacing again. "Forget it."

She made an indeterminate high pitched noise, opening and closing her mouth several times as she tried to reply. "You can't say something like that and then ask me to forget it!"

"Why the fuck are we arguing about a past hypothetical situation that never happened?" Luke yelled, grabbing the bottom of his hat and pulling it viciously over his ears, his face screwed in an expression of pained frustration.

Lorelai dropped her eyes. Her mouth suddenly felt bitter, tasted of guilt. "I just needed to—I needed to know."

"Know what?"

"What would have happened. If I really had been pregnant," she said. "I mean, we might not even still be—"

"Don't," he said again. "You know that's not true. I would have been pissed as hell, but I would have stayed. You know that. We'd have done it together."

Lorelai gave him a watery smile, and he returned to sit beside her. "Good," she said. "That's very good."

Luke cupped her face in his hands and studied her a long moment, running his thumbs against her cheekbones as he did. She tilted her chin up and kissed him, laying her hands over his. Lorelai brushed the tips of her fingers along the backs of his hands as he kissed her softly back. She pulled away, her throat aching slightly. She kept her eyes closed, drawing deep breaths. Now, she thought, she knew, he knew, and he was still there. She held his hands to her face, her own now tightly gripping his wrists, feeling his pulse flutter quickly beneath his skin. Luke kissed her bottom lip, her chin, her eyes, her forehead, still lightly stroking her cheeks with his thumbs.

"It would have been," he said.

Lorelai opened her eyes and searched his face. The tremors, the happy, nervous shaking he'd given her that first time he kissed her had never gone away—the certainty she saw in the set of his expression, his eyes, brought them on full force.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"We're good," he replied. She kissed him once more, briefly, and squeezed his hands before releasing them.
They were silent together, watching the snow fall as they sat side-by-side, Lorelai under Luke's arm, her head in the hollow of his shoulder. She replayed the conversation over in her head, hearing the array of tones with which Luke had spoken, always coming back to the calm, even way he'd asked her what she would say to a proposal now. It wasn't something she could think about; she was emotional enough as it was. She lifted her head.

"I'm going to go in and get some more coffee. Do you want anything? Tea?"

Luke started, as though she'd disturbed him from some reverie. His eyes were distant as he shook his head. "I want—" He stopped, stared blankly ahead another long moment. His breathing seemed shallow. He closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest with a sigh.

"Luke?"

He opened his eyes but didn't look at her as he put his gloves back on and adjusted his hat. "You know, I should go," he said briskly. "I have a delivery before we open, and—"

"Oh. Okay." She waited a bit, slouching in disappointment. "If you have to go, you have to go." He still didn't look at her, nodding, and so she sighed and kissed his cheek. "Thanks for coming, though."

"Yeah." He rose, jamming his hands in his pockets. "So, I'll see you. Later."

Lorelai forced a smile. "Yes, you will." She paused. "You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"O-okay," she replied, an expression of disbelief on her face. "I'll come by the diner."

"Good," he said. "Good."

Lorelai watched him turn on his heel and head back towards the dark edge of the yard. She stayed where she was, her hands clasped at her shins as she hugged her knees, intending to see him out as far as she could before she went back in for more coffee. It felt colder, suddenly. He left tracks in the fresh snow, sharp patches of brown peeking through the white, and seeing him retreat left her feeling suddenly bereft, lonely, almost hollow.

Luke trudged slowly, shaking his head as he went. He paused at the edge of the yard, hesitantly turning towards Lorelai and then back, towards her and then back. She watched him, her head tipped to one side as she tried to figure out what he was doing. He looked over his shoulder at her and she gave him a questioning look.

"Oh, fuck it," he said, jogging back to her.

"What's with you?" she asked.

He dropped beside her with a shrug. "I just—I can stay, a while."

She beamed at him. "I'm glad. I still need coffee, though. Come in with me?"

"Nah," he said. "I'll wait here."

Lorelai shook her head as she went inside, smiling to herself. She refilled her cup with the almost stale brew she'd made earlier and went heavy on the cream and sugar to compensate for it. She dawdled a moment in the kitchen despite the creeping sensation along the back of her neck, watching the snow fall before the window over the sink. This, she thought, was peace. When she
returned, Luke was in the same spot, tapping his toes and hitting his knees with the palms of his hands.

She sat and pushed herself close to him, nudging him until he put his arm around her. He held her a moment before he took his arm back. He pulled at the seams of his jeans. She could see him working at something, his brow furrowed in concentration, his jaw tightly clenched. She laid her hand on his arm, rubbing the material of his coat in what she hoped would be a reassuring way. She was about to open her mouth, to tell him to talk to her, when he lifted his head.

"Lorelai?"

"Hmm?"

"What made you bring all of this up now?"

She shrugged, sloshing her coffee. "I've had a lot of time on my hands to think about things."

"And?"

She darted a glance at him and took a breath. "I was thinking—I was thinking about how it would have been different if all of this had happened with someone else." He stiffened at these words as if she'd pricked him with something sharp. She stared at the yard before her as she went on. "Anyone else—well, first of all, anyone else would have left way back in July when I lost it after the town meeting, so it would have all been moot anyway. But even then..." She trailed off and said nothing for a moment; Luke waited. "If you had been anyone else, because I wasn't pregnant, and I hadn't told you that I thought I was, I probably wouldn't have told you at all. And things would have gotten all uncomfortable and strange—"

"Like that scene with Harry and Sally when they decide sleeping together was a mistake and he starts eating the salad like a lunatic?" he suggested.

Lorelai laughed shakily. "Yes, just like that." She paused. "No one else would still be here right now. That's what I was thinking about."

They were silent again for several long moments. Lorelai's left hand burned with cold and the small space between she and Luke began to produce a dull ache in her abdomen. At last, she hazardced a sidelong look at him, surprised to find him biting back a smile.

"What?"

He shrugged. "Oh, nothing."

"Luke."

The smile got the better of him. "I was just thinking—"

"Let me in on the joke, then."

"Just—if we were to view your life as some sort of game of Survivor—"

"Oh, stop," she groaned, hitting his knee. She shivered and tucked her left hand between her knees. "I love snow," she sighed, gazing past Luke to see the snow falling over the barn. "I love this."

He reached for her hand and held it between his gloved ones, rubbing her skin lightly. "Why are you only wearing one glove?"
"I lost this one," she said, pouting. "Tragic, because I love this set. It makes me so cute."

"You're already cute," he said. "It's probably around somewhere."

"Probably," she shrugged. She sat beside him and let him warm up her hand a while longer, giggling when he brought it to his mouth and breathed on it, kissing the joint at the base of her thumb.

They fell silent once more. Luke continued to warm Lorelai's hand. After a few moments, he took off his own gloves and folded her hand in one of his, stroking her knuckles lightly with the other. Again she felt the slight swell, the headiness that came from contact, from proximity. She glanced at him as he stared intently at their hands. She studied him before looking away: the moment now was good, her hand in his, coffee, the first snow. She didn't think anything of it when he released her hand and turned the palm up until he placed something cold at the center and closed her fingers over it.

She turned back to him, her eyes wide, as he gently pushed her hand away from him. She uncurled her fingers and looked down at what she now held. She drew a sharp breath.

The ring was old, an antique, she could tell, a simple setting of a square cut diamond set off by smaller sapphires in an elaborately engraved platinum band. Lorelai jerked her head up, searching his face. His expression was watchful, waiting, tremulously hopeful, slightly anxious. She opened her mouth, closed it again, and opened it once more. She made a small noise. Never in her life had she been so completely without words. She momentarily thought her entire body had gone numb, as well, as though her brain had ceased functioning altogether.

"Marry me," Luke said simply. His eyes were clear, certain, the blue intense as he looked into hers and waited.

She closed her eyes and inhaled slowly through her nose. She was intensely conscious of the feel of the ring in her palm, the constriction in her throat. She sought words, struggled to tie them together into sentences. She could only hear Luke's voice, the words he'd said echoing slightly as if from a distance. Her heartbeat felt inordinately slow, as did her breathing, as though she'd fallen asleep and hadn't noticed. The bite from the cold on her cheeks and the electric charge Luke gave off assured her she was awake, that he was staring at her, and that he was waiting for her to speak. She opened her eyes.

"You want me to marry you," she said.

He nodded, watching her carefully. "That's what I said, yes."

She dropped her gaze and stared at his left shoulder. Looking at his left shoulder was safer, there wasn't any expectation sitting on his left shoulder, staring at her, waiting. He had a seam coming undone; she should fix that for him. Really, the coat was so old she should make him retire it altogether, though it wouldn't go over well. A nice navy pea coat, maybe, she thought, something heavy. And a whole new set—hat, scarf, gloves... Her stomach flipped over. I only have one glove. And there's a ring in my hand that is without the glove. I am holding an engagement ring. That Luke gave me. This is a ring, in my hand, that Luke gave me, a ring that Luke gave me because he wants to get engaged. To be married. To me.

"Lorelai?" Luke ducked his head, trying to catch her eye.

Lorelai looked up again, startled. She wished she could stop feeling the cold of the platinum band against her palm so sharply—she couldn't think beyond the ring in her hand. She closed the distance between them, pressing her lips hard against his—she only wanted the contact, something
solid other than the ring cutting her skin. She drew back, her heart pounding in her throat, now beating so fast she feared she'd pass out. Her spine tingled. She blinked a few times, trying to gather herself together.

She tried not to think about the flush creeping under her skin, the rush of blood she heard in her ears, to ignore herself as she dredged up some semblance of verbal ability. Luke wanted her to marry him. He was proposing. And she was sitting in the same place she had been twenty minutes ago, when they'd argued about this very question. She had been so sure, she knew how she would have reacted in that particular situation. In the present situation, however, reacting required total concentration; the fact that he was sitting so close, barely breathing, causing her heart rate to escalate every other second, was making it all the more difficult.

"Are you sure?" she asked. She heard the desperation in the words, the pleading edge—her voice didn't sound like her own, it shook too much, choked on too much feeling.

Luke kissed her forehead. He caught her eyes again. His voice was low and even as he spoke. "I'm sure," he said. "I want you to marry me. I'm sure about that. I'm really, really sure about that."

She furrowed her brow and felt a tear skim her cheek as she unconsciously shook her head. "You know, this is—this is forever." She extended the word as far as she could, enunciating and stretching each syllable. She liked the way the word tasted as it rolled out on her tongue. "Forever," she said again. "'Till death do we part, and everything."

Luke pulled back to look at her more fully. He pushed a lock of hair off her cheek, sliding his finger down the side of her face. He traced her features, just as he had kissed them earlier, the lines of her mouth, her jaw, her eyes. Lorelai shivered. "I'm pretty okay with that," he said. "This is what I want. 'Till death do we part."

She felt her eyes welling up as she smiled. His breath was sweet, smelled of apples. "Say it again," she whispered.

He smiled softly. "Marry me."

She kissed him, light and slow, drew away at length. She opened her fist and contemplated the ring, now hot against the center of her palm. She caught her lower lip between her teeth, took a breath, and raised her eyes to his.

"Yeah," she said. "I'll marry you."

Luke rose, pulling Lorelai to her feet with him and lifting her into an almost painfully tight embrace. She closed her eyes as he kissed her, feeling the rapidity of Luke's heartbeat even through his jacket, feeling it in every inch of him as he held her to him, feeling it run through her. She fit herself against his chest, deepening the kiss as she both leaned forward and pulled him closer. The snow fell faster now, and a sudden wind came up, drifting snow into their eyes. When at last they pulled away from each other, Lorelai began to kiss the snowflakes from Luke's face. She closed her eyes again, straining onto the tips of her toes as she rested her chin on Luke's shoulder.

"Can we just stay like this? Just like this?" she asked. "Forever?"

He ran a hand through her hair and put her mouth to her ear. "That's the plan."

Lorelai kissed him just beneath his jaw as she inched back. She concentrated on the feel of his hand at the base of his neck, his arm around her waist, the sound of the snowy silence and Luke's labored breathing, the smell of the cold and his musty jacket and that particular spicy smell that
belonged only to Luke, the quality of the light and the shadows created by the snow as it drifted, the way the inn waited behind them as they stood in the center of the yard and the circle of light that enclosed it. She memorized the moment and looked to Luke, watching her as always, his gaze overwhelming. Lorelai hoped his fingers were burning like hers, that happiness this vast and huge hurt a little, if only as a reminder.

"I love you so much," she told him. "Just so much."

Luke swallowed thickly. "I can't tell you," he began, and stopped, lowered his head. She waited, placing a hand over his heart. He held it there as he raised his eyes again. "I just love you," he said, shrugging. "I just do."

They kissed again, less urgently this time. Luke lifted her off her feet as he brought her closer. She wrapped her arms around his neck, cradling his head in her hands. When they parted, she took his hand, linking her fingers through his and bringing him back to the porch stairs.

They rearranged themselves on the top step, Luke drawing Lorelai into his lap. She draped her arm across his shoulders as he put both his arms around her waist. She rested her hand against his cheek and kissed the tip of his nose. This face, she thought, I love this perfect face.

"The ring!" she said. "Can I put on the ring?"

"It is yours," he said. "But wait, can I—will you let me do it?"

Lorelai pressed the ring in his hand. Luke studied her a long moment and leaned in to kiss her. When he pulled back and looked down at her hand, she saw tears in his eyes. She bit her lip as he slid the ring onto the appropriate finger of her left hand. They both stared at it a moment. Lorelai kissed him again.

"We," she said, almost reverent, "are getting married." Luke nodded in reply, his head against her shoulder. Lorelai raised her hand and looked at the ring again. She spoke in the same awed tone. "I'm wearing an engagement ring."

"Do you like it?"

"I love it," she said. "Did you pick it out all by yourself?"

"I did," he said indignantly. "When we went to New York."

Her mouth fell open again. "You've had this since November?"

He looked down. "I wanted to wait."

"For?"

"The first snow," he said sheepishly. "It's not a thousand yellow daises, or anything, but—"

Lorelai softened. "Luke. Seriously. This? This was perfect." She sighed contentedly. "A man who proposes with coffee and donuts is a man you say yes to." She paused. "Coffee and donuts and a ring." She looked back at him. "You had a ring."

"Yes, I had a ring."

She kissed him, closing her eyes tightly, her palms flat against his cheeks. She didn't tell him that she'd been proposed to at least twice before, blindsided by the offers, and neither time had there
been a ring present. *Yet another item on the list,* she thought.

"What time is it?" she asked, at length.


She bounced in his lap. "Michel won't be here for a while," she said. "Will you stay? I want you to come home with me and be there when I tell Rory."

"Oh, Rory knows," he said.

Lorelai sat up straight. "*What?*

"She knows," Luke repeated, shrugging. "I showed her the ring, asked her permission."

"When?"

"The day I bought it."

"She's known since November? And she didn't tell me?" She sat a moment, stunned. "I feel so betrayed! I can't believe she didn't tell me." She shook her head. "It's just so wrong." Luke, she could see, was trying not to laugh. "Yeah, yuk it up, Burger Boy. Regardless, I still want you to be there when *I* tell her *officially,*" she said, the italics punctuated with sharp pokes into his shoulder.

"I have no objections to that," Luke replied. "You want to sit out here until then, or can we go inside and thaw out at some point?"

Lorelai grinned slyly. "Well, it would be highly inappropriate to bring you inside and let you make sweet, sweet love to me on my desk in the office—"

"Yes, highly inappropriate. And uncomfortable."

"—but there's a couch," she finished. "It's a bit narrow, but—"

"How is that more appropriate than a desk?"


"Seriously, when you talk to Rory, I want you to wear a sign, or something, so I can prepare myself."

"—and engage in some heated canoodling on said couch limited to the activities of groping, kissing, necking, and attempting to remove each other's clothing while simultaneously not allowing said removal of clothing to occur."

"So you want us to behave like teenagers making out in the basement while Mom and Dad are upstairs listening," he said.

She lit up, smiling. "Exactly! But, as we are older and more mature, I might actually let you touch my bra." She leaned in conspiratorially. "Boys can't handle that much excitement, but I think you might be up to it."

She gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. "So dirty!"

Luke kissed her and pushed her off his lap, onto her feet as he rose. "Let's get with the canoodling."

Lorelai tripped behind him, hanging on his arm. "Oh, being married is going to be so much fun," she laughed.

They spent the next two hours on the couch in Lorelai's office, kissing and talking and laying quietly. Lorelai lay tucked between Luke and the back of the couch, her head on his chest. He played with the ends of her hair and she traced patterns on her shirt with the tip of her fingers.

"Were you going to leave, before? Before you asked?"

Luke shifted. "You just told me you would have said no if I had asked you earlier—"

"There were extenuating circumstances," Lorelai said.

"I know that, but—my confidence was a little shaken, that's all."

They were quiet again.

"Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"Is this why you didn't want to talk about moving in with me?"

He nodded. "Seemed like jumping the gun."

"We're meeting some people this afternoon," she told him. "If at least one of them is halfway decent, we're hiring that person. I can't stand this much longer." She lifted her head to look up at him. "If that happens, will you come live at the house?"

Luke sighed. "Lorelai—"

"You want to wait until we're married, don't you?" she asked. He didn't reply. Lorelai settled back against his chest. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"If that's what you want," she said. "I don't get it, but if that's what you want, it's okay."

"Okay, then."

Later, Luke pulled back and caught his breath. "It's really okay with you if I don't move in?"

Lorelai blinked. "What?"

"Not moving in—you're fine with it?"

She kissed the line of his jaw. "Whatever you want, Luke. Now shut up."

A few moments later, he again drew back. "Why don't we just talk about it later, okay?"

"Talk about what? You're really breaking the rhythm, here, pal."
"Moving in. We'll sit down and have a conversation."

Lorelai smiled indulgently. "Okay. Let's do that."

Still later, as Lorelai admired her ring, she cut Luke off in the middle of a story he was telling about a kitchen fire he'd had during the week. "You know that getting married means we're going to have a wedding, right?"

"And?"

"Like, a whole wedding thing. There'll be flowers, and a cake, and music, and you and I will stand up in front of everyone we know, and I'll be in a dress and you'll have to wear a suit, and they'll watch us be all mushy and dopey and—"

"Maybe you'll be mushy and dopey."

"—we'll have to dance, and there'll be a party—Luke, this is going to be a whole spectacle," Lorelai finished. "I mean, all of Stars Hollow will turn out for this."

He sighed. "I realize this, yes."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Lorelai, I'm pretty sure the day I marry you, I'm not going to paying attention to much else."

Lorelai rolled her eyes and draped herself across his torso. "Mushy and dopey," she said. "And I love it."

When she heard stirring in the kitchen, Lorelai struggled to sit up, adjusting her shirt and running her hands through her hair. She stopped and looked at the ring on her hand, tipped her head to one side.

"What?" Luke asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

"I love this ring," she said. "I love it." She smiled. "We're getting married."

Luke sat up and put a hand to Lorelai's cheek. "We're getting married."

She turned her face into his hand and kissed his palm. She felt herself begin to tear up again and closed her eyes, pushing her cheek into his hand further, looking away from him.

"Hey," he said softly. "What's this?"

"I'm just happy." She wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "Oy with the crying already," she said, laughing. "C'mon, I want to go home."

They met Michel at the front desk. Lorelai kept her hands hidden in her pockets to avoid questions about the ring, one arm linked through Luke's. She kept him close, relishing the flutters and the vibrations being near him caused, and she wanted to stretch the feeling out as long as possible, to hold him to her side, to latch onto him in a way that almost frightened her—but the fear was a good one, controlled, reassured by the solidity of Luke's body beside looked annoyed already, his arms crossed over his chest and a pissy expression on his face. She clarified the arrangements for the day: she would come back early in the afternoon to take over and begin interviewing people while Michel went home for a break before he took over for the night.

"I am uncomfortable leaving Paw-Paw and Chin-Chin alone," he pouted. "Paw-Paw still looks
"Michel," Lorelai said, "if Paw-Paw is not currently projectile vomiting and is fit to be left alone, I am not spending another night here. Got it?"

He made a strangled noise in reply and stalked away to the kitchen. Lorelai made a face at his retreating back and tugged on Luke's hand.

"Take me home, Diner Man."

The house was quiet, Rory still sleeping when they came in. Lorelai kicked off her shoes and dropped her hat, scarf, and glove by the coat stand before she hung up her jacket. Luke gave her a look as he followed suit, draping his scarf over his coat and tucking his gloves with his hat into the pockets.

"This is why you lose gloves," he said, pointing.

Lorelai smiled and snaked her arms around his neck. Luke settled his hands at her waist and waited for her to speak. She only shrugged and kissed him, leaning forward as she did. He tightened his arms around her and rubbed her shoulder blades. He stepped back at length.

"I'm going to go up and take a very long, very hot shower," she said.

"Sounds good to me."

"Yeah?" she asked, gripping his collar lightly in her hands. "Care to join me?"

"I do, yes," he replied. "But Rory's still—"

"Luke, I'm pretty sure that Rory knows you've seen me naked. Also, she definitely knows that I've seen you naked. In fact, I can tell you positively that she knows we have sex from time to time," Lorelai said. "She does know what sex is, you know. She's very smart."

He looked at her from beneath lowered brows. "Regardless. Not in the shower, not while she's home."

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Don't say anything to her if she wakes up before I get out, okay?" She kissed him again and made for the stairs. She stopped on the landing and leaned over the banister. "Luke," she called softly. He turned, standing at the end of the hall. "We're getting married."

Luke grinned. "Yeah, we are."

Once in her bedroom, Lorelai stripped, leaving a trail of clothes haphazardly across the floor. She slid on her robe and stood before her dresser, brushing her hair. She was acutely aware of the ring on her finger, the feel of it as she ran her fingers through her curls and the glint reflected in the mirror as it caught the early morning light from the window. She took longer than necessary in the shower, her skin turning rosy under the hot water. After, she dressed quickly in jeans and a sweater and bounded down the stairs in her bare feet, tying her damp hair up into a messy knot as she went. Luke was standing by the sink, his hands on his hips, staring out over the yard. Lorelai came up behind him, put her arms around his middle, her cheek on his shoulder.

"I have to tell you," she said, "that I am ridiculously happy right now."

He looked back at her. "Yeah?"
"Mm-hmm."

Luke lifted his arm, and Lorelai shifted, letting him pull her to his chest. He kissed the top of her head. "Good," he said.

"I'm assuming the monosyllabic behavior means that you reciprocate, and you are just too overcome with feeling to express yourself."

He kissed her in reply.

Rory's door opened a half hour later. Lorelai sat on the counter, drinking coffee. Luke stood beside her; he held her hand and traced patterns on her skin. Rory shuffled into the kitchen, yawning and rubbing her eyes. She went to the coffee maker first.

"Morning, babe," Lorelai said. Rory mumbled a reply as she poured her coffee. "Sleep well?"

Rory shot Lorelai a filthy look as she took her first sip. "Early," she said.

"Hey, guess who's getting married?" Lorelai asked.

Luke darted a look at her that clearly spoke: "nice transition there, way to ease her into it" She kissed his cheek.

Rory furrowed her brow. "J. Lo? Again? Isn't she technically still married to that singer guy?" she asked sleepily. She slouched, heading for the cabinet where the Pop-Tarts were kept.

"I was thinking of someone a little closer to home," Lorelai replied, easing herself off the counter. "Or, at home. This home. Our home."

Rory turned abruptly. She looked from her mother to Luke, comprehension slowly dawning. Her mouth dropped open. She met Lorelai's eyes with a questioning look.

"Really, babe," Lorelai said. She held up her hand once more and twitched the ring finger.

Rory nearly broke her coffee cup in her rush to tackle her mother. They laughed as they embraced. When they calmed, Rory looked to Luke, brushing tears from her cheeks.

"Well, finally!" she cried. She quickly enveloped him in a fierce hug. "This has been the hardest secret to keep in my life!"

Luke returned her hug, patting her back a little. "I appreciate it."

Lorelai shook her head, her eyes bright as she looked at them both. "I am deeply wounded," she told them. "My own flesh and blood, lying to me—"

"I wasn't lying to you!"

"—and denying me the opportunity to spend my days in agonizing suspense as to when I would finally be asked the all important question until the pressure would finally get to me and I'd demand the ring at some highly inappropriate moment."

"Such as?" Luke asked.

"You know, town meeting, in the diner in the middle of the dinner rush, times like that."

"Speaking of, I should get to the diner," Luke said.
Rory slipped out from under his arm and took Lorelai's hand, examining the ring as Lorelai talked over her head to Luke. "I'll be by in an hour or so, I want to go up to the Dragonfly and tell Sookie. But I have a favor to ask," she said, darting her eyes from Luke to Rory and back. They waited, wary. "We can't tell anyone else until after we talk to my parents. I'm going to call Mom on my way to the inn and wrangle us a dinner invite for tonight."

Luke passed a hand over his face. "If you want."

"I don't want," she said. "But what I really don't want is for this to get back to her and have her turn into Claude Rains' mother in Notorious."

Rory dropped her mother's hand. "She's right. Grandma knows so many people in town now, and if someone called to congratulate her, she'd be upset that she didn't find out before."

"Wouldn't be pretty," Lorelai agreed.

"Okay. Then we wait," he said. He pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "I'm gonna go. But I'll see you there."

Lorelai grinned broadly. "You will." She put her hands on Rory's shoulders and turned her to face the other direction.

"What are you doing, freakshow?" Rory demanded.

"I want to kiss my fiancé here in what he will think an inappropriately impassioned manner," she said, her tone indicating this should be obvious. "So just stay turned around or he won't let me." Luke grunted, shaking his head.

Rory heaved a sigh. "Why don't I just take my coffee into my room?"

"Even better," Lorelai said.

Rory gave both her mother and Luke another hug—whispering in his ear as she did—took her coffee to her room, and shut the door. Luke stared darkly at Lorelai a moment as she sashayed over to him. He looked heavenward as she linked her hands behind his neck, her thumbs tracing lines under his jaw. After a moment, he caved, scratching at the fabric of her sweater as he placed his hands on the small of her back.

"What did she say to you?" she asked.

Luke looked at her archly. "Not much."

"Intrigue," she replied. "I'll worm it out of one of you eventually, you know. I'm extraordinarily good at worming."

"I believe you," he said. She slid her hands forward and pulled him down to kiss him gently.

"You call that an inappropriately impassioned manner?" he asked.

Lorelai stepped back and took his hand, dragging him behind her to the foyer. "Right," she said. "Precautionary measure, you understand. I know you think I don't have a shred of modesty, but If I'm going to ravish you—"

Luke cut her off, hoisting her up by the back of her thighs as he kissed her; she reflexively wrapped her legs around his middle, leaning down into him. She gently tugged on his hair, tipped his head back as she kissed him harder, pressed herself against him and squeezed his torso with
her legs. He staggered slightly until he was backed up against the wall. When she felt his legs begin to quake, she broke from him, laughing breathlessly.

"Now that's what I call inappropriately impassioned," she said.

Luke set her down, seeming stunned. He rested his forehead against hers. He took slow, measured breaths, his eyes closed. He peeked at Lorelai from beneath his lashes when she whispered his name. Her eyes shone as she spoke.

"We're getting married."

"We're getting married," he echoed, a catch in his voice. "I love you."

"Love you back," she said.

She followed him to the door, gripping his hand, unwilling to give him up. After several failed attempts, he made it out and jogged towards town. She held her hand to her chest, her eyes smarting a little.

When he'd gone, Lorelai knocked on Rory's door and gave her the all clear. They spent another moment admiring the ring, their heads together as they sat side-by-side in the kitchen. Rory snacked on a Pop Tart and demanded to hear more. Lorelai recapped the salient details, unable to sit still as she did, flailing her hands and bouncing in her chair. Rory smiled.

"I'm so happy for you, Mom," she said. "And look at you! You're all glowy and carried away! I can't remember seeing you this happy, ever."

Lorelai tucked her hair behind her ears. "That's because you don't remember the day you were born," she said. "But other than that, you're probably right." She twisted her ring, the familiar, fluttering, shaking feeling beating behind her ribcage as she did. "This is okay with you, right? Making Luke part of the family?"

"He already is part of the family," Rory replied. "This just makes it legal. And you know you don't need to ask me that. I love Luke."

"And Luke loves you. I know I don't need to ask—I just want to check in, make sure—"

Rory leaned forward and dropped a kiss on Lorelai's cheek. "I think it's the best idea either of you have ever had, and I don't know why you didn't do it sooner," she said.

"From the mouths of babes," Lorelai intoned. "Okay. I'm going to head to the inn, but I'll see you at the diner." She stopped before leaving the kitchen. "What did you say to him, by the way?"

Rory made a face. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

It was still snowing as Lorelai stepped outside, buttoning her coat. She tucked her scarf more securely around her throat and hopped down the front steps, heading towards the inn. Lorelai walked slowly, savoring the early morning quiet of the first snowfall, watching Stars Hollow soften, the ugly scars of a cold winter masked beneath the rapidly accumulating drifts. She hoped the roads would be clear enough to get to Hartford as she pulled her phone out of her purse.

Emily answered on the second ring.

"Mom?"

"Lorelai?"
"Who else calls you Mom?" Lorelai asked. "Unless there's something you think I should know. A second family in Cuba would really up your street cred."

"Isn't it rather early for a phone call, Lorelai?" Emily asked, her tone speaking volumes. "We've barely sat down to breakfast."

"Sorry to interrupt," Lorelai said. "I just—I was wondering what you and Dad were doing tonight."

"Why do you ask?"

She hesitated. "We-eeell," she said, "I thought maybe we could get together. All of us—you and Dad, me, Rory, Luke. Have dinner."

"It's not Friday," Emily pointed out.

"I know, but—" Lorelai smacked her palm against her forehead as she scrambled for the best excuse. "Rory's heading back to school at the end of the week, and it might be easier to bump dinner up than to have it Friday."

Emily sighed loudly. "Really, Lorelai, I do wish you'd give me notice when you do things like this."

"How often do I do things like this?" Lorelai shot back.

"We don't have anything planned for the meal—"

"I can take care of the food, if you like."

"—and the weather is absolutely terrible," Emily continued. "Can it wait until tomorrow?"

Lorelai stopped and kicked at the ground. "I'm sorry, Mom, I really want to do this today."

There was silence on the other end of the line.

"Mom?"

"Lunch, then. Come for lunch."

Lorelai closed her eyes and willed herself patient. "I can't—I have meetings up the wazoo at the inn. Please, Mom. If the streets are really that bad, we'll stay over. Rory has her own room, and there are nine hundred guest rooms—"

"Well," Emily said, "we'll be happy to have you, if you insist."

She sighed, relieved. "Thank you, Mom. Thank you. Do you want me to bring the food? Luke is a really good cook."

"I know this, Lorelai. One moment." Lorelai waited, knowing Emily was speaking to Richard with her hand over the receiver. "Your father thinks it would be a nice change of pace. It's a little odd, having your guests provide the food—"

"We're not guests, Mom, we're family," she said. "It'll be fun. Same time as usual?"

After she'd hung up with Emily, Lorelai quickened her pace. She arrived at the kitchen door breathless, her cheeks red with cold and her eyes watering, her hands sweating in her gloves. She
let herself in and scanned the room. Sookie was bent over the stove, talking to a muffin tin. Lorelai called to her and Sookie turned abruptly, falling against the counter as she did. Lorelai rushed to help her up.

"The floor's a little slick here," Sookie explained. "Why aren't you home sleeping?"

Lorelai smiled to the point her cheeks hurt as she took Sookie's hand. "I need to talk to you."

"Okay," Sookie said slowly, following as Lorelai led her to the pantry and shut the door behind them. "What's going on?"

"This," Lorelai replied, taking off her gloves. She held out her hand.

Sookie's jaw dropped and she began to jump up and down, incoherently enthusiastic, grabbing Lorelai's arms and pulling her into a hug, shoving her back to yank at her hands and look at the ring, all the while laughing and babbling.

"This is—I'm just—Lorelai, I can't—oh, my God—beautiful!"

"I know!" Lorelai cried. She put her hands on Sookie's shoulders. "Sook, I'm getting married. I am getting married. Married! Can you believe it?"

Sookie's eyes spilled over and she hugged Lorelai again, dancing a little. "Honey, I'm so happy for you! This is the most wonderful—I'm so happy! And look at you! You're so happy! Oh, I'm so happy you're so happy!"

Lorelai grinned broadly. "When did we step into a Sondheim musical?"

"I don't know, but this is just—this is—oh, Lorelai, it's just so great!"

The two friends laughed together, both wiping their eyes and laughing still harder. When Lorelai could speak, she told Sookie the story. Sookie stood breathless, wringing her hands the entire time, her mouth open and her eyes wide.

"This is just the best news," Sookie sighed. "You're getting married!"

"I know! Me, Lorelai Gilmore, notorious commitment-phobe and all-around romantic mess!" She looked at the ring. "Former, anyway."

They gushed a while longer until the distinct smell of smoke registered with both of them. Sookie swore and rushed out, nearly forgetting a hand towel in her haste to pull the now-blackened muffins out of the oven. Lorelai apologized, but Sookie waved it off with a shrug.

"I can make more. This is more important," she said. "When's the party?"

Lorelai sighed. "I don't know. I have to—Emily doesn't know yet, so we're going there tonight for dinner, to tell them both."

"Are you nervous?"

"I don't know. Maybe a little," she admitted. "She's changed so much, I know, but still..."

"What?"

"Part of me worries—expects, even—that she's going to ruin this for me, somehow," Lorelai said. She closed her eyes. "I know she likes Luke, and my dad loves him to an almost disturbing degree, but I just keep having flashbacks of the last time with Max and how much that hurt and
"That was a long time ago, sweetie."

Lorelai looked at Sookie with a sad smile. "I know. But it's hard to get past, like, thirty-five years of being the disappointment and waiting for the worst possible reaction." She straightened her shoulders. "It doesn't matter. Even if—even if she doesn't take this well, for whatever reason, I still get to marry Luke." She put her gloves back on and jammed her hat back on her head. "Listen, can you sit on this for twenty-four hours? I don't want anyone to know until after we tell my mom and dad."

"Anything you want, sweetie," Sookie said. "But I'm already planning the menu for the party. That I can't help—it's like hearing voices in your head."

Lorelai hugged her once more. "I wouldn't let that get out," she said.

She walked briskly from the inn to Stars Hollow, stopping just outside of the town proper. She dawdled on the sidewalk and took off her gloves. She indulged herself, looking at the ring from different angles, making it catch the light, before she slipped it off and put it in her jeans pocket.

She and Rory had breakfast at the center table of Luke's. Rory told her mother she had developed a perpetual idiot grin, and upon hearing this, Lorelai only smiled broader. The need to be secretive made Luke more gruff than usual, and he barely spoke to either Lorelai or Rory when he waited on them. Each time he passed, Lorelai touched his hand, his wrist, the hem of his shirt, the leg of his jeans, his hip, just brushing her fingers lightly against him. When she accidentally touched his ass, he jumped and dropped a bin of plates he'd just bussed from another table.

"Can I please speak to you upstairs?" he asked tersely.

Lorelai sighed theatrically to Rory, who was snorting in laughter in her coffee cup. Lorelai trailed Luke up the stairs. He opened the apartment door and gestured for her to go inside. He shut the door behind her, turned, and immediately drew her to him. A few heated moments passed; Lorelai whined in protest when Luke put his hands on her shoulders and pushed her back. He stared at her, trying to catch his breath.

"You gotta stop putting your hands on me," he told her.

She bit back a laugh. "I know. It's just—this ring? It's like an aphrodisiac. I can't help it. All I want to do is—"

"I know," he interrupted, putting up a hand. "You don't need to elaborate."

"I just want to be somewhere quiet with you for a very long time," she said. She made a face. "Apparently being engaged has turned me into Glinda the Good Witch; don't be surprised if I start spontaneously bursting into song or little mice and birds come into the house and help me get dressed in the morning."

Luke adjusted his shirt. "Don't sing, I beg you," he said. She smirked at him. He paused, and took her by the waist, dug his fingertips into her hips a little as he pulled her toward him. "And, again, I know. I'm not going to be singing anytime soon, and I know I've been a little... reticent—"

"Is that what you call it?" she teased, resting her hands in the crooks of his elbows.

"—I'm just a little—a little in shock, I guess." He looked down. "That, and I am the luckiest son of a bitch in this town and it kinda kills me I have to keep that a secret."
Lorelai slid her hands up and crossed them behind Luke's neck. "That is adorable."

"It is not."

She nodded, feigning agreement. "Okay, it's not." She closed her eyes, bit her lip as he began to run his hands up from her hips, along her sides. "Luke?" she asked, tilting her head as he leaned forward and kissed her just behind her ear.

"Hmm?"

"Why are you in shock?"

He raised his head and blinked. "You said yes."

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

He worked his jaw, thinking, before he spoke. "No," he said, "but I still wasn't quite prepared to hear you say it." He cleared his throat and averted his eyes once more. He trailed off, looked up to find her gazing at him expectantly. "But I'm so fucking glad I did."

Lorelai stepped into him, letting him hold her a little too tightly. "Potty mouth," she whispered. "You're happy, then."

"I am," he said, murmuring in her ear. "And if I could, I'd kick every single person down there, including Rory, into the street and lock the doors for a week, keep you all to myself."

"Only a week?"

He laughed. He kissed her once more and gently disentangled himself from her. "You're awfully demanding. But stop teasing me, down there."

Lorelai gasped, grinning and wrinkling her nose. "Dirty!"

He paused on the way out, his hand on the doorknob. "You talk to your parents?"

"Yes. She wanted us to do lunch, but I talked her into dinner. So it's on. Tomorrow, you can blatantly be the luckiest son of a bitch all you want. You could even take me right on the diner counter, should you be so inclined."

Luke raised his eyebrows. "That would be interesting, wouldn't it?" he said. "I think I can spare another minute," he said, closing the door again.

"If I knew getting engaged would be this much fun—"

He shook his head. "Don't finish that sentence," he told her, grinning as he lowered his head to hers.

On the walk home, Rory asked Lorelai what they'd talked about when they went upstairs. Lorelai made a noise at the back of her throat and tossed her hair.

"Trust me, babe. You don't really want to know."

"Eek. Probably not."


Rory's posture became suddenly erect and she wrapped her arms around herself defensively. "Not
since New Year's."

"Rory," Lorelai said. "That was—"

"He hasn't called me, either," she said.

"Have you considered that he might be waiting for you to call him, or that he's embarrassed?"

"Well, so am I," Rory said sullenly. She bumped into Lorelai, who, knowing what was expected, put her arm around her daughter. "It's going to be weird."

"I know. But you have to try to ignore the weirdness, babe. You'll just kick yourself if you don't."

Rory rolled her eyes. "So speaks the voice of wisdom."

Lorelai squeezed her and held up her gloved hand. "The voice of wisdom has a rock the size of a small Ferris wheel now that speaks for itself. Do you have your cell with you?"

"Yes," she replied slowly.

"Get it out. Call him."

"Mom!"

"Rory!"

"You think?"

"Occasionally," Lorelai replied. "Get it over with, you'll feel better, you'll put it behind you, you'll laugh about it when you're old or the next time you get really drunk, whichever comes first."

Rory sighed and did as she was told, speed-dialing. "Voice mail," she whispered. Lorelai gestured for her to speak. "Hey, it's me—Rory—uh, I was just—I was calling, just to say—wondering what's up and everything, and school is next week and wanted to know if you'd be there—which is silly because of course you'll be there, and..." She looked desperately at Lorelai, who gave her a signal to wrap it up. "I just wanted to talk to you. Call me back." She hung up and pointed at her mother. "You're evil."

"And you're sweet. He's going to pee himself when he hears that."

"Mom!"

She giggled. "Oh, man, I pissed my pants!" she chortled.

"Evil," Rory muttered.

Lorelai tried to nap until she had to be at the inn, but she was too twitchy for sleep. She arranged herself on the mattress, flat on her stomach, arms and legs stretched out, her cheek smushed against the pillow, and closed her eyes. She waited. When the alarm purred, she rose, dressed, and drove to the Inn. Two interviews in, she had a searing headache and a distinct ache under her left shoulder blade. She reached for the phone. She spoke briefly with Caesar, who told her Luke had gone out an hour ago, no, he didn't know when Luke would get back, no, he didn't know where Luke had gone, and yes, he'd tell Luke she'd called. She stuck her tongue out at the phone as she hung up.

By five thirty, Luke still hadn't called and Lorelai was shuffling through the resumes and her notes from the interviews, sighing. The best candidate was a very perky twenty-three year old graduate
of Johnson and Wales named Harley who had a voice that lilted up at the end of her sentences and made her sound as though she was perpetually asking questions. But she was bright, she was enthusiastic, she liked Stars Hollow, and she really, really wanted the job. Plus, she would either completely irritate Michel or turn him into a stuttering schoolboy, and that was always amusing. Michel arrived and she left him with the paperwork, telling him to look it over, and drove home. Luke and Rory were in the kitchen when she came in the front door, talking over the bags of food resting on the table.

"And then you caramelize it," Luke was saying. "Brings out all the good stuff."

Lorelai propped herself against the fridge. "Luke, I beg you: I've worked long and hard to make Rory as domestically challenged as possible, don't undermine years and years of careful training, okay?" They both gave her withering looks as she helped herself to a bottle of water from the fridge. "Hey, you're all fancy."

"It's a big deal," he said. "I'm not wearing jeans for this."

"That's too bad, because I was planning on wearing the overalls with the paint stains," she said, met by another shared roll of the eyes. "Man, you two are ganging up on me today. Rory, what's with the bag?"

"Grandma called a little while ago and asked me to stay overnight."

"Really? Why?"

Rory shrugged. "She said we hadn't spent any time together lately and she thought it would be nice, so I agreed."

"Huh. Well. Okay, then. Let's go while the Jeep is still warm."

"We're taking the truck," Luke said. Lorelai opened her mouth to protest. "Snow tires. Have you seen it out there?"

The drive was slow and silent. Lorelai, seated between Rory and Luke, stared blankly before her. She felt a weight in the pit of her stomach, an acidic, burning weight like fear. She'd been repeating it to herself all day, the mantra of we're getting married, but the prospect of saying it to Emily turned it into a reason for apprehension rather than celebration. She couldn't picture the expression on her mother's voice, couldn't fathom what she would say. At the end of her parents' street, she turned to Luke.

"This is a bad idea," she said.

He didn't take his eyes off the road. "It's going to be fine."

"No, Luke, it's not going to be fine because it's my mother and nothing is ever fine with my mother—she turns good things into—"

"Mom, you said yourself she'd changed," Rory pointed out. "And you were right. Stop worrying. Luke's right, it's going to be fine."

Lorelai shot Rory a look. "You know, you're supposed to be on my side of things."

Luke put his hand on Lorelai's knee. "Trust me. It's going to be fine."

She folded her arms across her chest. "I have no idea how you can be so calm. It's irritating. We're walking into the mouth of hell, you realize this."
"Melodrama, much, Mom?"

Luke pulled the truck to a stop. "Too late now, we're here," he said, smiling brightly.

Lorelai narrowed her eyes. "Seriously, Luke, you're freaking me out."

She followed Rory and Luke up the walk, her hands in her coat pockets. Rory rang the bell and hitched her overnight bag on her shoulder, offering to take a grocery bag from Luke, tossing a significant glance at Lorelai.

"I'm not helping him," she said. "He's freaking me out."

"You said that already."

"It's still true."

Emily came to the door, a smile plastered across her face. Lorelai eyed her suspiciously as they stepped inside and stamped the snow off of their shoes, hung up their coats. Richard came into the foyer and relieved Luke of his bags, immediately taking them to the kitchen. There were hellos and nice to see yous, all spoken with unnerving cheerfulness. Lorelai watched her family warily, sitting sullenly on a corner of the divan. She elbowed Rory.

"Something is going on here."

Rory looked at her with wide, innocent eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Lorelai pointed at her. "You're in on it!" she hissed. "Spill!"

"What is wrong with you?" Rory asked. "Would you calm down?"

Emily handed them drinks and sat opposite them, making idle small talk until the men joined them and had drinks in hand as well. Richard sat beside his wife with a contented, satisfied smirk. Lorelai gulped her martini so quickly her eyes watered and she sat up straighter as her mother turned towards her.

"So, Lorelai, what was so very important that you simply had to have dinner today, of all days and in this weather? I believe this may be the first dinner you have voluntarily sought out, and it has made me very curious," she said.

Lorelai cleared her throat. "Well, Mom, we do have some news."

"Oh?"


Emily lifted an eyebrow. "I believe we do, yes."

Her voice shook. "And you know that Luke and I have been seeing each other for a while, and that we've been friends for a really long time—most of Rory's life, really, and—"

"We know this, Lorelai," Richard prompted.

Lorelai cleared her throat. "Luke and I are—we're—I mean, we're going to—Luke and I—" she stopped, closed her eyes, and shook her head. Luke squeezed her hand reassuringly, running his thumb against hers. She opened her eyes. "Luke asked me to marry him, and I said yes. We're
getting married." She stared at her knees.

She gripped Luke's hand, swallowed, waited. Silence hung in the room for what seemed an interminable time before Richard was on his feet, offering Luke his hand, crying congratulations. She got to her feet with Luke as he rose to shake Richard's hand, pale and trembling as she saw her mother stand as well. Emily's features were soft—she couldn't be crying, could she? Lorelai's mouth fell open as Emily walked around the coffee table, holding her arms out to Lorelai. Without thinking, she stepped into the hug and let her mother pull her close.

"I am so glad to hear it," Emily said. She squeezed Lorelai once and pulled back. She raised a hand to Lorelai's cheek and thumbed away a tear. "I am very happy for you, Lorelai."

Lorelai put her hand to her mouth, suddenly aware she was crying. She felt her lower lip quaking, felt the knotted, painful weight in her stomach begin to rise; she dropped to the divan and buried her face in her arms, bent over her knees, and cried in great, shuddering bursts.

"What on earth?" Richard said.

"Mom? Are you okay?"

Emily sat beside her and rubbed her back. "Lorelai?"

She sat up quickly, wiping away the tears. "I just—I was so—and I didn't—and you—with everything, and this, and—I'm—I couldn't—"


Lorelai gestured and shook her head wordlessly, drawing a hiccuppy breath. Luke rubbed her knee, waiting. Lorelai tried to breathe. She turned to her mother.

"Thank you," she said, her voice still choked with tears.

Emily put a firm hand under Lorelai's elbow and helped her up. "Come, let's get you cleaned up. Richard, why don't you show Luke to the kitchen? Rory, you keep them company while Luke starts dinner."

Lorelai let her mother pull her up the stairs and into the bathroom, sat obediently on the closed toilet while her mother wet a washcloth with cool water for her. She held her tongue as Emily gently dabbed the cloth at her face.

"I'm very sorry, Lorelai," Emily said as she wrung out the cloth, "that you were so terribly anxious about coming to us with this news. This shouldn't have been an occasion for tears."

Lorelai sniffed and accepted the tissue immediately thrust in her face. "They weren't bad tears," Lorelai said. "I was just—I was relieved."

"You really must stop expecting the worst of me, Lorelai," Emily said. She crossed her arms over her chest, her posture erect. Lorelai recognized the carefully arranged features, the way her mother constructed the false front; she'd had years of practice, but Lorelai never before noticed the wounded set of Emily's eyes.

Lorelai sighed. "I really am sorry, Mom. It wasn't fair to you, I know. Call it a gut reaction."

"I'd rather not call it anything at all and forget it ever happened," Emily replied.

Lorelai gave her a small smile. "Thanks, Mom. You know we haven't told anyone else—we
wanted you to know first."

"I appreciate that," Emily said. She put her arm around Lorelai's waist and walked her towards the stairs. "Your father and I are extremely happy for you." She paused. "I know it is a bit early, but —"

Lorelai laughed. "At least some things don't change," she said. "Mom, a big wedding would make Luke miserable. I know you could plan something to put Brad and Jen or Charles and Di to shame, but I think small and simple would be best." She stopped them at the bottom of the stairs. "That is not to say that I will not be wearing the most fabulous gown in the known world, however."

"No, Lorelai, you're right: some things don't change," Emily replied. "And it is your wedding, you should have it any way you like."

"Really."

"However, if you would like some suggestions, I am more than willing—"

"I'm sure you are, Mom," Lorelai said, rolling her eyes. "Come on, let's go see what's cooking."

They drank champagne in the kitchen while Luke made them dinner—"Steak? Luke, don't you know red meat can kill you?" Lorelai teased—and taught Rory what he was doing. Lorelai sat on the center island, swinging her legs as she drank her champagne, her chest tight and her hands still shaking. Emily studied the ring and complimented Luke on his good taste while simultaneously trying to talk Lorelai off the counter. Richard stood nearby, declaring this was the longest time he could remember having spent in the kitchen.

"It's quite nice, isn't it?" he asked.

Lorelai nearly fell off the counter, she was laughing so hard, which Emily pointed out rather proved her point about the precariousness of such a perch.

Dinner was easy and relaxed. Lorelai began to unwind as the wine made its way to her fingertips and toes; she picked at her dinner, still too wound up to be really hungry. Dessert was a rich chocolate cake Emily "happened to have on hand," and more wine before the coffee. They dawdled at the table over conversation, a rarity, Lorelai noted. Rarer still were the hugs exchanged all around at the door as Luke helped Lorelai into her coat and they prepared to leave. Luke blushed as Richard clapped him on the back with further loud congratulations, and turned crimson as Emily hugged him.

"We're very glad to have you, young man."

"Thank you, Mrs. Gilmore," he stuttered, looking at his feet.

"Emily, please," she said. He nodded, biting his lips together. "We'll ease you into it," she laughed.

Luke walked Lorelai to the car, propping her up as she picked her way along the path.

"I like champagne," she said. "And it is still snowing."

"I can tell you like champagne," he replied. "It's really coming down."

"Champagne?"
He helped her into the truck. "No, the snow."

She leaned forward before he closed the door and kissed the top of his head. "You," she said, "are going to be my husband."

"I am that," he said. "Now sit back."

Lorelai struggled to focus on the way back to Stars Hollow, Luke slowly and carefully navigating them over through the ice and snow. At the midpoint of the drive, a thought occurred to her.

"Luke?"

"Yeees?"

"You do realize that when I marry you, you will also have to marry me," she told him.

He gave her a bemused look. "I understand how it works," he said. "You marry me, I marry you, and we marry each other."

She breathed deeply again. Clearly, he wasn't grasping the enormity of that concept. "I just want you to understand this, that you will be marrying me. You," she said, gesturing drunkenly, "will marry me."

With a sigh, Luke eased the truck to the side of the road. He turned in his seat and looked at Lorelai, who regarded him with wide, though heavy-lidded, eyes. "What's the problem with that?"

She shrugged. "I want this to be totally clear, that by asking me to marry you, you therefore are obligated to marry me. And that," she said, pointing, "my friend, is something to think about."

"I don't need to think about it," Luke replied. "And I don't know why you think I'm getting the raw end of the deal, here."

Lorelai leaned in conspiratorially. "You, sir, are a catch."


"I am also a catch," she continued. "I mean, look at me."

"I am looking at you," he said.

"That said," Lorelai went on, "you should know something. And that is that, however hot I am, I am also insane."

He laughed. "I know this. Believe me, love, I know this."

"And still, you want to marry me."

"Still, I want to marry you," he said. "Okay? Can we go home now?"

"Hang on a sec," she said, unbuckling her seat belt. She slid across the seat and awkwardly put her arms around his neck. "I'm going to kiss you," she informed him.

He rolled his eyes as she pushed closer to him, didn't protest when she kissed him rather heatedly, ignoring the slight sloppiness of the whole embrace. She pulled back after a moment, breathing heavily, and pushed herself back in her seat. "Okay," she said and re-buckled herself into her seat. "Good to go."
Lorelai kept silent until they pulled into her street. "I have to say that that went extremely well. Phenomenally well. Like, world record book well. My mother," she said, blinking heavily, "hugged me."

"Hugged me too," he grumbled.

Lorelai spread her hands. "I thought they'd take it okay, really, I did, even though I was nervous and afraid they wouldn't, but I had no idea they'd take it that well." Luke was silent. "I mean, they practically jumped off the couch. I felt like we were in a Nora Ephron movie."

Luke angled the truck into Lorelai's driveway behind the Jeep and killed the engine. "They sorta knew it was coming."

She stared, slack jawed. "How?"

"Today? I might have gone over there to ask their blessing."

"You did not!"

Luke sighed. "Yeah, Lorelai, I did." She gaped at him a moment as he continued. "They're your parents. It's the right thing to do, and I felt bad not having done it before I asked you, so I thought I would go over there today and—"

"I have absolutely no idea how to respond to that," Lorelai said. "What did they say?"

"They thanked me for asking and your dad tried to give me a cigar," Luke said. "Your mom just told me she was glad we found each other, or something like that."

"Huh."

With that, Luke got them both out of the truck and into the house. Lorelai frowned as she shrugged out of her coat. "It's fucking cold in here," she said. She reached for a light switch. "Damn. Power's out."

"I brought wood in the other day," Luke said. "I can make a fire. Do you have a flashlight?"


He told her he had one in the truck and went out to retrieve it; when he came back in, Lorelai had gone. He called to her as he knelt before the fireplace and began to build the fire. She spoke from the top of the stairs, startling him as she announced that she had gone upstairs to change into pajamas.

"How could you see what you were doing?"

She carefully descended the stairs. "I used my flash phone as a cell light," she told him.

"Or your cell phone as a flashlight," he said as she plunked herself on the floor beside him and propped her chin on his shoulder. "Hey, drunk girl."

She giggled. "Not drunk."

"Yes, you are. And so were your parents. And Rory was half a glass away," he said. "There was no stopping your father, filling those glasses." He studied her a moment. She closed her eyes, tipping her head to one side and smiling. "You okay? After the whole crying thing?" She murmured a positive. "You sure?"
"I am absolutely sure that I am absolutely fine and that you should stop worrying, okay?" she said. "I was just worried because there was precedent and I didn't want history repeating." Her eyes flew open. "I didn't say that."

"Don't worry about it."

"Seriously, Luke—"

He kissed her. "Don't worry about it," he said again, more slowly. "Why don't we sleep down here tonight, with the fire?"

"Oh, sexy!" Lorelai said. "Gimme the flashlight and I'll go get pillows and blankets."

"Why don't you just use your flash phone?"

She gave him a wet, noisy kiss. "You suck," she informed him, unsteadily getting to your feet. "Finish getting that fire going, buddy."

He laughed as she wobbled her way up the stairs. He joined her in the bedroom a few minutes later and helped her gather the comforter and pillows and followed her down back down the stairs. She took the flashlight from him and directed him to the hall closet for more blankets and disappeared to the kitchen. When Luke had laid out a stack of blankets in lieu of a mattress on the floor and toed off his shoes, she stalked back in, gripping a bottle of wine under one arm, two wine glasses in one hand and the flashlight in the other. He rushed to help her, earning himself a pissy glare from Lorelai.

"You haven't had enough tonight?" he asked.

She handed him a glass. "You haven't. You need to catch up. And I'm a big girl, I can handle a little booze."

"At least let me pour."

She sighed heavily. "Fine." She held her tongue between her teeth as she watched him pour the wine, her brow knit in concentration. He set the bottle down and she held out her glass. "Here," she said. "Clink."

"What are we clinking to?"

"To us, because we are getting married."

"Of course," he laughed. "Clink."

They drank deeply, still standing. After a moment, Luke took Lorelai's glass from her and set it down on the coffee table along with his, and reached for her. She twisted as he put his arms around her, leaning back against him, resting her hands on his just at her waist. She shivered a little.

"Cold?" he asked.

"Uh-uh," she said, pushing her head against his shoulder. "It occurs to me," she began, as Luke raised one hand and lifted her hair away from her neck, "that my mother, knowing that you proposed and that I said yes and that tonight would be the night after you proposed and I said yes, asked Rory to stay over so that you and I could be completely and totally alone."

"That would mean that my mother removed any obstacle to my getting laid tonight," she said. "That makes me really never want to have sex again."

Luke trailed his lips up her shoulder, her neck, finding the place at the nape of her neck that made her tilt her head away and curve herself into him. "Never?"

Lorelai turned and put her arms around his neck. "Well, never is a very long day," she said. She drew him to her, kissed him. "You, sir, are wearing too many clothes."

"Amen to that," he said. He tucked her hair behind her ears, taking her in, feature by feature, framing her face with his hands. His eyes were bright, the set of his mouth soft.

"I move that we remedy that situation immediately," Lorelai said.


She didn't know if she was expecting it to be different and so it felt different; she didn't know if it felt so simply because now the promises they'd made had visible, tangible proof, a certainty they could reach out and feel. She only knew it was different, somehow. His kisses were the same, only more. His hands, hot against her, were the same, but as they traced the planes of her body, she felt the heat marking her, searing her skin in new ways. The way her breath hitched and caught in her throat was the same, but the rhythm of their movement together was almost imperceptibly changed. The old intensity was greater, and when he spoke her name, his voice hoarse and rough like his stubble against her neck, her eyes stung and her throat ached. She only wanted to be closer; she couldn't get close enough.

She lay sprawled across him, her arms folded on his chest and her chin on her wrists, staring into the fire. He ran a finger up and down her spine. Neither spoke. Lorelai turned her head and laid her cheek against her arm, smiling at him with her eyes closed.

"This was," she murmured, "with the exception of the five painfully painful interviews I sat through today, a perfect day."

"Yeah?"

"Definitely."

"Glad to hear it."

She opened her eyes. "Luke?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you ever wish you could go back and do it again?"

"Go back where and do what again, love?"

"Back—back to before. Before everyone else."

Luke stroked his hand down her arm. "I don't know—I wish I hadn't wasted so much time. And I wish I could... undo... certain things. So that this—this would be the first." He sighed. "But you learn and you go forward and you try not to regret things. And there aren't any guarantees. If we did go back, if it was before and I took one of those chances I missed, who's to say we'd end up right where we are now?" She cast her eyes down, nodding thoughtfully. "Everything we did, everyone else—I don't know, but it seems like those are the things that got us here."
"I love it when you get philosophical, Luke. Makes your voice all deep."

He shook his head. "C'mere," he said.

Lorelai nestled against his side, her head in the hollow of his shoulder, and he put his arm around her, cupping her elbow in one hand. She traced letters on his chest, writing nonsense words.

"Luke?"

"Yeees?"

"What did Rory say to you in the kitchen, this morning?" She angled to look up at him. "Please? I have to know. I feel so out of the loop. She knew you were going to ask me, Jess probably knew —"

"Oh, he knew."

"—and you and my parents and Rory all knew what was going on this afternoon, and I didn't. I feel like Ross on *Friends* after the whole 'they don't know we know they know we know' thing."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Luke said.

"Please? Spill?"

He sighed, curled a lock of her hair around his finger. "She called me Pops."

"She did not."

"But she did."

"Huh." Lorelai tangled her legs in his and rubbed her foot against his calf. "We should have Jess down, soon. For dinner, or whatever."

"You mean serve him dinner, not have him for dinner, right?" Luke joked.

She snorted. "Luke, I don't know *where* comments like that come from. I am a kind and benevolent being."

"Whatever you say, love."

Neither noticed when, sometime later, the fire began to die. Lorelai held Luke to her and listened to the ragged edge of his breathing. When he began to move away, she held him fast, her eyes locked intently on his.

"Don't," she said. "Stay, just a second." Her eyes filled. "We're getting married," she whispered.

Luke folded her in his arms. "And thanks for that."

"You do realize what you're getting yourself into, right?"

He brushed his lips across her forehead. "I think we covered that one, Lorelai." He lay on his back and pulled her roughly against his chest. "God help me, but I love you."

"God help you, but I love you back."

Luke pulled the blankets up around them. As the fire burned to embers, they fell asleep, wrapped up in each other.
When they woke in the morning, the drifts came to the top of the porch railings outside; the entire neighborhood was silent and blank, the lights out up and down the street. Lorelai stood by the window and peered out. The landscape, she thought, hadn’t changed overnight—underneath, that was still her yard, her driveway, and next door, Babette’s garden waited beneath the snow, the gnomes still standing guard. The snow hadn’t made it new and it would eventually melt; everything would be where it was before, exactly as it had been. But this morning, she thought, it was beautiful in new and strange ways.

She smiled as Luke padded up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. He pressed his lips to her temple; she leaned back into his chest.

"Whatcha looking at?" he asked.

Lorelai reached back with one arm and touched her hand to Luke’s cheek.

"Same old," she said.

"How does it look?"

She turned in his arms and regarded him a moment. "Luke, my life," she replied, "it looks amazing."

Luke raised his eyebrows. "Your life, huh?" he said. "I like that."

Lorelai slid her arms around his neck and rested her forehead to his. "Me, too," she said.
February

Chapter Notes

Notes from original posting on ff.net:
So, my badass beta is a sophisticated jetsetter this month, which means that she's not yet read the completed version of this and I'm flying without my regular safety net. I realize this isn't necessarily ASP's Marty, but we haven't been given much to go on, so consider him a hybrid ASP-Lula Bo creation. Also, I'm pretty sure I made up the major—it's a little too specific, but I sorta don't care. In all, I'm unsure about this one, so feedback would be (as always) greatly appreciated. Standard disclaimers apply.

"I can't believe Lorelai took away your cell phone."

Rory looked up from her coffee cup and raised her eyebrows at Lane. "We're talking about Lorelai here."

"Oh, I can believe she'd do it," Lane said, "I just can't believe she actually did."

"You realize that makes no sense."

Lane topped off Rory's cup. "I was trying to be delicate," she said. "I meant I can't believe she had to take it away for the sake of your sanity."

Rory dropped her head to her hands. "I know!" she wailed. "I can't help it! It's been three days and I just keep waiting for him to call—Mom says that the theory of a watched pot applies to phones as well, so I'm not even allowed to know where it is for the rest of the day."

"He'll call you back," Lane said. "I've never seen you like this before."

She sighed. "I'm just so crazed right now. Mom is completely moony and Luke is all over the house taking measurements, and my grandmother is driving me insane with the party, and I'm waiting for my grades and the phone call from Marty…" She raked her hands through her hair. "The coffee probably isn't helping much, either—you have anything chocolate back there?"

Lane plated a brownie for her and began reassuringly to tease her about her GPA. Rory took the ribbing with a roll of her eyes when the bell over the door rang. She sat up and looked over her shoulder in curiosity; the lunch rush had petered out and the diner had been fairly quiet for the last half hour. She nearly choked on the brownie in her mouth when she saw them come in.

Dean looked the same, and Lindsay, leaning against him, was pale. Neither of them looked to the counter as they slid into chairs at the first available table. Rory quickly averted her eyes and looked back at Lane, who shrugged. Rory took a long swallow of coffee, suddenly cold and shaky.

"I am so hungover," Rory heard Lindsay whine.

"You put a lot of that stuff away last night," Dean laughed. "You were bombed."

"I know," she said. "But we never have people over. The next time Kyle buys for us, we should
Rory shook her head at Lane, her eyes closed. "Kill me," she mouthed.

Lane leaned over the counter. "He almost never comes in anymore, and he only does when Luke's not here" she whispered. She paused. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"I ran into him at Doose's the first week I was back from Yale," she replied, her voice low. "I was on my cell with Marty, so we didn't talk, but it was still weird. Like, weird-weird."

"So not just weird, then," Lane said.

Rory shoved the last of the brownie in her mouth and chugged her coffee. "I've taken enough abuse for today, thank you. And I have to get home and finish packing. And check the mail. And my messages. If I have any." She stood and shouldered her purse. "I'm beginning to think I need medication."

"Just now?" Lane asked.

To keep from having to walk directly past Dean and Lindsay, Rory walked to the opposite end of the counter and made her way across the back of the diner towards the window into Taylor's shop, where she pretended to peer in and consider the merchandise, and continued, staying close to the far wall until she reached the door. Lindsay sat with her back to Rory; Dean, his face buried in the menu, didn't look up.

It had been snowing on and off since that first snowstorm, flurries of light, fine snow that froze over between each new fall. Taylor was nearly run distracted trying to make sure every street, sidewalk, and driveway in town was sanded, salted, or deiced. Rory hugged herself as she followed the path home. Two days from now, she'd be back at Yale, where the walkways would be nowhere near this pristine. It was comforting, the feeling that leaving Stars Hollow for Yale wasn't leaving home for alien country, but leaving home for home elsewhere with its own set of quirks and traditions. Her class schedule was going to kill her, but it was going to be fun. And Marty had convinced her to take another class with Professor Flynn; he wouldn't be there with her, but…

Rory shook herself, repeating his name under her breath. Things with Marty were so far up in the air right now, she thought, she'd need a telescope to properly focus on them. She quickened her steps. Lorelai had taken her cell phone, but if Rory knew her mother, she was sure she'd find it in the vegetable drawer of the refrigerator—it was the only place neither one of them ever really bothered to check.

The front door was locked. Rory frowned as she fumbled for her keys in her purse and unlocked the door. Luke was supposed to be there fixing the downstairs sink. Rory shrugged as she stepped inside; he must have come in the back way, though why, she couldn't imagine. She hung up her jacket and walked to the desk in the front hall, dropping her keys. She was about to pass through to the kitchen when she caught movement from the corner of her eye. Rory turned, startled, as Lorelai sat up on the couch. Her hair was wild, the collar of her shirt askew. She looked at Rory with wide eyes and a too-bright smile.

"Rory!" Lorelai cried. Her voice was unnaturally high. "Hey, babe! I thought you were at the diner!"

"I was," Rory replied. "I have some packing to do, so I came back. Why aren't you at work?"

Lorelai got to her feet quickly, smoothing her hair back. "I came home for lunch," she said,
slightly breathless.

"Why would you come home for lunch?" Rory asked.

"Oh, you know," Lorelai replied. She shifted on her feet.

Rory stared at her a moment before realization dawned. She smiled smugly. "Luke's on the couch, too, isn't he? You're like teenagers, the both of you."

Lorelai lifted one shoulder in response and tugged at the hem of her shirt. "Things were really slow today at the inn," she whispered. She leaned down. "Say hi to Rory."

A hand appeared over the top of the couch. "Hi, Rory."

"Hi, Luke," she called. She lowered her chin. "He's got pants on, right?"

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "Please, honey. I've got pants on; he's got pants on."

"I'm still here!" he bellowed. "Could you please not say things like that to her? And could you please not ask questions like that? I have pants on, for Christ's sake! And a shirt! I'm not some sex-crazed jackass, you know, I can control myself. For crying out loud. The two of you are gonna drive me frickin' nuts one of these days," he growled, sitting up. He gave Lorelai a hard look, his hair mussed and his face flushed. She made loud kissing noises at him in reply.

"Sorry, Luke," Rory laughed. "I'm going to my room. As you were."

Luke pulled the flannel that hung over the end of the couch on over his tee shirt and ran his hands over his scalp. "Fat chance."

"Oh, would you stop?" Lorelai said, hitting his shoulder. "God. So she caught us making out, big deal. Get over it." He grunted. Lorelai smothered a smile, shaking her head, and sighed. "I should be getting back to work anyway." She retrieved Luke's hat from the coffee table and handed it to him. "Hey," she said. "Marty called."

Rory's jaw dropped. "He did?"

"I told him you'd be back this afternoon, so he said he'd call again."

"Did you talk to him?" Rory asked. "How did he sound? Was it weird? What did he say?"

Lorelai slipped her hand in Luke's and began to walk to the front door, pulling him behind her. "He said, 'hi, is Rory there?' and then when I said no, he said 'okay, could you tell her I'll call back, please?' It was a perfectly normal conversation," she said. "Although he did tell me his name three times."

Rory groaned and turned to her room. "I'm going to go suffocate myself, now," she said, waving at Lorelai and Luke over her shoulder.

"Have fun with that," Lorelai replied. "I'll be back early."

"I'll probably be dead by then," Rory called. "But it's nice to know."

She threw herself on her bed, spread-eagle on her stomach, her cheek pressed to the comforter. Though she'd been sleeping more than she did at school, she was still bone-tired—this was complicated by the fact that she was also listless and distracted during the day, incapable of focusing on anything. She'd been this way since New Year's, the day Luke and Lorelai got
engaged the only respite she'd had from the jangling nervousness she was experiencing. It was better when Lorelai was around, when the clouds of free-floating anxiety Rory kept walking into dispersed; with Lorelai, Rory instead was able to live off the vicarious high she received from the happiness her mother seemed to radiate. It was difficult not to be happy simply by extension beside someone so unabashedly joyful—contentment seemed a fine perfume Lorelai left traces of wherever she was. But then there were moments like this, when worry pressed down with a weight that threatened to crush her.

She sat up with a sigh and looked around her room. There were things to do, she reminded herself. At the moment, moping was a far more attractive alternative to doing anything resembling productive activities. She reached above her head to the shelf where her journal rested.

Dear Mom,

So, I'm aware that it's ridiculous for me still to start this way when you're really only ever thirty seconds away by phone, but it makes more sense to me—I don't feel quite as silly, as if I'm talking to myself. This is just easier, somehow.

I know, too, that I'm being a drama queen in the worst way, but this thing with Marty, the way I messed up after I called you New Year's Eve—I can't stop thinking about it. I have not felt this stupid and confused and useless since the summer. And I know it's not so bad—nowhere near as awful as what I did with Dean.

And Dean? That's a whole other issue. Seeing him today—seeing him ever, really—was strange. I don't know if he saw me or if he's gotten that good at ignoring my very existence. I've heard he and Lindsay have been meeting regularly with the reverend at church but that doesn't mean he's told her, which still makes me uncomfortable. But what's odder than that is the way I feel when I see him now—rather, the way I don't feel when I see him. I always have this fleeting moment of panic and remorse, this automatic reaction, the way people with allergies sneeze whenever a cat walks into the room, even if the cat's not near them. But once that passes, there's not much else. When I see him now, I don't think of him as My Dean, not the way he is here and now in the present moment. I get a little "Steel Magnolias" nostalgic when I do think of My Dean of the Romantic Past, of my first boyfriend and first love, but that version of My Dean isn't a walking, breathing thing for me anymore.

I don't know whether to think that's sad or not.

Thinking about Dean is really the last thing I want or need to be doing right now, though. I can't rehash that whole experience on top of everything else, with my grades being late, with Marty. More specifically, with Marty and what we've been calling The Hideous Kissing Incident.

Mom, it wasn't hideous. It so wasn't hideous. Hideous is a very gross exaggeration. It was the absolute and total opposite of hideous. So much the opposite that I regret being drunk not only because it really cheapens the whole experience but also because I can't remember it the way I want to. There's no movie scene, all slow motion and soft lighting and dramatic music, to play in my head at night when I go to sleep—and stop looking at me like that, I know you do it, too—just this collage of sounds and touch and smells. Nothing solid, just incoherence. And I hate that.

It wasn't—at least, on Marty's end of the deal—a sloppy, fumbling, drunken thing. I don't think I've ever known him to be quite that unhesitant about anything. When I finally registered that he was kissing me and I was kissing him, he was already holding me up, holding me to him so, so tightly that I don't know whether or not I was even breathing, and he only kept pulling me closer. There aren't quite words for the way he—Mom, he kissed me like I belonged to him.

Rory dropped her pen. Her eyes tightly shut, she recalled the way his arm had been firmly around
her waist, the way he cradled her head with his hand and tangled his fingers in her hair. He'd made her lightheaded, unsteady, heady. She'd had to take hold of him, to dig her nails into his shoulder and grasp the back of his shirt in her fist. She remembered how she had arched into him, as he leaned into her, as he opened her mouth to him and made it his, the metallic taste of need on the back of her tongue. She opened her eyes and stared blankly at her journal.

And then… I don't know who pulled away first. He was looking at me when I opened my eyes—which, honestly, took me a while. I don't know that I've ever been quite that thoroughly overwhelmed. And I don't think the drinking is entirely to blame. That was a kiss, Mom. A full-body, oh-mighty-God, can't-think-and-don't-want-to, passionate-in-a-fiery-way (though I've never used the word passionate in a sentence in my life) kiss. You remember that scene in Pretty in Pink when Iona and Andie are talking about Blane and the way he kissed Andie, and she says "I felt it everywhere"? That. It was that kind of kiss.

But after, I just… I did everything badly. He looked at me and I just forgot how to breathe because as much as I wanted him to kiss me again, that was how much I needed to get away and think or not think and pass out and pretend it hadn't happened because now everything would be wrong between us because I would screw it up, somehow, and he wouldn't be around anymore. And he saw that, I know he did, saw it all over my stupid drunk face, and it hurt him, I know it did, because he stuttered and he went away and we spent the rest of the night not touching or talking or looking at each other. We all went back to the band's apartment and I said goodnight; right before I went to hide in Lane's room, Marty told me he was going to catch the Stars Hollow bus to the train station in Hartford and go home the next morning, which I knew, but he wanted me to walk him to the bus. I told him I would, and I went to bed.

I have to confess something, here. I have to get this out, even if it's only in this journal and I never tell you to your face, because I hate myself a little for this part, Mom.

I purposely overslept so I wouldn't have to walk him to the bus stop.

I'm horrible. I'm small and weak and disgusting and I should be expelled from the universe for that. But I couldn't do it. I couldn't face him, not that soon. Somewhere in the back of my unconscious brain, I knew it was time for him to go and I kept right on sleeping until I knew he'd be gone. I couldn't talk to him. I would have ruined it, the whole thing, our friendship, the kiss, any possibility of good coming out of it. And I really, really wanted him to kiss me again. So I stayed asleep because that would have just been too complicated and I had a hangover and because I suck that much.

The thing is, Mom, that what I'm really afraid of, more than anything, is not what will happen to me but that I'll hurt him. The idea of hurting him just kills me. He's got this amazing, good heart, and he's a goofball and he rambles about the most inane things and he spills food in his lap and he collects Simpson paraphernalia and the world just awes him, everything fascinates him as though he never got done being six years old when the world was still this incredibly bizarre and beautiful thing for him to figure out—I'm not saying he's perfect, because there are a hundred ways he can bug me and he's a little socially inept sometimes, but he's just such a good person, Mom. How often do you meet really good people? That's just what he is. He's an amazingly, truly good person. And if I ever did anything to hurt him, that would be—that would be one of the worst things I can imagine. Considering the fact that I've already done one of the worst things I can imagine, that's saying a lot. So I don't know what to do.

I don't know.
And I really wish my grades would come already. And that Grandma would stop calling me to ask me about floral arrangements because it's not like she needs my help or listens to my advice anyway. She wants me to feel included, and it's nice, but I really don't need it to appreciate what she's doing. And also I wish that you would stop looking at me like I'm the cutest thing in the entire world whenever the subject of Marty comes up, like I'm a toddler learning to walk covered in daisies cooing and chasing a puppy. It really doesn't help.

I'm going to lose my mind. Or I've already lost it. I don't know. That's probably a symptom. If you gave me crazy genes, I'm going to take you down with me, you know.

Love,
Rory.

She snapped the book shut and secured it with the elastic band. With a baleful look around the room, she pushed herself off the bed and opened her wardrobe to begin packing. She turned on her stereo, cranking the volume to drown out the thoughts that were still needling at her.

"Caroline's got crazy eyes that shine. Day's blowing through my mind like fallen leaves…"

The phone ringing made her jump. Rory picked up the phone from the desk and clutched the handset to her chest as she turned off her stereo.

"Hello?" Immediately, she cringed. She sounded all of twelve.

A pause followed, and she heard him take a breath. "Rory? Hey. It's Marty."

Rory spun on her heel and collapsed on the bed. "Hey," she said. "How are you?"

"Doing okay. You?"

"I'm fine—same as always," she said. *Except that I want to die, that's new.* "My mom got engaged."

She could almost hear the smile. "Oh, hey, that's awesome! When did that happen?"

"A few days ago," Rory said. *That was the day that I called you and you didn't call me back and I've been living in agony since then feeling like a total clod and so I should probably be mad at you but since I'm the ass in this scenario I can't be,* she added in thought. "I swear, she hasn't stopped smiling. And every woman in town has seen the ring at least three times. Luke says that the next person who pinches his cheek or tries to touch him at all is going to get backhanded across the room."

"That's unfortunate for your mom."

Rory laughed. "My mom's answer to that was that only naughty touching was allowed from hereon out, which of course made Luke uncomfortable and everyone laugh at him and he wouldn't make her coffee for the rest of the afternoon. Lucky for her she can pretty much do it for herself in her sleep, though."

"Good for them," Marty said. "They're happy."

"Happy is a bit of an understatement. There's so much sweetness around here I'm about to fall into a diabetic coma." She paused, smiling wistfully. "The day after she told my grandparents, she made me go to the diner with her, and it was—she was so proud, you know? The place was packed, and she sat at the center table, put her hand right up in the air, called for coffee, and kept waving her hand over her head until Kirk noticed the ring, and then everyone sorta went nuts. I
thought Luke was going to have a coronary."

She heard him chuckle. "Your town is weird."

"It is," she told him, "but that's part of its charm."

"You should put that on a tee shirt."

"I'll make a motion at the next town meeting," she said. "But what about you? How've you been? We haven't—"

"I've been working for my dad," Marty said, cutting her off. "Picking up shifts, covering people away for the holiday. The tips are good."

"Good. So you're keeping busy?"

"Yeah. It's been wicked busy."

"Wicked," Rory echoed. "I'd like to see the bar, sometime."

"Sure," he said.

Rory stared at the ceiling. Silence during phone conversations wasn't unusual for them, but the extended, painful quiet they were currently experiencing was something new. She flipped over on her bed and kicked her feet angrily at the mattress. She closed her eyes tightly, willing him to speak, to break the silence and put her out of her misery, to say something about anything, even The Hideous Kissing Incident.

She spoke before she realized it.

"Marty?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry I didn't call you sooner. I should have called you after you left Lane's that morning and made sure you got home okay."

Marty was silent a beat. "It's okay."

Rory bit her lip, waiting. After another moment of awkward silence, she decided he wasn't going to return the apology for the three days that lapsed since she'd called him. "No," she began, "it's—"

"Rory?"

She jerked her head up. Luke stood in the doorway, rubbing grease from his hands with a towel. She furrowed her brow at him.

"The mail truck just honked—I think your grades came."

She was on her feet in an instant. "God, I hope so," she breathed.

"What's going on?" Marty asked.

"Oh, there was this annoying, stupid mix-up with the Registrar—there was some mistaken hold put on my account, and the school wouldn't send my grades until it was lifted. Because of the holidays, it's taken forever. I couldn't even get them online," she said, making her way down the
"But hopefully they came today." She paused at the door and slid her feet into the first available pair of shoes—one of Lorelai's many pairs of black heels.

"I think you should steel yourself for the bad news," Marty deadpanned.

Rory huffed a sigh as she opened the door and stepped out onto the porch. "I know, I know," she said. "I'm not expecting any surprises, or anything, I just—"

The heels, she thought, as her feet shot out from under her, had not been the best idea. She unsuccessfully threw her arms out to brace herself, to catch hold of the railing seconds after her left foot slid forward; her right ankle twisted sharply as the sole skated over the ice and the heel caught the edge of a plank. She fell on her side. The phone flew from her hand as her temple connected to the porch step with a sickening thud. It wasn't until she landed on the front walk and rolled onto her back that she felt the stabbing pain in her elbow, and she knew that she had fallen on it in her tumble down the last two steps. She lay still a moment.

"Luke?" she called. She closed her eyes. If her head weren't already threatening to split down the center, she would have banged it against the snow in frustration. I really should have suffocated myself, she thought wearily. "Lu-uuuuuuuke?" Tentatively, she raised her head and tried to sit up. "Also not a good idea," she muttered. She took a deep breath. "LUKE!"

She relaxed a little when she heard him come to the porch. "Jesus!" he cried. "What the hell happened?"

"Well," she said, "I thought I would give meditating a try."


"I fell."

"Does your back hurt?" She shook her head as much as she dared. "Your neck?" Again, she indicated a negative. "Okay, I'm going to sit you up," he told her. "Easy, there. E-a-sy does it." He rested his hand solidly at the base of her neck and drew her up enough to slip his arm behind her back, helping her into a sitting position. He looked at her closely, studying her eyes. "You okay?"

She grunted. "I dropped the phone."

"What?"

"The phone. I dropped the phone."

Luke looked over his shoulder and saw the handset in the snow. He reached back with his free arm and picked it up. He put the phone to his ear. "Rory's gonna have to call you back." And with that, Luke hung up.


"Put your arms around my neck," he told her.

"I can't believe—"

Luke sighed. "Rory, I need to get you inside. You can yell at me in the house all you want. Put your arms around my neck so I can carry you in."

"I don't need to be carried," she said sullenly, looping her arms around him. He hooked his other arm beneath her knees and with a series of grunts, managed to get to his feet with her in his arms.
Rory stared at him a few seconds, pouting, and let her head fall to his shoulder. "I can't believe you hung up on him. I've been waiting for him to call me for days!"

He fumbled with the front door. "He'll call again," he said.

Rory felt flushed, suddenly, as they entered the house and he walked towards the couch with her cradled against his chest. She wanted to howl with frustration and embarrassment. "You can't just take the phone from someone like that and hang up on the person she was talking to, especially with The Hideous Kissing Incident that happened that she needs to resolve with him!" she continued, her voice slightly hysterical. "I can't believe you did that. I just cannot believe you did that. You don't do things like that, I don't care if you are marrying my mother!"

Luke deposited her on the couch and bent over, putting his hands on his knees to get on eye level with Rory. She lightly touched the side of her head and grimaced. "Did you hit your head?" he asked.

"Not too bad," Rory said. She winced as Luke gently felt the spot above her ear that had received the brunt of the hit. She hissed as he lifted her hair away. She looked at him plaintively. "That hurt. And—"

"Rory. You hit your head," he told her. "You could have a concussion. He can wait. Did you black out at all?"

She sighed. "I don't think so."

"Are you dizzy?"

"Maybe a little," she conceded.

"Right," Luke said. "I'm taking you to the doctor." In response to Rory's protest, Luke laid his hand heavily on her shoulder. "If you have a concussion, you need to see a doctor. Why are you holding your arm like that?"

Rory didn't realize she'd been cradling her arm to her chest. She shook her head and immediately regretted doing so when a wave of dizziness smacked her in the face. "I bumped it," she said. "When I fell. Down the stairs. I fell down the stairs, Luke."

"I know you did, pal," he said. He rubbed her shoulder. "I'm going to get you some real shoes and take you to urgent care."

She let him carry her to the truck. She could feel the lump beginning to form on her temple; frowning only made the pain worse. As Luke pulled the truck out of the drive, she remembered.

"Can we stop and get the mail?"

The look he gave her was all the answer she needed, and she sat back with tears in her eyes. *This day sucks* she thought.

Luke drove her to Hartford, and by the time they reached the hospital her head ached so much there were spots in her vision. She groaned with every jolt of the truck; Luke kept darting glances her way, muttering half-hearted platitudes and once patting her on the knee. Her elbow throbbed angrily as well. She protested very little when Luke made her wait for him to come to the other side of the truck, help her out, and walk her to the charge nurse. When they left two hours later, she leaned against Luke as she limped to the truck and pressed an ice bag to her forehead, her left arm hung up in a sling, and her right ankle bound in a swath of Ace bandage. They drove to the pharmacy for painkillers and then the Dragonfly, going in the kitchen door. Lorelai stood behind
the counter with Sookie, drinking coffee. When she saw them come in, she paled and crossed the kitchen, her arms open.

"What happened?" she cried, closing Rory in a careful hug.


Rory let Lorelai rock her and smooth her hair. "It's not his fault," she said. "I went out to check the mail and I slipped on some ice."

"There wouldn't have been ice on the porch if I had put enough salt down," Luke said.

Lorelai clucked her tongue. "Poor thing, you fell down the stairs?"

"I fell down the stairs," Rory said. "And it's not your fault, Luke. I was wearing the heels, it's totally my fault."

"Why were you wearing heels to check the mail?" Sookie asked.

"They were there," Rory replied.

"Are you okay? What's with the sling?" Lorelai asked. She led Rory to a stool and sat her down. Sookie placed a cup of coffee and a plate of cookies in front of her.

"She has a mild concussion," Luke supplied, "and she jarred her elbow pretty bad. Nothing to worry about; the sling is just for a few days."

"Oh, poor thing," Lorelai said, smoothing Rory's hair. "You sure don't know how to go halfway, do you, kid? When you fall down the stairs, you fall down the stairs."

In lieu of reply, Rory shrugged and shoved a cookie in her mouth, following it with a loud slurp of coffee. She knew when her mother heard the rest of the story, Rory would never hear the end of it, and she figured she could wait on that.

"Thanks for taking her in, Luke," Lorelai said. "But I wish you guys had called me. I should have been there."

Rory leaned into Lorelai the way she had when she was small and they'd been standing in line for something too long. "Luke took good care of me, Mom."

"I'm sure he did," Lorelai said softly. "You want him to take you back home so you can rest?"

"Please. My head is really mad at me right now."

"Heads don't tend to appreciate being slammed into porch stairs, no," Lorelai agreed. "I'll be home soon."

Rory and Luke were silent during the ride back to the house. Again, he helped her out of the truck and inside. She immediately went to her room and kicked off her shoes to climb onto the bed.

"Can I get you anything?"

Rory opened one eye. Luke leaned in her doorway, his hands in his pockets. "Tea?" she asked. "Only don't tell Mom."

"I won't," he said. "Hang on, okay?"
"And Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"The mail?"


She was almost thankful for the headache, as it made thinking nearly impossible. She let herself drift between sleep and awake as Luke shuffled around the kitchen. She took slow, even breaths and waited for the ibuprofen to kick in. Luke came in and gingerly sat on the end of the bed as he handed her a cup of tea and dropped an envelope on her comforter. He held a mug of tea for himself in his other hand.

"Thanks, Luke. For the tea and the ride, before—I'm really sorry I yelled at you, too," she said. "The thing I said about Mom..."

"Already forgotten," Luke told her. "And you were right, too—that's not my place."

"Taking care of a Gilmore in the middle of a mini-meltdown despite her best efforts stop you? Since when is that not your place?"

He tipped his head, conceding. "You want to talk about it?"

She averted her eyes. "Talk about what?"

"The Hideous... you know... Incident."

Rory furrowed her brow and winced. "My head really hurts," she said.

Luke began to rise. "I'll let you rest, then."

"No, that's not—" Rory stopped. "I appreciate the offer, Luke—maybe later?"

He nodded. "Sure." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I'll be in the other room, if you need me."

"You're not going back to work? The dinner rush—"

"The doctor said you should have someone with you for the next few hours, and the crew at the diner has it pretty well covered. I'm good here."


"Anytime." He paused. "Rory?"

"Yeah?"

"It'll turn out all right."

She lowered her eyes. "How do you know?"

"I know."

"How do you know?"

He sighed. "He'd have to be an idiot to let that be the thing that messes it up. And so would you,
quite frankly. I know for certain that you're not an idiot and I'm assuming since the kid goes to Yale, he's no Kirk, so… it'll turn out all right."


"Call me if you need anything."

She curled up in the proliferation of pillows her mother had made for the bed and stared at the ceiling. The tea had calmed her somewhat and with the ibuprofen was softening the sharp pain in her temple to a dull ache. The envelope stared her down a moment before she gave in and slit it open to read her grades. Closing her eyes, she sighed: not her best, but no surprises. She burrowed further among her pillows. She knew she should call Marty back and explain herself, but her limbs were heavy and her mind too cloudy for speech. She wondered if Luke had laced her tea with sleeping medication before she began to drift.

It was dark when she woke. Lorelai poked her head in, squinting against the dark.

"Rooory," she whispered.

"I'm awake," Rory said. "You can turn on the light. When did you get home?"

"Just," she replied. Lorelai flipped the light on and joined Rory on the bed, cuddled up beside her. She faced her daughter with a concerned smile. "So," she said, pushing a lock of hair off Rory's forehead, "tell me."

"Tell you…?"

"First, how are you feeling?"

"Okay," Rory said. "Stupid."

Lorelai's eyes were sympathetic. "Oh, babe," she sighed. "Accidents happen. Second, tell me what's going on with you and Marty."

"Nothing's going on with me and Marty."

"Rory."

"Mom."

She sighed. "I only ask because Luke mentioned you were on the phone with him when you fell and you seemed upset—"

Rory frowned. "He told you I seemed upset?"

"We-eell, he didn't say that in so many words—"

"How many words did he use, then?"

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "He said you were on the phone with Marty when you fell. That's it. Just that you fell when you were talking with Marty. From that, I inferred—"

"Stop inferring, then. I'm not upset."

"Rory—"

"I just—I can't let this be yet another item on the list of stupid mistakes Rory Gilmore's made with
a boy." She took a breath. "And this is the first sort of boy thing, since Dean, and that's—it's important, for some reason."

Lorelai regarded her with a sad smile. "Well, it isn't sort of a boy thing—it's most definitely a boy thing. The fact that it's the first since Dean is a big deal simply because it is, because that itself was a big deal and you had to do a lot of work to get through that and figure it out. With the both of those together, sweets, it's understandable if you're upset or confused or scared. Starting over with someone new is always scary, and it's so much scarier when it's someone you really, really like. The fear factor—no cow testicle reference intended—"

"Mom, cows don't have testicles. They're girls."

"Fine, then no horse intestine reference intended—the fear factor just shoots through the roof when you get romantically involved with someone you've depended on as a friend—it's scary, babe, when you change that relationship; it's intimidating; it's overwhelming; but, Rory, hon, it's worth the anxiety, in the end." She leaned back against the pillows. "You know, if things had been different on the night of the test run, I think I probably would have done my best to avoid Luke, too, after he kissed me."

"You did," Rory said. "Remember? I had to talk you into the date twice."

Lorelai thought a moment. "I guess you're right. I didn't want to avoid him, but it was—it was scary. He was my best friend—present company excepted—and then he was kissing me, and it was just the most incredible… I mean, I felt that kiss everywhere, and who wants to avoid—"

"Mom," Rory groaned.

She held up her hands. "My point is that I know that it's easier not to deal with it. But you're just delaying the inevitable, babe. And wasting a whole lot of time, too." She pulled something from her pocket and handed it to Rory.

Rory snorted; the cell phone was cool in her hand. "You put it in the veggie drawer, didn't you?"

Lorelai shrugged. "He left a message on the house phone and said he'd try your cell instead, since he missed you here."

Rory dropped a kiss on her mother's cheek. "Thanks, Mom."

"Anything for you, sweets. Luke ran out to get some food, so dinner'll be a little while. Do you want anything?"

She wrinkled her nose. "My stomach's kinda oogy. In a bit."

Lorelai smoothed Rory's hair from her forehead once more. "Okay. I'll just be in the living room if you need me."

Rory waited until she heard the TV on in the other room before she flipped the cell open and dialed her voicemail box.

"You have six new messages," the automated voice told her. "First new message: Rory, it's me—I don't know what just happened or who that was but call me when you get this and let me know you're okay... It's Marty, by the way." She laughed.

"Second new message: Hey, it's Marty. Again. I know you might not have gotten the other message and I shouldn't leave you another one when you haven't called back because that's a little desperate, even for me, but I just wanted to make sure everything's all right. Which it
probably is. Maybe you, like, fell off the bed. I fall off the bed all the time, so I know what that's like. Well, not all the time, I mean, just, I sometimes fall out of the bed, but it's usually when I'm asleep and I don't know I've done it until I wake up, except that one time freshman year when I—"

Rory closed her eyes as she listened, shaking her head. "Third new message: Got cut off and now I forget what I was saying anyway, which is probably a good thing. So. Call me. When you can. Okay. I'm gonna go, then. This is me, hanging up. Bye."

"Fourth new message: So, it's been awhile, and I'm starting to worry that you really did fall off the bed, or whatever, and that you fell off the bed because you were making evasive maneuvers to avoid an intruder, probably the guy who hung up, and that he had no choice but to put you in the back of his car because you saw him, and now you're all tied up in the trunk with him like Jennifer Lopez in that movie, and if that's the case, don't, you know, fall in love with the guy—I'm sure he's no George Clooney. If you haven't been kidnapped, call back."

She felt flushed, now, as the fifth message began to play. "So, I know, right, I'm insane and you now have legal grounds to keep me at least fifty feet from you at all times. But I wanted to say this, about the thing on New Year's Eve, because I feel like it has to get said—I'm not sorry, and it was amazing, and I'd like for it to happen again, if that's okay with you, and I understand if it's not or maybe it is but it's not okay yet and you want to wait, that's—that's bearable, too, and preferable to the more negative alternatives. And I know this is a conversation we should probably have in a situation where you can actually respond, but—" She sat up.

"But what?" she demanded. "But what?"

"Sixth new message: The thing is, Rory, is that we haven't talked in a few days, and that's been weird. And also uncomfortable. And that's sorta nice, that not talking to you is a bad thing, but I don't want us to be not talking because... because of the thing. Which I mentioned before. And I won't again. Unless you bring it up, which is technically you mentioning it, so it's still fair game. I really don't have any idea what I'm talking about anymore or what it is I was going to say except that I'm really worried you hit your head and now have amnesia and you'll end up an accountant in New York like Kermit the Frog in Muppets Take Manhattan, and boy is that a reference I wish I could take back." She heard him sigh. "Call me when you get your memory back, okay?"

Rory raised her hand and touched her fingers to the sore spot at her temple, exploring the bump. She chewed on her lower lip a moment before she hit the number five on her speed dial.

"Hello?"

"Hey," she smiled. "It's me."

Marty sighed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," she said. "Want to hear the precautionary tale as to why high heels are bad news?"

"You're okay?"

"I'm a little banged up," she admitted, "but I'll live." She paused. "I got your messages."

She heard him swallow. "Yeah?"

Rory took a breath. "I'm—the thing? I'm going to bring it up."

"You are?"

"Just—just so you know."
He was silent a moment. "Are you bringing it up now?"

"Sort of. A little."

"You're bringing it up a little?"

"Is it okay if I don't want to talk about it over the phone?"

"It's okay," he said slowly. "We'll talk about it not over the phone."

She laughed, sighing. "Good. And Marty?"

"Yeah?"

"I really am sorry."

"I know. Thanks." He cleared his throat slightly. "So. I'm not really into high heels, or anything, but I do love a good precautionary tale."

"Really? That's too bad, because I can get my hands on a pair of pink suede heels that would look so adorable on you," she teased.

Neither Luke nor her mother would let Rory drive herself back to school that weekend, and so she ended up, Sunday afternoon, in the passenger seat of her own car, Lorelai behind the wheel with Luke following behind them on the way to Yale. Both women were quiet, lost in thought. Rory stared out the window and watched the highway spin past as she scripted out the conversation she would have to have with Marty. She hadn't got much further than "hey," when Lorelai broke the silence.

"You're going to be my maid of honor, right?" she asked.

Rory smiled at her fondly. "Of course," she replied. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I just wanted to ask," Lorelai said. "Say it out loud."

"Have you decided when it's going to be?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not yet. I don't even want to think about it until after this ridiculous party."

"It's not going to be ridiculous," Rory assured her.

"Luke is already in hives over it."

Rory giggled. "Grandpa wants to take him to the barber."

"Do me a favor. Don't tell him that."

"Soul of discretion, Mom," Rory said. "You're looking at her."

"Really? She bears startling resemblance to my pal Rory."

"What should I say to him?" she asked abruptly. "To Marty?"

Lorelai was quiet a moment before a grin slowly spread across her face. "Don't say anything," she said. "Just go in there and grab him and act like you're going to lay a big, fat one on him, and when he asks you what you're doing, say, 'Ending our friendship.'" She sighed. "It worked so
"Mom, With Honors is the worst movie ever," Rory groaned. "Awful."

"Oh, come on! Walt Whitman? The homeless? Death? Joe Pesci? What's not to love?" Lorelai asked. "And, sorry, babe, but worst movie ever goes to—"

"Ah, how could I forget?" Rory laughed.

"From Justin to Kelly," they said in unison.

"Spring break will never be the same again," Rory said.

"Text messaging and love and group choreography." Lorelai sighed. "That's the way, uh-huh, uh-huh, I like it!" She maneuvered the car into a parking space and cut the engine. She turned in her seat, regarding Rory a long moment. "Sweets, you just have to tell him what you want."

Rory nodded. "I know."

"Want to practice on me? I'll be Marty, you be Rory, tell me what you want."

"Because that's worked so well in the past."

Lorelai tossed Rory her keys. "Oh, try me." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, exhaling through her nose and pushing her hands away from her, palms out. She opened her eyes and assumed a slouched posture. "Hey, Rory," she said, her voice husky. "How's the head? Still perfect?"

"Mom," Rory whined.

"Mom," Lorelai mimed looking around. "Whoa, is your mom here?"

"Mom!"

"I'm trying to help!"

She toyed with her keys. "I know, and I appreciate that, but I just—I guess I won't know what I'm going to say until I see him, that's all." She stopped. "And that smile on your face, by the way, is mildly infuriating. Luke's waiting and I keep getting these cryptic 'Men are beasts' emails from Paris, so I should probably check in with her to make sure she hasn't, you know, shaved her head and become a Buddhist monk."

The hallways of the dorm were crowded and noisy as Rory led Luke and Lorelai towards her door. She tucked her arm close to her chest as she walked, darting her eyes back and forth as she noticed who had come back and who had yet to arrive. Paris's door was still closed and her whiteboard blank. With a sigh, Rory unlocked her door. She stepped aside for her mother and Luke behind Lorelai, bearing the majority of Rory's luggage.

Lorelai wrinkled her nose. "Kid, your room has a distinctly unpleasant stench."

"I believe the use of the word stench implies the unpleasantness, Mom," Rory said. "It's not that bad."

"Woo, Gilmore," someone called from the hall, "you storing bodies in there?"

Luke pointed at the window. "I'll just open that."
Rory sat heavily at her desk and put her head in her hand. "I hate my life."

"Rory! You left a pizza under your bed!" Lorelai cried. "No wonder it smells like rancid cheese in here! There is rancid cheese in here!"

"Take it out from under the bed," Luke said.

"I'm not touching it," she replied.

Rory looked at them balefully. "I'll toss it, don't worry about it."

"I got it," Luke sighed. "Should probably take it to the dumpster out back, though, otherwise you'll stink up the hall. You need any help with your luggage, Rory?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm good. Thanks, Luke."

He tugged a lock of Lorelai's hair. "We should go."

"You go," she said. "I'll meet you at the truck in a few minutes. I need a minute here with the Smelly Cheese Girl."

"The nickname thing does get old, Mom."

"No such thing." Lorelai scoffed.

Rory rose and gave Luke an awkward, one armed hug. "See you Friday, Pops."

"See you Friday," he replied, ruffling her hair. "Have a good week."

Lorelai plopped on Rory's bed and tucked her feet up under her. "I just wanted to talk to you about a few things," she said. She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear, fluttering her hands nervously. "This first one is most likely none of my business—"

"Not the greatest opening line," Rory said.

"—so you should feel free to tell me so and not answer at all, and I'm honestly not sure it's even that important, but I'm absolutely positive that you've been thinking about it because that's what you do, so I thought—"

"Mom."

She sighed and leaned forward, her hands braced on her knees. "Does Marty know about Dean?"

Rory lowered her eyes. "He—he knows about the fact of Dean. Sort of."

"I'm going to need some elaboration on that one, babe."

"So, last semester, we were in that class together, remember? One week we had to do this roundtable discussion of a paper this girl wrote about losing her virginity, and it was awful. Marty and I were talking about it, and he said something about how his first time story was so clichéd it wasn't worth writing about—"

"In a car, huh?"

Rory rolled her eyes. "I don't even want to know," she said. "Anyway, he asked me about mine, and the whole thing sorta came out—the whole Dean-Jess-Dean-Jess-Dean debacle." She paused. "Most of it, anyway. I left out the married part." Off her mother's look, Rory took a breath. "I told
him that when Dean and I were… together, he was involved with someone else and it was really bad and it messed me up—I thought the married part would have been overkill."

"How did he take it?"

She shrugged. "He—he was sympathetic." She ran her fingertips along the back of the chair. "In context, he said he understood." She looked levelly at Lorelai. "We didn't get too far into it. He knows it's something that will never, ever, ever happen again. I left it at that."

Lorelai nodded. "I think that's probably a good idea. I just—I know how you worry at things, so I was worried for you."

"Well, that, at the very least, is all good. So, that was the first thing—what's the second?"

Her mother paused and averted her eyes a moment. "The engagement party."

"Yeees?"

"How are you going to handle it if Jess is there?"

Rory felt her breath stop in her chest. "Mom," she began.

"Luke hasn't—he mentioned it, inviting Jess, and then he backpedaled and said it probably wouldn't be a good idea with my family—meaning Richard and Emily, I assume—and everyone from Stars Hollow, Jess not being their favorite person and vice versa, and he tried to make it seem like it wouldn't be a big deal, but…" She trailed off. "I hate to push this on you, sweets, but I think it would mean a lot to Luke if Jess were there. And Lord knows I'm not Jess's biggest fan, but he's Luke's family and it's Luke's party, too, whether or not he wants it. I just wanted to know how you feel about that." She bit her lip, waiting for Rory to answer.

Rory rose and sat beside her mother on the bed. "The last time I saw Jess, I ended up sitting in a packing box, crying. I'm not—I wouldn't go out of my way to see him again, or anything, but I think I could handle it if I had to. And he should be there, you're right. There are going to be so many people there that I won't even have to talk to him. And for Luke? With everything he's done for us, for me, I can deal with this for him. And at least he'll have someone there as miserable as he is to glower with."

Lorelai smoothed Rory's hair off her face. "You're such a good kid. How did you get to be such a good kid?"

"I have a good mom," she said.

Lorelai put her arms around Rory and gave her a hug as tightly as she dared, the arm in the sling between them. She pulled back at a knock on the door, which opened before Rory could give an invitation to come in.

"I swear, I'm going to become a lesbian," Paris announced. "Hey, Lorelai."

"Hi, Paris." Lorelai rose. "I should go. The man's waiting." She shouldered her purse. "Paris, the second weekend in February, my parents are throwing an engagement party for me and Luke, and we'd love you to come."

Paris smiled tightly. "Thanks, Lorelai. I'll be there. Nice ring, by the way. You do know how diamonds are—"

"Call me later, hon," Lorelai said, stooping to kiss Rory's cheek. "Paris, hope the lesbian thing
works out for you."

Paris threw herself on the bed. "I hate to be the dark cloud, here," she said, as Lorelai left, "but the chances of it working out for anyone are so slim in this day and age that I really can only wish them luck without actually believing that luck will do them any good."

"I take it things aren't going so well with Professor Fleming," Rory said.

Paris growled. "Don't say that name in my presence again. Do you know what he did?" she demanded, sitting up. "He took me to New York for New Year's Eve, took me to dinner and this very exclusive literati party and the Four Seasons and then dumped me as soon as we get back to New Haven the next day."

"Oh, Paris, I'm so sorry," Rory breathed. "Really."

"I may never trust a man again," she intoned. "Worms. Beasts. Monsters. If I didn't have so much to do in the next twenty years, I'd consider joining a convent."

"You're Jewish."

Paris stared at her a moment. "Don't mock my pain. I can take you out."

Rory choked on a laugh. "Oh, I know."

"Why does your room reek?"

"Let's just go sit in your room and you can continue to berate the entire male species there, okay?"

Paris led the way across the hall and went on at a clip for over an hour about the relative evils of romantic relationships before she realized Rory's arm was in a sling and saw the bluish bruise on her temple. She stopped, mid-pace and mid-rant.

"What the hell happened to you?" she demanded.

Rory turned her head. She was flat on her back on Paris's bed, staring at the ceiling, her arms resting on her stomach. "I fell down the front steps at home." She raised herself up on one elbow. "Hey, are you hungry? You wanna go grab some dinner?"

"No thanks. I have an ethics paper due for the first class on Thursday that I haven't started yet—I'm going to order something and do my research instead. Get Marty to go with you. He'll probably choke on his tongue in excitement."

"Paris."

She pointed at Rory. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"I'll talk to you later," Rory said flatly. "I'm going to leave my door open for a while and keep airing my room out—keep an eye on it for me, will you?"

Rory trudged down the hall towards the stairwell, her chin tucked to her chest. She was worn out already, tired. She rubbed her eyes and shook her head, trying to lift her mood. She found herself at Marty's door and knocked.

"Come in—but be forewarned, I'm half naked!"

Rory giggled. "Which half?"
He was in the process of pulling on a long sleeved tee shirt as Rory swung the door open and poked her head in. Marty grinned at her as he tugged the shirt down over his middle, striding across the room.

"Hey," he said, giving her a cautious hug.

She closed her eyes as she put her good arm around him. "So this is how you get all the girls, huh?" she asked. "Walking around half-naked like an Abercrombie greeter?"

"Well, I like to go with what works," he replied. He stepped back and studied her. "Nice bruise, there, Rocky."

Rory flushed and looked down. "Please. I wish it were a battle scar. At least then it wouldn't be so embarrassing."

The touch of his fingertips, gently and tentatively easing the hair from her forehead made her jump. She raised her eyes and watched Marty as he pushed the lock of hair behind her ear and just touched his thumb to the still swollen spot of black and blue just above her eye. Rory bit her lip, trying not to wince. He brushed his knuckles across her cheek as he lowered his arm and slipped his hand under her chin, tilting her face up to his. Her fingertips were on fire, her insides tingling.

"Tell you what, you can say you were protecting me from a mugger," he said.

She thought her laugh sounded shaky. "Deal."

Marty dropped his hand and offered her a seat. She clambered up on the bed and arranged herself against his pillows, looking around. He'd rearranged the furniture, hung up the Three Stooges poster she'd given him for Christmas, put down a rug. She nodded in approval, pushing her cheek against his pillows.

"You have the softest sheets of anyone I know," she told him. "And that includes my grandparents. I love it."

"Don't let that get around. I've got a manly image to protect," he said. "So, what's up?"

"I was wondering if you wanted to get some food with me."

"Way ahead of you," he said. "I ordered in a little while ago. It should be here any minute."

Rory sat up. "That was very prescient of you."

He shrugged. "Usually, I figure if I know you're coming, I better be prepared with victuals." He paused. "And today I thought if I prepared myself with victuals your freaky sixth sense of food delivery would direct you here."

"I do not have a freaky food delivery sixth sense," she cried. "It's from growing up with Lorelai Gilmore, I'm sure. I have a talent and I don't even know it," she sighed, kicking her shoes off. "I'm not going to complain, though—don't look a gift food horse in the mouth, I always say."

"Always?"
She curled into herself, reclining on his bed as they waited for the food. It was easy, she thought, to slip back into the banter, and comfortable. She felt less weighed down, less weary as he talked about his little brother's ineptitude with a mop and the hilarious spectacle it caused in his father's bar. She closed her eyes when the phone rang and he ran out to grab the food. She wanted to pull the blanket folded at the foot of the bed up over her and sleep, to stay where no one would ask anything of her.

"I got pizza, I got fried mozzarella sticks, I got buffalo wings and soda and garlic bread and—on the off chance that Luke has converted you over the break—a salad."

She pushed herself off the bed and went to help him as he kicked the door open, taking what she could and placing it on his desk. "Blasphemy," she said. "He is teaching me to cook, but it'll take years of deprogramming to get me salad-willing."

They sat on the floor with paper plates balanced on their knees. Rory handed Marty a soda. "Can you open this for me?" she asked. She laughed as he made a production out of it, pushing his shirtsleeves over his elbows, flexing his biceps, and taking a deep breath as he popped the tab for her. "Marty? Do you ever get—do you ever get sick of yourself?"

He stopped, a slice of pizza in his hand and his mouth full. He looked at her with wide eyes. "You trying to tell me something, Rory?"

"No, of course not. I just—lately I'm just so—I get to the point where I get so tired of myself. Like, could I just shut up already, you know? Do you ever feel like that?"

"I guess so," he said. "I think when you get in a funk, that's just what happens. It's like, if you could get out of your own way, you could stop being in a funk, but you can't and it just gets worse."

"Exactly," she exclaimed. "That is exactly it. And that's how it's been since—" She bit her lips together. "You know."

Marty cleared his throat. "Yeah."

The silence in the room was overwhelming for a moment. Rory tried to gauge his reaction, to see if she could read his thoughts on his face. She put her plate down and hitched herself across the floor towards him until their knees were touching.

"Marty? I—I was awful."

He looked at her evenly, his eyes serious and dark. "You sorta were."

"And I am sorry."

"You said that, yeah."

Rory placed her hand on his knee and tapped her fingers against the seam on his jeans a moment. She then reached for his hand and looked at him apologetically. "Am I terrible? Am I the most awful person in the world?"

He toyed with her hand in both of his. "You're not the most awful person in the world. It shouldn't have happened that way, any of it. I can—it'll happen again when it happens, I guess."

"And you're okay with that?" she asked.

He released her hand and sat back. "No. But I'll wait."
"Marty—"

"I don't especially want to keep talking about this," he said. His voice was flat.

"Okay."

They were quiet. Rory stole a glance at him as he polished off the pizza, his eyes fixed on the floor. He was pale. Her stomach clenched and she felt the hot swell of anger in her throat; if she could have, she would have punched herself on his behalf. There were ways to fix this, she knew. But, she thought; but. The way out she chose was, she knew, the cowardly one.

"Hey," she said, "will you come to my mom's and Luke's engagement party with me next month?"

"Yeah?"

"Be my date?"

"Yeah," he said. "I can do that."

When they'd finished eating, they stretched out on the bed, side by side, kicking at each other for room. Rory felt the weight of all that remained unsaid heavy on her chest. But as Marty handed her a pillow and began to speak, he affected lightness, and so she followed his lead and tried to forget, or at the very least ignore, what she knew they were both thinking of. He told her about his spring schedule, and she laughed.

"I can't believe you're taking drama," Rory said. "Really."

"It fills a requirement and it's easy," he said.

"You know how many famous actors start that way, just taking it for a requirement? It would be so cool if that's what happened to you," she said. "And I can tell everyone I knew you when."

"Yeah, I'll thank you when I win my Oscar," he grunted.

Later, when they were talking about the wedding, something occurred to Rory. She sat up and looked down at Marty. "Oh, my God. After my mom and Luke get married, that will mean that I have dated my cousin." Marty began to laugh. "Before the fact, but still."

She stared blankly before her as the bed shook with the force of Marty's guffaws. "I will have dated my cousin. I have to—I'm going to have to pull out three of my teeth and buy a trailer and put a car on blocks in my yard and start drinking moonshine."

Marty put his hand out and rubbed her back. "I'm going to buy you a housedress," he told her.

"Not funny."

He began to laugh again. "But it really is."

She fell asleep against his shoulder watching a movie. She woke in the wee sma's, needing to use the bathroom, and looked around her in confusion. It took her a moment to remember her surroundings and get her bearings. When she had, she slid off the bed, located her shoes, and pulled the covers over Marty, who slept on his back, hugging himself. She smiled and leaned over him. He shifted and rolled onto his side, and Rory couldn't help but put her hand out, comb back the thatch of unruly curls that fell across his forehead. She stooped and dropped a kiss on his cheek before she let herself out. Her own room was damp and clammy with cold when she stepped inside; she struggled to get the windows closed before she shivered out of her clothes, into
stepped inside; she struggled to get the windows closed before she shivered out of her clothes, into her pajamas, and under the covers.

Classes began the following day; Rory's schedule was worst later in the week, on Wednesday. By the time she stepped into the classroom for her writing class with Professor Flynn that day, she had already had her first beginning Italian class and a poli sci lecture, missed lunch, and called her mother twice. She dropped into a chair towards the middle of the seminar table with a sigh. Flynn came into the room, her arms full of paper, her hair wild with pens stuck through the messy knot she wore on the crown of her head. She dropped everything she carried on the table and put her hands on her hips, surveying the students before her.

"I hope you're livelier than you look," she said at length.

Rory rolled her eyes and picked up her pen, ready to begin. The class went by too quickly as she scribbled notes and covered her syllabus with addendums and corrections. When Flynn dismissed them, Rory felt spent from the writing she'd done. She gathered her things and rose to go.

"Miss Gilmore."

Rory stopped short and turned. "Hi."

Flynn peered at her over her glasses. "Nice to see you again, too, Miss Gilmore." She began to gather up her papers again. "I wondered: what's your major, here?"

"Political science with a minor in English," Rory replied.

"And why is that?"

Rory furrowed her brow. "Yale doesn't have a journalism major," she said.

The professor's expression was bemused. "Right," she said. "And you want to be a journalist."

"That's been the plan," Rory said. "Why do you ask?"

She began to round the table for the door. "I'm teaching a seminar for seniors in the fall," she said. "It's only open to English majors with a concentration in creative nonfiction. If the enrollment is good, I might be able to teach it again. If the enrollment isn't good, then it's out."

"Well, I hope the enrollment's good," Rory said uncertainly, following Flynn out.

The older woman stopped abruptly and turned on her heel to face Rory. "I'm telling you this now, Miss Gilmore, so that you have an appropriate amount of time to declare yourself an English major with a concentration in creative nonfiction and get special permission from the department head to take the senior seminar."

Rory felt herself blush. "I'm sorry—"

Flynn rolled her eyes and sighed. "Miss Gilmore, you have talent. You could, potentially, have a great deal of talent. But you need work. You need to learn to take criticism, you need to learn the finer points of editing, and you need to learn a great many other things I don't have time to list. I think you would be an asset to this seminar and it would do you some good—a lot of good—to take this." She pushed her glasses up on her nose with the end of her pen. "Look, I'm not one to discourage you from heading in the direction of journalism—I was a history major as an undergraduate. Political science might be the way to go for you, and I'm not denying it wouldn't be helpful to have that under your belt if you wanted to work for Fox News—"

"God, no," Rory spat. "Geez."
"Rory," Flynn began again, "think about it. Creative nonfiction is a great concentration. You have time to declare. You could do a lot with it."

"I never thought about it before," she said.

"Think about it now." Flynn threw her scarf over her shoulder and made for the exit. "And Miss Gilmore," she called, "tell your friend Marty to get off his ass and into my office—his schedule is a mess."

Marty snorted when he heard this. "I rue the day I asked her to be my advisor," he said. "But she's right. I am in need of advising."

Rory looked over at him. He was folded into the armchair under her window, reading, as she stretched out on her bed and stared at her notes. "What do you think?"

"That a single European currency was probably a good idea, if only England could get on board," he replied. "About what?"

"The major switch," she said. "Creative nonfiction concentration in English."

His non-reaction, she thought, was telling—she could see him keeping his features carefully neutral. "I think whatever you do, you'll do great. I think you would love being a writing concentration major person thing."

"Do you like it? Being an English major?"

"Well, I am planning on being professionally useless," he said. "It seemed like a good way to go, the major. And yeah, I like it. I can never remember what to call it, but I like it. My life's goal: to be featured in the humor issue of The New Yorker. This is how I'm gonna get there."

"My grandfather will have a coronary," she sighed. "You think, really?"

"Rory," Marty said. "Do you want to do it?"

She sat up and ran her hands through her hair. "I don't know. I do know that I'm not as sure as I used to be about the whole Christiane Amanpour thing. There are a lot of ways to be a journalist."

"There are," he agreed.

"Huh."

The last week and a half of January felt rushed as Rory settled back into the grind of classes and study. The last Friday of the month, she collapsed on her bed after her writing class with a sigh. She reached for her cell phone and flipped it open.

"I'm dying."

"Well, I'll miss you, babe."

"Thanks, Mom. I don't really want to go to dinner tonight. Just the whole prospect of getting dressed—"

"Are you naked?"

"—getting dressed up," she amended, "and driving out there and back… I'm so tired," she sighed.
"I'm sorry, sweets. You want to come home with us afterwards?"

Rory wriggled into a more comfortable position on the bed as she thought about it. "No, thanks. I have a ton of work to do—I switched my schedule around a little, and I had to play catch up for a few classes. I can't afford to fall behind again."

"Well, tell you what—Luke and I will take one for the team and beg out for you," Lorelai said.

"Are you sure? This means that the only topic of discussion all night will be the party and the wedding."

She sighed dramatically. "For you, babe, what wouldn't I do? But you'll owe me." She yelped. "God! Luke, I'm on the phone, enough with the pinching!"

"I so don't want to know," Rory said. "Thanks, Mom. I just need to catch up on my rest a little."

"You do that, then. I'll call you after dinner, okay?"

"Talk to you then. Love you."

"Love you, too, babe."

"And love to Luke."

"You're just full of love tonight."

"That's what happens when I get tired," Rory said.

"Don't advertise that. Or if you do, just make sure to say your rates are excellent."

"Bye, Mom," she said pointedly.

The clock sat on the windowsill over her bed; she reached over her head and twisted simultaneously to check the time. Three-thirty, she saw. She set the alarm back on the sill and rolled off the bed. The hall was quiet as she stepped out and knocked on Paris's door.

"Go away!"

"Paris? You want to do something tonight?"

Rory stepped back in surprise as the door was wrenched violently open. "What part of 'go away' is so foreign to you?" Paris demanded, her face red and her eyes bloodshot.

"Are you okay?"

Her friend rubbed her eyes and sighed. "I'm fine, okay? I'm absolutely fine. And no, I don't want to do something later. I have a deadline and reading and nine hundred other things I should be doing besides standing here talking to you."

Rory crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. "Fine."

"Fine."

"I'll talk to you later, then."

"Whatever," Paris said, slamming the door.
Rory continued down the hall to the stairs. Since her breakup with the professor, Paris had been reclusive and even more sharp than usual. Rory knew Paris would come around eventually and things would go back to normal, or as normal as they could get with Paris. At the moment, however, Rory wasn't sure she was up for dealing with a more-hostile-than-usual Paris by herself. She hadn't slept well the night before; she was moody and pouty and she had a knot between her shoulders she couldn't quite reach to rub loose. She only wanted to slouch on Marty's bed and flip through a magazine while he played video games and relax for a while. She knocked on his door and waited.

Marty opened the door a crack and poked his head out, grinned when he saw Rory. "Hey!"

"Hey," she smiled. "I'm skipping out on Friday night dinner, and I thought I could maybe enlist your help in Operation De-Bitter Paris."

"Is that a viable operation?"

"She needs to get back to healthy Paris levels. Right now, she's at record high levels of bitterness. Ivana Trump bitterness."

"That's some powerful bitterness."

"So what do you think?"

He hesitated. "Will she threaten to castrate me again?"

Rory snorted in laughter. "Probably, but she's working out the pain, Marty. It's part of a process."

She leaned closer. "Hey. Even if she doesn't want to come, you want to go do something? Catch a movie, or whatever?"

Marty nodded. "Yeah. I'm—right now isn't so good, but—"

"Okay," she said lightly. "I wanted to take a nap anyway. Come down around six?"

"Six it is," he said.

She was halfway down the stairs before she remembered the book she'd left in his room the day before. She turned, bounded her way back up the hall, and paused at the events bulletin board when she caught sight of an ad for a poetry reading; she rolled her eyes, seeing it dated four months ago.

The door was still slightly ajar and so Rory didn't bother knocking before she pushed it open and let herself in, calling out. Immediately, she stopped short, unable to breathe. She felt heat surge beneath her skin as she flushed to the tips of her fingers and her mouth dropped open. Not entirely sure what she was doing, she pointed and stuttered.

"What the hell?"

Rory didn't know the girl sitting on Marty's lap, her mouth so close to his Rory couldn't see space between them. She looked over at Rory, nonplussed, but didn't move to rise. Marty dropped his hands from where they rested at the girl's sides. The girl still gripped the collar of Marty's tee shirt in her hands as Rory's words hung on the air.

Everyone began to move at once: Rory retreated to the door, stepping backwards, as Marty grasped the girl's wrists in his hands and pushed her away from him and she struggled to rise. The tears came hot and fast, before Rory had time to think, and the words quickly followed.
"You said—you said you'd wait," she cried, her voice choked and unsteady and pleading. "You said you'd wait," she repeated. "And I trusted you, I believed you, I thought—I thought that I would be okay with you, that I could trust myself with you. This was going to be different. This wasn't going to be confusing, it wasn't going to be—it wasn't going to be hard." Her lip trembled and she brushed at her cheeks with the backs of her hands, hardly conscious of her movements as she spoke. "I trusted you," she said again, "and now look at you!"

Her eyes filled rapidly as she spoke, the tears spilling over unnoticed as she carried on. "You're all Colin Farrell with the girls all over you! I told you things and you met my grandparents and you read my papers and then! And then! You kissed me! You kissed me, you did, you kissed me and it was amazing and then you didn't call me for days! Days! I fell down the stairs and broke my elbow and my head and—and I just—I can't believe this!" Rory covered her face with her hands. 

"I can't believe this," she said softly. "You said you'd wait. And now—and now I'm confused. Again."

Marty rose. His companion recoiled as she looked Rory up and down, her expression at once horrified, offended, and dismissive. Marty's own face was red, his brows drawn together and his mouth set in a hard line.

"Who are you to yell at me?" he demanded. "I kissed you? I didn't call you? You're confused? Jesus Christ, Rory—don't talk to me about confusing! I've been waiting on you since September! I've been patient—I've been more than patient, I've been respectful! I've sat next to you on your bed and my bed, in the dark, and I've never—"

He paused, took a breath. "I know guys have messed with you before and I didn't want to be one of those guys, so I've waited for you to be ready, I've waited for you to let me know when it's okay, and I'm still waiting. Yeah, I kissed you—I got drunk, I didn't think about it, and I kissed you and yeah, it was amazing. But I knew the second it was over that you were going to freak out about it, and guess what? You did. So I waited for you to call me, and you made me wait a hell of a long time and that's why I didn't call you back, I wanted to make you wait for once. But then you went and fell and I couldn't stay away… But you still wouldn't talk to me—"

"You were the one who said you didn't want to talk about it!" she cried.

"Oh, and you pushed so hard for that conversation," he retorted.

"Hey," she said angrily, "don't—"

"No, you don't, Rory! Don't put this on me—this has always, always been your call. You've been in control of this since minute one, and I've just been playing catch up. Do you have any idea how frustrating that is? How fucking confusing you are?"

Rory bit her lip, hard, and hugged herself. She turned her head. The door was still open and she could hear people whispering, giggling in the hall. The girl who had been in his lap stepped forward and brushed past him.

"We'll finish later, Marty," she said. She looked at Rory. "We were working on a drama assignment. A scene. I'm not trying to get on your boyfriend."

The words were out before she knew she'd spoken.

"He's not my boyfriend."

Rory covered her mouth with her hand. She felt her eyes well up again as the girl left and closed the door behind her. Rory turned her back to Marty and tried to catch her breath. He was silent;
she could feel his stare on her back, just at the place where her muscles were tied up in painful ropes of tension.

His voice was both harsh and weary as he spoke. "I don't know what you want from me, Rory. I don't. I've been doing my damnedest to figure it out, but I'm still lost. Every time—you're always keeping me at arm's length. I've stayed around because I keep hoping maybe you'll let me in. And yes, I know how sad and pathetic that sounds," he said, losing his intensity. She turned around to find him watching her fixedly. He shrugged. "I know it. But screw you, Rory, if you're going to come in here and accuse me of being confusing. I know what I want and you know what I want, but what I don't know is what you want. So what do you want, Rory?"

She drew a shaky breath. "My Don Quixote," she said. She didn't meet his eye.

Marty crossed to the desk and picked up a heavy volume. He extended his arm and held it out to her. He shook it. "Take it."

Rory reached out and took the book with one hand, immediately crossing her arms over it and clutching it to her chest. "I thought—"

"I know what you thought," Marty said.

"Marty…"

"What?" he asked. The gentle, pleading tone made Rory's throat tighten.

"I have to go," she said.

Rory yanked the door open and jogged down the stairs to her room, slamming her own door shut behind her with such force she knocked the whiteboard off her wall. She threw herself on the bed and indulged in stormy tears until she had cried herself into a stupor. When she could think to form words, she called out for a truckload of Chinese food, changed into her most comfortable pair of pajamas, and returned to her bed. When her mother called her after dinner in Hartford, Rory didn't answer her cell. Instead, she pulled from her bookshelf the boxed set of _My So-Called Life_ DVDs that Luke had given her for Christmas and began to watch.

On the following Thursday afternoon, Paris stood in the center of Rory's room and declared herself finished with wallowing and unable to stand looking at Claire Danes another minute. She'd paused on her way out of Rory's room to give her friend a sympathetic look and a "get over it, will you?" Rory threw an egg roll at her.

She was restless now, as she tucked her feet up under her and dug her spoon viciously into the carton of Ben and Jerry's Half Baked she held. With a sigh, she took a final bite and crawled off the bed towards her mini fridge. The contents were rather dismal, even for her. Four cans of Diet Coke and one slice of three day old pizza, the Ben and Jerry's in the small freezer, and a lone apple on the bottom shelf. She kicked the door shut with a sigh.

She hugged herself as she ambled across the room to her window. Her stupidity this last week felt lodged in the back of her throat, as though it were medication she'd taken without enough water to wash it down. She was on her sixth day of self-imposed exile. She felt bloated and nauseous with shame and too much takeout. The weather, she thought, wasn't helping—it had been raining steadily since the confrontation with Marty. Not helping, she thought, but fitting.

Her cell phone was ringing somewhere, and she dragged herself towards the sound of the tone. She located it under her pillows and rolled her eyes at the caller ID, not bothering a greeting when she answered.
"How's my little Howard Hughes?"

"Mom."

"Emily Dickinson?"

"Mom!"

"Salinger?"

"Stop it."

Lorelai chuckled. "Sorry, babe. How have you been spending your solitary hours?" she asked with affected seriousness.

Rory flopped back to the pillows. "I'm considering petitioning the Dean's Office to let me home school myself until the end of the semester, when I can transfer to an overseas school and change my name."

"Well, as long as you're not planning on doing anything drastic."

"Oh, of course not," Rory said. She sighed. "I do realize I'm being a little… dramatic."

"I wouldn't say that, hon," Lorelai replied.

"You wouldn't?"

"I'd say you're being completely dramatic and also ridiculous," she said.

Rory sniffed. "So?"

"Babe, you've got to talk to him."

"I don't want to talk to him."

"Yes, you do. You're just afraid."

"So?" she said again.

Lorelai sighed. "You can't keep doing this to yourself, babe. So you embarrassed yourself a little —"

"A little? Did you not hear the story I told you? That's not a little embarrassing—it's like Ashlee Simpson with the lip synching on SNL. Worse than that—it's Ben Affleck's entire career since the whole J. Lo thing!" Rory cried. She put her hand to her forehead. "I'm never going to be able to look at him again, Mom."

"Rory, you can't hide forever. You're just—"

"Delaying the inevitable, I know." She twirled her hair around her finger. "I'll call you later, Mom. I need a shower."

"Talk to him, babe."

She tried to scrub herself clean of the embarrassment in the shower, stood under the hot water until she was pink and raw and aching. When she realized it wasn't helping, she turned off the tap and wrapped herself tightly in her towel, rushing back to her room without pausing to look in the
mirror. She changed into a pair of fresh pjs before climbing back in bed and pulling the covers over her head. Neither tears nor sleep were forthcoming, and so she threw back the comforter and stared balefully around her. She cursed to herself as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed.

Once more, Rory rose and went to the window. She leaned on the sill. Her forehead against the glass, she peered out against the gathering dark, shivering. As she stared at the velvety darkness of the courtyard, she sunk herself once more in mortification and self-pity. She wondered what time it was; it got dark so early, now, she thought. The thought occurred to her it was better that way: no one would see what an awful person she was in the dark. *If Lorelai could hear you now,* she thought, cringing.

"Maybe Paris is right," she said aloud. "Get over it already." Her voice sounded thin to her own ears and she sighed. She should keep feeling awful; she was awful. She banged her forehead on the glass as she had the same thought she'd had so many times throughout the week: she didn't deserve to feel better. "Drama queen," she muttered.

A knock at her door startled her, and she turned, smoothing the skin under her eyes with the tips of her fingers as she went to answer.

She lifted her chin in surprise. "Luke," she said. "Hey. And wow, did I not expect to see you on the other side of this door." She stepped aside to let him in. "What are you doing here?"

Luke passed into the room and held up two large takeout bags with the diner logo on the front. "Your mom's working late at the inn tonight," he said, "and she told me you've been eating take out for a week. The diner wasn't especially busy, so I thought I'd bring you some real food. It's all wrapped in a few layers of tin foil, so it's still hot. Mostly," he added.

Rory gave him a weak smile. "Oh, Luke, you didn't have to do that," she said, clearing a space on the desk. He put the bags down and she peered inside. "Luke, I'm never going to be able to eat all this. Is that a whole pie?"

He nodded. "Yep."

Rory turned to him, a questioning look on her face. "Are you going to stay and have dinner with me?"

"Nope," he said. He rocked forward on his heels and raised his eyebrows as he spoke. "That's for you and whoever you choose to share it with."

"She told you," Rory said sullenly.

"She told me."

She sighed and perched on the bed. "It's so humiliating. I overreacted so badly—they need to invent a new word for overreaction, that's how bad this was."

Luke sat beside her. "Well, you did learn from the best."

Rory snorted. "I won't tell Mom you said that."

"Good idea."

They were silent a moment.

"Luke?"
"Yeah?"

"Do you ever get mad she made you wait so long?"

Luke rubbed his eyes. "You two are really hung up on that," he said. "I don't, no. Not now."

"Why did you wait?"

He looked at Rory, appraising her. "I guess because I would have rather had her in my life, didn't matter how, than stop waiting and not have her in it at all." He rose. "I should get going, close up the diner." He gestured towards the food. "There's a lot of good stuff there. Don't let it go to waste."

Impulsively, Rory wrapped her arms around Luke's middle and rested her head against his shoulder. "Thanks, Pops."

He held her tightly with one arm, cradled her head with one hand. "Anytime, Rory." His voice was choked and throaty. He patted her back. "It'll work out."

She gave him a final squeeze before she stepped back and daintily kissed his cheek. "If you're wrong, I'm coming after you."

"I consider myself warned."

"Luke?"

Luke stopped in the doorway. "Yeah?"

"What should I say?"

He was silent a moment. "That you're sorry," he said. "And after that, I guess whatever you need to."

"Thanks for the food. Love to Mom, okay? And drive safe, the roads are probably a mess," Rory said.

"See you at dinner tomorrow. Get some sleep tonight," he said and closed the door behind him.

Rory stared at the carrier bags on her desk, her eyes fixed blankly on the logo. She then moved quickly, not wanting to give herself enough time to think. She took one bag in each hand and opened her door, heading down the hall and up the stairs before it had closed behind her, before she had time to change her mind.

She took a breath and knocked.

"Yeah, hang on a sec!"

Rory bounced on her toes, keeping her eyes locked on a point above Marty's door. Her heart was already going at a painfully fast rate when the door swung open, and seeing Marty—and much of Marty's exposed midsection—caused her throat to tighten and her chest to swell. He was again in the process of pulling on a tee shirt, his head stuck in the neck hole and a thatch of damp brown hair peeking from the top until he yanked the shirt down over his chest and emerged, red-faced and smiling ruefully. Rory felt her own cheeks flush with heat. She was ashamed to find her legs were slightly shaky. His expression fell when he saw his visitor. Rory lowered her eyes.

Marty waited, silent.
Rory raised the bags and swallowed hard. "Dinner?" she asked. "I don't know if you've eaten…"

"I haven't eaten," he said shortly.

She wet her lips. "My—Luke brought me a ton of food. You want?"

He regarded her a beat before he opened the door wider and turned back inside. "What did he bring?" he asked.

"Burgers, fries, onion rings, chicken fingers, pie, brownies," Rory listed as she began to lift containers from the bags and set them on the desk. She hoped he wouldn't see the slight tremor in her hands. "Pretty much the works. Ten to one he snuck a turkey burger in there, though." She looked up. "You don't have to eat it. I'm just saying that's probably what he did."

They filled their plates and went to sit together on the bed. The TV was on behind her, and Rory turned to see what was playing.

"The O.C.?" she asked. "But it's not on this week." She stopped. "Why do I know that?"

"It's not," Marty said, slightly sheepish. "I… I have it on tape."

He offered Rory a can of soda and opened one for himself. They ate in silence until the food on their plates was gone.

Marty cleared his throat. "So."

"So," Rory said. She raised her chin and looked Marty in the eye. "I am really, really sorry."

"Okay," he said slowly. "Go on."

"First of all," she began, "I was ridiculous, and I'm embarrassed for myself—I know I probably embarrassed you, too, and I'm sorry for that. And secondly…"

"Secondly?"

"Secondly, I had no right to say those things." Her gaze faltered under his intense stare, one she couldn't read. "It's not an excuse to say that I was tired and cranky, which I was, and it's not fair to blame that girl for draping herself all over you—" She stopped and bit her lip. "I was wrong, and I'm sorry. Everything you said was true and I needed to hear it."

"Agreed."

She looked at him again. "I've been really unfair to you. I'm just—I'm really sorry, Marty. Really. And again."

"Okay," he said again. "I mean, it's not okay, but I know you're sorry. I'm sorry, too—not for what I said, or anything, because I was right, but I'm sorry it happened at all."

Rory set her plate aside and drew her knees to her chest. For a moment, she played with the hems of her pajama pants. "I really hope I didn't ruin this."

He dragged a French fry through his ketchup. He raised his head, at length. "Nothing's ruined."

He leaned forward. "Trust me, Rory. It ought to be easy—I'm really not that complicated."

Her smile was sad. "I trust you," she softly told him. "I have no idea why I reacted that way, I really don't."
"I do," Marty said smugly.

Rory raised her eyebrows. "Oh?"

"You were totally jealous," he said, grinning. "You thought the hottie was after my bod, and you were jealous."

"Hottie? You think that girl's a hottie?"

He waved a French fry at her. "And there you go again, with the jealousy. I can't help being a stud, Rory."

"I am not jealous," she replied and punctuated her remark by tossing a fry at him.

"You can deny it all you want," he said archly, "but your actions betray you."

"I'm not responding to this."

"You are," Marty shot back. "Saying you're not going to respond is a response."

Rory opened her mouth to speak and thought better of it. Instead, she scooted across the bed to fit herself against his side and wrap her arms around him. She slung her legs over his lap, rested her head on his shoulder, her forehead against his cheek, and closed her eyes. After a moment, Marty returned the embrace, gathering her in his arms and drawing her closer.

"That's better," he said. "I like my women silent."

Rory laughed, her eyes still closed. "You're in for a disappointment, getting involved with a Gilmore." She tightened her hold on him. "I hope you're prepared."

"Call me Boy Scout, then."

She lifted her head from his shoulder and grazed her lips against the edge of jaw. "Sure thing, Boy Scout," she whispered. She sat up, slipped her arms around his neck and looked him in the eye a long moment. "I don't—I don't know how to do this. I've never been very good at it, and it seems like I just keep getting worse. I tend to freak out, which is obvious by now, I know. I freak out, and then I mess up, and that makes it worse, and the cycle just keeps going, and—"

Marty shifted, awkwardly pulling Rory onto his lap. "Shit happens."

"Eloquent, Marty."

"My dad owns a bar. I therefore know with absolute certainty that shit happens." He shrugged. "I don't know anything else, Rory. I don't. It's not like I've done this a whole lot, either. So I'm—I'm right there with you. Scared and clueless and stupid—"

"Did you just call me stupid?" she demanded.

"You are," he said. "We both are. As far as I'm concerned, putting yourself out there for someone else knowing that that person could just rip your guts out is moronic."

He spoke so matter-of-factly, looked her straight in the eye as he did, that she knew this was an elemental truth of some sort for him, that he'd been handed his guts by someone he trusted before; as she brushed the hair off his forehead again, averting her eyes and biting her lip, she prayed it hadn't been her.

His hands were at the small of her back, and he tapped his fingers against her spine as he
continued. The pressure of his palms, the faint touch of his fingertips, were so reassuring they made her eyes smart. Rory found herself suddenly aware of the lack of space between them—she shivered at the realization that she was sitting in his lap and a thin layer of cotton only separated his hands and her skin. She became suddenly conscious that her breathing was slightly labored, that there were pinpricks of fire in her joints. She struggled to concentrate on his words beyond the even and low tone of his voice.

"But if you don't put yourself out there," he was saying, "and give that person at least the opportunity to rip your guts out, you're going to be miserable anyway, so you might as well give it a try as not under the theory that if the other person doesn't rip your guts out, you could be happy or you could make someone else happy in spite of the danger inherent to the whole situation—" He stopped. "I just think not doing something because it might go badly is a stupid reason not to do it. And not doing it is just as likely to make you miserable as anything else. Which is basically what I just said, I know, but I'm repeating myself because you're looking at me with that 'I'm totally confused and about to laugh my ass off' expression on your face so as much as I think I'm making sense I'm obviously not."

Rory smiled, lifting her right hand and running her fingertips up from Marty's collar to the edge of his jaw, down to his chin. She laid her palm flat against his cheek as she leaned forward and rested her forehead to his. "I get it. The Lloyd Dobler theory of romance."

She heard his breath hitch. "Come again?" he said.

"I want to get hurt," she said. "Lloyd Dobler, Say Anything..., that first scene in Corey's room—"

He blinked; she felt his eyelashes brush her cheeks and her breathing came all the more shortly. "Yeah," he said. "That." Shifting her once more in his lap, he took a deep breath. "I'm just saying I'm—"

"Willing to risk it?"

"Yeah."

Rory lifted her head and looked him in the eye. "Good. So am I."

The words were enough, somehow: she believed it when she said it, knew he believed it, too. As her eyes fluttered shut and Marty closed his mouth over hers, Rory held her breath. She felt her abdomen tighten as he kissed her, and she knew that unlike the first, heated kiss that was only a hazy impression of sensations, this time, this kiss would remain clear in her memory. The solid warmth of his chest as he held her crushing close; his hands so sure as he tugged at the hem of her tee shirt and laid his palm flat against the small of her back; his mouth both soft and firm at once, insistent and hot against hers; the thrum of his pulse in his throat beneath her palm; the muted sounds of people passing in the hall and the television still on just behind them; his particular taste and scent—this was the way it should have been, she thought, the way it should stay, the recollection imprinted, written into her skin. She slid her hands up once more, cupping his face between them. He tipped his head to the side, pushing against her, kissing her even more deeply.

She broke from him, eyes wide and startled, when she heard his head hit the wall. Marty grunted and opened his own eyes. He stared a moment before he seemed aware again, before he could think to move and pull her back to him.

"Marty," she protested, mumbling against him. "Your head."

In one swift, fluid movement, he had her on her back, one hand on her hip and an arm beneath her
neck. He kicked the remains of their impromptu picnic to the floor. "Don't care," he said. Rory closed her eyes as he kissed her, clinging to him, cradling his head gently with one hand.

God, she thought, when was the last time she'd just let someone hold her like this, just kissing and touching and breathing that wasn't somehow fraught with something else? The ache she felt as he dug his fingers into her hip that made her curve her body up to his was absent any sort of apprehension; the tremors in her hands and the tightness in her chest were more pleasant than fearful. She groaned in protest each time he pulled away, whether to breathe or trace kisses along her collarbone—the former was necessary and the latter was nice but altogether it was time not spent kissing him and there had been too much of that already.

She moved to help him out of his shirt, pushed him to sit up and guided the tee over his stomach and chest. He stopped her, asking if this was okay, was she sure, and she smiled in response and sat up as well, tugging his shirt off and casting it aside before she twined her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his. She kissed him sitting up, running her hands along the smooth skin of his shoulders, dragging her nails along his spine; she pulled him back to the pillows and kissed him lying down; she kissed him till her lips were stung and swollen and numb. He pulled back and studied her, scanning her features. His eyes were bright.

"What?" she asked.

He touched the back of his hand to her cheek. "Nothing."

"Marty."

He smiled and kissed her just beneath her eye. "This is just nice, is all."

Rory closed her eyes again. "Mm," she breathed. "Agreed." She rolled on her side and pulled his arm around her waist. He settled onto the pillows, slipping his other arm beneath her head and holding her to his chest, his chin on her hair. "Marty? Exactly how many episodes of The O.C. do you have on tape?"

"Oh, a few," he said, clearing his throat.

"You have the DVDs, don't you?" she laughed, angling to look back at him.

"So?"

She kissed the hand that rested on her shoulder. "You're just—there's no one like you, do you know that?"

"I get that a lot. Mostly from my mom." He sat up. "Hey, was there dessert in those bags?"

The evening passed quickly and she stayed tucked under his arm, talking, watching TV, kissing, not talking. She tried to remember if it had ever been this easy before. It should have been this way, she thought, just on the edge of sleep, after the first time. The thought sobered her, remembering the way the night had ended: Dean taking off, the fight with her mother, the crying and the long hours spent alone feeling wretched and small and hateful. The memory still burned in her throat like bile. Tonight, as sweet and simple as it was, wouldn't displace those few hours in May. It shouldn't, she thought. Even so, she felt as though she was starting over, if only a little bit. She burrowed further under Marty's covers and closer to him. He shifted, resting his cheek against the crown of her head.

"Hey, Rory," he whispered.

"Hey, Boy Scout."
"If I fall asleep, will you leave?" he asked, the "again" implied in the uncertain quality in his voice.

"Only if you make me."

Rory began to doze again, lulled by Marty's breathing and the pressure of his hand flat against her stomach as he absently rubbed the cotton of her top with his thumb. She smiled, her eyes closed, when he laughed at something on TV; she felt the rumble in his chest at her back and sighed. She whispered good night and let herself fall asleep.

When she woke, Marty was still sleeping, snoring slightly. Rory checked the clock on his nightstand and groaned. She rolled over, put a hand to his cheek, and said his name softly. He grunted.

"Marty," she said again. "Hey, wake up."

He scowled as he opened his eyes.

"Good morning, sunshine," she giggled. "I'm sorry to wake you up——"

"Not sorry enough not to do it," he grumbled.

With a roll of her eyes, Rory sat up and swept her hair back. "I have to go to class," she told him. "And then I have to go to class, and then I have to go to class again, and then I have to go to dinner."

Marty flopped onto his back and sighed. He scratched his head, looking up at her, squinting with one eye against the light that reflect off the wall behind her. "Hartford," he said.

"Hartford."

He placed his hand on the small of her back and scratched lightly at her tee shirt. "Will I see you later? After class and class and class and dinner?"

"We could go to a movie," she suggested, laying back and cuddling close to him.

"Or we could stay in and do more of what we did last night," he replied.

Rory buried her face in his shoulder. "You're such a boy."

"Stud, Rory. I'm a stud."

She sat up again. "Right. I have to do my daily ablutions and gird up my loins for the fray." She looked at him. "Thanks."

"For?"

"Last night. Forgiving and forgetting and——"

"Who said anything about forgetting?" he teased, propping himself on his elbows. She narrowed her eyes at him and he laughed. "We're good."

"Good," she said. She leaned forward and kissed him a long moment. "I have never wanted to go to class less in my life."

"Wish I could get that on tape," he said, kissing her again.
"I'll call you later."

"Have fun with the ablationing and the girding and everything."

As Rory shouldered her bag later that day after class with Professor Flynn, she cursed herself for having a schedule that meant she had to be aware and present until the very last moment of the week. Slowly she made her way up to the head of the table.

"Professor Flynn?"

Flynn looked up from the stack of papers she was attempting to organize. She regarded Rory warily as she jammed a pen into her bun and picked up her papers. "Timidity, Miss Gilmore, never got anyone anywhere."

She stood up straighter. "I've decided to change my major," she began, deciding to skip the prelude and the apology for her timidity that immediately came to mind. "I have my old advisor's signature, and I need the signature of someone in the department I'm declaring as well."

"And you want my signature."

"I do," she said firmly. "I hoped you could take me on as one of your advisees."

Flynn drew a great breath and took the paper that Rory held out to her. "I suppose I must suffer the consequence of converting you to the dark art of writing." She scrawled her signature at the bottom of the page and passed it to Rory. "Did your former advisor protest?"

"No, not exactly," Rory said. She paused. "He didn't remember me."

Flynn pulled on her coat and strode towards the door. "I don't expect to be so lucky. Until next week, Miss Gilmore."

Rory left straight from campus for Hartford. The truck was already in the drive, Lorelai and Luke just climbing out as Rory arrived. She grinned at her mother as she picked her way up the walk towards the door.

"Oh, smiling is good," Lorelai said, by way of greeting.

"You have no idea," Rory told her.


Lorelai put a hand to her cheek as though to shield her mouth from Luke. "Mushy talking makes him uncomfortable," she said.

Rory giggled as Luke jabbed at the doorbell. They were ushered inside and sent to the living room where they took their drinks. Emily stood by the drink cart, martini pitcher in hand. A few moments later, Richard wandered in, newspaper in hand. He looked up, seeming surprised to find them all seated and sipping their drinks.

"Is it really Friday?" he asked.

Lorelai smirked. "Actually, Dad, this is a mirage. We're not really sitting here, and that's not a real newspaper you're holding. I know how lifelike it seems, but don't let it fool you. It's too dangerous. Now, I tell you this for your own good, so—"

Richard looked at his wife in bewilderment. "What on earth is she going on about?"
"Nothing, Richard. It's just one of her 'jokes,'" Emily sighed, rolling her eyes. "Of course it's Friday. You know it's Friday."

He looked down at his paper. "But this is Thursday's paper," he said.

"Dear God, maybe this is a mirage!" Lorelai cried.

"So, Grandma," Rory said, "how are the plans for the party coming?"

Lorelai hissed and glared at her in mock horror. "Traitor!"

Emily crossed her legs and smoothed her dress over her lap with a particularly peeved expression. "Your mother is being impossible."


"I am not!" Lorelai said, indignant.

"Oh, you are, too," Emily retorted. "She won't even let me buy you both dresses!"

"Which reminds me," Lorelai said. "Hon, do you think you can come back with us after dinner so we can do a fitting at Lorelai's House of Couture?"

"Can't," Rory said. "I have a date."

A half-second of silence followed before everyone began to speak at once. Rory's cheeks flushed pink and she sipped her soda. "A date! With whom?"

"Well, that's quite something, isn't it?"

"Huh."

"That's my girl! Remember what I've always told you—"

Emily rose to refresh her drink. "Lorelai, I beg you not to continue. I've no doubt you'll say something vulgar."


"I'm going out with Marty," Rory said. "We're just going to the movies. It's not a big deal."

Her mother grinned at her. "You're blushing. It's a huge deal."

"Can we please not talk about this?" Rory pleaded. "Please?"

"All right, then," Richard said. "Suppose we sit down to dinner and you tell us how your school work is going."

Her nerves began to get the better of her as they crossed the hall to the dining room and sat down, served themselves and poured drinks, and began to eat. She held her fork and jabbed at the chicken on her plate, watching liquid ooze from the puncture marks, arrested by the sight, her voice caught in her throat.

"So, Rory," Richard said gaily. "How is everything at Yale? Your classes are going well, I take it?"
Her head snapped up and she blinked. "Very well, Grandpa, thanks."

"And you are enjoying your studies this semester?"

"I am, yes," she replied. She picked up her knife and began to slice into her chicken. "I actually just changed my major," she said, hoping to sound nonchalant.

"From what to what?" Lorelai asked.

"Mom!"

Lorelai took a sip of wine, chastened. "Sorry. From political science," she said slowly, "to…?"

She bit her lip before she spoke again. "English. With a concentration in creative non-fiction."

"Oh, hon, that sounds great," Lorelai said. "I like the sound of that, it's very official. What made you choose that? And pass the salt, would you?"

Richard was very still and very silent. Rory darted a glance at him as she picked up the salt shaker and handed it across the table. "I have this professor who's really sort of scary but her classes are just amazing and… I think—" She stopped and looked at her lap, drew a deep breath. "I've been thinking a little about what I want to do when I'm done at Yale and it's—it's not as clear as it used to be, I guess."

"What do you mean it's not as clear as it used to be?" Richard asked.

Rory looked at him. "I still want to do all the same sorts of things, Grandpa, I do. I want to travel and see important things and tell people about them. I just don't know if I want to do it in the same way." She paused. "I don't know, honestly, if I'm cut out to be something like a foreign war correspondent or an embedded journalist or something like that. I don't know if I want to be cut out for something like that."

"Rory, honey, you know that's not true," Lorelai said. "Of course you're cut out for it. You're a walking paper doll."

"And what would you do instead?" Richard asked, his voice grave.

"I don't know—I just know I want to write more than just the news, I want to write about the world. I like writing for the paper," she said, "I do. But this kind of writing that I've been doing, it's so much more challenging and it makes me see things differently. It makes me see myself differently. And I'm good at it, Grandpa—or at least, I could be."

Once again, the family was silent. Lorelai gave her a sympathetic smile. "I think it sounds fantastic, Rory. And I think no matter what you do, you'll amaze us all."

"Being a professional writer, Rory, is not an occupation one just walks up to," Richard said.

"I know, Grandpa."

"It's very difficult to make any sort of living as a writer."

"At first," she said. "And also it's very difficult to make any sort of living in journalism, at first. It's hard to get hired and get promoted… It's not that much different, Grandpa, what I want to do, and I have to do a lot of the same things to get there, but I'm starting from a different angle, now."

"I think it sounds fine, Rory," Emily said. "You're young, after all, and you have every right to
change your mind."


"What are you writing about now?" Luke asked.

"Right now? An essay for class about Stars Hollow, sort of. It's hard to explain."

Richard sighed heavily. "Well, my dear," he said, "you seem to know very well what you're about. It all sounds a little… frivolous… I suppose, to me, which I must tell you will worry me a bit, but you have always had sound judgment about your studies before. I must applaud you for taking a chance."


"I promise I'll keep you posted, Grandpa," Rory said. "I was invited to join a senior seminar in the fall by this scary professor. I'm going to be the only junior in it, she said."

"Well, Rory, that's wonderful," Emily said. "Shall we have our dessert, now?"

As her mother walked her back to the car after dinner, Rory marveled at how well her grandfather had taken the news. "I mean, you can do practically anything with an English major after you graduate, except maybe go to med school, but poli sci just seemed more solid, somehow. More concrete. I thought he'd hear 'English major' and think I was going to turn into an unemployed hippie the minute I got my degree."

"Your grandfather," Lorelai said, "is working on this whole new thing. Even if he can't approve of your choices—my choices, our choices, whatever—he's trying to accept them as yours or mine or ours. That's what he told me. It kills him, a little bit, because it's hard for him not to want to tell you what to do, but he's trying. And the effort is practically visible—little beads of sweat on his forehead and everything. I swear, one of these days he's going to go all Peter Finch in Network and scream that he's mad as hell and he's not gonna take it anymore!" She shrugged. "Until then, he'll keep trying."

Rory stopped with her hand on the car door handle. "What do you think?"

Lorelai put her arm around her daughter. "I think you should do what you want to do and what you think is best. But when you write essays about growing up, I would appreciate it if you made it absolutely and utterly clear what a hot mama I was, am, and ever shall be."

"You don't want me to portray you as wise and witty?"

"Wise and witty, of course, but only after you establish the hot part."

"Good night, Mom," Rory laughed.

Her grandmother, Rory thought, was nothing short of frightening when in the midst of her party planning. The next week was a flurry of phone calls between classes and surprise visits on campus, choruses of "what do you think of this" and "what do you think of that" and "will you promise me that Luke won't wear flannel?" and "your mother must be kept from the champagne after ten o'clock." How Rory became the designated representative of the Stars Hollow Gilmore-Danes family contingent, she didn't know. Nor did she understand why her grandmother insisted on asking questions that she either already knew the answer to (of course Luke won't wear flannel to the fancy dress party, Grandma) or that she had already made up her mind about (of course I think Mom will like the salmon mousse puffs, Grandma). She took to turning off her cell phone and hiding in Marty's room until Wednesday, when Emily called Marty's room and asked for her
there. On her way back to Stars Hollow Friday afternoon, Rory retrieved her ringing cell from the passenger seat of her car, holding her breath in trepidation. Another phone call from Emily would mark the seventh for the day, an all-time record high.

"Hello?"

"Please tell me you're almost home."

"I'm almost home, Mom."

"Are you lying, or are you really almost home?"

"I'm really almost home," Rory said. "Fifteen minutes."

Lorelai sighed. "Good. I need a little face time with the only sane person I know before this whole catastrophe gets underway."

Rory would have closed her eyes and banged her skull against the headrest if she weren't driving and talking on the phone at the same time. Lorelai's forebodings of doom had been almost as great in number as Emily's concerns over the plans for the party. Her mother, however, had refrained from calling Marty's room, though not from leaving multiple messages an hour on Rory's voicemail.

"I'm not talking to you anymore," Rory told her. "It's going to be fine."

"It's not going to be fine!" she shrieked, not for the first time. "You don't mix groups like this! You can't have all of my parents' old friends—meaning old money Hartford golf-playing geezers—and all of my friends—meaning the entire township of Stars Hollow—in the same room without the building that houses it spontaneously combusts, which will happen right after Gabriel comes in with the trump and the sinners and saved are all separated into folks for the bride and folks for the groom, left side or right side!"

Rory sighed. "Mom, I have to get off the phone now, okay? I'm driving. And," she said, in her best conciliatory tone, "while I'm sure that Grandma has done her best to get together an amazing guest list, I doubt she has the requisite pull to get Jesus to come for the sinners and the saved. She's good, but she's not that good."

"That's what she wants you to think!"

"I'm hanging up on you now," Rory said. She snapped the phone shut. "This party is going to kill me," she said to herself.

Though it took pouring a can of Diet Coke laced with rum down her mother's throat, Rory got both herself and Lorelai dressed, made up, coiffed, and waiting in the living room for Luke by six. They were expected at the hotel in Hartford at six-thirty, as Emily had called three times to remind them. Rory knew by the end of the night the pins in her hair would feel embedded firmly into her skull, but at the very least the dress was not uncomfortable. Her mother had outdone herself with this one, a simple strapless dress of a burgundy material that seemed to shimmer in the light. Lorelai's, Rory thought, for being even simpler than her own was much more elegant, a sheath of midnight blue. As they had zipped each other up, Rory observed that the dresses were fitted rather tellingly.

"Hey, you aren't going to have that figure forever, honey," Lorelai had responded. "Might as well flaunt it while you got it."

The two Lorelais sat together on the couch, Rory slumped against her mother. Lorelai put an arm
around her and fingered a lock of hair off Rory's forehead.

"Do you wanna know a secret?"

"Do you promise not to tell?" Rory said.

Lorelai giggled. "No, I'm serious. And I guess it's not really a secret so much as a nugget of information that few people are privy to."

"I can see how that could be misconstrued as a secret," Rory said. "Tell."

Lorelai took a breath. "Your grandfather invited your dad to the party tonight."

"What?"

"He's not coming, or anything, but he was invited."

Rory bit her lip and furrowed her brow. "Why would Grandpa do that? I mean, holy awkward situation, Batman. So inappropriate." She paused. "And how do you know? Did Grandpa tell you, or have you talked to Dad?"

"Grandpa told me, but your dad did send me a very nice card. It made Luke grunt." Lorelai smoothed Rory's hair with her hand. "I think Grandpa just thought that, you know, Christopher's your dad and he's technically an old friend, and... I don't know. But Chris is very graciously not coming, which I think is good, because the whole thing is already enough to give Luke cardiac arrest. And I haven't seen him in so long—I think since Gigi was born—that it's just better this way. Otherwise, it's just all too The Way We Were."

"Are you Hubble or Katie?"

She made the duh face. "Hubble."

"Really?"

"Before, I was Katie," Lorelai said. "Now, I'm Hubble."

"You're very versatile," Rory replied.

"I know. When will you go down and see him again?"

She shrugged. "I don't know when I'll get the chance. Spring break, for a weekend, maybe. When I went after Christmas, it was... weird. Awkward. Like we didn't know quite what to do with each other."

"It'll get easier," Lorelai told her. "You'll find a rhythm."

"Oh, I know. It's still good he's not coming." She paused. "Have I told you how glad I am that you're marrying Luke?"

"Tell me again."

"I heartily approve," she laughed. "I can't think of anything better."

Lorelai smiled and twisted the ring on her finger. "Me neither, babe."

Rory sat up. "I forgot my purse. Be right back."
As she hunted around her room for the purse she wanted, Rory heard the front door open and her mother shout an appreciative phrase at Luke. She found what she was looking for and threw in the few articles she always kept with her before she turned on her heel and made her way back down the hall. She paused in the arch at the end of the hall, bit her lip as she hung back.

Luke held Lorelai, his arms tight around her as he pressed his palms against her shoulder blade and the small of her back. His cheek against her hair, he sighed with his eyes closed, muttering. Lorelai hugged him in an equally fierce embrace. She gripped the back of his suit jacket, leaning up into him, tipped forward off the heels of her shoes. She soothed him, speaking low in his ear.

"I'm fucking tired," he was saying.

"I know."

"I don't want to go to this party."

"I know," she said again.

"I've been on my feet all day. I've been on my feet all day serving people, people who have done nothing while I've served them but shove food in their mouths and then proceed to talk—with the food still in their mouths, I might add—about this party that I don't want to go to."

"Well, they have very bad manners if they're talking with their mouths full," Lorelai said. "And it's a disgusting visual."

"I don't want to go to this party."

"Luke," she sighed, "my life, future husband of mine—"

"So you're going to sweet talk me now?"

"—it's one night. I know you don't want to do this, but—"

"So remind me why I'm doing it?" he asked.

She pulled back and rested her chin against his. She batted her lashes at him. "Because you love me."

"I do, huh?"

"You do."


"How very sweet of you to say so," Lorelai said. She twined her arms around his neck and kissed him.

Rory cleared her throat to alert them both to her presence.


"Hey."

Lorelai looked over at her. "Your timing sucks, kid."

"You riding in with us?" Luke asked, disentangling himself from Lorelai.
"I am," Rory replied. "Are we ready?"

Lorelai stepped back. "I think we are. And I must say, we look fabulous. Look at Luke," she commanded. "Don't my man clean up good?"

Luke wore a navy blue suit, the white oxford beneath crisp and open at the collar. He had negotiated with Emily over the tie. *That*, Rory thought, had been an interesting Friday night dinner. She grinned in approval.

"Very rakish," she replied.

Emily met them in the lobby of the hotel the moment they arrived. Lorelai muttered that she should carry nips in her purse for moments like this. Emily appeared not to hear as she led them to the ballroom where the party would be held. The party had been planned at first for the Hartford mansion, and then a small function hall, and, as the guest list slowly grew and Emily's party planning instinct took her in its grasp, finally the hotel ballroom. She had a string ensemble, a wait staff circulating, decorations, a bar, pictures of Luke and Lorelai...

"Dear Lord, Mom!" Lorelai cried. "Are we getting married here tonight?"

Rory swallowed a laugh when she caught the look on Luke's face. He was pale. She reached out and grabbed him by the wrist, dragging him away from her mother and grandmother. While she had personally experienced the more evil aspects of alcohol, she was slowly discovering that its more stultifying effects could be useful in certain situations. And this, she thought, was absolutely one of those.

"Come on, Pops, you're gonna buy me a drink," she said. "I'm underage, you know."

He leaned down to speak in her ear as they walked. "Did you know it was gonna be this—"

"Enormous?" she supplied. "No." She patted his arm. "Don't worry, it'll go by quickly."

"Really?"

They stopped and Rory leaned against the bar. "If you drink enough."

She stood at the end of the line as they welcomed guests—Richard first, Emily, Lorelai, and Luke all before her. Nearly all of Stars Hollow had been invited, and nearly every single arrival from the town had a comment or two for the nature of the shindig. The other half of the crowd—Old Money Hartford, as Lorelai termed it—were long-standing family friends and the like (very few business associates, by general and silent consent). As much as Emily and Richard had relaxed in the past months, Lorelai had observed to her daughter, the fact that the wayward Gilmore progeny was *finally* being made an honest woman was too great a temptation for showing off to the doubting Thomases and judgmental Emily Posts to resist. Rory shifted on her high heels, smiling tightly as people filed past with their gifts and cards. She sighed in relief when she saw Lane enter, followed closely by Paris and Marty.

"My people!" she grinned. "Thank God." Paris and Lane went to deposit their gifts; Marty hung back. Rory slipped her hand in his and tugged. "Hi," she said. She tipped her face up to his and kissed his cheek. "I have to hang here a while longer."

He shrugged. "It's all good. I'll grab a drink and go let Paris use me as a verbal punching bag for a while. It seems therapeutic."

"That's very kind of you," she said solemnly.
"Come find me." He bent lower. "I like the dress."

Liz and TJ were among the last to come in. Liz hugged her brother fiercely, slapping his back with both hands. "My big brother!" she cried. "Taking the plunge. I'm so happy for you both." Luke rolled his eyes as she pointed at Lorelai. "What did I tell you? Most of your life. I knew it then. I knew it! I was just waiting for you to figure it out."

"Indeed, Liz, you are very wise," Lorelai said. "I defer to your superior bridal knowledge."

"What the hell is she talking about?" Luke asked.

"Girl stuff," Liz replied. "Welcome to the family, Lorelai. You gonna change your name?"

"I sure am."

Luke looked at her. "You are?"

"Yeah," she said. "Why not?"

"I just didn't think—I mean, you've been Lorelai Gilmore a pretty long time—"

"Gee, thanks, Luke."

"I just meant that I understand if you don't want to change your name."

"But I do want to change my name," she said.

"But you don't have to."

Lorelai rubbed his arm. "I know that. But I'm going to."

"You don't have to do it for me. I'm fine if you want to stay Lorelai Gilmore, really, I—"

She took Luke's hand in both of hers. "It's okay," she said. She regarded him solemnly. "Luke, there is another."

Rory snorted. "You've been saving that one, haven't you?"

Lorelai bounced on her toes. "Oh, forever."

Luke shook his head, his eyes closed. "There are too many women in my life," he groaned.

Liz chuckled as she continued into the room, stopping in front of Rory. Rory was caught off guard when Liz pulled her into a hug and said it was nice to finally meet her, finally. Liz held her at arm's length and studied her, nodding her head. At length, she shrugged, a happy grin on her face. "It's really, really good to meet you," she said again.

Her body seemed to know when he came in before Rory realized it in thought. The air changed, shifted. She stood up straighter, wrapped her arms around herself, and turned her chin against her shoulder. Jess stood in the door, his hands jammed in his pockets, his expression cautiously bored. He waited a beat, rocking back on his heels, and was joined by a petite, olive-skinned brunette in a black cocktail dress. She slapped the back of his head with the tips of her fingers as she came to stand beside him, grinning as she did. She grabbed his hand and forced him out of the doorway. Rory took him in—he looked the same, despite the fact that he'd condescended to wear khakis and a rumpled blue button-down. She suspected more than just Luke's influence at work on that account. He ducked his head as Richard and Emily greeted him. Lorelai's smile was tight, but
kind, as Jess stepped over to Luke and shook hands.

"This is Ashley," he said.

Rory watched her mother shake Ashley's hand. She felt slightly numb, was aware that she was holding her breath. Jess hazarded a glance her way. He didn't smile; his face remained neutral and calm.

"Hey," she said.

He nodded. "Hey."

Ashley darted a glance between them. Rory swallowed and put out her hand. "I'm Rory."

"Nice to meet you," Ashley said.

They wandered toward the bar. Lorelai reached her hand behind Luke and took Rory's, giving it a reassuring squeeze. Rory looked at her and mouthed that she was okay. Lorelai nodded.

"Le's git this party started," she drawled.

Rory was unsure how a party like this was really supposed to go. The first hour seemed comprised of Emily and Richard making the rounds between the various knots of people that had gathered on the dance floor and Lorelai dragging Luke in a similar pattern. Rory had a feeling her grandmother had drafted a whole course of action for the evening as though this were the Norman conquest of England and she needed a plan of battle. Rory sat at a table not far from the bar, watching people come and go, chatting with Lane and Paris and Marty.

"Excellent nosh," Marty said. "Too bad it's not exactly a Hungry Man dinner."

Rory closed her eyes. "Please tell me you do not eat Hungry Man dinners."

"It was a metaphor," he replied, causing Paris to snort. He nodded towards the bar behind Rory. "That the future cousin?"

She turned and sighed. Jess leaned over the bar and spoke to the bartender; Ashley stood beside him, holding his one hand in the both of hers, leaning into him with her chin on his shoulder. He smiled back at her. Rory crossed her legs and sipped her champagne. "Yep."

A few hours later, the party was in full swing. Miss Patty and Babette had commandeered the piano for Morey and terrified the string ensemble into silence. Gypsy was throwing Andrew (and anyone else she could wrangle) around the dance floor with great gusto, surrounded by couples much more tamely taking advantage of the music. Rory found herself caught by her grandfather and, not knowing quite how to say no, allowed herself to be paraded around as the Yale-going, Gilmore legacy. As she plastered a smile on her face and bobbed her head, listening to the inane conversation passing between her grandfather and a former golfing partner, she saw her mother similarly trapped in conversation with a drunken and reeling Kirk. She managed not to giggle as Lorelai handed off her empty champagne flute to a passing waiter and took a fresh one. Her grandfather began to extricate himself from the conversation and Rory called herself back, made the obligatory nice-to-meet-you-goodbye, as she saw Luke step up behind Lorelai and put an arm around her waist, pulling her back against his chest.

Her mother's "Thank God!" was audible even at a distance and over the noise of the crowd and the music.

Richard put a hand on Rory's shoulder. "That's what marriage is all about," he said, and she
laughed.

Not long after, Rory stood to the side and again watched the crowd. Her mother had pulled Luke onto the dance floor; they turned in a slow, lazy dance, whispering to each other. Rory's throat swelled and she felt tears at the ready. Lorelai's eyes shone as Luke leaned forward and spoke in her ear. She tipped her head back, laughing, and he tightened his arms around her, erasing any space between them. She pressed her cheek to his and closed her eyes. Rory bit her lip. A sudden weight across her shoulders made her jump. Marty smiled down at her, his arm around her.

"You okay?"

She nodded. "I'm just—look how happy she is. My whole life, she was pretty much alone. Even when she was with someone, he wasn't really there, you know, wasn't really part of it. And now—now she's not alone anymore."

"Alone. Bad."

"Friend. Good," Rory giggled. "But I'm serious. She's so happy," she said, her eyes filling. "And they're so good for each other. Ever since I was small, all she wanted was for me to be happy, for me to get the things I wanted. I never would have thought—" She stopped and took a breath. "It didn't turn out how I thought it would. But this, when I see her like this, it just makes so much sense, and it seems like all that stuff—this is how it's supposed to be." She looked up at him with a watery smile. "I'm just really, really, really glad for her."

He kissed the top of her head. "Dance with me?"

"Absolutely."

The party thinned as the night continued. Rory sat at one of the tables, her head on Lorelai's shoulder, yawning as they discussed the number of gifts waiting to be opened and the corresponding number of thank you cards that needed to be written. Marty dropped into a chair beside her, and she sat up, looking around. The only people still there were the Gilmores, Luke, Jess and Ashley, and Marty.

"Where'd everyone go?" she asked.

"It's almost one, Rory," he replied. "People went home."

"Oh." She rubbed her eyes. "They're smart."

Lorelai patted her head. "My baby's not a night owl."

Luke approached got down into a squat in front of Lorelai. "We may have a problem."

"What's that?"

"I drove us in."

"You did."

"And I'm not fully functional to drive us back," he continued. "And neither are you, and neither is Rory, and I'm assuming Marty has his own car—"

"I do."

Luke sighed. "You know, we have a room."
Lorelai sat up. "We do?"

"Yeah. Your parents too. They booked it just in case. We could stay."

She looked at him dubiously. "You hate places like this. You say the sheets smell like chlorine and the comforters are made out of plywood."

"Better to sleep on chlorine sheets than end up smeared across I-84."

She put out her hands to him and they rose. "Can't argue with that. Are there two beds?"

"We can probably get a cot," he said.

Rory looked up at them. "What, for me?"

"If you don't want to stay, Jess and Ashley are headed back to Stars Hollow," Luke said. "They're gonna stay at the diner."

Rory couldn't help pulling a face.

"I can take her home," Marty offered. "I'm okay to drive, really."

"It's up to you, kid," Lorelai said.

She looked at Marty. "Let's go."

She kissed her mother and Luke good night and followed Marty to the car. They were quiet as they drove, listening to the radio. She had spent a handful of hours in a room with Jess, not speaking to him, and it hadn't been painful or horrible—awkward, she conceded, but not quite the carnage she'd feared. She suspected he'd been warned to be on his best behavior more than once by more than one person; he responded to Gypsy's multiple disparaging remarks with a lifted eyebrow and slightly clenched jaw.

Rory glanced over at Marty. Miss Patty had nearly pinched his cheek off his face when Rory had introduced him as her boyfriend. He'd crimsoned, stuttered, and tried to hide behind Rory (a feat, she teased him, impossible, given the disparity of their heights). It led to a brief, heated interlude in the coat-check room; when he'd asked why, she'd only smiled, shrugged, and launched herself at him again.

He followed her in when they got to the house. "So, which shoes were the culprits of the fall?"

"I'm not deigning to answer that question," Rory said, kicking off her heels and adding them to the tangle of shoes by the door. "Are you hungry?"

"Starved. The tasty nosh was not so filling," he said, following her down the hall. "That your room?"

"That my room," she replied. "What do you feel like, jalapeno poppers or pizza bites? Or do you want to go really crazy and have them both?"

"I'm all for the crazy."

Rory microwaved the snacks and joined him in her room, tucking her feet up under her as she sat on the bed with the platter of food. Marty stood beside the bed, his hands on his hips, as he studied the pictures on her wall. He pointed.
"Where's that?"

She squinted. "Oh. That's me and Grandma on the Rialto Bridge in Venice, from the trip we took over the summer. My mom actually redid the whole room while we were away, put up all the pictures and everything."

Marty stood still, studying another frame intently. "Did she put up this one, too?"

"No," she said. "She left a few frames for me. I put that one up."

"That's us."

She smiled. "That is us."

"When did you put it up?"

"After my birthday, when we had the pictures developed."

He looked at her a long moment before joining her on the bed, stretching out on his back with his hands folded behind his head. She blushed under his gaze and toyed with one of the pizza bites. They fell silent again, listening to the hum of the quiet together, the slight shifting and settling of the house and the tick of the furnace. Rory tried not to stare at Marty as he helped himself to the food on the plate and continued to look around the room at the pictures. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him he was the first boy to be in her room—other, obviously, than Luke, who didn't count in any case—since the May before, but that would require greater explanation. The moment as it was now was perfect—easy, simple—and tainting it with the memory of that night, she thought, was pointless.

"I like this room," he said. "And damn, woman, eat all the food, why don't you?"

Rory laughed and set the plate aside. "Sorry." She lay down beside him, her head in the hollow of his shoulder. "I love this room."

He put his arm around her, cupping her bare shoulder with his hand and tracing gentle circles with the tips of his fingers. It made her shiver, and he held her closer.

"I should go. It's late."

She nestled beside him, whispered kisses along his jaw. "Stay."

"But what about—"

She placed her hand on his chest, felt his warmth beneath her palm. "Just stay with me. Please."

He kissed her forehead. "I'll stay."

And they fell asleep there in their party clothes, among the piles of pillows the color of sunshine and cream, arms around each other.
March

Chapter Notes

Oh yeah, that time I created a real weird specific OC and then TOTALLY forgot about it for ten years.

The day she found out Winifred Bedermeir passed away, Emily awoke with the unaccountable feeling that something was wrong. She woke suddenly, no transition between sleeping and wakefulness. Her eyes opened and the night was over and there she was, in her husband's arms in the hotel bed in California. She thought she had forgotten something. She tried to think of the date. Did she have an appointment she'd forgotten to cancel? Was it someone's birthday? Anniversary? Was she expecting a delivery? Why was she awake before the sun had even come up?

She stayed tucked beside Richard, her head on his shoulder, as she ran down the list of possible things she hadn't done before they'd left on this trip two weeks ago. But the internal calendar her mind kept simply out of habit came up blank: nothing had been left behind or not rescheduled. The details of the vacation weren't even her concern, as Richard had taken charge and planned the trip down to the hotels and the itinerary. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep again. But the dim sense of foreboding made it a futile endeavor, and she lay awake, waiting.

Some hours later, Emily sat in the sunroom of the hotel, a novel open on her knee and a bellini in her hand. She stared blankly at her book, unable to read. The letters on the page were a mere confusion of symbols as the sense of something amiss ate at her. What had she forgotten? What hadn't she done? What, she wondered, what, what, what, what, what?

Emily Gilmore, you are being utterly ridiculous, she told herself. You are on vacation. Try and enjoy yourself, for God's sake.

Win would have approved. (Though she would have sniffed at the new nickname. She had conceded to Emily's shortening Winky to Win begrudgingly after Emily delivered a twenty minute dissertation on the multiplicity of reasons she could no longer say "Winky.") Emily rolled her eyes as she sipped her drink. They had spoken only a few days before, when Win had told Emily she was being thoroughly impossible and a good time was wasted on her if she wasn't going to do her best to enjoy it.

Emily was ashamed to remember she'd pouted. "I would like to do just that, Win, really, I would. But I can't seem to… There are so many things to do at home, you know, I feel as though we left at the absolute worst time, and it's making me restless. There's the house for you to finish by May and Lorelai's wedding, and—"

"Emily," Win said gently. "Stop for a moment and take a deep breath. Remember what life was like before you had a to do list."

"Did such a time even exist?" Emily asked.

Win laughed. "Go, my dear. Get drunk at a wine tasting and call me on Friday."

"Take care… Winky," she added, rolling her eyes.
"Only you could make a person's name sound like an insult," Win shot back. "Good-bye, my dear."

Friday was still days away, however, and if she called the home today she knew she'd only be chastised when Win took the phone. Emily sighed. Richard was out playing golf, and this afternoon they had another vineyard tour and wine tasting to attend. The tour of California vineyard country had been Richard's idea; Emily was beginning to think he did it more for the golf than the wine. She didn't begrudge him his morning game, however, as she sat and read and made the final plans for Win's house in Stars Hollow. It would be ready by April, at the very earliest. She smiled and turned the page, thinking of it. The sense of accomplishment she felt was greater than she'd had in years.

But she shook herself, brought herself back as she finished her drink and focused on the book before her. The house was in Connecticut, she was in California, and she didn't need to think of it right now.

She gestured to an attendant for another drink and began to read. As she scanned the page, she once again heard Win's amused chortle in her ear. "Good girl," Win told her. It irritated her slightly, and she took to the novel with a determination resembling vengeance.

"Mrs. Gilmore?"

She looked up, startled. It took a few seconds for her to refocus her eyes on the young girl standing uncertainly before her. "Yes?"

"You have a phone call from your daughter. She says it's urgent," the girl said. She handed Emily a portable handset.

Her stomach clenched as she took the phone. "Thank you," she said. "Lorelai?"

"Hi, Mom."


"Mom, Rory and I are both fine," Lorelai said. "But—"

"What about Luke?"


Emily rolled her eyes. "Is he all right as well?"


"Where are you?"

She heard her daughter take an impatient breath. "I'm at Luke's, Mom. I tried calling your cell a few times, and I left a message, but I had some news that couldn't wait."

Emily put a hand to her throat. "You haven't—please, please tell me you haven't eloped."

"Mom, we haven't eloped. We have no plans to elope—" There was scuffling in the background; Emily heard Lorelai mutter _shut up._ "—so please, stop and let me get this out." She paused. "I got a phone call early this morning. It's about Winky."

The air stilled. Emily closed her eyes. Her hands, her face, her feet were all numb—she was
immobilized. Her chest was tight. Her voice, when she spoke, echoed coldly in her own ears.

"She's gone." It wasn't a question. This new, dull certainty was worse than the paranoia that woke her that morning.

"I'm so sorry, Mom," Lorelai said softly. "I know you two were close."

"When did it happen?" Again, she heard herself speak in the same even, frighteningly neutral tone. Her eyes burned with dryness.

"Last night. Miss Charlotte stopped by her room to pick her up for breakfast this morning and found her. She went in her sleep." She paused. "Mom?"

She took a sip of her drink, needing the tart stinging jolt of alcohol; the cloying sweetness she tasted instead offended her. "I'm here."

"Are you okay?"

Emily's hand trembled slightly as she closed her book and set it on the table beside her. "Yes, thank you, Lorelai. What's being done?"

"Well, she left some instructions."

"I'm not surprised."

"The lawyers are going over her will, and everything, but the papers she had in her room were more about…" Lorelai trailed off.

Emily sipped her drink again, needing to do something, anything, with her hands. "About the funeral arrangements."

"Yes."

"What are they?"

She was tentative. "There's going to be a memorial service at the home. She's asked—she's asked that you and I scatter her ashes, after."

"And when is this all to happen?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Your father and I will leave on the next possible flight—"

"Mom, there's no rush, really. If you left today you wouldn't get in until late tonight, and you'll be exhausted—it might be easier to leave tomorrow and—"

"I will call you when the arrangements are made," Emily said.

Lorelai said nothing a moment. "Whatever you think is best, Mom."

"I'll speak to you soon, then."

"Mom?"

"Yes, Lorelai?"
"Are you all right? Really?"

Emily put a hand to her hair, absently patting it in place. "I'm fine, Lorelai, thank you for asking."

"I really am sorry, Mom."

"Yes, well, I'll talk to you soon," she said again.

The sunroom was warm. The tables and chairs were some sort of faux-wood, but remarkably comfortable, Emily thought. The cushions were plush and didn't shift when she moved. The table was scarred with water marks, though she could see someone had made an effort to sand them away. It was shabby, really, to allow such things to become noticeable. She stared at a pair of water marks that overlapped like the rings of a Venn diagram. She traced Win's name on one side with the tip of her finger, her own on the other, and in the middle… She wondered who occupied the space in the middle.

She rose and made her way to the suite Richard had taken for them.

When Richard returned from his morning on the links, he found his wife hovering over a suitcase in their room, her cell phone clamped between her ear and shoulder as she barked instructions to the person on the other end of the line.

"I don't care that you've fully booked the first class cabin, nor do I care how much it's going to cost me to change the date for my return ticket. You are going to bump someone from two of those first class seats, you're going to do it today, and you're going to do it politely!"

He closed the door with a bit more force than was necessary. Emily jumped, fluttering a hand to her chest as she turned and looked at him. He opened his mouth to speak; she stopped him, holding up her hand and shaking her head.

"Yes, yes. Yes. I said yes, for God's sake!" She paused. "Thank you. And the new tickets will be waiting at the—very good. Thank you."

Emily snapped her cell phone shut and rubbed her temple. Richard reached out, and the touch of his hand on her shoulder made her shiver. She stepped away.

"We're going back on a five o'clock flight, which doesn't leave us much time. I've started your packing for you, but I still have to arrange a car to drop us off and pick us up when we get to Bradley—it's a mercy we're not flying into New York, I don't even want to think about the headache that would have been."

"Emily," he began. She stared, waiting and impatient. Richard tipped his head to the side and regarded his wife with an expression of utter befuddlement. "What on earth is going on?"

She threw up her hands and rounded the bed towards the adjoining room of their suite. She stopped as she reached for the room phone and looked at Richard a long moment.

"Win Bedermeir died last night," she said.

His features softened. "Oh, my dear."

"I'm fine," she said, turning away from him.

She was startled yet again to find herself in a tight embrace, Richard holding her to him and stroking her hair. She felt herself automatically relax as she fell against his shoulder, wrapped her arms around him. Her eyes closed; she inhaled the faint trace of cigar smoke and starch embedded
in all his clothes. He squeezed her.

"Oh, my dear," he said again.

Emily stepped back. "Do you mind terribly, cutting our trip—"

"Not even in the slightest. Tell me what I can do."

"You can finish packing your suitcase," she told him. "Really, Richard, how many golf shirts does one man reasonably need in life?"

"I prefer to leave such questions to the philosophers, Emily." He kissed the top of her head before he turned on his heel and brusquely headed for the closet.

For a moment, it was funny. She smiled as she lifted the receiver and put the phone to her ear. But as she prepared to speak for the desk clerk, she remembered why she was calling and felt the deadweight in her chest again. It stayed with her as she and Richard finished their packing, as they rode in the car to the airport, as they passed through security checks and boarded their flight. She sat on the aisle side of their seats, staring blankly before her while the flight attendants gave their safety instructions and the captain made his announcements. Richard held her hand, silently sympathetic.

Richard was dozing lightly. Emily had no idea how much time had passed since takeoff. She shifted uneasily in her seat, waking her husband. He sat up, blinking in surprise.

"I feel silly," she said.

"About what, my dear?"

"I didn't know her very long."

"You didn't know her very long, so you've no reason to be upset?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, but… yes. It seems too much, somehow, not my right. The people she lived with, the people who were going to the new house with her—they're the ones who've really lost something."

"Emily," Richard sighed. "True, you've known her less than a year, but you talked to this woman almost every day. You were in charge of her future, in the form of that house. You have a right to your grief. She was very much a part of your life these past months. When we were apart, she was there for you."

"She was," Emily said, smiling sadly. "She took my mind off things, occasionally. Or else she talked my ear off about her own husband—she knew what she was doing, I'm sure."

He tightened his hand over hers. "And for that I am very thankful."

Emily leaned her head on his shoulder. "I am, too." She paused. "I am sorry, Richard, that our trip was cut short."

"Don't give it another thought, my dear," he said, kissing her forehead. "We've time enough for anything we want. There will be other trips. This, this is more important."

It was late when they reached home. Emily didn't relish the thought of talking to Lorelai at the moment, tired and aching as she was, and so she went immediately to bed. She slept dreamlessly and woke the next morning nowhere near refreshed from her trip. She struggled through her
morning rituals before she got in her car and began to drive.

Lorelai sat at the counter in the diner, chatting on her cell phone and stirring her coffee. Emily watched her through the window for a moment. She remembered her daughter at eight, at ten, at thirteen, rebellious with a perpetually protruding lower lip and an ugly slouch. She sat taller now, yet her posture still seemed easy and relaxed as she kicked her feet at the counter. Her suit was beautifully cut, Emily thought, startled by the revelation that Lorelai looked quite elegant, even in her atrociously high heels and the novelty tee shirt peeking out beneath her blazer. Luke emerged from the kitchen to refill Lorelai's cup, pointing at the "no cell phone" sign behind him, and she gave him the finger, laughing.

"Some things never change," Emily sighed. She stepped into the warmth of the diner and made her way to Lorelai's side.

"Sure, babe," Lorelai was saying. "I think that'd be nice." She looked up, surprised by Emily's rather sharp poke at her shoulder. "Hey, Rory, I'm going to let you go. Grandma's here. I will. Have a great day, sweets. Love you, too." She hung up and regarded her mother with a blank, open-mouthed stare a moment.

Emily crossed her arms over her chest and raised her eyebrows. "It is customary, Lorelai, for people to greet each other when they've not seen each other for some time. For example," she said, "I often like to say 'hello' in situations like these. I find it works wonders."

"Sorry," Lorelai said, rolling her eyes theatrically. "Hello, Mother."

"Why, hello, Lorelai," Emily replied. "How lovely to see you."

She stood, tucked her hair behind her ears, shifted on her feet. "How are you? When did you get in? What are you doing here?"

"I'm fine, Lorelai. Your father and I got in late last night. I thought perhaps you and I could sit down together before you went to work today, discuss the arrangements for the service," Emily replied. "Is that information sufficient, or are there more questions?"

Lorelai opened her mouth to speak when Luke rounded the counter and stopped before them. "Hey, Mrs. Gilmore. Good morning. Can I get you some coffee?"

"Luke, I've told you a hundred times to call me Emily," she said. "But coffee would be nice, thank you."

"Have a muffin, Mom," Lorelai said as she led the way to a table. "They're still warm, and Luke makes killer cranberry muffins. He puts orange stuff in them, so they're all citrusy."

She nodded. "A muffin, then," she said.

Lorelai dropped herself into a chair with an audible sigh. Emily thought that despite the color in her cheeks, Lorelai looked tired. "Rory says hello, by the way," she said, "and sends her love."

Emily sat back as Luke put a coffee cup in front of her and poured. "I'll call her this evening. I haven't spoken to her since we left. Is she still dating that boy?"

"She's still attached at the hip to that boy," Lorelai said wryly. "She's spending her spring break this week in Boston with her dad and Sherri and the baby, but she insists that it has nothing to do with the fact that Marty's family lives in Cambridge. She'll be back for dinner on Friday, Mother," she said, off her mother's look. "Luke, honey? Baby? Sweetie darling? Another donut for your beloved and betrothed?" she asked.
"You've already had two," he said gruffly.

"So what difference will a third make?" Lorelai asked. He only gave her a hard look in reply and left to get Emily's muffin. "So, Mom. You wanted to talk about the service?"

"I did."

"I've talked to a few people at the home, Mom, and it's all taken care of. They have a pastor, and the memorial will be in the chapel in the home. They called the crematorium Winky requested and they have a hearse… all we have to do is show up. Miss Charlotte says Winky left a very detailed list of instructions, in case of… this," Lorelai finished rather sheepishly. She sipped her coffee. "They've asked me to speak."

Emily ducked her head and stared into her coffee cup. "Oh. And will you?"

"I couldn't say no," she said. "Mom, it's not that they didn't want you, you know."

She picked up her fork and lifted away a piece of the muffin Luke put in front of her. "I don't need to be placated, Lorelai."

"No, I know that," Lorelai said quickly. "I'm just saying… Miss Charlotte told me they thought it might be better if it was someone—that you two were so close, that it would be too hard for you."

"I'm sure you'll give a lovely eulogy," Emily said. She raised her eyes. "Will there be many people there?" Lorelai shrugged in reply. "Yes. Well. Where did Win want us to—to scatter the ashes?" Her voice faltered.

Lorelai watched her mother, her expression concerned and watchful. "You're not going to believe it."

"I'm sure I won't, knowing Win."

Lorelai smiled. "The boardwalk in Atlantic City."

"Oh, dear God," Emily said, looking heavenward. "Only Winifred Bedermeir."

Lorelai had two more cups of coffee as she waited for Emily to finish her breakfast. She watched her mother over the rim of her cup, chatting lightly about Rory at Yale and the Dragonfly. Emily didn't know whether to be grateful or irritated that her daughter was attempting to comfort her by banal distraction. She rose from her seat and reached for her purse.

"Don't worry about it, Mom," Lorelai said. "It's on the house. I have connections." She pulled on her coat and called over her shoulder for Luke. "I have to go, future husband o' mine," she told him when he emerged from the kitchen.

Emily watched them say their goodbyes, the way Lorelai cupped his cheek as she kissed him and reflexively rubbed her thumb over his lip to remove the trace of gloss she'd left, the way he captured her wrist with his hand as they parted and leaned in to whisper something to her. Emily smiled sadly, her eyes smarting, as Lorelai rolled her eyes again and solemnly said, "I promise." She said goodbye to Luke and followed her daughter out, pulling her coat on as she did.

"What are you promising to do?" she asked.

Lorelai flipped her hair over the collar of her jacket. "To go easy. The inn's been crazy-busy lately, and I'm not sleeping too well."
"Why not?"

She shrugged. "Would that I knew, Mom. I'm off to work. What are you up to today? You want to come hang at the inn? I'm swamped, but you can schmooze with Michel, and Sookie will make you a killer lunch, and you can have my office for the afternoon, and you can feel free to criticize my interior decorating skills all you want," she said, her voice teasing and wheedling at once. "Come on. What do you say?"

"That's very kind of you to offer, Lorelai," Emily said, "but I have plans today."

"You do?"

"Yes, Lorelai, I do—and don't sound so surprised. You do know that other people continue to have lives when you leave the room, don't you? Or do you think we all exist in some sort of stop-motion, vacuum-like universe wherein we only ever do anything when you are present?" Emily said.

Lorelai averted her eyes, frowned. "Okay, you have plans. Sorry I asked. I'll pick you up tomorrow at noon for the service."

"Tomorrow at noon, then," Emily said.

The house was sullen and silent when she arrived. She hadn't really meant to go—Lorelai's surprise was well-founded: Emily didn't have plans but the pity-invite was too much and too desperate to take. Lorelai had called Tom and stopped work out of respect for Win when she heard of the old woman's death; they were to resume work on the house once her ashes were scattered at the end of the week. Emily let herself in through the front door with the key that hung on her keychain just beside her own house key. She walked quickly through the cavernous front room, with its high ceiling and tall windows. She took the stairs quickly, unnerved by the lack of a banister.

Win's room was the second on the right, the smallest bedroom in the house. There were three on this floor, four on the next, and Win had picked this one for herself immediately. Emily told her she couldn't imagine why—the house, she had said, is absolutely enormous and there's an extra room much bigger than this. Win had shrugged.

"And what do I need space for, my dear? It's not as though I have a plethora of earthly possessions I'll be bringing with me. No, Emily, give me a small room with a window and a bed and a little desk and maybe an armchair, that's all I ask," she had said. "That's comfort enough for me."

The wallpaper was already up. As soon as that was finished, Win had Emily hang a framed picture of Harry on the wall opposite her bed. He stared grimly into the camera, scowling. His eyebrows, Emily thought, were fierce. She had to admit, he was a handsome man in his own way, even if he frowned over this tiny room as though it had offended him somehow. She sighed. Win had clapped her hands and smiled gleefully when she saw the picture there during one of her brief visits from the home where she and her friends planned to live until the house was finished.

"Oh, doesn't he look absolutely horrible?" she'd asked, delighted. "Simply wretched!"

Emily swept her eyes over the room one last time before she turned and descended the stairs. She was hardly aware of her actions as she got in the car, turned the key in the ignition, and drove home.

When the doorbell rang at noon the next day, she was waiting for Lorelai in her living room. Her
navy blue dress was ironed and fresh, her make up was subdued, and she had a hanky in her purse. She waited, determined, in the living room until Lorelai stepped in.


Emily stood and breezed past her daughter. "You're late," she said. She pulled on her coat and opened the door.

"So you thought you'd make me wait in the car, then on the front step, then in the foyer, just to teach me a lesson?" Lorelai followed her out and picked her way back to the Jeep, talking at Emily's back.

"Are we really going in this thing?" Emily asked.

Lorelai inhaled through her nose and closed her eyes. "Yes, Mother," she said slowly. "We're really going in this thing, otherwise known as my car. You've ridden in this thing many times before."

"We are going to a funeral, Lorelai. It requires a bit more dignity than a jaunt into town for a cup of coffee and a donut," Emily shot back.

Lorelai stood on the driver's side of the Jeep, her hands on her hips. She fixed her eyes on the hood of the car a moment as she gathered herself together. Emily watched her daughter, took in the pursed lips and furrowed brow. When she looked up, her face was a mask of resolution.

"Would you like me to drive your car instead?" she asked, her voice deliberate and clam.

Emily rolled her eyes and opened the passenger door. "This is fine."

They were silent for most of Connecticut and into Massachusetts. Lorelai tapped her fingers viciously against the steering wheel and hummed. Emily watched the road signs. The nursing home was in southern New Hampshire, a small coastal town. Emily eyed the map and directions Lorelai had printed out from the internet.

"Lorelai Gilmore!"

She jumped. "Jesus, Mom. I'm right here. What?"

"The estimated time on this trip is three and a half hours!" Emily said.

Lorelai waved a hand. "Those things are never right, Mom. Trust me. Hey, could you hand me a Pop Tart? I keep a box in the glove compartment."

"I certainly will not—you're not speeding, are you? The last thing we need today is to get pulled over by a state trooper for speeding. Three and a half hours—we've barely been on the road an hour and a half and we're—"

"Mom, I told you, it's fine. I'm not going unreasonably fast. Would you just calm down and hand me a Pop Tart?"

"I will not," she said again. "Do you know what sorts of things go in products like that?"

"No, and I don't want to," Lorelai said. She paused. "How are you doing, Mom? With this whole, you know, funeral… thing. Are you okay?"

"I would be much better if people would stop asking me how I am, Lorelai," she said shortly.
Lorelai didn't reply.

"So Rory's spending her spring break with Christopher?" Emily asked, some time later.

Lorelai nodded. "She's spending her break with Christopher and Gigi, but it doesn't hurt that Marty's just around the corner. She was so excited to introduce Marty to her dad, I can't tell you, Mom. It'll be good for them, for Rory and Christopher, to spend some time together."

"It's too bad that realization didn't come much sooner."

"Don't start, Mom," Lorelai sighed. "I don't want to get into any of that today, or anything else, for that matter."

Emily determinedly held her tongue for the rest of the ride. She reflexively remarked on the time when Lorelai pulled into a parking space at the home, earning a grunt from her daughter. She nearly had to jog to keep up with Lorelai as she strode to the building. After a few disorienting moments, she found herself seated in the front row of a small congregation of folding chairs in what seemed to be a parlor. She took in the lectern, the many wreaths and flowers, the minister wandering the front of the room.

She tried to pay attention to the service when it began, but she could only think that Win would have been bored out of her skull were she there. Win would have cut the minister off twenty minutes ago and demanded to know about his life. When he announced Lorelai, Emily could almost feel Win's elbow digging at her ribs: "ah, here we go," she would say, "this is the good stuff."

Lorelai stood at the lectern and looked out over the small congregation. Emily watched her take a moment: she looked down, smoothed her skirt, tucked her hair behind her ears, raised her chin, and smirked. Emily felt the beginnings of a smile twitching at her lips. This was a Lorelai pose she recognized—one, she thought, that Win would appreciate.

"I've tried to think of a good way to begin talking about Winky, but every time I come up with something, I think of what Winky would have said. If I started by telling you that I didn't know her that long, she would have said 'so what?', waved her hand, and told me to start over. If I told you that I've never met anyone quite like her, she would have said that told her absolutely nothing interesting about her character, and character was the good stuff. It's a big responsibility, to talk about the life of a biographer, but I think it's something Winky would have gotten a kick out of.

"I met Winky during one of the worst weeks I've had in years. I was sleep-deprived and emotional and a general mess, and I sat down to tea with this tiny little woman in five layers of clothing and red Chucks who told me to tell her about my life. 'Lives interest me,' she said. I told her about myself, and something unexpected happened: I started to feel better. My problems weren't fixed, they weren't smaller, but I knew they weren't the end of the world, either. And when I think of her now, that's what I remember: Winky had this incredible, bizarre ability to make you feel at home in your own skin, make you feel like you really know who you are even when you're the most confused you've ever been."

Lorelai shook her head, smiling sadly. "I think if she were here right now, she'd tell me to get to the point and stop talking around it. Winky... I didn't know her that long or all that well, but I know that she was unique and sassy, and she was fun, and she just loved her husband, loved talking about Harry. And the reason that Winky was so unique and sassy and fun was because she knew who she was and she knew she was loved, and she was happy."

She sighed. "I guess the point is that I want to be Winky when I grow up—and by that I mean that, at the end of my life, I want to know those things, too, to know that I loved and was loved
and that I was always my own person. I think we all want to be Winky, in the end… She was interested in other people's lives, but hers was the one we all admired." She paused, rolled her eyes. "She might have laughed at me for that, but it's still true. And wherever she is right now, I'm sure she's laughing anyway."

Emily looked at her daughter sidelong as Lorelai sat beside her. Lorelai thumbed away a tear and gave her a watery smile, a shrug. They rose for the final prayer and hymn. Emily remembered the hankie in her purse; she had the vague notion it was wrong that she hadn't needed it. She watched the small crowd file out, waited as Lorelai spoke briefly to some of the residents of the home. She was startled by a touch at her elbow. She turned to be met by a tall, willowy woman with shockingly blue eyes and equally shocking white hair. In her hands, she held an old-fashioned hatbox.

"Charlotte," Emily said. "How nice to see you. I'm so sorry about Win."

Charlotte nodded. "Thank you, Emily. It's been quite a difficult week. With the other papers in her room, Winky left these, and she asked that they be given to you."

Emily took the hatbox Charlotte offered, her forehead set in puzzled lines. "Are you sure?"

"Quite. She said you'd know what to do with them."

They made their goodbyes and Emily sat once more, the box in her lap. Lorelai came to stand beside her.

"What's that?" she asked.

"I don't know," Emily said.

Her daughter pointed toward the door. "I'm going to go make a phone call—meet you outside?"

She nodded. The clicks of Lorelai's heels against the floor seemed overly loud as Emily ran her fingertips around the edging of the lid to the box. Gingerly, she lifted the lid and peered into the box. Its contents, she thought, were unremarkable—she'd been expecting something more momentous from Win Bedermeir than packets of letters tied in faded sateen ribbon and a mass of photographs piled haphazardly among the envelopes. Emily looked up and glanced around her, as though searching out her departed friend, utterly baffled by the gift. She replaced the lid and slowly made her way to the front of the building.

Lorelai stood leaning her hip against the Jeep with her back to the building, once more talking on her cell phone. Emily paused a few feet away on hearing Lorelai's end of the conversation. "Yes, Rory, that's a great idea," she said dryly. "How exactly would that conversation go? 'Gee, Mom, I'm really sorry your friend died, but could you please stop being such a heinous bitch?'" She sighed. "It's fine—she's grieving, I can deal with it. I am less certain of my capability to deal with driving back to Hartford with the urn of ashes riding shotgun in the Jeep. It's just so creepy. I mean, I loved Winky, and I'm more than happy to do this whole finale rites thing for her, but it's just… In that teeny little jar are a woman's entire mortal remains. Hey, when I die, will you give me a Norse funeral with the burning pyre and the whole raft thing? Or else I want to be displayed in a glass casket in the entryway of, like, Hard Rock London… No, I have it here on the hood of the car," she said, straightening and turning. Her mouth fell open slightly. "Mom!" she trilled. "Rory, sweets, I have to go. It looks like Grandma and I are on our way back."

"Who on earth put you in charge of the ashes?" Emily asked wearily. She opened the passenger side door and carefully negotiated the hatbox into the back seat as Lorelai tucke
Winky's urn and ashes into a safe position behind the driver's seat.

"The head home guy," she said. "What's in the box?"

"Letters," Emily replied.


She rubbed her temple. "Whom. I didn't examine them that closely."

Lorelai slammed her door shut and put her keys in the ignition. "Home again, home again," she said. "You okay? You want to stop for something to eat, some coffee?"

"No, thank you, Lorelai. I would just like to go home."

"Okay. Home it is." She paused. "Mom, just so you know, I did talk to the lawyers and everybody, and the others are still coming to live in Stars Hollow. The house didn't just belong to Winky, but she made arrangements—"

"I'm aware of this, Lorelai." Off her look, Emily continued. "Win and I talked about it some time ago, how I should proceed should something... like this occur."

"You two talked a lot, then."

"We did."

"I'm so sorry, Mom."

Emily looked out the plastic window, oddly comforted by the way it distorted and blurred the landscape. "Thank you, Lorelai. And it was a lovely eulogy."

"Thanks, Mom."

They were well into Massachusetts when Lorelai's cell phone rang. She immediately reached for it. Emily spoke before she could catch herself.

"You really shouldn't talk on the phone while you drive. It's unsafe."

"Thanks for the tip, Mother," Lorelai replied, flipping the phone open. "Hello? Wait, slow down. You're looking for what?" She paused, working her lower lip between her teeth, her brow furrowed and her expression peevish. "I haven't seen it. Did you check Bert?"

"Who's Bert?" Emily asked.

Lorelai flapped her elbow in lieu of answering. "I don't know where it is, Luke... I know you can't find it, but what would you like me to do about it? I'm sure I'd fold my arms and blink myself right over there if I could, Master, but unfortunately, I don't have those kinds of powers. And, while the Jeep is certainly a utilitarian vehicle, it's not like I can throw it up to warp speed nine and get back to Stars Hollow to help you out." She paused. "Luke, I swear to God if you use the words tape measure one more time... Seriously, are your measuring needs that dire that you can't—fine, you do that. Fine." With that, she clapped the phone shut and threw it over her shoulder into the back seat with an angry growl.

"What on earth was that about?" Emily demanded.

She curled and uncurled her fingers around the steering wheel several times before she answered. "Luke has lost his tape measure."
"So, apparently I'm somehow to blame for the fact that the damned thing's gone missing in the first place, and because I can't tell him off the top of my head where to find it, he's pissed at me," Lorelai replied. "I'm surprised he's managed to go this long without losing anything."

"What does that mean?"

"Oh, nothing," Lorelai said. She shifted in her seat. "Things have just been a little…"

"A little what?" When she didn't answer, Emily asked again. "Lorelai?"

"Unsettled, I guess," she answered. "My hours have been just crazy-weird this week, so I haven't been home much. The inn's been hosting lots of parties, and I've been out late, so Luke hasn't been around. And of course, he's still schlepping his stuff back and forth between his apartment and the house every time he does come over—and it's not like he'll put stuff in a bag, or anything, because somehow using an overnight bag is girly. He needs one of those things that you see hobos using in cartoons, the stick with the little bag on the end. What do they call those? We used to sing a song about them in grade school, something really irritating that got stuck in your head until you wanted to just blow your brains out. Damn, that's going to bug me."

Emily waited until Lorelai paused for breath. "You mean he hasn't moved in yet?"

"No, he hasn't moved in yet," she said, rather sullenly, Emily thought. "And he won't even talk about it. He started to do some stuff last month, and then it just—he just stopped."

"And have you discussed this with him?"

"No, Mom, I haven't," she shot back. "There just hasn't been time to talk about anything this week, that's all." She rubbed her eyes with one hand and flicked at the windshield wipers. "He gets all cagey, anyway, if it comes up in conversation. It's better to just let it be for now."

"Is it?" Emily asked.

She looked at her mother archly. "Cute, Mom, but I'm not biting."

Emily didn't reply, just lifted one shoulder and tipped her head in gesture of consent. Several moments later, Lorelai slapped her hands against the steering wheel, crying, "A ha! 'Waltzing Matilda!'"

"What on earth are you going on about?"

She turned to Emily, her face alight with an amused, triumphant smile. "'Waltzing Matilda!' That's what they call those little hobo bags with the stick. 'Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda, won't you come waltzing Matilda, with me?'" she sang.

"Are we there yet?" Emily said in reply.

Lorelai giggled. "Told you it gets stuck in your head."

By the time Lorelai pulled the Jeep into the drive, Emily was more than ready to go inside, take a hot shower, and go to bed knowing that she would never have to spend so many hours in such a small space with her daughter again. Lorelai turned in her seat and smiled brightly.

"So, tomorrow, I'll pick you up around four?" Lorelai asked.
"Excuse me?"

"Winky requested that her ashes be scattered at dawn, so I figured we'd go up Thursday night and stay over at a motel instead of driving up in the middle of the night. I told you this, like, twenty minutes ago," Lorelai said.

"I wasn't listening," Emily said. She rubbed her temples.

"I know," Lorelai said cheerfully. "You had that glazed look. Four o'clock tomorrow, okay?"

Richard seemed to understand without being told that what his wife wanted was quiet and rest. He let her be as she had a light supper, gave her privacy when she went up to shower. When he came into the bedroom in his robe and slippers, a book under his arm, she was propped up on the pillows as she watched South Pacific on DVD.

"I can turn it off if you'd like to read," she said.

He kissed her. "Nonsense, my dear."

She fell asleep before Nellie had washed that man right out of her hair.

The next day was dim and rainy, overcast and cold. Lorelai arrived at twenty after four. She was breathlessly apologetic for her tardiness. "Traffic," she explained through gritted teeth. "It's going to be a nasty, nasty drive, Mom. I'm sorry. I should have—"

"While I'm sure you're capable of a great many things, Lorelai, I assume controlling the weather is not one of them," Emily said. "It can't be any more unpleasant than our last outing."

"Gee, thanks, Mom. Your enthusiasm is overwhelming."

Emily's only reply was an arch look. Lorelai laughed, shaking her head. She took her mother's bag. "I know. Pot, meet kettle. I get it."

She had outfitted the Jeep with a CD player for the drive and piled a few pillows and blankets in the backseat. Emily tucked a chenille throw over her lap as Lorelai merged onto I-84, thankful for her daughter's foresight—even with the heat on, Emily couldn't shake the damp chill and the clammy feeling of her skin. Lorelai turned on the CD player with a wicked grin.

"Mom, you are about to be inducted into a very exclusive, powerful club, the only membership requirement being the possession of a very well-kept secret," she said. "This Linda Rhondstat CD you're listening to has been provided courtesy of none other than my fiancé, Luke Danes of Stars Hollow. Yes, Mom, believe it or not, Luke has a soft spot for the ballads of broken-hearted women belting high notes at the tops of their lungs. Last week, I caught him singing in the kitchen. Under his breath," she added. "But let me tell you, the sight of Flannel Man crooning 'Long, Long Time' is one not easily forgotten."

Emily chuckled. "I take it this isn't public knowledge?"

"Are you kidding me? He'd deny it 'til he's blue in the face, but I swear, a good per cent of his happiness to be cohabitating with me in the near future is that it gives him an excuse to stock up on albums he's always wanted because now he can say they don't belong to him."

"The near future—so you've some idea when he's moving in?" Emily asked.

Her face fell. "Not exactly."
"I don't understand, Lorelai—I saw you two together the other day, I've seen the way you relate to each other, but then you say he doesn't want to move in and you're bickering on the phone—"

Lorelai snorted. "Bickering is what we do, Mom. We've perfected it to a near science. That's not new. The moving in thing—in the long run," she sighed, "it's not a big deal, and I know that, but it's—it's more complicated than it seems." She looked at Emily. "Luke and I, Mom, we're solid. We're good. We are the Rob and Laura Petrie of Stars Hollow. There are just… there are a few things that need to get sorted out."

Emily studied her a moment. "I must say, Lorelai, you never cease to astound me."

"How's that?" she asked warily.

"You revel in something so juvenile as Luke's taste in music but you are also incredibly steady and mature when it comes to your relationship with him," Emily said. "It's just not what one would expect."

She shrugged. "That's my charm, Mom—I am a paradoxical, whimsical creature."

"That sounds like something Win would have said," Emily told her.

Her face broke open in a grin. "Mom, that might be one of the nicest compliments you've ever given me," she said. "Really. Hey, do you have any idea why we're going to New Jersey to scatter her ashes? I don't get it."

"It's where they were married," Emily said. "Really?"

The remembrance of the story made Emily smile sadly. Her eyes were distant as she spoke. "Harry was older than she, you know, by a few years. They met when he was a student at Dartmouth and she worked at the local bookstore. She was seventeen, he was twenty-two, and he had just joined the Army to go to war. They corresponded, and when he came back four years later, they went to Atlantic City and got married."

"That's so romantic," Lorelai breathed.

"Oh, that's only half the story," Emily said. "They were engaged to be married, and they were going to be married in Harry's temple—I forget the town, but his family was from New Jersey. Neither Win nor Harry wanted a big wedding, but Harry's family was rather prominent in the community and his mother had planned a rather large wedding and an elaborate, opulent reception—"

"Imagine that," Lorelai said.

Emily lifted an eyebrow and continued. "So, being the contrary individuals that they were, the day before the wedding, Win and Harry eloped. They were married on the boardwalk at dawn in a civil ceremony officiated by a gay rabbi."

Lorelai's mouth fell open. "That is—seriously? Because that is just the best wedding story ever. A civil ceremony officiated by a gay rabbi?"

"Well, Harry knew he had to be married by a rabbi or his family would cut him off, and it so happened that he knew a fellow in Atlantic City who was a justice of the peace and a rabbi, so technically they were safe," Emily said. "The fact that he was gay I think is just incidental."
She covered her mouth with her hand, snorting this time in laughter. "I may need to pull over," she gasped. "I cannot tell you how very much I wish I had that on tape."

"Yes, well, don't get any ideas, Lorelai," Emily said.

"Tell me more," she said. "I had no idea Winky's life was so interesting. And quirky. I know Harry was a writer, but other than that, we talked more about me than anything else." She paused. "But really, when is that not the case?"

Emily smoothed the blanket in her lap and yawned. "Well, you know Harry wasn't just some writer, don't you?" she asked. She crossed her ankles and continued, telling Lorelai how Harry dictated his work and Win transcribed it, mentioning one of his more famous works.

"Holy crap, Mom. You're telling me Harry wrote that? I had no idea that was him."

"Of course he didn't publish under his real name—Harry Bedermeir isn't exactly the most elegant or authorial name, so he used a nome de plume."

"But Mom," Lorelai said, "the man who wrote that was a Nobel Laureate for Literature."

Emily nodded. "I'm aware of this, Lorelai."

"Wow. Like, really wow. Wow, wow, wow. Winky, our Winky, was married to a Nobel Prize winner."

"Yes, she was," Emily sighed. "And she loved him."

Lorelai shook her head in wonder. "That's just amazing. So, I want to know more. It's a long trip, so start talking, lady."

She hadn't run out of stories by the time they got to New Jersey. Lorelai continually interrupted her, asking questions, making comments, pretending to pull over as the result of shock. Her antics and the stories that Emily didn't even remember she knew made the trip surprisingly short. She only realized how hungry she was when they checked into the hotel and saw it was after eight. They gave their bags to a bellhop and went immediately to the hotel restaurant.

Lorelai held her martini in one hand, sitting back in her chair. Emily could see the appraisal in her look. She set her own drink down and looked levelly at her daughter.

"What?"

Lorelai gestured. "Nothing." She sipped her drink. "Those stories are amazing, Mom. It's too bad Winky was just a biographer of other people, worse that she was never published. Her memoirs would have been amazing." She set her mouth in a line of chagrined disappointment. "It's just a shame that all has to die with her."

"And what, exactly, are you trying to say, Lorelai?" Emily inquired.

"I'm not trying to say anything, Mom," she said smugly. "Nothing at all."

They ate in relative silence, took the elevator up to their rooms. Lorelai stuck her key card in the slot and pushed the door open, calling good night to her mother. Emily followed suit. She grinned and counted to five.

"Ah, shit!"
Emily opened the door that separated their rooms and poked her head into Lorelai's room. "I got adjoining rooms this morning, I hope you don't mind," she said. "I called to check the reservation. It just seemed to make better sense—we have to get up so early tomorrow, this way we can synchronize our wake up calls, and—"

Lorelai smiled tightly. "No, Mom, it's perfect."

"Excellent. Well, I'm going to take a hot shower."

"Thanks for the update," Lorelai said, her tone dry.

She could hear Lorelai on the phone when she stepped out of the bathroom, wrapped in her robe. She rubbed the towel hard against her scalp. The door between their rooms was open. As she walked to the mirror over the dresser, Emily told herself it wasn't really eavesdropping: Lorelai hadn't thought to shut the door and it wasn't as though she was trying to hear her daughter's conversation.

"And then they got married on the boardwalk at dawn. Get this, Luke: they had a civil ceremony officiated by a gay rabbi… She had such an incredible life—it's just so sad. Yeah, I know, she was old, but still…" Emily heard Lorelai throw herself on the bed. "The hotel isn't bad—plywood comforters and chlorine sheets, but it's only for one night. Yes, we will be back tomorrow, around noon probably. I'll come by as soon as I get in… No, I know, but this week has been so bizarre and backwards. I feel like Molly Ringwald in Sixteen Candles: nothing has gone the way it's supposed to." She sighed heavily. "How do you know it hasn't been that bad?" she demanded.

Emily listened to the one side of the conversation as she combed her hair and put on her moisturizer. She had no idea what Lorelai was talking about. It was clear, however, that Luke had been doing what Win called "talking her out of her tree." In the thirty plus years Emily had been married to Richard, she'd had more than her share of long distance phone calls; she'd been Lorelai on more than one occasion, purposefully whiny and begging to be coddled. The fact that he knew what to say eased the pangs caused by absence more than whatever pretended hurts she'd told him of. The things weighing her down at the moment couldn't be teased or reasoned away, and so her own phone call to Richard was brief and cursory. His "I love you" as they said goodnight wasn't a miraculous cure-all as it had been on lighter occasions but it was something, she thought.

She was reading in bed when Lorelai came to the doorway to say good night. Emily peered at her over her reading glasses. There were times when she forgot her daughter was nearing forty, that she herself was getting older; standing as she was, leaning against the doorframe in a Hello Kitty! tank top with matching bottoms, her hair pulled back and her glasses on, Lorelai was twenty-three again. She tipped her head to the side and smiled.

"What?" she asked.

Emily set her book aside. "Oh, it's nothing."

"What are you reading?"

She glanced at the cover. "It's a novel Rory lent me—Possession. Have you heard of it?"

"Oh, I've heard of it," Lorelai said ruefully. "Luke and I tried to read it a few weeks ago, but it wasn't quite his thing. Too much poetry. We gave up about halfway through."

"You and Luke tried to read it?" Emily repeated.

Lorelai stood upright, crossed her arms over her chest, and scratched at one shoulder absentely as she sauntered into the room. "It's just something we do, reading together. Well, for the most part,
he reads to me, but same difference," she said. She sat at the foot of the bed. "Do you like it? The book?"

"I do," Emily said. "What sorts of things do you two read?"

She shrugged. "Just, you know, whatever. *The Once and Future King*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany.*" She looked at the ceiling. "What else?" she wondered aloud. "He's a big mystery fan, so sometimes Robert Parker or Raymond Chandler. We're doing *The Lord of the Rings* right now, but man, that book is nine bazillion pages long."

"Lorelai, are you happy with your life?" Emily asked abruptly.

She looked at her mother, her chin on her shoulder. "Yeah, Mom, I am," she said. "It's hard, sometimes, but I'm happy." Her expression was thoughtful. "Are you happy, Mom?"

Emily took off her glasses and began to slide further beneath the covers. "Of course," she said. "But I am tired, and we have an early wake up call tomorrow. We better get some sleep."

"Sure," Lorelai said. "Night, Mom. Sleep well."

She was up long before the wake up call, already dressed. She sat on the bed, her ankles crossed, waiting. The call came, and immediately Emily rose and opened the door that separated her room from Lorelai's. Her daughter was sprawled across the queen-sized bed, face down between the pillows. Emily laid a hand on Lorelai's shoulder and shook her.

"Lorelai, come along and wake up."

She grunted. Emily repeated the process several times before Lorelai raised her head and regarded her mother with a scowl, her eyes still closed.

"You know, we could just as easily scatter her ashes later as now," Lorelai croaked. "At a decent hour. It's not like she'll know."

"Lorelai Victoria Gilmore!" Emily cried. "Are you listening to yourself?"

"No," she whined. "It's too early for that."

"Do not make me forcibly drag you out of this bed, Lorelai. I will do it."

She sat up, growling. "Five minutes," she said. "I need five minutes."

The walked to the boardwalk in silence, the urn under Lorelai's arm. Emily found herself plodding in slow steps. She felt as though the sky, still heavy and overcast, was a weight across her shoulders; she was tempted to grab Lorelai for support, afraid her knees would give out. She glanced at her daughter. Lorelai's early-morning pout was somber, her eyes distant, puffy with sleep.

"It's not even really dawn," Emily said suddenly. "It's so cloudy."

Lorelai looked up, squinted. "It's getting lighter."

"I suppose it is."

They stopped by unspoken consent at a spot on the boardwalk at a spot equidistant from two of the trash barrels that dotted the walkway. Emily resented their existence—there was nowhere they could go and not be bookended by rubbish, and it seemed so inherently *wrong*, so disrespectful,
so inappropriate. She took the urn from Lorelai's hands in both of hers when Lorelai unceremoniously thrust it at her.

"Should we say something?" Lorelai asked.

"What would you like to say?"

She chewed her lip. "Honestly? I'd like to tell her I'm glad I met her, and I'm sorry she's gone, and I'm truly grateful to have learned the things she shared with me."

Emily turned the small receptacle between her palms. "I think that's just fine, Lorelai. I would only add that I am going to miss her."

The two women turned their backs to the wind. Emily loosened the top of the urn. After a moment, she tipped it slightly. The wind picked up, took hold of the contents. Emily heard Lorelai whisper goodbye as the dust dispersed. She echoed the word under her breath; her eyes began to smart. As they turned away from the boardwalk, Emily fumbled to replace the lid of the urn. She sniffled, wiped the back of her hand against her eyes to clear her blurred vision. Lorelai slung her arm over her mother's shoulders and pulled her against her side as they walked. Emily tucked her head to Lorelai's shoulder as the tears spilled over.

"I know, Mom," Lorelai said softly. "I know."

The return trip wasn't quite as cheerful as the ride up had been. Both women were moody and quiet, lost in their own thoughts. Lorelai dropped her mother off with a see you later and a sympathetic smile. Emily watched Lorelai pull away before she turned to the house. She shook her head at the irrational, lonely pang in her chest and went inside.

The hatbox holding the letters was where she'd left it: behind a chair in Richard's study. She held it in her lap and began to sort through them. The packets contained three or four months of letters apiece. After some careful searching, she located the oldest bundle.

The paper was thin, almost brittle. Emily held her breath as she slid the letter from its envelop.

To Harry Bedermeir:

While I consider it an honorable act that you've done in writing to my mother to ask permission to write to me, I must also tell you it was an unadvisable one. Mother was not at all pleased to receive your letter (and I suspect you know this, as you are more than likely fully aware of your reputation in town; I further suspect you wrote to her for the sake of the story you would have as a result). I, however, am not entirely adverse to receiving such communications in the future. You should send all correspondence to my cousin Charlotte at 14 Windsor Road—Charlotte, I must tell you, has only grudgingly agreed to this arrangement because she thinks "you may possibly one day be very talented," though she still sees reason to doubt. Her parents do not monitor her mail as mine do (lucky, lucky Charlotte).

While she may come around in time, I think it best to keep my mother in the dark for the moment. She will be surprised to find that it is really her idea that you and I write to each other while you are away, doing your duty as you must, as she is often surprised by her own good thinking.

Should you choose to respond to this letter and do so in a way I find amenable, I may be tempted to address you as "dear" in my next salutation. You should not take this as a compliment, you understand, or even as a sign of affection, but simply a gesture of goodwill.

Please take care. I would be quite put out should you fail to come home, and you have seen for yourself why I am renowned for my temper.
I am (quite possibly) sincerely yours,

Winifred

PS It would be to your advantage to find a suitable diminutive or sobriquet by which to address me, as I find Winifred an absolutely hateful handle and look kindly on those creative enough to name me themselves.

Emily laughed aloud as she read the letter. There was something familiar in the easy, teasing style. She imagined a smitten young man at the front would be nothing short of tickled to receive such a letter, light and flirtatious in its own fashion, and more than anything affectionate.

"I would be quite put out should you fail to come home," she read aloud. Only Win could tell someone not to die in such terms. Well, she thought, not only. She glanced at an old photograph in an ornate silver frame, a picture of Lorelai at fifteen that had rested on Richard's end table for years. It was a candid, taken by whom, Emily had forgotten. Lorelai was talking to someone out of frame, the expression captured in the photo animated and bright.

Emily returned the letter to its envelope, careful not to tear the paper so brittle with age.

To My Lady Red, the next letter began,

You'll excuse the liberty I take in addressing you as "my lady," I know. I feel sure we're not up to 'dearest' yet, and anything else seems criminally negligent—a cold 'to' won't do.

She was smiling when Richard came in. He sat on the ottoman before her and placed his hands gently on her knees. She looked up at him, tears in her eyes.

"These letters," she said. "They're gems." She laughed as she thumbed a tear from her eye. "He called her Red."

Richard leaned forward and pressed his lips to her forehead. "I'm delighted for you, my dear, that you have them to read." He rubbed her leg lightly with the tips of his fingers. "Rory is here, and I expect Lorelai at any moment."

Emily looked up, horrified. "Dinner! I—I forgot! There's nothing to—"

He waved a hand. "Oh, my dear, it is all taken care of."

She followed him to the parlor and the drink cart, pestering him with questions as they went—what did he mean, taken care of? He smiled in a way that would have infuriated her, had she the energy for it, had she not been emotional enough to enjoy the slight pampering. Rory rose from where she sat on the divan as her grandparents entered the room, and Emily ceased her questioning as she crossed the room and enveloped Rory in a tight hug.

"I am very glad to see you," she said.

"Grandma, I'm so sorry about your friend," Rory said. "I wanted to come with you, but Dad had tickets to this thing, and then there was this dinner, and—"

Emily pulled her down to sit beside her on the divan. "I appreciate the thought, but your mother was quite company enough."

"She always is," Rory agreed.
"Rory, I'm thinking of beginning a project," Emily began; the ringing of the doorbell cut her off.

"I come bearing gifts of food and drink!" Lorelai announced. She stood in the entryway to the room, two paper bags in her arms. "And, while I tried to get Tyler Florence to put in an appearance, he's too busy teaching a housewife in Parma how to fix her watery lasagna to make it, so we're going to have to settle for some guy I picked up off the street in Stars Hollow."

Luke walked past, carrying a similar burden. "Stop announcing me when we go places," he said.

"Come on, you two," Lorelai said. She indicated with her head. "We're going to go hang in the kitchen while the man cooks. I've heard it's quite nice in there."

"Go on ahead," Emily replied. "I need a moment with my granddaughter."

Rory gave her grandmother a questioning look, waiting until Lorelai, Luke, and Richard were well into the kitchen to give in and ask.

"What's up, Grandma?"

Emily smoothed her skirt, chastising herself for the old nervous habit. "I've come into possession of some… rather interesting letters."

"Mom told me," Rory said.

"Yes, well, they're really quite something, and they—with the help of some rather forceful hints from your mother—have given me an idea," Emily said. "I'm—I'm not sure if this is something…" She trailed off. "I want to make a book," she announced, lifting her head. "I—I want to put the letters in a book."

Rory's face broke into an excited, exultant style. "Grandma, I think that's amazing!"

"Well, there's more," Emily said. "I think there should be more, there should be… Like that novel that you lent me, the one with the letters between the poets?"

"You mean Possession?" Rory asked. She thought a moment. "So, you want to write around the letters," she said. "Use them as a framing device, tell a story around them, right?"

She tapped Rory's knee. "That's exactly it. However, I'm not—it's been so long since I've written anything besides letters, myself, and, well, I know that you have a very full class schedule and your work on the paper and your social life, and I don't want to put another burden on you, but—"

"Grandma, I would be more than happy to help," Rory said. "I've never really tried fiction, but it's sort of fiction based on real life, so it shouldn't be too different." She bit her lip. "Why don't we do this, Grandma: you start working on it, whenever you want, and just try your hand at it, and you and I can have a weekly study date where we sit down together and go over it—that way we're writing together, but we have something to start with."

Emily furrowed her brow, uncertain. "I don't know, Rory—on my own? Write it on my own?"

"Why not?" Rory said. "You knew Winky, and you have her letters, and you wouldn't have asked me if you didn't have some idea of how you wanted it to be—and," she added, her voice rising in excitement, "you told me once, when we were in Rome, you told me you wanted to be a writer. Remember?"

"I remember," Emily said softly. "Well, if you think so…"
"We'll just try it for a while," Rory said. She threw her arms around her grandmother. "I'm so glad you're doing this, Grandma. I know it's going to be great."

Later that night in the quiet of her bedroom, Emily curled up once more with Win's letters and photographs. She lifted a picture from the chaotic pile in the hatbox and considered it several long moments. Win couldn't have been more than nineteen, Emily thought. In the photograph, the young girl leaned against a car. She was laughing, her head thrown back, her hair falling in long curls behind her. Win stood with one hip against the car door, her hand on the other. Her posture was easy, and Emily could picture her standing up straighter and walking away, her movements fluid and relaxed. She remembered Lorelai, the day of the funeral, waiting for Emily at the Jeep, remembered the picture she'd just seen of Lorelai in the study. Emily ran her nail along the lines of the polka dot dress Win wore, an old-fashioned (now old-fashioned, she conceded) shirtwaist style, her expression thoughtful.

She put the picture aside and took up another from the same year, a close-up. In this, Win wore her hair pulled back and low, a formal, off-the-shoulder dress and pearls. Emily had seen photos like this before—she'd been in photos like this, formal sittings and portraits.

Win had told her once it was easy to be two people at once if you only knew how: the saucy, self-confident, slightly outrageous girl who clung so fiercely to her individuality wasn't held in the stranglehold of the subdued, obedient daughter Win patiently was. To be one, she'd said, you had to put up with the other and make do. "It all evens out in the end," she insisted. "If I hadn't had so many years of practice with my parents, putting up with Harry's foul moods would have been impossible. Pleasing other people doesn't mean giving up who you are," she'd said. "No, Emily, it does not. You have to work with what you're given in life."

Again, Emily traced the lines of the photograph, the curves of her friend's face. Emily had worn her hair that way herself; she'd put on her mother's pearls and smiled. But in the broad, insouciant, friendly smile, in the slant of Win's eyes and the pert, challenging light therein, she saw someone else as well.

"Oh, Lorelai," she sighed.

With that, Emily reached into the drawer of her bedside table and retrieved the journal that Rory had given her months ago. She thumbed the gold-edged pages, opened the cover, smoothed the first page, and began to write.
The rain had begun on Saturday. Lorelai had been glad, at first. The weather was unseasonably warm, and rain seemed fitting, especially rain of this sort: a light, fine mist that fell softly and blurred windowpanes like smeary, wet kisses. It was an April kind of rain, she thought, not like the rain she and her mother had driven through to Atlantic City. After a winter of cold, unpredictable weather and nasty freak rainstorms, the sun shower on Saturday morning felt like a welcome into spring.

What had started as a light sun shower, however, by evening had grown into a full-fledged angry torrent. Lorelai had listened to it grow more violent from her perch on the ledge of the tub in the upstairs bathroom, had heard the rumble of thunder just after the front door slammed shut and she'd been left alone.

By the fifth day of rain, Lorelai was stir-crazed and ready to pour an entire pot of hot coffee on the next person to tell her that April showers brought May flowers. The rain now fell in sheets, slanted sideways by constant, unrelenting winds. She stood at the living room window, arms crossed over her chest, and wondered briefly if it was too self-centered to feel that the weather had adapted more to her moods each day this week. The wind beat a stray tree branch against the glass, and she flinched at the sudden movement. Her porch was littered with fallen branches and soggy leaves she hadn't yet gotten around to sweeping away. The front yard, dimpled with puddles that threatened to overtake the scant grass that was there, depressed her, and she turned her back on the window.

_So wish I could sleep_, she thought. _It's all Luke's fault. Stupid dork._ She rolled her eyes and rested her chin on her shoulder, scratching lightly at her elbow as she looked over to the TV.

"Poor slob, poor slob without a name," Audrey Hepburn said.

Lorelai folded herself up on the couch, legs tucked up under her, her cheek against her knees. Even if he was a stupid dork, she thought, after nearly a week without Luke whatever anger that flared during their short, brutal fight Saturday evening had faded. It had been replaced by a hollowness, an aching in the center of her chest that kept her awake at night. If she hadn't been so tired, she'd be angry with him at this point for simply making her so sad. She reached over her head and groped for the phone on the end table. Without looking, she dialed. The greeting she received was a whining groan.

"What?"

"I'm sorry," Lorelai said. "But I can't sleep. I needed to talk."

"You're not seriously calling me again. You are _killing_ me."

"Please?"

A sigh. "What's wrong?"

"I can't sleep," she said again.

"What movie are you watching now?"

"_Breakfast at Tiffany's_."

"Mom. You hate that movie."
Her mouth fell open. "I do not!"

"You always say that watching that movie actually gives you the mean reds," Rory said. "You think it's depressing and sad."

Lorelai hit the pause button as Audrey Hepburn jumped up from her bathtub couch, crying that it just couldn't be Thursday—but it is Thursday, she thought, day five of Hurricane Luke and Lorelai.

"That's why I like it," she said.

She heard Rory take a breath. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"I told you, I can't sleep," she said. "And I don't want to go up there."

"Why not?"

She paused. "There's a menacing stain on my ceiling."

"Mom."

"There is! It's shaped like a Gremlin!"

"Then don't feed it after midnight," Rory said. "Would you just call Luke already?"

"I can't."

Rory groaned. "Mom, I have an Italian test tomorrow—today, rather. It's two in the morning. This is the third time you've called me tonight. Please, please call Luke."

Lorelai said nothing.

"You know you don't want to be talking to me right now," Rory began.

"That's not true!" Lorelai cried, sitting up. "I always want to talk to you!"

"I just mean you'd rather be talking to Luke."

She sat up. "I can't. I can't call him, Rory. I just—I can't. This is his thing, he needs to be the one to call first."

"Mom, what was this fight about?"

A powerful gust of wind swept across the house. Simultaneously, Lorelai heard the kitchen door swing open and the power flicker and die. She sat in complete darkness, listening to the back door banging open in the wind. The portable phone she held made not even a staticky pop. She threw it aside with a howl and got to her feet. She took tentative steps to the kitchen in search of candles and matches, to shut the kitchen door and latch it closed. Tears pricked painfully behind her eyes; she sniffled and squared her shoulders. She would not cry. She wouldn't, she told herself. She wouldn't cry because it was two in the morning and the power was out and she was by herself and it was raining and she'd had a vicious, pointless fight with her boyfriend. That she was not going to do.

Rory's question echoed as Lorelai lit the candles on her kitchen table. She fetched herself a can of soda from the fridge before she sat down to wait for the power to come back on. What had the fight been about? She popped the top of the soda and startled herself with the sound. Whatever it
had been about, she thought, it had been a lot like that—sudden and loud and disorienting. The comparison made her snort and the carbonation stung the inside of her nose. Her eyes watered and she coughed, trying to draw a proper breath. Yes, she thought, the fight had been a lot like that.

Lorelai chugged half the can in an effort not to think. She wasn't surprised that it didn't work; nothing else had helped so far, and she'd ended up dwelling on what they'd said to each other as they avoided the actual source of tension. This was another of their dances, she knew. Yelling at each other about anything else was easier than talking through the problem.

She'd been avoiding the bedroom all week. When the fight had reached its most vicious pitch, Lorelai remembered bellowing at Luke and hauling herself to the upstairs bathroom, locking herself in. He hadn't followed her. When she emerged an hour later, she'd crossed the hall to the bedroom and found it scattered with the things he'd left behind. A pair of socks. His jacket. His watch. Though she'd been forced to go in and get clean clothes for work every day, she hadn't slept in her bed since. She curled up each night on the couch in the living room instead. She rubbed her temples wearily, thinking of it. It hadn't done her much good: she'd found it impossible to sleep at all.

The wind moaned under the eaves; the sound made Lorelai shiver. She wandered into Rory's room with one of the candles and set it on the desk by the door. The light was uneven, faint at best, but she knew what she was looking for and the slight glow of the candle would do.

She'd hidden the jacket in her daughter's wardrobe for no other reason than if Luke tried to sneak in and steal it back while she wasn't home, it would be the one place he wouldn't look. For the same reason, his watch was in Rory's underwear drawer. Lorelai opened the wardrobe and slipped the jacket from the hanger she'd placed it on, beneath an old winter coat of Rory's, and hugged it to her chest. She kneeled to open the drawer where Rory kept her fine unmentionables. Lorelai found the watch wrapped in a pair of Wonder Woman under-roos. She giggled as she untangled it from the cotton. It was a sad state of affairs that its cold heft in her hand was the most comfort she'd had in days. She rolled her eyes at the maudlin melodrama of the thought and slipped the watch onto her wrist. She was perversely glad that, since he'd stomped out of the house on Sunday, he'd not only been without the joy of her company, he'd been without the jacket and watch as well. She struggled into the jacket and cuffed the sleeves. She allowed herself a moment to smell the fabric, breathe him in.

"You're being ridiculous and strangely creepy," she told herself. "You're also talking to yourself. It's never a good sign."

She took her candles and returned to the living room, telling herself she wouldn't allow the artifacts he'd forgotten to sway her in any way. If he wanted to talk to her, if he wanted to make up, he was going to have to come to her. He had been the one to snap first; his had been the most hurtful barbs; he had the problem, even if he didn't know it. She could sit here by the flickering light of her candles, hugged comfortably in his jacket with her knees tucked up under the tee shirt she'd stolen from him months ago, and wait him out. She missed him, but she knew, without quite understanding why, that Luke had to be the first to reach out.

Reaching out was something he wouldn't be able to do at the moment, she realized, remembering that all her phones were portable and so electric; she and Rory had never had the patience for cords that attached phones to bases and bases to walls, but patience would have at the very least made it possible for him to call. She pouted a moment and jiggled the watch on her wrist. She wanted to call Rory again. Her emotional, inner thirteen-year-old was getting the better of her—she wanted to be reminded that she was an occasionally rational adult who didn't have to spend her night sulking and waiting for her boyfriend to call. But, she thought, there's really nothing better to do at the moment.
She remembered her cell phone a few moments later. She'd turned it off days ago—a precautionary measure, she'd told herself at the time, to give him the opportunity to sweat it out and also to keep herself from calling Rory one time too many—and left it in her purse. The battery would still be good. She retrieved it, nearly knocking over one of her candles in the process. She curled up on the couch and flipped it on. As the phone lit up, it beeped and began to vibrate in her hand. *Incoming call.*

She sighed into the phone as she answered. "Hello?"

The rain seemed to clatter on the other end of the connection. "Where the fuck are you?"

She furrowed her brow. "What?"

"Where in the fucking hell *are* you?"

"Luke?" she asked. Immediately, she slapped her palm to her forehead at her own stupidity, instinctive though it was.


His anger riled her. He didn't *get* to be mad, she thought. "I'm at my house. Where else would I be?"

"You are not at your house," he told her.

"*I am* at my house, you lunatic!"

"You are *not* at your house!" he bellowed. "I've been calling your fucking house for over a fucking hour, and there's no answer, which means that you are not at your house!"

"Well, where the hell are you?" she shot back. "You sound like you're in Burma."

"I'm across the fucking street at the pay phone, is where I am," he said. Lorelai was aware that his voice was raised more in necessity than anything else, because of the rain, but it didn't ease the irritation making her fingertips itch. "I got so goddamned pissed off trying to reach you, I pulled the fucking phone out of the wall downstairs, and since you made me put in the portable upstairs, it's all I had, so I had to come out here in a fucking *monsoon* to call you and keep getting no answer only to realize that I've locked myself out of my fucking apartment!"

"You want to tone down the language there, Tony Montana?" she said. "The reason you couldn't get through, genius, is that *all* the phones in this house are portable and therefore, not functioning in what you have so exaggeratedly called a *monsoon*. I'm sorry you locked your keys in the apartment, but that's not my fault, and I'd appreciate you not yelling at me for something over which I had absolutely no control!" She was on her feet and pacing now, her voice rising with each pronouncement. "Now, not that you deserve the offer, but hang up the pay phone and get your ass over here before you catch pneumonia and blame me for your untimely death."

He was silent a moment. "If I come over, you gonna let me in?"

"No, Luke, I was offering only so that I could stand at the window and mock you for your stupidity in coming over—for crap's sake, of course I'll let you in. I'm mad at you, but I'm not, you know, Miss Minchin."

"I'll be there in five minutes," he said. "You got any firewood in the house?"

Lorelai looked over her shoulder. "Some, next to the fireplace. Why?"
"Gee, Lorelai, I don't know. What do people typically use firewood for?"

"I'm hanging up on you before you say anything else that will make me retract said offer," she said. "Hurry up."

Lorelai resisted the temptation to wait by the window or door, didn't want to give him the satisfaction of catching sight of her waiting for him. She stretched out on the couch, her hands folded on her stomach. His watch was heavy on her wrist, which was no longer such a comfort; she slipped it over her hand and placed it on the end table behind her. She laid her cheek against the cushion and played out what would have been the next scene in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in her head. "Sing-sing, and step on it, darling."

She heard his heavy tread on the stairs sooner than she'd expected him. He banged the door with the flat of his hand, calling her name. Slowly, Lorelai got to her feet and padded across the room towards the door. She rested her hand on the doorknob a moment before she opened the door. They waited a beat, regarding each other over the threshold. Luke, in one fluid motion, stepped in, kicked the door shut, slipped his arm around Lorelai's waist, and drew her to him. She gasped as his arms went around her, pinned her own to her side. He held her in a fierce embrace; she found herself crushed against his chest, her cheek squashed in the shoulder of his water-logged vest. He rested his chin on her hair, and when she spoke, she jarred him, knocking his teeth together.

"So, this was so not what I expected to happen."


She wiped the back of her hand against her cheek, damp from his vest. "No, it's fine. Just… wasn't prepared for that."

"I—when I called and there was no answer… I panicked," he said, his voice low. "Scared myself shitless. And then I got pissed off, and the phone came out of the wall, and… mostly, I was worried."

"I was right here," she said. She took his wrists in her hands and began to lead him away from the door. "Let's get you out of these wet clothes." She paused. "And know that any scenario where that phrase is sexy is just so unlikely tonight," she told him. "Go wait for me in the bathroom. I'm going to get you some dry stuff. And take a candle."

She watched him pull off his boots and hurry across the house to the stairs, dripping on the floor as he went. He hadn't bothered to turn his hat around to cover his eyes, and Lorelai could see the water streaming from the bill of his cap, down the collar of his shirt. She sighed as she picked his boots up by the laces and tossed them onto the porch rather than let them puddle on her hardwood floor. She waited until he was out of sight in the bathroom before she went through the motions of finding something for him to wear. There were pajama pants in the dryer, she knew, and socks in the bedroom, still… She gathered his things and attempted to ignore the tiny, chirping voice in her head that wished the power would come back on so that she could make him something hot, get something warm in him, and the other, sultrier voice that insinuated there were other ways of warming up the man she loved that didn't have to involve hot liquid, though it would be interesting if they did. She wrinkled her nose as she mounted the stairs and passed the bathroom for her bedroom.

He called to her from where he stood on the bathmat. "Lorelai?"

"What?" She bent to rifle through a pile of laundry.

"You're wearing my coat."
She stopped, feeling caught. "So?"

"So, why are you wearing my coat?"

The amusement in his voice needled her. "In the hopes that if I get enough of my cooties on it, you'll never want to wear it again."

He chuckled. "If I don't have your cooties on me by now..." he began.

She stood in the bathroom door, his pants and socks hugged to her chest. The look on her face, somber and hurt, silenced him. He remained rooted to the bathmat; he'd thrown his vest, flannel, and tee shirt into the tub behind him, and he waited for her bare-chested in his jeans, his arms hanging loosely by his sides. The candle he'd brought up from the living room cast an unsteady, orange light over the room. It made Luke look haggard, pale. Lorelai tossed the socks and pants at him and moved towards the linen closet.

"Why were you trying to call?" she asked.

"It was raining," he said.

"It's rained before—it's been raining all week, actually, and you haven't tried to call," she countered. "Besides, it's not like I'll melt. I'm not made of sugar."

"You sure about that?"

She looked at him over her shoulder before she turned and began to rub at his shoulders vigorously with the towel she held. "Why were you trying to call?" she asked again.

Luke shrugged. He was watching her, and Lorelai determinedly concentrated on drying him down. "The power was out," he said. "I was worried about you."

"I'm a big girl, Luke. I can handle a power outage."

He caught her hands in his. "I know that."

They locked eyes a moment. Lorelai faltered, felt the hot rush of tears threatening to break the façade. She wrested her hands away. Covering his face with the towel, she massaged his scalp, dragging her fingernails along the terrycloth of the towel as she dried his hair. He made a noise of appreciation; she snapped the towel away and handed it to him.

"Finish yourself," she said. She squelched the dirty that immediately came to mind.

He did as he was told, skimming the fabric along his arms and across his back. Lorelai sat on the toilet. His jeans were in a tangled heap on top of his other clothes. She debated taking everything down to the dryer, but the prospect of carrying the heavy, soaking load down the stairs wearied her, and she instead focused her gaze on Luke's feet. When she looked up, he was twisting the towel in his hands, shivering slightly. She could tell, even in the weak light, that he hadn't slept.

"Cold?" she asked.

"Nah."

"I couldn't find a shirt for you," she said vaguely. She looked down at herself. "Oh." She stood and shrugged his coat off.

"You don't have to—"
She tossed the jacket into the hall. "I have shirts here, Luke," she said flatly, pointedly adding, "You don't." She grasped the hem of the shirt in her hands, her arms crossed before her, and pulled the tee over her head. "Consequence of not really living here."

Luke swallowed thickly. Lorelai turned her cheek to him as she extended her hand, offering him the balled-up, inside-out baseball tee. Immediately, she covered herself, wrapping her arms around her torso to hide her bare breasts. As though, she thought, he hadn't seen her bare breasts a hundred times before. As though he weren't intimately acquainted with her bare breasts.

"Thanks."

Lorelai stood a moment, holding herself, feeling more naked in her Thursday day-of-the-week underpants than she'd ever felt standing naked in front of him before. "Whatever," she said. She turned to the bedroom. His right hand, cold against her skin, set heavily on her shoulder, stopped her. She stared at the doorframe, waiting.

He slipped his hand lower, sliding his palm along her collarbone, pausing to dip his fingertip in the hollow of her throat, until he came to rest it on her left shoulder. Lorelai shook at the unexpected contact. He pulled her back against him, again rested his cheek on her hair. Lorelai took a breath and held it. She felt him close his eyes as he laid his other hand flat against her bare stomach, just at her navel. She flushed with heat beneath the chill of his touch. He lowered his mouth to her ear.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She waited to speak until she was certain her voice wouldn't break, that her tone would be even and cool. "What are you apologizing for?" she asked.

He sighed, his breath warm against her neck. "Not calling. I shoulda called. I am sorry, you know."

"I know," she whispered. She pressed her cheek to his. "But it's not enough, that."

He shuddered as she stepped into him, her back warm against his chest. She felt the goose-bumps rise on his skin. He tightened his arms around her and she stayed for a moment, her eyes closed as well, as he curved his body to hers and dug his fingers into her arm and her side, as he buried his face in her hair. Her throat ached.

"Put your shirt on," she said. To her own ears, her voice sounded hollow. "I'm going to get some clothes."

He released her slowly. "I'll meet you downstairs."

She closed the door of her bedroom behind her, gave herself a moment as she sat on the bed. She pressed her forehead to her knees and growled. She told herself she was being worse than melodramatic. She told herself she was being silly and oversensitive and it didn't have to be a big deal.

She rose and went to her dresser in search of pajamas, sighing. "But it is."

Luke was kneeling in front of the fireplace, coaxing the flame from the kindling, as Lorelai came downstairs. She set the candle she held on the coffee table and dropped to the floor a few feet away from him. His hair was still damp. He avoided her gaze as she reached out and rubbed the fabric of his shirt at his elbow.

"I like you in that shirt," she said. "It looks better on you."
He smiled ruefully. "And here I am thinking the opposite," he said.

"Ah, but I don't have your manly physique to fill it out," she replied.

"Thank God for small favors, then," he chuckled. He paused. "Listen, Lorelai—"

She decided she didn't want to hear it, that she wouldn't give him the chance to placate her, talk around it yet again. It was too late, she was tired, and they'd only have to go through it all another time. She said the first thing she could think of: "You look like hell."

He tipped his head, conceding. "I haven't slept."

She sat up and shook her hair from its ponytail. "Me neither."

"I wish I knew what to say to make this better," Luke said wearily. "I already apologized."

"It's not about apologies anymore," she told him. "And you know that."

Luke rose and wandered to the window. "I missed you, this week."

"I've been here." She inched closer to the fire, spreading her hands towards the heat. "You could have come over."

"Could I have?" he asked, turning.

"Of course," Lorelai said. "You know that, too."

He snorted. "Right. Don't I remember you telling me you couldn't look at me anymore and to get the hell out of your house? Those were your exact words, I'm pretty sure: 'I can't even look at you right now. Get the hell out of my house.'"

That she remembered, she thought. The memory lodged painfully in her throat, gave her a bitter taste at the back of her mouth. Her next words hurt as she spoke them: "And then you actually left. I still can't believe you actually left. You left!"

Luke gaped at her. "You told me to!"

"But I didn't mean it!" she cried. "When have you ever left when I've told you to, anyway? That's not what you do, Luke—you fold up your jacket and you sit on the couch and you tell me you're not leaving even if I want you to, that is what you do! You were supposed to—you were supposed to follow me upstairs, and we were supposed to keep fighting until we were done and it was fixed and then we'd have amazing make up sex and eat pancakes and fall asleep and it would have been fine! But instead, you left."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that was what you wanted?" he demanded.

"Because," she said quietly, "you've always stayed before."

"And you always get pissed at me for it," he returned.

"Not really," she said. "Luke. Why don't you want to come live with me? Why is that so hard?"

"Ah, geez, is that what this is about?" Luke groaned.

Lorelai felt her jaw drop. "What do you mean, is that what this is about?" she squeaked. "Were you here the other day? Did you not listen to yourself ranting about my stupid kitchen and my teeny tiny bathrooms and my teeny tiny bedroom with the teeny tiny bed and my stupid hallway
with arches and my weird lamps? Were you not present for the litany of complaints you made about my housekeeping skills—or, excuse me, my lack thereof? You did everything but tell me I have stupid hair!"

"Oh, I did not," he said.

"Yes, Luke, you did. And when I dared to defend myself, you then proceeded to attack me for being too sensitive!"

"Are you on drugs?" he demanded.

She stared at him a long moment, slack jawed, unable to speak. "Seriously, did you just ask me if I'm on drugs?" She got to her feet. "No wonder I told you to get the hell out of my house," she said sullenly. "For crap's sake, Luke—do you not remember that argument, really? Because I'm pretty sure I could give you a word-for-word reenactment, if necessary."

"It's not necessary," he sighed. "I just—do you really think I don't want to live with you?"

Lorelai crossed her arms over her chest and kept her features carefully calm. "I really think you've come up with a hell of a lot of reasons not to move in for someone who claims to want to move in."

"You know that's not true," he sighed.

"I don't know that's not true," she said flatly. "When I brought it up the other day, you went into defense mode just like you are now—"

Luke scowled. "I am not."

"Oh, you are, too." She was sure that he saw, when she looked up at him, the weariness that overwhelmed her confusion, the readiness to give in, and again, the hurt. She knew it would raise guilt in his throat like bile, and she sighed. "We can move, if the house is the problem. We can find another place in Stars Hollow. It's not the only house—"

Luke contemplated the rain falling beyond the porch before he answered. "I don't want you to have to move. You love this house."

"It's just a house, Luke. It's not Tara, or anything, and I know that—yes, it's been my home for a long time, but I want—I want you to feel like where we live isn't just my place, you know? It's not fair that you should feel like a guest in the place you're going to live," she said. "And I want you to live with me. So it's fine, we can move."

"No," he said firmly. "You're not moving because of me."

"Well, you're going to move because of me, aren't you?" she asked.

"It's not about the house, Lorelai."

"A-ha!" she said, pointing at him. "I knew there was something—my spidey-sense was tingling. If it's not the house, then what is it? Come on, Luke. I'm not going to be able to sleep until we settle this, that's very clear by now, and my normally sunny disposition becomes quite Hyde-like when deprived of beauty sleep. Tell me."

Luke passed a hand over his eyes. "I've never really lived with anyone before."

"That's not true," she countered immediately. "You lived with Jess."
"With a girl," he corrected.

She fluttered a hand to her chest. "I'm flattered, good sir, by that appellation, but it remains untrue. You lived with Rachel."

"I did not live with Rachel," he said darkly.

"Yes, you did," she said. "I remember. She came in, all, 'hi, how's it going?' and then immediately installed herself in your apartment. You gave her a drawer. That whole time she was here, you were living together."

"And you remember how that turned out. She moved the milk and I ended up breaking in and then breaking things here just so I'd have something to fix and not be there while she moved the milk," he said.

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "Luke, my life, I refuse to believe that Rachel left because you were uncomfortable with her dairy placement preferences."

"No, she left because of you." He lifted his head, his eyes wide.

She stared at him a moment, her lips parted in mute surprise. "You never told me that," she said, when she had found her voice. "Why didn't you ever tell me that?"

"Well, you went and got engaged," he pointed out. "It was sort of moot. Besides, what would you have done differently?"

"I don't—that's just—crap," she said weakly. She made a noise of disbelief, shaking her head. "Luke. I never knew."

He shrugged. "I know."

"God, Luke. I wish—I just—I didn't know," she said again. "But, still, while we will talk about this at length at another time, it has no bearing on the current topic at hand."

"Just because she left for another reason doesn't mean I wouldn't suck at living with someone," he said. "And why are you talking like a commentator for NPR?"

"I'm tired. Apparently that makes me Terry Gross," she sighed. "You think you're going to suck at living with someone? Living with me? Luke, you practically live with me already. I don't see how it's any different if your stuff comes and lives with my stuff, too."

"It's just different." He shuffled his feet. "I don't know—it's not like I'm worried you'll kick me out if I leave the toilet seat up one too many times."

"Then what is it like?" she asked. She waited a moment, and receiving no answer, clicked her tongue to the roof of her mouth and exhaled an impatient breath. "What, Luke?"

"Lorelai," Luke sighed. He sat back on the windowsill. "I don't know how to answer that. I just don't."

Lorelai closed her eyes. "Every time we've talked about this, you've either found something else to talk about or a reason why we should talk about it later until five days ago when you just exploded. And I have since spent the last five days trying to think of reasons why you wouldn't want to move in with me."

He said nothing a while. At length, he slumped further against the window. "What have you come
"up with?" he asked.

She smiled faintly. "Well, there's the repeated, two in the morning, panicked revelation that you don't want to get married—" she began.

Luke stood up straight. "Of course I want to get married!"

"I know that," Lorelai said. "But at two in the morning, it's hard to be sure of anything when you're not speaking to your husband-to-be because for some reason he has an aversion to sharing an abode with you."

"Ah, geez, Lorelai." He passed a hand over his face. "I'm sorry. You never should have—I can't believe I did anything that would make you think that I didn't want to marry you. I'm so sorry. I suck."

"You do not suck," she said. "My brain got there with very little help from you."

He shook his head, braced his hands on his hips as he stared at his feet. Lorelai could see the mental ass-kicking he was giving himself, the tabulation of how long he'd have to punish himself before he sufficiently paid for the anxiety he'd caused her. She fought the urge to cross the room and put her arms around him; the small voice that had tormented her with taunts of Luke's indifference was attempting to convince her to keep laying on the guilt because he really did deserve it. *I have a really nasty inner voice,* she thought.

"Hey," she said. He looked up. "It's okay. I'll get over it. Besides, that was just one among several."

"What were the others?"

Again, she gave him the whisper of a smile. "Well, that I have horrifying BO and you can't stand my ungodly stench."

Luke's mouth twitched slightly. "You do not have an ungodly stench."

"No?"

"The way you smell is actually one of your many attributes," he said.

"Yay for me, then," she said. "So that's off the list. Also, there was the theory that you're suddenly deathly allergic to my sheets."

"I am not allergic to your sheets."

"I also wondered if you just couldn't stand the prospect of living next door to Babette for the rest of your life and therefore being the subject of more gossip than you are now."

"No," he said. "Well, yes, but no."

"That, I understand. Well, then, that really only leaves the last one."

"Which is?"

She took a breath. "That you're afraid to put up bookshelves."

He furrowed his brow in confusion. "Say what?"

"You can put bookshelves up here, Luke," Lorelai said.
"I appreciate that," he replied, "but I don't have the first idea of what you're talking about."

"You can put bookshelves up in my house," she said again. "And unless you discover a sudden affection for Hello Kitty! and Betty Boop socks—and God help us both if that ever happens—the only socks you'll ever put on here will most definitely be yours." She waited for this to sink in, but he continued to look at her in utter bewilderment. "You are going to be the only man with socks here. There'll never be any other sock man in this house but you."

When the realization hit him, his entire body tensed. He stood straighter, balled his hands into fists. He began to pace. His jaw was clenched—even his eyelids seemed to Lorelai strained in some way. He was silent for several long moments. "Lorelai. I know you would never do that. I know that. I can't—I can't believe you would even—how can you even think I would think that?"

"Luke, stop," she said. She tentatively stepped towards him. "I don't think you think that. I think maybe your brain went ahead and thought it without your help whether you think your brain thought it or not. Your brain hears 'moving in' and it remembers Nicole and moving in with her and how that ended up, and your brain has to know that no matter what it thinks, that's not going to happen with me, with us." She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and tipped her head to the side, smiling cautiously at him. "Your brain might be a little paranoid. I just want to let it know it doesn't have to be."

Luke turned away from her, again shaking his head. "I still—I still don't get why you're bringing that up. What it has to do with anything."

"Do I really have to explain this to you?" she asked.

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared blankly at the window, keeping his back to her. He said nothing a moment. "You're wrong."

"Am I?" she asked.

"It has nothing to do with us, what happened before." His voice was rough, tired.

"But it does," she insisted. She stood beside him, placed her hand at his elbow to turn him towards her.

He started at the touch of her hand on his cheek. She brushed her fingers along the edge of his jaw, down his chin. She ran her forefinger over the arch of his eyebrow, her eyes sad as she studied his face. At length, she laid her hand to his cheek once more and forced him to look down at her.

"I don't know what it was like for you before, okay? But this is what I do know: Rachel came back to town and lived with you for awhile, and it didn't work out; you and Nicole tried to move in together, and it didn't work out—worse, when you tried, that's when things went screwier than they already were." He grunted at this, and she apologized softly. She continued, "I think there's a part of your brain that's afraid that moving in with me will somehow herald the doomsday of our relationship. And I'm telling you right now that it's not happening. Clearly, you or your brain needs to hear it."

He leaned into her palm. "Stop talking about my brain, Lorelai."

"I'm serious," she said. "Come here," she said, taking him by the hand. She pushed him to sit on the couch and climbed onto his lap. She straddled him, placed her hands on his shoulders, and dipped her head low to look at him. "Luke, it's going to be fine. You knew that—you know that. You didn't give me this ring for nothing, and if I thought for a second you were jerking me around
with it, I'd make you a eunuch faster than you can cover your crotch with both hands."

"That's extremely genteel of you," he said. "I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't mean," she said. "I do. And we're okay. Your brain just has a little catching up to do, but your brain can totally trust me." She kissed his brow. "Lord knows that while they're superior to all others, I don't love you for your body and your coffee alone. I'm pretty fond of your insides, too."

Luke wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her into a hug. She leaned into him, hugged him awkwardly around his neck, and rested her chin on his shoulder. He pressed his lips to the crook of her neck. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry we fought. I'm sorry for staying away. I'm sorry I'm a dick," he said.

"You're not a dick."

He angled back to look at her. "Would you just let me be a dick, Lorelai?"

"Heh. Dirty."

He studied her a moment. "I'm not sure it is what you think it is. The bookshelf thing."

She placed her hands squarely on his shoulders and squeezed hard. "Regardless, know that you can put anything you want anywhere you want to—"

"Now that's dirty," he said.

"Oh, good one, Luke, good one," she said, lifting an eyebrow in amusement. "Know that, she said again, "and know that I know you know it."

He touched his forehead to hers. "So, fight over?"

"Depends."

Lorelai felt him tense beneath her once more, felt him take the deep breath he tried to hide as he ducked his head. When Luke raised his eyes to meet hers, his expression was resolved.

"You tell me when, I'll be here. Me and my stuff," he said.

"You sure?"

He nodded his head once, emphatically. "Five days of this again, I'll be beating the shit out of Taylor just to distract myself."

"Well, I'm glad I can amuse," Lorelai laughed.

"We're good?"

"We're good," she replied.

"How long are you going to hold this over me?" he asked.

She smirked. "Oh, many, many weeks, my friend."

"So," he said, pushing her hair off her shoulder, "are we at the amazing make up sex part of the whole fight scenario?"
Lorelai let herself fall forward against his chest, swinging her leg over his lap so that she lay across him. "Nope."

He supported her back with his arm, tapping his fingers against her elbow as he propped her up. "Nope?"

"Hungry," she said.

"Do I want to know how you've been surviving the past five days?" he asked.


"Sookie hasn't been feeding you?"

"Not for lack of trying," she replied. "However, I was wallowing, and there is a protocol to follow."

He gathered her closer, grew serious. "I'm sorry, Lorelai. Really."

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "I won't tell you it's been fun." She traced a loopy, cursive L on his chest. "It has been the exact opposite of fun. In fact, fun completely vacated the premises. Fun went and moved to Canada. Something about not approving of Bush's foreign or domestic policies. I don't know. We weren't speaking by the time it up and left."

"I want to get married."

"I know."

"I want to live with you."

"I know."

Luke stroked her hair. "I guess… I guess things take time."

"Says the man who waited the better part of a decade to kiss the woman of his dreams."

"Who would that be?" he teased.

She poked him in the ribs, hard. "Watch it. You haven't earned back teasing rights yet, bucko."

"Sorry," he said. "How can I make amends?"

She lifted an eyebrow. "I think you know."

"Ah," he said. "Right. Pancakes." Luke lifted Lorelai out of his lap and rose. "When was the last time you ate a piece of fruit?"

"What's that?" she asked.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that." Luke put out his hand. "Come with me, I'll make you something."

Lorelai held his hand between both of hers as she followed him to the kitchen. His skin was cold, still; he hadn't warmed up properly when he came in from the rain. She sat on the counter and watched him, kicking her heels against the cabinets. They were silent, save Luke asking Lorelai
for a match to light one of the burners and blessing her for having a gas stove.

"Forgot about that," she said. "It's a pity I don't drink instant coffee."

Luke didn't acknowledge this as he lit another burner and put the kettle on for tea. She made a face at him as he brought the mugs down and dropped tea bags in; he countered with a face of his own that made her laugh and nearly topple into the sink.

As they had done the first time almost a year ago and so many times since, they shared the pancakes from a plate balanced precariously on Lorelai's thighs as she sat on the counter and Luke stood between her knees before her. After several moments of silent eating, something occurred to her, and Lorelai set down her fork and caught Luke by his wrist. He stopped and looked at her, a question mark on his face. She then kissed him softly with her eyes closed, sighing into him, smiling against him. She had wondered, once, if there would come a time when kissing Luke this way, deep and long and slow, being kissed by Luke, would be commonplace, would no longer make her giddy or her abdomen tighten or give her that sensation of small, winged creatures beating at her ribcage. Raising her hand, she just touched her fingertips to his cheek, and at her touch, he leaned into her. As he pushed himself forward and gripped her waist tightly in his hands, she knew such a time would never occur. The weight of unanswered questions still sat heavily on her shoulders; she'd made him lay bare the emotional carnage created with other women that he still refused to see as well. Even so, she thought, when his mouth was over hers, it all became inconsequential, if only for the moment.

When they parted, she rubbed her thumb along his lower lip, smiling wryly. "You're scratchier than usual," she told him.

He bit her thumb. "Sorry. I can shave."

"You can?" she teased. "I'm shocked." She took a sip of tea and shuddered. "Seriously, Luke. How you can forgo coffee for something as tasteless as this, I'll never understand."

"Likewise," he said, "but backwards."

"Yes, that made very much sense," she said. "God, did I miss you."

Luke set the plate aside and pulled Lorelai forward, towards him, wrapped his arms around her as she crossed her ankles at his back. She draped her arms over his shoulders as he kissed her, savoring the taste of him, the pleasurable pain of his beard as he pressed closer and deepened the kiss, trapped her against him with his hands flat against her back beneath her tank top. She raised one hand and cradled his head; for the first time since he'd slammed the door behind him and left, she felt content, awash in his presence.

When they broke from each other, breathless, she kissed the tip of his nose. "Did you miss me?"

In answer, he made to lift her from the counter and carry her out of the kitchen. Abruptly, she dug her nails into his shoulder and pulled back. "Wait. There's something else we need to talk about."

She paused. "And I'm still hungry."

He obeyed, making another stack of pancakes and adding bacon that he discovered in the depths of the fridge from the last time he'd made her breakfast. She cooed thanks for him and demanded hot chocolate in lieu of her tea.

"How long am I going to be your indentured servant, here?" he asked as he complied.
She blinked. "For life. Didn't you know? That's what marriage is all about, baby."

"And what do I get into the bargain?" he asked, eyeing her.

She spread her hands with a wicked grin. "Me as your willing love slave," she said.

He stepped away from the stove and just pressed his lips to hers. "You're getting the raw end of the deal on that one, you know."

"Keep kissing up, Luke," she laughed. "I'm loving it. In a non-MacDonald's sense."

He plated the food and handed her a steaming mug. "So. You wanted to talk."

"I just think there are some things we should talk about while we're, you know—"

"Delving into the uncomfortable?" he asked. He popped a piece of bacon in his mouth. "Shoot."

"Wedding," she said, her mouth full.

"Let's have one," he said. He helped himself to her hot chocolate.

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, then. Would you like to participate in any way?"

"You mean, other than showing up and saying 'I do'?"

"There are details to plan, moron," she shot back. "Sookie's got the menu covered, Lane's dealing with the music, my mother has commandeered the invitations, Rory's picking out readings, we have the location, but there are other things we need to discuss."

"Such as?"

"Such as, who are you going to get to stand up with you? Groomsmen?"

"Jess."

Lorelai stabbed the last bite of pancake with her fork. "I'm having Sookie and Rory for bridesmaids, so you need at least one other person." She grinned at him. "You could always ask Kirk. He'd wet himself. And then he'd pass out."

"Yes, I'll do that," he drawled. "So, he said as he took the plate and put it in the sink, "you said there were some things. What else?"

Lorelai studied him a minute, thinking. The strain of the last week—the confusion caused by the fight, the sleeplessness, the time spent apart—were clearly written on his face. He was moving slowly, as though putting one foot in front of the other required thought and effort. She reached for him, and he once again pulled her into a hug as she sat on the counter. She rested her chin on her wrists, her arms looped around his neck. It might have been enough, the distance they'd come in the past few hours, she thought. And there was always time, later.

"Nothing," she said. "Just the wedding." She pulled back slightly.

"And?"


He reached for her hands, carefully avoiding her eyes. "Maybe we should think about adding on
to the house," he said.

"What do you mean?"

Luke shrugged as he stared at their linked hands. "Add on. Make the house a little bigger. I mean, closet space alone—"

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "Oh, please."

"I'm serious. The house—I don't know, maybe it wouldn't hurt to have another room or two, just for practicality's sake."

"For practicality's sake?" she echoed. "Because…?"

He ran his thumb over hers. "Just, you know. In case we need room somewhere down the line, we'll have it."

"Room for what?" Lorelai asked, her brow furrowed.

Luke looked up. His eyes, as he locked his gaze on hers, were both serious and soft. "Room for—for anything. Just extra room. We might—we might decide we want it," he said, "or that we—we need it. And then we'll have it."

Lorelai’s mouth fell slightly open, her lips just parted, and she raised her head as an idea began to form. Something flashed in Luke's eyes, something she almost recognized. "So you think we should add on," she said deliberately, "now. So we have room for… later."

"I think it would be a good idea, yeah," he replied. "It would be good to—to be prepared."

Lorelai closed the distance between them and kissed him lightly, briefly. "Okay."

He broke into a wide smile. "Yeah?" he asked. "Good. I'll start making some calls, get moving on it."

"Just like that?" she asked.


She laughed. "And it's that easy. I don't know if I can afford it right now, Luke."

"Maybe not," he said, "but we can."

She lifted her head. "How?"

"Same way I could buy a building without a loan and give you thirty thousand dollars out of pocket," he said. "I've got some investments we could pull. I've got a savings account that's—it's one of those egg things."

"An egg savings account?" she asked. "A nest egg?"

He snapped his fingers. "That. We can do it. We'll get Tom out here, get an estimate, a plan, whatever. Don't worry about it."

"You're just full of surprises, there, Money-bags."

"Don't call me that."
She giggled. "Sure, Mr. Trump."

"Ah, geez, woman, would you cut it out?"

Lorelai ran her hands along the outsides of Luke's arms. "Oh, come on. Women love The Donald."

"Do they?" he asked, putting his hands on her hips, pulling her forward once more. He kissed her, a slow, languid kiss.

She pulled back and shook her hair, wet her lower lip with the tip of her tongue. "I think it's the hair," she said hoarsely. "Or maybe it's the pout." She continued as Luke bent his head and gently kissed the space just behind her ear. The whispered touch of his lips against her skin shook her to her core, and speaking took considerable concentration. "Conan O'Brien does a really hilarious impression of the Trumpster," she said. Luke trailed his kisses lower. Lorelai worked her fingers through his hair and tipped her chin to give him better access, even as she asked, "And, good sir, may I ask what it is you're doing?"

He didn't pause. "If you're asking me what I'm doing I'm not doing it right." He had reached her collarbone, slid his hands under the hem of her shirt and slowly up her sides.

"Oh, no, I think that's okay, what you're doing there," she said.

At this, he stopped. He took a step away. "Okay?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I meant to say something else." He lifted an eyebrow. "What I meant, of course, was 'may I ask what it is you're doing to me, making me so crazed with lust I want you to take me right here on this counter? Oh, baby, don't tease me so,'" she said. "That is obviously what I meant."

He scratched his head. "I gotta say, working in the food service industry makes that particular fantasy a lot less appealing."

"Consider the spirit of the sentiment and not the letter, then," Lorelai replied.

"Right," he said, and with that he hoisted her off the counter and onto his shoulder. He carried her this way to the living room while she made wolf-whistles at his rear end. Ignoring her, he deposited her on the couch and pinned her to the cushions before she had a chance to sit up. His kiss was heated, almost rough. Lorelai hooked one leg over his and slipped her arms around his neck, arching into him. His left hand was beneath her, his right tangled in her hair. He kissed her a while, just kissed her, held her, traced his fingertips across her skin. Lorelai let him take his time, knowing that he needed to show her the things he thought she'd doubted. It reassured him, thinking he could reassure her. And when she at last yanked his tee shirt impatiently over his head, he followed her lead.

She was dimly aware, at some point, of the strains of "Moon River" sounding through the room with the patter of the rain and the crackling of the fire. She wrapped herself around him, opened her eyes and watched him move, watched him watch her. He was tender as he kissed her now; she barely heard the words he whispered with his lips still touching hers, his voice lost in the sounds of the house around them. Love, she thought she heard, and home.

Luke tucked a blanket around them, after. Lorelai settled against his chest, smiling sleepily. He combed his fingers through her curls, his chin on her hair. She felt him press a kiss to her forehead. She kissed his shoulder in return, murmured his name.

"Hmm?"
"We brought the power back on," she said.

Luke lifted his head and looked around. Breakfast at Tiffany's played on the television; numbers blinked at them from the VCR beneath. He chuckled. "That might be one for the record books."

"Dear Guinness Book of World Records," Lorelai began.

He kissed her. "Hey, what time is it?"

"Hang on," she said, reaching over her head. His watch was still on the end table. "Close to five."

He cursed softly. "I have to go to work."

"No, you don't."

"I have to open."

Lorelai propped herself up on his chest and looked at him intently. "No, Luke, I don't think it's a good idea. You don't look at all well."

"No?"

"In fact, you look downright feverish," she went on. "I think I might have given you this twenty-four hour bug I've suddenly come down with."

Luke smiled at her lazily, brushed the hair away from her face with the back of his hand. "There's a dirty joke in there somewhere."

"Stay with me today," she said seriously. "You owe me this, Luke."

"Everyone will know," he said.

She shrugged. "So they know. Is there shame in spending a day having hot make up sex with your girlfriend?"

"Fiancée," he corrected her. "I want to stay."

She eased herself up and gently tugged his lower lip with her teeth. "So stay."

Luke laid his hand against her cheek. He studied her. "You're far too forgiving."

"No," she said, kissed his palm. "Just incredibly impatient. I want you here, and I want you with me, and if that means that I have to put up with your emotional retardation, then that's what I'll do." She shrugged. "That's all. Waiting isn't my forte."

"I've been serving your coffee long enough to know that," he replied dryly. "I'm gonna call Caesar, have him open."

Lorelai sat up, pulling the afghan up around her. "Yay," she said. "I win." She smiled. "Meet me upstairs, 'Kay?" She paused. "Where's my shirt?"

While Luke went in search of the phone, Lorelai crept back upstairs. Luke's wet clothes were still in the tub; she hung them over the door and turned on the taps. She hummed to herself as she added bath salts to the water and clipped her hair up in a messy twist. They had both been right, she thought: she'd given in more quickly than perhaps he deserved, made it too easy for him, but giving in and making it easy helped her get her way.
"There's a flaw in that logic," she sighed to herself.

She was still rifling through her medicine chest when Luke stepped up behind her and slipped his arms around her. She reached back and touched his cheek; she ran her fingers along the line of his jaw absentely. Her head tipped back, she gave him an awkward kiss and mumbled against him. "Strip." He raised his eyebrows in response. "Get in the tub," she told him and kissed him again.

Luke pushed his pajama pants off and stepped into the tub. "You put some girly kinda smelly stuff in this water? And are we ever gonna, you know, go to bed, sleep?"

"Just salts," she replied. "Nothing with a girlier smell than vanilla."

"Ah, geez," he interjected.

She eyed him askance as she set up the things she needed along the edge of the tub. "You can wash it off later. And yes, sleep, also later, but there are other things to attend to first." As she pulled her shirt over her head, she rolled her eyes at his rather pointed, delighted silence. "So not what you think, Flannel Man."

Luke sat with his back to the wall, his legs stretched out towards the tub faucet. Lorelai stepped in and forced his legs apart with her feet, sitting squarely between his knees. The water rose and lapped at the edges of the tub, threatened to spill over. She hissed, sucking air in over her teeth, as she adjusted to the heat of the water and felt her skin flush and blossom with color. Luke watched her with undisguised interest. She drew her knees to her chest, palming water up her arms and over her shoulders; Luke grasped her ankles and pulled her as forward as she'd allow him. He leaned in and rested his elbows on her knees, letting his hands dangle at her sides. As he kissed her, he cupped water in his hands and poured it over her spine, ran his fingers along the edges of her shoulder blades.

Lorelai pulled back from his kiss, wincing. "Seriously, ouch," she said. "Hence the bath."

"Excuse me?" he asked, a quizzical look on his face.

The way he was massaging her back and tightening his legs against her was altogether more distraction that she'd planned. She reached behind her and grasped the can of shaving cream she'd placed on the ledge. Waving it in Luke's face, she smiled brightly.

"You, my darling dear one, are going to get the full facial treatment," she said. "It's moisturizing shaving cream for dry and sensitive skin, because I know how concerned you are about your delicate complexion."

He watched her, his expression no less confused, as she produced a razor and a small bowl that she dipped into the bathwater. "Full facial treatment?"

Lorelai cupped her hands in the water and raised them to Luke's face, gently splashing his chin, cheeks, and neck. "You need a shave," she said. She shook the can of shaving cream vigorously before uncapping it and filling her palm.

"Yeah," he said, and he started slightly as she began to rub the shaving cream along his cheeks. "But I can take care of that myself," he said, speaking even as she lathered him completely. "I use an electric razor."

She sat back slightly and sank her hands in the water to rinse them. "You do? Have you cleaned it in the last ten years? Or replaced it? Recharged it?"
He glowered at her. "It has different settings for how close you want to shave," he said flatly.

"So you shave to achieve your particular look?"

"Where did you get this stuff, anyway?" he asked, a little desperately.

"They were having a sale at the drug store, and you didn't have any of this sort of stuff here, and not knowing about your normal beauty routine, I figured it wouldn't hurt to have some stuff around in case you ever needed it," she said simply. She brandished the razor close to his ear. "Up or down?"

Luke circled her wrist with his hand and lowered her arm. "Have I mentioned that I'm a dick?"

She softened. "Luke," she sighed. "Can we—can we just let it be over, that? It takes too much energy, carrying around that stuff. I prefer to expend my energy in more productive—" He snorted at this, and she giggled. "—ways. Okay?"

He released her wrist and placed his hands flat on her thighs. "I love you," he said. With that, he kissed her.

"Menthol shaving cream!" she protested, pulling back. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and laughed. "Luke, my life—"

He handed her the can she'd just put down. "Yeah. Sorry. Lather up."

"Dirty, dirty, dirty," she said, shaking her head. "Up or down?"

"Down," he said. He jutted out his chin. "Just remember—sharp instrument, very close to major arteries."

Lorelai blew a kiss at him. "No worries, lover."

She worked slowly, her brow furrowed in concentration, her tongue between her teeth. After each stroke of the razor, she rinsed the blade in the small bowl of water she'd set aside. Luke watched her, trying not to smile, gripping her thighs tightly each time she brought the blade into contact with his skin. He angled his face for her, tipping his chin up so she could shave beneath his jaw.

"How'm I doing?" she asked.

"So far, so good," he told her through clenched teeth.

She bent a little lower as she got to his chin, scooting back slightly. "The lighting in here is terrible," she said. "Which is why I always do my makeup in the bedroom—totally sucks when I miss a spot shaving my legs, though, because you get ninety-nine per cent smooth and then that one little strip of—"

He grimaced. "Easy, there," he said. "You clipped me. Less talking, more watching what you're doing. And believe me, that last doesn't need an explanation."

"I'll let that pass on account of the fact that I've sliced you open," she said.

"Just a flesh wound," he said. After a pause, he added, "I'll do you for that."

She laughed aloud. "Dirty!" she gasped. "But seriously, what are you gonna do, bleed on me?"

"I'm invincible," he said, lifted his chin.
She passed the razor just beneath his lower lip, down towards his chin. "You're a looney," she said. "By the by, so glad you've worked out the whole soul-patch phase of your facial hair development."

But he wasn't done yet. "All right," he sighed, "we'll call it a draw."

Lorelai rinsed the blade. "I think you killed that joke to death, just then, Luke."

He grinned goofily. "Running away, eh? You yellow bastard. Come back here and take what's coming to you. I'll bite your legs off," he said.

"End the Monty Python, Luke," Lorelai said. She reached for a wash cloth and soaked it, wiping the remnants of shaving cream from his face. "You're done," she said.

He sat up straight to let her examine her handiwork and passed his hand over his newly-smooth skin. "Man, does that feel weird," he said. "How do I look?"

Lorelai tipped her head to the side and regarded him. She cupped his cheek in her hand, at length. "You look different." She rubbed his chin with her thumb. Her face fell. "You don't look like you."

"Hey." His voice was gentle, concerned, as he angled to look at her. "What's this?"

She'd turned her face away; she worked her lower lip with her teeth and fought the sudden surge of tears. Looking at Luke without his characteristic beard, seeing the thinness in his face and the hollows under his eyes, the bleariness and redness therein under the harsh fluorescents of the bathroom lights, Lorelai was overwhelmed by a wave of weariness. Her bones throbbed angrily. Her neck suddenly felt weak, as though it would no longer hold her head up properly. The accompanying swell of emotion caught her even more off-guard; she felt the tears hot on her already flushed cheeks before she recognized that she was crying. As Luke massaged the small of her back, she tried to calculate how many hours of sleep she'd gotten this week.

"Talk to me, Lorelai," Luke said.

She shook her head mutely and grasped his arms tightly with both hands. "I don't know," she said, ashamed to hear herself blubbering. "I'm tired." She took a great, shuddering breath. "I'm really, really tired."

Luke closed his eyes and let out a breath of relief. "I know," he said. "I know. C'mere." He drew his knees up and helped her maneuver an awkward turn until her back was to him.

With a shaky laugh, Lorelai let Luke fold her in his arms; she curled up against his chest and tucked her forehead against his neck, closed her eyes. She cursed softly.

He held her tightly. "I'm sorry for this week, I really, really—"

"Luke, no offense, or anything, but shut up, okay?" she sighed. "I know you're sorry. I appreciate the fact that you're sorry. I accept the apology. I forgive you, I love you, and I just want—I want us to—to be there, already, you know?"

"Be where?"

"Where we don't have to do this anymore, you know, where we've done all this stuff already, where all the stupid little whateveres, these things—they just don't matter. Or happen. Or when they do—if they do—they're, you know, easier," she said. Luke didn't reply, only pressed his lips to her temple. "I know. I'm not really that naïve. But I just—I wish we could get out of our own
way. Let ourselves be.

Luke rested his hand on Lorelai’s knee beneath the water, swung his fingertips lightly across her kneecap. He was silent for what seemed to Lorelai a very long time. She stayed in his arms, immobile, and concentrated on the sweep of his fingers in the water. Relaxing against him, she brushed her knuckles along the line of his jaw in a repeated arc as she attempted to adjust to the new smoothness of his skin. Lorelai thought the silence had settled within her, somehow, formed some sort of inner calm. She flattened her palm against his cheek and drew his mouth to hers. As he kissed her, his hand solid and warm at the base of her neck, though her pulse quickened and she shivered in the rapidly cooling warm water of the bath, the calm remained.

When she let him go, he looked down at her, traced the lines of her face with the tip of his finger as she'd earlier done to his—it was a familiar gesture, one of thoughtfulness and deliberation. "Like that, you mean?"

She smiled sadly. "Something like that." She kissed him again. "To bed? For to sleep?"

"To bed," he echoed, "for to sleep."

He helped her up and handed her out of the tub. She shivered into a bathrobe, balefully surveying the bathroom.

"Water, water, everywhere," she sighed.

Luke stopped drying himself off and quickly kissed her forehead. "Go, I'll take care of this."

"Luke—"

"Go," he said again. "I got this."

The clocks in her bedroom erratically blinked different numbers at her as Lorelai pulled back the covers on her bed. With a glance towards the stain on her ceiling, she briefly considered calling Rory; the overcast sky and continued rain made it hard to gauge the time and her body-clock was so confused that she had only the vague notion that it might still be a little early for a phone call. She wandered the room, picking up random, scattered items of clothing from the floor as she waited for Luke.

She was in the process of buttoning up an abandoned flannel she'd found in a pile of cast-off work clothes when he came in, naked and still slightly damp from the bath, and unceremoniously, uncharacteristically threw himself on the bed with a heaving, grunting sigh.

"Fucking hell, am I exhausted," he said. He lifted his head and squinted at Lorelai with one eye. "You're really into stealing my clothing."

She shrugged as she padded across the room and crawled into bed. She shook her hair from its clip as she spoke. "Didn't steal it. I found it. And I have no idea how clean it is." She thrust her wrists at him, her hands covered by the too-long sleeves of his shirt. "Smell."

Instead, he rolled the cuffs of the shirt back and kissed her wrists. "Smells pretty okay to me," he said. "Certainly not an ungodly stench."

"Good." She wriggled beneath the blankets and turned on her side to face him. "It's utterly bizarre, I have to say."

"What?"
"Your face," she said.

"Thanks, love."

"I mean, I'm expecting you to get out of bed and go to the mini-bar—"

"There's a mini-bar in here now?" he asked, raising himself up slightly.

"—the imaginary mini-bar," she said, rolling her eyes, "for a shaken-not-stirred-martini, what with you all clean-shaven like that. And naked. There's something about you clean-shaven and naked that screams 'Secret Agent Man.' Can you do a Scottish accent?"

"I'm not going to call you Moneypenny, Lorelai."

"Tragic." She paused. "It's good you're here."

"Agreed."

She sighed. "You ever get so tired you can't sleep?"

"Nope. Just close your eyes."

She whispered good night and did as she was told. They lay facing each other, Luke's arm around Lorelai, his hand flat against her back. She tucked her head under his chin, threw her leg over his thigh. He stroked her hair, and she could hear his breath rattling in his chest as it began to even out; she could feel his arms relaxing a little as he drifted to sleep. Her palms were flattened between them, pressed against his abdomen, and the steady in and out of his breathing began to lull her to sleep. The last thing she heard as she drifted off was guttural rumble in the back of Luke's throat that signaled he was gone and snoring. She smiled.

The light had shifted when she woke. Lorelai kept her eyes determinedly shut, feeling groggy and stiff. She had the odd sensation of floating in water, of rising and falling with the slow ebb of the tide. A throaty, snorting grunt brought her fully awake. Without having to open her eyes to look, Lorelai knew she was no longer sleeping on her bed—she was stretched out spread-eagle on her stomach, her arms thrown out wide, directly on top of Luke, her head falling almost uncomfortably into the crook of his neck. Biting her lip, she raised her head slowly, and she felt the muscles at the base of her own neck knotted and pinched.

One of Luke's hands rested heavily on her rear. Lorelai squinted against the hazy, uneven light that filtered through the tree branches outside her windows and the curtains within. It was raining, still, though the wind was less and the fall was softer now. She wondered again what time it was as she tried to negotiate herself off of Luke; as she slid herself down his side, his hand tightened on her ass, and she swallowed the ready yelp of protest in response. She reached back and guided his hand up her back, loosened his hold on her until she could roll off him and onto her back on the mattress. She turned to look at him a moment. He slept with his mouth open, tasting the air as he took a great, easy breath, now unburdened of her weight. The hand that had until a moment ago taken residence on her bum he threw over his forehead. Lorelai pulled the covers up over his chest.

She kissed his cheek before she sat up to go. His hand twitched; he muttered something incomprehensible. Lorelai shushed him, stroking his cheek lightly, and kissed him again. "Sleep," she whispered. He sniffed and rolled on his side without opening his eyes.

Lorelai tiptoed downstairs, running her hand through her hair. Her mouth was dry and her eyes hurt—she felt as though she'd been drinking. And me the very portrait of abstinence, she thought. She needed coffee. As she walked the hall to the kitchen, she knuckled her eyes, yawning.
she dropped her hands, she shrieked.

Babette, standing over the kitchen table, hollered as well. She spun on her heel, turning to face Lorelai, and wielded the pen she held in her hand as a weapon. Lorelai laughed shakily, fluttering a hand to her chest.

"Oh, Babette. You scared me," she gasped.

"Lorelai, sugar, you nearly made me wet myself!" Babette cried.

Lorelai bit back a laugh. "I'm sorry for that, Babette. And not that I'm not glad to see you, but what are you doing here?"

Babette sat at the table and gestured. "Oh, I was just leaving you a note, doll. Me and Morey were having our breakfast at the diner, and I thought I'd just bring a little something to get you through the morning." She handed Lorelai a to-go cup with the Luke's logo on the side. "I knew you weren't gonna be working today—"

"How did you know I wasn't going to be working today?" she asked. She blew a little in the cup before taking a sip. Making a rather inappropriate noise of appreciation, she sank into a chair. "I seriously think this coffee just made my knees weak. I don't know what the hell that man puts in this stuff, but it's just orgasmic." She shot a guilty look at Babette. "Was that an over-share?"

Babette waved her hand. "Take your kicks where you can get 'em, sweetie-pie."

"Very wise, Babette," Lorelai giggled. "But again, how did you know I'd be home?"

"Saw Sookie at Doose's last night and she told me she'd convinced you to take the day off. 'Bout time, too, honey—you been running yourself ragged this week." With this, she gave Lorelai's knee a light tap of the hand. "And Luke! Who knows where the heck he's been since the two-a-you had that fight."

Lorelai paused, mid-sip. "What? Hasn't he been at the diner?" she asked, and she could feel the frown starting in her forehead as she spoke.

"Patty tells me he comes down in the morning, opens up, and disappears until late—doesn't set foot in there all day. I haven't seen him once this week," Babette said. "Oh, sugar, don't look like that. I'm sure he's just fishin', trying to cool off. Probably doesn't want to be around people—you know how he is, doll, better than anyone."

The frown had descended, and Lorelai couldn't quite bring herself to give Babette the chagrined look of reassurance she knew was expected. "I do know how he is," she said. "And I'm sure you're right, he doesn't want to be around people."

"You listen to me, honey," Babette said. "Whatever this is, it ain't worth it. You got something good, you two do, and we've all been watchin' for years now—since ya first stepped foot in that diner a-his. You two got something people go their whole lives lookin' for."

Lorelai looked down, a blush creeping up her neck. "We're lucky."

"And stupid, if ya mess it up now."

She laughed. "Everything's fine, Babette—we're sorting it out. I don't intend to let him get away, not after I've got him trained up so well." She paused. "I honestly don't know what he's been up to this week, but he's here now, so—"
"Sugar! You made up?"

"We're in the process," she said, cocking an eyebrow.

Babette rose. "Don't let me keep ya, then, darlin'. That's a good time, right there."

Lorelai nodded. She opened her mouth to speak, stopped cold when she heard her name called plaintively from the living room. She squeezed her eyes shut, offering a silent prayer that Luke was wearing some sort of covering over his lower half and would not give Babette an eyeful when he entered the kitchen. *So to speak*, she thought, opening her eyes again with a sigh. She looked hesitantly at Babette as she got to her feet.

"Lorelai?"

She could see Luke hadn't really opened his eyes as he came shuffling down the hall, his hair sticking up in odd places and his face imprinted with marks from the sheets. He was wearing droopy pajama pants, she was relieved to see, that he yanked up with one hand as he yawned and entered the kitchen. He stood beside the refrigerator, trying to blink. He resembled a little boy who had wandered from his bed during a cocktail party and had to be led away before he really awoke and would refuse to go to sleep again.

"Wha's going on?" he mumbled. "Why'd you leave?"

As Babette watched them, enormously amused, Lorelai set her coffee down and reached for Luke's hand, taking it in hers. She placed her free hand on his chest and tried to look him in the eye. "I just came down for some coffee," she said. "I'll be right back. Go on up."

He wrinkled his nose and looked past her with heavy-lidded eyes. "D'ja go all the way to the diner?" With some effort, he focused his gaze on her again. "In that?"

"No, Babette brought it for me," she said patiently. "Luke, why don't—"

"Babette's here?"

"Hiya, honey," Babette called, waved.


Lorelai tapped her fingers against Luke's chest to get his attention. "Luke, you need to go back upstairs—I'll be up in two seconds," she added. She smiled fondly as he closed his eyes and nodded by tipping his head all the way back and then bringing his chin down to his chest. Though she knew it would probably make the *Stars Hollow Gazette*, Lorelai leaned up and kissed him squarely on the mouth before she turned him in the direction of the living room. She walked behind him a few paces, her hands on his shoulders, kissed the back of his neck, and shoved him lightly on his way.

"Bye, Babette," he called.

Babette had started before Lorelai even turned around. "Honey, why you're coming after coffee when ya got that lyin' next ta ya upstairs, I don't know. I mean, hubba hubba."

"Thanks for the coffee, Babette," Lorelai replied.

"Any time, sugar, you know that. There's a sack 'a doughnuts on the counter for you, too." She paused at the door on her way out. "Guess I don't need to tell you to have a good day."
Lorelai shook her head with an embarrassed smile. "Bye, Babette."

Coffee and doughnuts in hand, Lorelai returned to the bedroom to find Luke hanging half-off the bed, face down. She maneuvered him into a more comfortable position before sitting, her back against the headboard, and drinking her coffee. Luke laid a heavy hand on her thigh.

"C'mere," he grunted.

"I'm having my coffee," she countered. "You want a doughnut?"

"No," he said. "I want you to come here."

With a last sip, she complied, scooting down until she was tucked in the curve of his arm, her chin in the hollow of his shoulder. She watched him several long moments.

"Stop staring at me."

"I'm not sleepy."

"How can you not be sleepy?"

"I'm just not." She sat up. "I'm going to go downstairs and call Rory."

"You can call Rory from here," he said, and he latched a hand onto her elbow to tug her back down.

"Yes, but the talking will keep you awake."

"It doesn't normally." he replied. He opened his eyes fully for the first time since they'd both fallen asleep. "I miss you."

"You're such a schmoop," she teased. "I'll be right back, I swear."

"Ten minutes," he said.

"Okay, ten minutes. And when I get back, you can wear me out," she said.

She changed in the laundry room, clothes that she was only half-sure were clean. "I really need to rethink my system," she muttered. There were shoes by the door, and her cell was in her hand as she stepped out, double-checked the lock to make sure she could get back in. The grass was slick beneath her feet as she jogged through the rain to the garage, cursing under her breath. She wasn't entirely sure what she was doing; she was entirely sure that whatever Luke had been doing all week, fishing wasn't it, but the odd clanking sounds she'd heard in the garage the day before yesterday made slightly more sense.

See, Rory? she thought. I told you no squirrel could be that big.

Whatever Lorelai had been expecting to find in her garage could not have prepared her for what she did find when she pulled the doors open. She stood, mouth agape, and stared before she stepped inside and shut the doors behind her. Her hand shot out to the light switch, and when the overhead lamps flickered and came on, they revealed the make-shift carpentry workshop she'd seen and not quite believed when she'd opened the door. There were sawhorses with planks of wood across them; various, oddly menacing power tools; the toolbox Bert, open and the contents strewn haphazardly around it; jars of nails and screws and other equally unfamiliar pieces; sandpaper; the missing measuring tape. Lorelai took tentative steps forward, her mouth still hanging open. And when she saw it, she was unsure she'd be able to form coherent sentences
anytime soon.

She hit the speed-dial on her cell almost instinctively. "I'm sorry, I have no idea what time it is, but you are absolutely and totally not going to believe where I am standing and I am completely and utterly serious and oh, my God, I feel like I'm going to pass out."

"Mom? Are you okay? Where are you?" Rory's voice returned Lorelai to herself slightly, the fine line of worry in her daughter's words chastising her.

"I'm fine, sweets, I'm sorry—I'm just—I am—there are no words for how I currently am. Flabbergasted, maybe, or stunned—I'm just—I'm—I'm totally incredulous, is what I am," she babbled. "I can't even—I can't think," she said. "This is just too much."

"Mom, you're really starting to freak me out. Are you having some kind of episode? Should I call the paramedics? The men with the butterfly nets? Artie Davis from the packie at the edge of town?"

Lorelai took a great breath and held it, her eyes closed. "The paramedics, no, the men with the butterfly nets, possibly, and Artie Davis from the packie at the edge of town only if he's started making deliveries because my God could I use a little medicinal vodka right now."

"Mom, just tell me where you are."

"I," she said, again drawing a heaving breath, "am in… the garage."

"Holy crap, Mom, is that all?" Rory said sharply. "My God, here I am imagining you in the panic room and afraid that Jordan Leto's trying to kill you."

"The cell wouldn't work in the panic room, honey," Lorelai said. "And I'm sorry. I'm in the garage, and I am telling you, it is a sight to behold."

"More than it usually is?" Rory asked.

"Much more," Lorelai said. "Babe, Luke has—I don't know how to put it—he's taken over the garage. There's stuff everywhere."

Rory groaned. "Mom, this isn't some weird sex thing, is it?"

She snorted. "Yes, Rory, actually Luke has set up a sado-masochistic torture chamber outfitted with rubber walls, whips, chains, a sex swing, and, for good measure, a vaulting horse," she said flatly. "In fact, I'm wearing a pleather bustier right now."

"Sorry. There's a thing in the Dean's office with a student that I'm covering for the paper and I have sex on the brain."

"Keep that one to yourself, hon," Lorelai said. "I wish you could see this, Rory. It's just—"

"Flabbergasting, stunning, and incredible?"

"Exactly," Lorelai said. "You will never guess what I am looking at."

"So tell me," Rory said.

Lorelai waited a beat. "Babe, he made a chuppah."

"I know that," Rory said flatly. "It's been in the yard forever. We walk past it every day."
"No, Rory, I mean he made me a new chuppah. This is not the same chuppah. This is another chuppah," she said. "And it's just—it's gorgeous."

She could almost hear Rory's mouth turn up in a happy, mushy smile. "That's so sweet! He made a chuppah just for you and him together!" she fairly cooed. "Because the old one was supposed to be for you and Max—this is the Danes family chuppah!"

"Which is the name of my next CD," Lorelai said. "And yes, sweets, that's exactly what he did."

"What does it look like?"

Lorelai circled it, stepping over various sharp tools as she went. "A lot like the old one, with the arches and the carvings and everything, but—hang on," she said. She stood on her tiptoes and strained, unsure of what she saw. She ran her fingers along the detailing, still rough-hewn and harsh against her skin.

She dropped to the sawdust-covered floor, her head tilted back as she continued to study her chuppah. "The arch has stars all along it. And flowers. There are little l's, too, on the posts." She continued to describe the smaller details as she found them until her eyes wandered a moment and she caught sight of something else in the back corner of the garage. She got to her feet and carefully picked her way towards the back. Her sharp intake of breath caused Rory to ask if she'd sat on a nail. "No, it's—he's—he made something else."

"What? What?"

Her eyes filled as she slid her arm across the smooth curve of the top. She bit her lower lip, tried to compose herself before she spoke. "It's a rocking chair."

"A rocking chair?" Rory echoed.

Her laugh was choked and shaky. "A rocking chair," she repeated, "for sitting next to the fire when he reads to me and I knit and we listen to the coyotes."

"Coyotes?"

"It's—it's not really hard to explain, but it's just something he and I, we talked about it once. It had been—it was a rough day, and we were at his apartment, and I made some passing comment about sitting in rocking chairs by the fire... " she trailed off. She laughed again, bending forward at the waist, disbelieving. "He made me a rocking chair."

She was almost startled when Rory spoke again, she was so lost in her thoughts. "How did you end up in the garage?" Rory wanted to know.

"Oh, something Babette said," Lorelai replied, rubbing her eyes. "And because of the giant squirrel from the other day."

"You'll explain that to me later, right?" Rory asked. "I'm about to go into class, so I have to hang up, but—Mom, did you—I mean, are you and Luke—"

"I followed the advice of my sage and lovely daughter and talked to Luke, yes," Lorelai answered. "He and I are going to be okay."

"Good. I have to go, but I'll call you later?"

"Sure," Lorelai said. "Have a good class, babe."
Clad again in the flannel she'd been wearing, Lorelai slipped beneath the covers beside Luke a few moments later, unable to stop herself from beaming. He pulled her roughly against his chest and held her a little too tightly as he spoke.

"That was longer than ten minutes."

Her reply was a lengthy, heated kiss. When she drew back, her eyes were alight with laughter. "Any more complaints?"

"Actually," he said, "someone kneed me really hard in the side last night. Really hurts. I might be bruised."

Lorelai lifted the covers and inspected the spot he pointed out. She made sympathetic noises as she slid down his side. She pressed her lips lightly to the invisible bruise several times in quick succession. She smiled up at him, rested her head on his abdomen as he pushed the hair off her face.

"Hey, Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

"I love you back."

"A lot."

"Same here."

"No, a really lot," she said.

"Well, I love you a really lot, too," he told her, chuckling. He gently pulled her towards him again, guiding her with his hand at the back of her neck.

She paused as she hovered above him; his eyes were still red and his face drawn, but as he looked up at her, pushed her hair behind her ears so he could better see her, his expression was restful, even happy. She let herself collapse against him and wrapped her arms around him in an awkward, fierce hug. He encircled her with his own, rubbing his cheek against hers.

"Babette said you were hubba hubba," she whispered in his ear.

"Ah, geez."

Lorelai rocked herself in his arms, laughed until she cried.

Later, she stretched on the bed, her movements almost feral as she yawned, arched her back, twisted her limbs about. Her joints felt loose, her body suffused with warmth. She was spent, her exhaustion now seeming almost luxurious as she extended her arms and wiggled her fingers. Luke had gone downstairs for a moment, so she let herself take up the entire middle of the bed. She watched the shadows she made in the slanting light of late afternoon. The rain had tapered off, and Lorelai saw the trees beyond her window weeping the excess water against the glass and the side of the house.

"Not a bad way to spend a day off," she remarked to Luke as he entered the room.

Luke climbed back into bed and handed her a glass of water, kissed her. "Not gonna disagree with
"That, my friend, is a very weird turn of phrase," she said. "You ever think about it? I do not disagree with you? It's a very nice way of saying while I do not agree with you, I still think you're wrong."

Luke set his water glass on the bedside table. "Then I heartily agree with your assessment."

Lorelai only smiled in reply, watched him as he took her hand and laced his fingers with hers. After a moment's deliberation, she spoke. "Hey, Luke? Where were you this week?"

His posture immediately stiffened. "What do you mean, where was I?"

"Well, Babette said that you haven't been at the diner, so I was just wondering—"

"Of course I was at the diner," he said.

"Babette says you weren't. She said that Patty said that you haven't been there during the day. So if you weren't there, were where you?"

Luke squirmed. "I was… out."

"Out where? Doing what?"

"Out someplace doing stuff!" he said.

"Oh, that clears everything right up," Lorelai said. "What were you doing?"

He passed a hand over his eyes. "I was working on a project."

"What kind of project?" she pressed.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked, looking her squarely in the eye.

She softened. "No, it's okay. It just—it seemed odd."

"I didn't want to be where people'd be looking at me all day."

"But you're so pretty," she said. "I'm glad you stayed today."

"Thanks for having me."

Lorelai leaned against him. "Dirty."

Things had nearly returned to normal by the end of the month—Luke's apartment was full of half-filled boxes and the majority of his clothes were residing in heaps on the floor of Lorelai's closet; he took to cursing a blue streak whenever he misplaced something, as there was no telling when or where he would find it. Lorelai took it in stride and, on the occasion that his surliness was a bit too pointed, she amused herself by moving whatever he'd just found to an entirely different place.

While she was delighted in theory that Luke had taken such active measures to begin the move, she had to admit to herself that the confusion it caused was more than she had expected and nothing short of tiresome. As he'd promised, Tom came over late one afternoon and the two men argued about the possibility of adding on—the wheres, hows, you-don't-know-what-you're-talking-abouts. When the details had been evened out and Tom had confirmed that he could get a crew to begin work in early May, Lorelai looked over the plans. Luke stood beside her at the kitchen table, pointing out various nuances. She studied the paperwork and attempted to ignore the
strange, nervous palpitations in her chest.

"Let's do it," she said.

The week before her birthday, she began to catch hints of preparations being made. Luke took mysterious, numerous calls, and when Rory called and Lorelai answered, Rory would affect nonchalance; Lorelai didn't know whether she should be amused or proud that her daughter was such a bad liar. Packages arrived at the diner, at the house, left on the doorstep, that she wasn't allowed to see. The whole process delighted her immensely.

Birthday Week had been shortened to Badass Birthday Weekend, for the sake of Rory's academic schedule. The night before the day of, the Lorelais sat on the floor of the living room surrounded by takeout containers. Rory fell onto her back, groaning.

"I'm never eating again," she said.

Lorelai helped herself to another piece of pizza. "Wuss," she teased. "Come on, take it like a man."

Rory raised her head. "Oh, hush, you. Are you having a good birthday?" she asked, struggling to prop herself up on her elbows.

"I am," Lorelai replied, her mouth full. "No birthday is complete without a Godfather marathon and a sickening amount of junk food. I'm just sad Davey had to get the chicken pox at this particular point in time and Sookie can't be here."

"And Lane's in New York," Rory lamented. "We're stuck with each other."

"That we are, pal," Lorelai said. "Not so bad."

Rory smiled at her mother as she pushed herself to her feet and ambled to the DVD player. "Pick your poison, birthday girl. And where's Luke?"

"Put in The Goonies. And he's working late," Lorelai said. "I thought you might have something to do with that."

"I know nothing," Rory told her.

"Then Yale's really been a waste of time for you, huh?"

"My mother, folks."

Lorelai reached for a soda. "So, what'd you get me for my birthday?"

"Not telling."

"What'd Luke get me for my birthday?" she asked. "It's the first birthday of coupledom, Rory. Please tell me he knows that the five hours of handyman work no longer cuts it and that I am a very, very greedy girl."

"Oh, he knows," Rory said archly. "That, he knows."

"Is it the chuppah? Did he tell you?" At Rory's shrug and unbearably smug smirk, Lorelai tossed a piece of pizza crust at her. She climbed onto the couch. "You have a responsibility to prepare me for any atrocities, you know."

"Has he ever given you a bad gift before?" Rory asked.
"Has he ever given you a bad gift before?" Rory asked.

She conceded that he hadn't. "He's not really the world's best shopper." She paused, twisted the engagement ring on her finger. "But he has good taste, at least."

"Yes, he does," Rory said. "Now be quiet, lady, and watch the movie."

Lorelai woke to a faint touch against her cheek. She blinked against the darkness, disoriented. Luke crouched in front of her, smiled at her as she opened her eyes. He gestured for her to be quiet, and she looked over to see Rory sleeping on the other end of the couch.

"What time is it?" she whispered.

"It's after midnight," he told her. He kissed her softly. "Happy birthday."

She held her arms out to him. "Upstairs," she said.

He cocked his head towards Rory. "Do we just leave her here?"

"She's okay where she is," she said. "C'mon, upstairs."

Luke pulled Lorelai to her feet and lifted her up, cradled her with an arm under her knees and another behind her back. She looped her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek.

"You are the birthday girl," he said. "I hate to say it because it's a stupid phrase and I'm gonna regret it tomorrow afternoon when I'm feeding you grapes—"

"An excellent idea, except for the grapes."

"—but," he continued, "your wish is my command."

Lorelai locked her hands at the back of his neck and traced lines against his skin with her thumbs. "Oh, this is gonna be the best night ever."

Birthdays, she reflected the next afternoon, were really superior to all other days. She lay on the couch thumbing through a book that Rory had given her. Luke sat opposite her, rubbing her feet. She had just finished the orgy of gift-giving and the special lunch he'd made her of double cheeseburgers and chili fries. There had been books and clothes from Rory and a ridiculously extravagant mall gift certificate and an ornate picture frame that would ultimately find a home in the back of a closet somewhere from her parents. Luke had been shy about his gifts—another pair of crystal earrings made for her by Liz, a delicate, thin silver chain with a small L charm that she'd immediately insisted on wearing, enormous Hello! Kitty slippers with stuffed Kitty figures at the toes, The Rundown on DVD in commemoration of the first night he'd spent with her in the house, a copy of Jane Eyre, as she'd decided she wanted them to read that together next, a wedding album, bath salts, and a fitted, olive-green jacket.

"So you'll stop stealing mine," he'd said.

"I don't steal yours because I want to wear it, I steal it because you need a new one," she said. "But I love it, thank you. And don't even think about stealing it—it'd be way too small for you and you'd rip it right down the middle."

"You like it?"

"I love everything," she'd said.

He'd shuffled his feet, embarrassed. "There's one more thing," he'd said.
Lorelai tried to smother a smile and failed, though she managed to keep her seat. She could feel herself color as Luke disappeared from the living room. When she glanced at Rory, her daughter had shrugged. Lorelai felt a dangerous pricking behind her eyes; her hands trembled as Luke came back into the room. In his hands, he carried a small, oblong box that he thrust at her. He kept his eyes cast down as she opened it.

Inside lay a bright, copper-colored door-plaque. Lorelai’s breath caught in her throat as she lifted it from the box and fingered the engraving. “Lorelai G. Danes,” it read, in smooth, elegant script, with “Owner and General Manager” beneath it. The name temporarily rendered her speechless, and she could only stare. When she was able to look up again, she saw Luke hanging back, his hands in his back pockets. She struggled to swallow the choking disappointment, resented herself for the sinking feeling in her stomach, and gave him a wavering smile.

"It's perfect," she said sincerely, though her voice shook.

"For your office door," he said.

"I can see that."

"So—good?"

She got to her feet and put her arms around him, stood on her tiptoes as she leaned into him. "Good," she murmured. She closed her eyes as he held her and swung her slightly off her feet.

For the rest of the afternoon, the question of the chuppah and the rocking chair in the garage sat at the tip of her tongue, threatening to spill over. She excused herself to shower an hour before they were to leave for dinner; beneath the water and the steam, she felt as though she couldn't rid herself of the tinge of disappointment no matter how hard she scrubbed. She felt ungrateful. The presents he'd given her she really did like, she told herself, and she loved him for his thoughtfulness. She stepped out of the shower and made a face at her steam-blurred reflection in the mirror before she crossed the hall.

Rory stood by the bed, laying out an outfit. Lorelai clutched at her towel. "Babe, I appreciate the thought," she said, "but I'm old enough to be dressing myself."

Her daughter smiled wickedly. "Ah, but you're dressing for an event tonight, Mom. You have to have the appropriate evening wear."

"Just what am I dressing for?" Lorelai asked. She stepped closer and examined the clothes. "Okay, a gold lame top and a fuchsia mini-skirt? Are you sending me out to turn tricks, now?"

"You'll see," Rory said happily, turning on her heel. "Come down and I'll do your makeup."

She ventured down to Rory's room, feeling ridiculous and exposed in her outfit. Rory sat at her desk in front of a makeup mirror in an outfit similar to her mother's: black hot pants and a purple and black polka-dotted halter top. Her makeup was likewise overstated and almost garish. She wore her hair in a high, curly ponytail. She grinned at Lorelai.

"We are gonna look so awesome," she said, "and everyone is going to be so jealous. And wait until you see Luke."

Lorelai pestered Rory with questions as the younger girl rouged and painted her up, but Rory wouldn't budge. She merely smiled and added more blue eye shadow or another swipe of blush. Lorelai looked in the mirror with a sigh. "I look like Carole Channing."

"You look perfect," Rory said. "Now your hair."
"Oh, God."

By the time Rory had finished with her, Lorelai's hair was three times its natural height. She sat in the living room, pouting disconsolately as she sipped her first birthday drink. Rory was hiding in her bedroom with the phone. Lorelai drained the rum and Coke before she cautiously raised a hand to her hair. She whimpered.

"I'm going to have to shampoo for a week," she told herself.

She sat up when she heard the front door open. "Luke?"

"Don't turn around!" he said.

"Uh, okay."

"Just—I need you to promise me something. Without turning around," he added.

Lorelai furrowed her brow. "Okay."

"Do not say anything. I don't want to hear a peep about this. If you say anything about Herb Tarlek or Tom Jones or professional wrestling or anything like that, I swear to God, I will not be held liable for what I do."

"So you want me to not comment on whatever it is you're wearing," she said. "Considering what I'm wearing, I don't know, Luke—"

"Not a word," he said. "You are the only person in the universe for whom I would submit myself to this, and if you so much as—"

"Okay!" she cried. "I won't say anything! Can I turn around now?"

She heard him sigh heavily. "Might as well get it over with."

Lorelai turned in her seat and peered over the top of the couch. Immediately, her mouth fell open as she stared wordlessly at Luke for several seconds. She covered her mouth with both hands as though to prevent the laughter from escaping, but the giggles, once they began, were uncontrollable.

"Yuk it up," he said dryly.

He stood just inside the living room, his hands on his hips, in a tight-fitting yellow leisure suit with a cream-colored, silky shirt beneath it, open at the neck and unbuttoned to the middle of his chest. Around his neck was a heavy gold chain. His hair was slicked back, and he held in one hand a pair of aviator sunglasses. He looked miserable.

Lorelai got to her feet with some difficulty, gasping for breath. "You look like John Travolta!" she shrieked.

"Ah, geez, I told you not to say anything! You promised!" he said.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but it's just so funny." She giggled as she snaked her arms around his neck and pulled him into a hug. A moment later, he gave in with a grunt and slipped his arms around her as well, lifting her off her heels as he did. They rocked each other where they stood a few moments, and Lorelai continued to shake with laughter. She pulled back. "It's mostly out of my system."

She laid her hands on his lapels. "I'm sorry, really. It's just—look at us. Where the hell are we going? A pimps and hos party?"

He snorted. "No. You'll see when we get there."

"I'd kiss you," she told him, "but the lipstick is smeary and I think we're trashy enough as it is. Thank you for whatever it is you're doing."

"Yeah, you better thank me," he said sullenly.

She lifted an eyebrow. "Later, my life, later." She pulled back. "You know, it's not such a bad look for you. Although I'm not so sure how comfortable I am with you exposing so much chest hair. The women of Stars Hollow just better be able to control themselves. People are going to be shocked by the stunning hotness you hide under all that flannel."

Luke rolled his eyes and slapped her rear end lightly. "I appreciate you sucking up, but no amount of flattery is going to make me comfortable wearing this."

She was about to respond when she heard Rory’s step in the hall. She turned her head to see her daughter with the digital camera poised. "Rory, no," she said, and the flash popped.


"Staying alive?" Lorelai echoed.

"Woo, woo, woo, staying alive," they chanted together.

"I'm never, ever going to live this down," Luke said. "Can we just go and get this over with?"

Neither Luke nor Rory would tell her where they were going even as they began the trek into town. She pointed out that most of the houses were dark and the streets were deserted. "We going to a party?"

"Patience is a virtue," Rory told her.

She heard the music when the reached Main Street. The lights spilled past the square and lit the entire roadway. Lorelai stopped on the corner, craning to see. Rory tugged on her arm to pull her forward, and she followed reluctantly. They were at the diner before she figured out exactly what was going; she clapped her hands and jumped with excitement, hollered.

"Roller-disco! Roller-disco!"


A dance floor had been constructed in the middle of the square, smooth planks fitted together a few inches above the grass. Chinese lanterns hung throughout the square, and above the dance floor, a disco-ball was suspended from a pole. Lane had set up a DJ station in the gazebo. Tables of food lined the outside rim of the square, and the entire center of town was a throng of people eating, laughing, and nodding their heads to the music.

"How?" Lorelai asked.

"Oh, it was easy," Rory said. "Got some guys in town to build the platform—"

"—and we rented the skates from a roller-rink in Hartford. The disco-ball is Kirk's—"

"Why am I not surprised?"

"—and Sookie did the food. The clothes are from Miss Patty's costume closet," Rory finished. "Voila! Birthday roller-disco party!"

Lorelai hugged Rory tightly. "You are my favorite daughter."

"Lucky me," she replied.

Someone had equipped Kirk with a microphone. He wore a pinstriped leisure suit and seemed inordinately pleased with himself as he walked onto the empty dance floor. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, only to be answered by screeching feedback. "Someone check those amps!"

He cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said again. "Our guest of honor has arrived. The dance floor is now open."

Lorelai submitted to a disorienting half-hour of hugs and good-wishes from the townspeople as she wandered the square, taking it all in. It was the biggest party she'd seen in the center of town, not counting the annual Firelight Festival and, she had to admit, her first engagement party. Luke trailed behind her as she walked, attempting to hide as much as possible by keeping close to her. She squeezed the hand she held and turned to him.

"This is torture for you, isn't it?" she asked.

"You have no idea," he said. "But it's your birthday. This is for you, so I'm doing it."

She kissed him. "Too much to ask you to roller skate with me?"

The music changed as they stepped awkwardly onto the dance floor, a ballad Lorelai didn't recognize. Luke's hand tightened over hers as they made tentative strides along the floor, following the circle of the other skaters as they went. He was concentrating determinedly on his feet.

"Luke?"

"Hm?"

"Thanks for my presents. And the party. Everything."

He shrugged. "No big deal."

"Big deal," she said.

"Did you get everything you wanted?"

She forgot for a moment that they were skating and turned to answer. Her right foot caught an uneven spot on the platform and sent her wheels flight out from under her. She hung on Luke's hand, grabbed at his arm to steady herself too late—for what seemed a moment she had the sensation of weightlessness before she hit the ground with the full force of her fall. She felt Luke's hand still in hers, and she looked over to see him rolling onto his side. They'd somehow managed to fall off the edge of the platform and onto the grass, and they lay in the shadow of the other dancers.

"That's gonna hurt tomorrow," she said.
"Lorelai! Sugar! You all right?"

"We're okay," she bellowed. "You're okay, right?"


They lay silent a moment, trying to catch their breath. At length, Lorelai began to laugh. Luke turned his head to look at her, puzzled. She gestured with one hand, silently indicating the ludicrousness of the entire situation. Luke pulled himself across the grass and hovered over her, taking a surreptitious look around to see that no one was watching. He slid one fingertip down the side of her face.

"I forgot to tell you how good you look," he said.

"I look like Tammy Faye Baker."

He kissed her forehead. "You do not look like Tammy Faye Baker. Everyone else here looks like Tammy Faye Baker, even some of the men. You are beautiful."

"Keep talking, Luke Danes, keep talking," she said. She smiled when he kissed her instead. "This is a good birthday," she told him.

"So, did you get everything you wanted?"

She looked up at him a long time. There were reasons, she thought, he kept things locked up the way he did—too many people had fallen away, walked away, hurt him, and he'd remained to deal with what was left. She ran her thumb along his lower lip, her fingertips along the line of his jaw. Finding the right key to fit the locks after all the time that passed between then and now was hard and painful and she understood that he'd rather not do it; and when he had to, he needed to do it in his own way and on his own terms. He looked at her expectantly, puzzled by her silence. She drew him down, guided his mouth to hers, and as she kissed him, she decided that whatever she'd walked in on in the garage was really no different. When she broke from him, she smiled.

"I really did," she said.
May

The last week of classes loomed, outlined in red on Rory's desk calendar. She knew she should be reading or studying or preparing herself for the reading and studying she'd have to do when classes ended and exams began. The Friday before, she went as usual to dinner in Hartford, stayed late to look over Emily's writing with her, and headed back to Yale with the intention of locking herself in her room for the next three days. It had been difficult concentrating, the last week or so, and she needed the extra time. Things had come up, clamoring for her attention—opportunities and thoughts she wasn't sure she was ready for that kept her awake nights thinking. She had resolved to lay them aside for the weekend and be diligent, get caught up, get ahead. When she got to her room, however, Paris was waiting for her with *The West Wing* on DVD.

"I've had an exceptionally bad day and I wallowed with you before so you owe me a wallow now," she said.

"What happened? Are you okay?" Rory asked. She shrugged out of her coat and kicked off her shoes, shook her hair from the claw that held it back. She raked her hands through her curls with a sigh.

Paris looked at her with a baleful expression. "Are you trying to flirt with me? Because your boyfriend lives upstairs." She gestured. "And you're not really my type."

"Paris, what happened?"

She sighed. After a moment of uncharacteristic silence, she shook her head. "Nothing. Just a general bad day, one that I don't want to talk about, which is why I have fictional politics and sex scandals and I ordered pizza. I know you probably ate a cow at your grandparents', but—"

"There's always room for pizza," Rory said. "It's like Jell-O. You sure you're okay?"

Paris rolled her eyes and threw herself on the bed. "Yes. Fine. You in?"

"I also never turn down fictional politics and sex scandals," she said. "You mind if I just…"

Her friend waved a hand. "Go."

Rory hurried down the hall and up the stairs in her bare feet, working the inside of her lower lip between her teeth. She knocked softly on Marty's door before she opened it slightly and poked her head around the doorframe. He sat on the bed, his legs straight out in front of him, in loud red pajama pants with flying pies on them and a hooded sweatshirt. He wore the hood up and, as Rory looked in, pulled hard on the strings and closed it over his mouth. She let herself in. Marty turned his head in her direction at the click of the door closing but kept the hood closed.

"This is a very weird new look," Rory said. She stood in front of him, between his ankles. The bed was high, and his feet hung at her waist. "It's a little Grim Reaper for my taste."

"I'm having no thoughts," he answered. He tapped his feet gently against her rear end. "Thoughts are gone. Thoughts have left the premises. No thoughts."

She leaned forward, rested her hands on his knees. "Is this supposed to help?" she asked. She scratched lightly at his pajama pants. "Marty?"

Marty tugged harder on the strings for his hood. "Opening night is in exactly a week."
Rory clambered up on the bed and into his lap. She pushed the hood back. He didn't protest, but
didn't raise his eyes to hers. He was red-faced, his brow knit in worry. Rory waited for him to look
up.

"I'm going to suck," he said sullenly. "I don't know why—"

"We've been through this," she said patiently. "You are not going to suck. You know that play
backwards and forwards, and the director wouldn't have cast you if she thought you were going to
freeze up at performance time."

He put his arms loosely around her waist, leaned forward, and buried his face in her shoulder. She
cradled his head, worked her fingers through his hair. He heaved a sigh. "I am not going to make
it another week," he groaned.

"You are, too," she said. She tugged him back to look him in the eye. "I would love to sit and
commiserate with you some more, but I have to go commiserate with Paris for a while first—she
has dibs. You want me to come up later?"

He nodded. "I promise not to be all, you know… this."

Rory pressed a kiss to his forehead. "Be however you want," she said.

"Thanks." He held her tightly a moment. "I'll see you later."

"Yes, you will," she murmured, just before she leaned down and kissed him.

Marty broke from her after a moment. "You sure Paris has dibs?" he asked, rubbing her back
lightly, feathering kisses along the line of her jaw to her ear.

"Bad day," she said. "Girl time." She pushed herself off his lap, kissed his cheek. "I'll be up."

As the door shut behind her, she heard Marty sigh, muttering, "Yeah, so will I."

She found Paris camped out on the floor of her room with two open boxes of pizza in front of her
and the TV already on. Rory changed into her pajamas without speaking before she sat and
helped herself to a slice.

"Tell your friend POTUS he's got a funny name… He's not my friend, he's my boss. And it's not
his name, it's his title."

Rory glanced up at the TV. "What'd I miss?"

"Rob Lowe accidentally sleeping with a prostitute."

"Did he trip over something?" Rory asked.

Paris looked at her. "You just stole their joke."

"Good for me," Rory said. "So, you want to talk about it?"

"What?"

"Whatever it is that has you in this fabulous mood." She glanced at her friend sidelong. "You have
a run-in with Asher, or something?"

Paris gave her a death glare and broke a piece of crust in half with a vicious twist. "No," she said
forcefully. "It's nothing. Bad day. Every person I talked to today was stupider than usual, I got a paper back with a grade I didn't deserve and couldn't talk the professor out of, I accidentally dyed all my underwear purple by washing it with a brand new bra, and my parents are yet again in the throes of a will-they-or-won't-they separation cycle. Thank you for mentioning Asher, too, that's just the cherry on the top of my day."

She apologized softly. "No talking, then."

"You don't have to baby-sit me, you know," Paris said. "If you want to go…"

"Why would I want to go?"

"Muppet-head's probably—"

"Could you please not call him that?"

Paris snorted. "I can't believe you can't see the resemblance. With the hair?" she said. "Still, if you'd rather—"

Rory rolled her eyes. "Paris, please. I can spend a night away from my boyfriend, you know."

They were silent several moments as they watched TV and picked at the pizza. Paris cleared her throat.

"So," she said, "have you guys done it yet?"

Rory nearly choked on a sip of soda. "Excuse me?"

"It's a totally natural question, Mary. You've been together a few months now, and it's not as though you're an iron Madonna anymore, so—"

"Paris! I am not discussing this with you!"

She wiped her hands together. "Right. You haven't."

"Would you just watch the show?"

"So now you don't want to talk," Paris said.

"Not about that, no," Rory replied.

"Well, why haven't you done it?"

Rory stared at her. "Paris!"

"Unnatural, if you ask me," she muttered.

"No one's asking you!" Rory cried. "For crap's sake, Paris."

Paris smiled as she took another bite of pizza. "You know, there might be something to this whole wallowing thing."

When they'd polished off the pizza and Paris had retreated to her own room with the DVDs, Rory lay on her bed, her hands folded over her stomach, and sighed. She contemplated calling her mother for a moment before she rolled off the mattress to get to her feet. The thoughts rolling in her head were just short of articulation, and there was no point in calling just to pout. She tucked a pillow under her arm, grabbed her room key, and turned off the lights as she left. It was a routine,
now; it wasn't every night, wasn't always his room, but more often than not, the hours after midnight she spent sleeping to the rhythmic sounds of Marty's breathing. It had prompted Lorelai to comment, more than once, that as a couple Marty and Rory were so cute it was nauseating.

Her knock was tentative, and she waited for Marty to come and open the door for her this time. He smiled down at her as he stepped aside to let her in. He had traded the bulky sweatshirt for a lightweight thermal tee that was one washing away from being too tight. Rory perched at the end of the bed, her pillow hugged to her chest.

"How's the thinking coming?" she asked.

Marty grinned and leaned against the doorframe. "Slowly improving, I think. How's Paris?"

"Better for having abused me awhile," she replied. "She's ruined any possibility that I could study tonight, though. She's got my brain all haywire."

"How do you mean?"

She waved a hand. "Normal Paris stuff," she said.

"Irritating and bossy," Marty supplied. "You should have just stayed here."

"It's fine," she said, sighing, and she fell back on the bed. "I owed her a good mope." She curled up around her pillow, and, when Marty sat beside her, rested her head on his thigh. "Semester's almost over," she said softly. "It's so weird."

Marty brushed her hair from her face with a light sweep of his fingertips. "You realize that when this semester's over, we'll be half done here?"

"God, don't say that," she moaned, pushing her cheek against him. "It's too depressing." She put out her hand and traced the outline of a pie just above his knee. She felt him tense for a fraction of a second, so slightly she wasn't sure he'd tensed at all—it could have been a twitch, a muscle spasm, she told herself. But she heard him sigh and knew. She pushed herself to sit up. He looked at her expectantly, silent. "I think I'm going to sleep in my room tonight."

"Okay."

"It's just—I'm not really sleepy, and I'll probably keep you up, and I think I'm going to go home anyway, so I'd have to get up a little early and we always, you know, lie around on Saturdays, so—"

Marty gently covered her mouth with his hand. She blinked in surprise but felt a surge of gratitude that he'd stopped her from going on until she'd run out of breath. Her voice sounded high and unnatural and her words were falling too quickly for comfort.

"Rory, you don't have to explain. It's fine. Not fine-fine," he conceded, "because I like it when you're here, but if you want to be by yourself—that's, you know, whatever."

She gave him a watery smile before she threw her arms around him and hugged him fiercely. He laughed as she tightened her arms around him further, gripping his tee shirt in both hands. He rocked her in his arms, and Rory rested her cheek on his shoulder. She closed her eyes and gave herself a moment; it was an awkward, uncomfortable position to be in, sitting on her knees with one arm snaked around his back, the other over his shoulder and her head tilted at an angle.

"Everything okay?" he asked, at length.
Rory pulled back and nodded silently. Marty kept his hands at her waist, pinched the waistband of her pajama pants between his fingers. His face was set in a look of utter bewilderment, and she brushed a palm across his forehead as though she could wipe away the confusion. She let her hand come to rest on his cheek. "I'll come up before I leave tomorrow," she said.

"Please do."

She leaned down and just touched her lips to his. "Night," she said, speaking against him.

His response was to catch her in a soft, teasing kiss. The heat began in her fingertips, as it always did; when she finally broke from him, Rory felt feverish. She wet her lower lip with the tip of her tongue and took a breath.

"I should go," she said. She pulled away and slid off the bed before he could draw her in again. "Tomorrow—I'll see you tomorrow."

He was grinning again as the door swung shut behind her.

Rory lay in the dark of her room, listening. The campus was still awake and she could hear its movement outside her window. Still, the noise in her head was louder than the white noise of a college Friday night. Nineteen days—nineteen days was all she had left in the semester, in this school year. Two days of April, she thought, seventeen of May. It was the last weekend of April; she shook her head as though trying to rattle the numbers loose. She had a handful of classes left as a sophomore, a short, densely-packed exam period, and a due date for her writing portfolio. And that would be the end of it, the end of this year. She'd pack her things, load up the Toyota, and head for home, at least for a while. The thought sent nervous tremors through her, made her heart beat in a strange, strangling way.

She rolled onto her side and bunched her pillow beneath her head. This was a time of year she'd always enjoyed, with its cool mornings and warm afternoons, the approach of summer just noticeable in the yellow light of dusk. When she was small, Rory had always thought May sounded like a happy month; something in the name was brisk and sweet. As she curled into herself now and tried to shut her eyes against the flicker of the streetlamp beneath her window shade, she couldn't dredge up any semblance of delighted anticipation. Her stomach clenched. Her skin felt too tight. Her eyes burned. With a sigh, she turned on the lamp beside her bed and reached for a beaten and abused copy of *Emma*. Though she'd read it before and always enjoyed it, lately the heroine had done nothing but irritate her. Emma was bossy, Rory thought, and condescending, thought she knew what was best for everyone around her and didn't have a clue what was going on in her own head. She ran her fingers over the text without seeing the words. After an hour of flipping through pages and reading (but not reading) only her favorite parts, she put the book aside, turned off her light, and arranged herself carefully on her pillow. She waited to fall asleep.

Sleep, she discovered, would not be forthcoming.

Had her bed always been this uncomfortable? she wondered. That lump just under her right hip, had that really been there all year? And the light outside—had it always cast that strange shadow that looked exactly like the profile of Alfred Hitchcock? Rory screwed her face up as she closed her eyes, held her breath like a four year old preparing to throw a nutty in the middle of the supermarket. She exhaled in a short burst and told herself that it was a matter of mind over body. She could fall asleep if she really wanted to, no matter that she still felt flushed and tingling from Marty's kiss (she checked the clock—*hours* ago), that her heartbeat seemed so abnormally fast that she could hear the blood pounding in her ears. She didn't really have "I Think I Love You" stuck in her head.
Oh, God, she really did. "I was sleeping and right in the middle of a good dream, like all at once I wake up from something that keeps knocking at my brain."

She whimpered as she flopped onto her stomach and pulled her pillow over her head. It didn't drown out the noise inside. It rather seemed to increase the percussive beat of the Partridge Family and the strange roaring sound of her blood as it pumped through her veins. Her chest felt tight, and though she was desperate, she didn't think auto-asphyxiation was the answer. She released the pillow and rested her cheek against the mattress, taking a long, cool breath.

The wakefulness was almost painful. The tick of the clock on her desk seemed to echo, and the noise only grew louder as the sounds of partying on campus dwindled into silence. Rory sat up in bed and growled as she looked around the room, lit hollowly by the streetlamp outside. She squinted. Four AM. "I think I love you, so what am I so afraid of? I'm afraid that I'm not sure of a love there is no cure for."

"Okay, seriously?" Rory said aloud. "That's enough of that."

With that, she vaulted out of bed and made for her small DVD collection. She paused a moment, her hand hovering over When Harry Met Sally before she grabbed Heathers. She felt too much like Harry, moaning alone in the dark. Black comedy better suited her mood.

She managed to fall into an uneasy sleep just before "I love my dead gay son!"

When Rory woke, the sunlight filtering in under the half-closed blind was weak and thin. She propped herself up on her elbows and blinked. "I think I love you, so what am I so afraid of? I'm afraid that I'm not sure of a love there is no cure for..." She rolled off the bed, groaning, and struggled her way to the shower. She found herself bopping slightly to the beat in her head as she stood under the hot water. "Believe me, you really don't have to worry..."

An hour and a half later, she knocked on Marty's door. She had her book bag slung over her shoulder, causing her to slouch down on one side under the weight. She wore an old cardigan over a tank top and a pair of old, worn jeans, her damp hair tied up in a loose knot—her study outfit. She paused a moment before knocking again, more forcefully this time.

"It's open!"

She was talking before she even stepped in the room. "Hey, sorry, I know it's early, but I got absolutely no sleep last night and I thought maybe if you were up we could grab some coffee before I left for Stars Hollow—" As she spoke, she dropped her book bag and shut the door, glanced at the bed. She stopped abruptly when she saw Marty seated at his desk clad only in a pair of jeans. She stared, her mouth slightly open. "Hi," she said at length, remembering herself.

Marty looked up from his computer. "Hey," he said, rising. "I got a surge of early morning creativity and I wanted to strike while the striking was good." He crossed the room in two steps and kissed her good morning. "You say something about coffee?"

Rory rubbed her eyes. "I thought we could go get some," she said. "But first—Marty, why is it that whenever I walk into your room lately you're in various states of undress?"

He looked down at himself as though surprised he wasn't wearing a shirt. "Oh. Well, it's a—it's a study thing?" he said, his expression sheepish. "It's just something I do when I'm working on my writing or, you know, math or something that's giving me a hard time."

"What is?"

Marty pursed his lips. Rory could see him weighing the words, trying to figure out the least
embarrassing way to phrase it. "I think better the fewer clothes I'm wearing," he finally said. "I
can't explain it. The words just come easier when I'm not wearing a shirt."

"So last night's whole sweatshirt thing—" Rory began.

"—was my way of dealing with an academic roadblock, yes," he said. "When I can't think, I add
layers. When I can, I take 'em off."

She smiled. "Well, lucky me," she replied.

"But I can get dressed," Marty said, "if you want to get coffee or breakfast before you go."

"No, I don't want to interrupt you if you're in the middle of a… creative surge," she said slowly. "I
should get going, anyway. I have so much to do." She put her fingertips to her temples. "And I
got no sleep last night. Thank you very much, David Cassidy."

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh, nothing." She shook her head. "I'm just going to go." She leaned up on her tiptoes and
kissed him squarely on the mouth. "I'll call you," she said, pulling back.

She stumbled as she tried to move away, tipped forward. Marty caught her easily, his arm around
her waist, and Rory let herself fall against his chest. She snorted noisily, blowing an
exasperated puff of air through her nose, and began to laugh. Marty looked down at her and said
nothing, though his expression clearly telegraphed "my girlfriend is a crazy person." She shook
her head again and took a deep breath.

"I'm fine," she said. "Just wonky without sleep."

He grinned at her. "Okay, then."

With that, Marty lifted his free hand and pushed a lock of hair from Rory's forehead, leaned in,
and kissed her again. She relaxed, slipping one arm about him as she snaked the other over his
shoulder to draw him closer. Her chest was tight and tingling, her legs wobbly beneath her. She
was miles from coherent thought, but her awareness of the feel of his skin beneath her palms was
overwhelming. He was cool and taut and smooth and when he moved she could feel things
shifting beneath the surface, muscles and tendons and bone. His hand found the base of her neck,
tightened there briefly as he pressed her closer. Rory arched her back, pulling Marty into her as
she fisted a hand in his hair and dug her nails into his back. She broke from him, breathless, and
made to step away.

"I have to go," she said softly.

"Mmhmm," he murmured, walking her to the door, still holding her. He kissed her as they took
slow, short steps together. When he had her backed up against the door, he pulled away and
looked at her, his eyes cloudy. "You sure you have to go?"

Rory ran her fingertips along the line of his jaw, her gaze still fixed on his mouth. "I have to go," she said. "I have to go where there are very few distractions and none of this sort or I'm never
going to get anything done and I'll fail out and then go bald and possibly die."

"Can't have that," he said. He pulled her to him again.

"No," she said, tilting her head to one side as Marty kissed the soft spot behind her ear, as he
worked his way down to her shoulder and his hands slipped beneath the hem of her tank top.
"That would be bad." She bit her lip and wound her arms around his neck. The tips of his fingers
inched up her sides, leaving heated skin in their wake. "God," she sighed. Again, she shook her head. "Marty, we have to stop," she said gently.

His forehead fell to the crook of her neck. "Because you have to go."

"I can't go see my mom with a fresh hickey," she told him. She placed her palms flat on his chest and pushed him back to look him in the eye. The heat of his nearness dissipated slightly, and she struggled to keep her features from betraying her disappointment. "If I stay, neither one of us is going to get anything done. Even if I'm in my room and you're up here, I'm just going to be thinking about when I can take a break so I can—"

"Come up here and ravish me?" he supplied. His expression darkened. "You sure that's why you're leaving?"

She pressed her lips quickly to his. "I'm leaving because I find your studliness so totally irresistible, yes."

"Now she sweet talks me," he said, rolling his eyes. "Get lost, Gilmore, before I give into the urge to chain you to the bed." He stepped away and passed a hand over his mouth. "Do me a favor and pretend I didn't just say that."

Rory grinned at him and reached down for her bag. "I'll call you." She opened the door and paused on the threshold. She turned to see Marty watching her expectantly, waiting for her to say whatever she'd paused to say. "Marty?"

"Rory?"

She took a breath, but she already knew the words would stick at the back of her throat by the way her stomach had dropped. "Nothing. I just missed you last night."

His smile only heightened the heat already skimming beneath her skin. "Good," he said.

Rory tried to clear her head as she walked to the car, hitching her book bag higher on her shoulder, taking deep breaths, shaking her hair from the band that held it back and smoothing it back into a ponytail anew. She paused at a coffee kiosk and got the largest cup of black coffee available, dumped in several packets of sugar. She could still see Marty's expression as she wandered the walkways of campus; his eyes, so wide and dark and searching, saw everything going on behind her own. It made her feel naked, exposed. She sipped her coffee in the hopes that the bitterness would burn away the lump in her throat and remove the taste of Marty's mouth and his kisses. She stumbled over the curb when she reached the parking lot, thinking of both. She felt his hands again beneath her shirt, his fingertips just skimming—she shook her head, sipped her coffee again, willing herself to focus on something else, anything else. It had been a mistake to go up and see him. It was too early for Marty's hands to have been anywhere close to where they'd been: she had studying to do and essays to revise and a hundred other things demanding her attention.

"I think I love you, so what am I so afraid of?"

She threw her book bag into the backseat of the Prius and settled behind the steering wheel. The moment she turned the keys in the ignition and the car rumbled to life, Rory hit the power button on her radio. The CD player buzzed, and as Rory put the car in drive, she felt a faint sense of relief at hearing the opening strains of "Running to Stand Still." She muttered thanks to her mother for the copy of *Joshua Tree* and pulled out of her space.

It was still early when she pulled up by the mailbox at home, but she was unsurprised to see
Luke's truck parked beside her mother's Jeep. Rory gripped the strap of her book bag tightly in both hands as she trudged across the lawn. She fervently hoped that it wasn't so early that she'd surprise Luke half-naked in the kitchen as she'd done once before—she'd had enough of half-naked men for the time being. She stopped on the porch, her key hovering outside the lock, when she heard sounds of a scuffle. She tested the door, found it unlocked, and stepped inside.

The living room was empty, but Rory could hear thuds and bumps coming from the direction of the bedroom upstairs. She went to drop her bag on the couch and stood in bewildered silence—none of the furniture was in the right place, the couch pushed back and the coffee table shoved to one side, the armchair askew in its regular corner. She was about to call her mother when she saw movement from the corner of her eye. She turned to see a vaguely familiar-looking girl coming down the hall from the kitchen with a coffee cup in hand.

The stranger smiled. "Hi. Rory, right? I'm Ashley. We met at the—"


"For me, too," Ashley snorted. "But Jess and I both had the day off, which happens so rarely that I decided to come down with him and help out today."

Rory furrowed her brow. "Help out with what?"

Ashley opened her mouth to speak just as Lorelai came barreling down the stairs. She stopped on the landing, still turned towards the bedroom, and began to wave her arms as though she were a runway traffic controller directing a plane to land. Rory bit her lips together as she watched, shaking her head in disbelief. Luke descended the stairs, stepping backwards, carrying one end of a mattress. As he came closer to the landing, Rory could see Jess at the other end. He looked pissed, she thought.


She skipped down the remaining stairs and seemed to notice Rory and Ashley for the first time. "Hi, hon. Did I know you were coming?"

"Nope," Rory said. "What's going on?"

"Hang on," Lorelai replied. "Luke, you have to lift it to get around the corner." She paused. "You have to pivot." She began to giggle. "PI-VAT. PI-VAT. PI-VAT."

Rory dissolved into giggles as well as Luke stopped dead in his tracks and looked at Lorelai with an expression somewhere between annoyed and astonished.

"Woman, what the fucking hell are you talking about?"

Lorelai only laughed harder and waved to Rory, gesturing that she should explain. "It's from an episode of Friends, Luke."

Luke sighed, shifting the mattress slightly as he began to negotiate his way down the stairs again. "So not only is it something I wouldn't have known on my own anyway, it's also probably not that funny to begin with?"

"Yup," Rory said. She gave her mother a withering look as Lorelai crossed the room and put an arm around her. "Hi," she said.

"Hey, babe. My fiancé just swore at me."
"I heard him."

"I'm wounded," she said. "Hurt. Deeply and profoundly hurt." She was shorting again. "Scarred to the very depths of my being—"

"Mom, how much coffee have you had today?"

Lorelai pretended to count on her fingers and then shrugged. "I have no idea. I've been up since two AM."

"What for?" Rory asked.

"Couldn't sleep," Lorelai replied.

"You and me both," Rory said. "So you're hyper-caffeinated and sleep-deprived all at the same time?"

"I am a vision to behold," she said. She looked over at Luke as he and Jess dropped the mattress in the center of the living room. "What's next?"

"The box spring," he replied. "And then the frame. I told you that before."

Lorelai leaned down. "He's cranky."

Luke said nothing to this but threw Lorelai an exasperated glance before he jogged back up the stairs. Jess remained in the living room, his hands on his hips, and stared at the floor. Ashley rolled her eyes. "And apparently he's spreading the joy," she said in a stage-whisper, tipping her head in his direction.

"I heard that," Jess said shortly.

"JESS!"

He looked heavenward a second before he turned on his heel. He stopped on the landing. "Hey, Rory."

"Hey," she said, offered him a tentative smile. "So, what's going on here?"

"Oh," Lorelai said, "turns out that the job Tom was going to do between Winky's house and our addition fell through, so he can start a month sooner here. We're moving everything out in preparation for the demolition of my bedroom wall." She paused. "I love saying that, for some reason."

Ashley took a sip from her mug. "Luke asked Jess to help out, moving the furniture, so here we are."

"What about you, babe?" Lorelai asked, rubbing her shoulder. "What brings you to the Hollow?"

"Finals," she sighed. "I needed to go someplace where I could concentrate, no distractions." She looked around balefully. "I couldn't focus at school."

Lorelai clucked her tongue. "And you come home to this. I'm sorry, Rory. I'd suggest you use the office at the inn, but Michel is hosting a convention for chow owners today and the place is just yip central." She looked towards the stairs to Luke and Jess emerge from the hall with the box spring. "You could go to Luke's," she said.

"The diner isn't really—"
"No, I meant the apartment," Lorelai said. "You'd have the whole place to yourself, at least until the afternoon. And it's always quiet up there. You'll be the writer in the apartment over the shop, it's very bohemian or Victorian or some sort of –ian thing. What do you say? And when you're done for the day, you can come over for dinner and you and I can do a fitting for your dress."


Lorelai made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "It's fine, babe. Go on, I'll probably swing by later."

An hour later found Rory cross-legged in the middle of Luke's bed—the only space big enough for her to really spread out on, no matter how slightly bizarre it felt—surrounded by piles of paper. She had shrugged out of her cardigan, thinking the apartment over-warm, and she sat with her bare feet tucked up under her. Luke's apartment was startlingly quiet—she hadn't really believed her mother when Lorelai told her it would be, but the general hum of the diner below became the occasional ping or faint crash upstairs. Rory spent a few moments on her arrival arranging her papers, putting pens through her ponytail so she'd have them at the ready, finding a place for her coffee cup, and trying to forget that the only significant amount of time she'd spent in this apartment in the past was with someone who was no longer her boyfriend and very much someone else's. She'd turned off her cell and arranged herself in the center of the bed with a sigh, determined to focus on her writing and forget all boyfriends, past and present, for as long as she could.

She was in the process of untangling an ugly sentence in the essay that comprised forty per cent of her portfolio grade when she ran out of coffee. She whined to herself, glanced at her papers, and crawled off the bed. She walked towards the kitchen, looking for her shoes. The sound of the apartment door swinging open startled her so much that she nearly dropped her coffee cup. She caught her breath, put a hand to her chest as she got her bearings and turned towards the door.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to… scare you," Jess said. He stood in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, and rocked back on his heels.

"You didn't," Rory said. "Well, you did, but that's just because I'm sort of in an intense writing mode which means that I'm not really here-here, I'm all spaced out and out of coffee, so—" She stopped. "You didn't." They regarded each other a beat. "You going to come in?"

She saw the whisper of a smile—the sardonic, Jess smile that she knew by heart—on his face as he stepped inside. "Luke sent me over for a tool that he's missing. I'll just be a sec."

"Don't hurry on my account," she said. "I'm just—well, I'm just here. And, hey, if you see a pair of shoes…?"

"I'll let you know," he said. He went immediately to Luke's closet, pausing at the foot of the bed for a fraction of a second. He kept his back to her as he spoke, searching through the junk at the bottom of the closet. "What're you working on?"

Rory pulled at the end of her ponytail. "It's a portfolio for a writing class at school. It's—the point of the class is telling stories through location. Actually, it's sort of perfect that I'm here right now because the major essay is about the diner."

Jess stood and looked at her over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. A sort of snapshot history of me and my mom through Luke's. She hugged herself. "It sounds lame, I know."
He cleared his throat. "Is it any good?"

She couldn't help but laugh. "It might be, when I'm done with it."

"Then it might not be lame." He waved a large screwdriver. "Found it." After a beat, he crossed the apartment again. He stopped by the door. Rory watched him as he raised a hand to the back of his neck, held it there a moment, and drew himself up straighter. "You doing okay?" he asked.

Rory studied him a long moment, her head inclined to one side. She smiled softly. "I really am. You?"

"Getting by," he said. "Your shoes are under the bed."

She smiled in thanks, and when she turned towards the bedroom, she heard the door shut behind him. She sat on the edge of the bed a moment, her shoes in her hands, trying to reign herself in. It was ridiculous, this shaky feeling. But it had been the most words they'd exchanged since the night she'd shouted in his face like an angry three year old and he'd taken off into the night and her life had spun horribly out of control. She took a deep breath. He had asked if she was okay; the only reasons she could think he'd do so would be because someone had told him she wasn't or because he needed or wanted to prove that he could—who suggested otherwise was something she couldn't resolve.

The apartment buzzed with cast a look over her shoulder at the scattered contents of her portfolio, put her shoes on, and grabbed her coffee cup to go downstairs. She answered Lane's wide-eyed, questioning stare with a shrug and a hurried "I'll call you later." Back in the apartment, she sipped her coffee and resumed her work. She decided, as she pulled a fresh pen out of her hair, that something about Luke's apartment cleansed her mental palate and made her able to focus. She couldn't be sure how much time had passed when she heard the door open again—she figured it had been roughly four hundred revolutions of "I Think I Love You" on her mental jukebox, however long that was. And, if she thought to notice, she was so tired, her bones ached.

"Rory? Sweets?"

Rory lifted her head. "Mom?"

Lorelai stepped into the apartment, smiling wearily. "Hey there, writer lady. How's the portfolio coming?"

"Oh, it's okay," she said. "How's the furniture moving going?"

Her mother made a face. "As well as can be expected, I guess. Luke made me clean my closet."

"I did," Lorelai said, offended. "But I threatened not to more than a few times." She looked around the apartment. "Holy crap, this place is a mess."

"I know," Rory sighed. She scratched the crown of her head with the end of her pen. "I'll get everything before I go, though."

Lorelai shook her head and crossed toward the window. "I meant the boxes. Did you not notice the multitude of boxes in here?" She leaned over and peered into a half-filled cardboard carton. Rory watched her mother from the center of the bed. She glanced at Rory, one eyebrow cocked; Rory waited, knowing a comment was forthcoming.

"Luke has more fishing books than any sane person should ever have. Didn't Erma Bombeck say
that anyone who watches more than three football games in a row should be declared legally brain-dead?” she asked.

"Something like that," Rory replied cautiously.

"I think probably the same theory applies to actually reading more than one fishing book in your lifetime." She paused in mock-contemplation. "Should I worry that I might potentially be marrying someone without any discernable brain function?"

Rory tipped her head to the side and pretended to consider it. "As long as it doesn't hinder or impede your relationship in a general way, I think you can probably work around it."

"How do the purple silk boxer shorts I found factor into that?” Lorelai asked, holding the offending item up with her index finger for Rory's inspection.

"Well, then you have to call the whole thing off," Rory said.

Lorelai stared at the boxers hanging from the tip of her finger. "I was afraid of that." She let them drop with a sigh. "What if we burn them?"

"As long as there's no evidence, I think you're good to go," Rory said.

"Cool. We can add them to our bachelorette party bonfire," Lorelai said, stepping around several boxes on the floor before joining her daughter on the bed. "I don't know where they came from, and I don't want to know."

"I really don't need that information at my disposal either," Rory said. "Because—"

"Ew?" Lorelai supplied.

"Yeah."

"So," she said, "daughter of mine. You want to head back to the house with me? Pack it in for the day?"

Rory started to remove the pens from her ponytail. "Oh, do I," she said. "What time is it?"

"Close to five. I've been sent for cake and pie," Lorelai told her.

She looked up from the pile of papers she was making. "Not punch and pie?"

"I figured the pitcher of margaritas I'm going to make will be a fairly good substitute for the punch."

"I can't believe it's almost five already," Rory sighed, stuffing her folders into her book bag. "I feel like I just got here." She stood and swayed slightly on her feet. "Oh, dizzy."

Lorelai was at her side in the next instant. "You okay?"

"I'm okay—just haven't eaten anything today," she said. "I might need a bit of sustenance before we start hitting the sauce."

Lorelai put her arm around Rory's shoulders and walked her to the door. "And sustenance you shall get. Luke was starting the snacky appetizers when I left. Some sort of spicy spinach and artichoke dip. It smelled incredible."

They stopped in the diner for the desserts that had been set aside for them. Rory grabbed a donut
from one of the display dishes as well. Lorelai clucked her tongue and shook her head. "Luke is gonna be so mad at you," she intoned. "But don't worry, I won't tell."

They walked in silence a few moments. Rory could see Lorelai watching her from the corner of her eye. She finished her donut, wiped her hands on the seat of her pants, and cleared her throat. "What, Mom?"

"Nothing," she said lightly.

"What? You're giving me the I'm-totally-working-on-something-in-my-maniacal-brain-look."

Lorelai smirked. "Can I put that on my resume?"

"Mom."

"I'm just wondering how everything is with you," she said. "What with Luke and I being all Cory and Paul, Barefoot in the Park, drama, drama, drama, and you doing your study 'till the sun don't shine thing, it occurs to me that you and I have not had a good jaw session in a while, and I just want to check in, see what's brewing in that big ol' brain of yours." She paused. "Your non-maniacal brain."

Rory rubbed her temples with the tips of her fingers. "I've just been working really hard on my portfolio. I'm stressing, so I'm not always sleeping that great," she added. "I've had some things on my mind."

Lorelai lifted a lock of hair from her daughter's forehead. "You want to talk about anything?"

"I'm okay," she replied. "I'm good, you know. I'm fine. It's not capital P problems, or anything. Just some things I've been thinking about."

"Well, good thing you don't do a whole lot of that," Lorelai teased. "I'm always here, babe."

"I know." They fell silent again until something occurred to Rory. "Hey, so, if there's a hole in your bedroom wall, where're you going to sleep?"

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "That is the sixty-five thousand dollar question. We've done everything out of order: Luke started packing before we were even sure that Tom could do the job for us, and we assumed it wouldn't start until after the wedding anyway, but—"

"But because it's you and Luke, nothing's going according to plan?"

"Exactly," Lorelai said. "So now it's either Luke keeps packing and he lives out of boxes at the house and we sleep on the floor, or I bring all of my shit to his place and I'm the one living out of boxes. Either way, it's a pain in the ass and I'm starting to think this whole thing was a little ill-advised. It was Luke's idea, though, so when we're both bitching about close quarters and what-all, at least I can blame him."

"Yes, at least that," Rory chortled. "It's important to have someone to blame."

"If I've taught you nothing else in this life, Rory, at least remember that."

Rory fell silent as she attempted to decide how to best bring up one of the many things that had been eating at her the past few weeks. She studied Lorelai, decided that straightforward was the best approach.
"You can sleep in my room," she said.

Lorelai shook her head. "Not after next week, babe. Then you'll be sleeping in your room."

"I actually wanted to talk to you about that."

Her mother paled slightly, and the corners of her mouth turned down. "Oh?"

Rory slowed her steps. "I'm sorry, I should have told you this when I actually did it, but I applied to some internships for the summer."

"Hon, that's great," she replied, her enthusiasm thin.

"I sent my resume to a few places—the Courant, obviously, and the Times, which was a long shot, and the Boston Globe Magazine. I didn't get the Times, and I didn't think I would—I'm a sophomore still, but I thought I'd try."

"But you got the others?"

She nodded. "I did. I could work at the Courant and stay in Hartford during the week with Grandma and Grandpa—" Lorelai shuddered; Rory ignored her and continued. "—or I could do the one with the magazine and stay with Dad and Sherri." She saw her mother's face fall. "I haven't made up my mind yet, Mom. The one with the Hartford paper doesn't pay, but it's close to home and I'm more familiar with the city, so it has that going for it. The internship with the Globe has a really, really small stipend, and it's only four days a week, so I could come home for the weekends and get an extra day with you. Plus, it's with the editorial staff."

"You've done the pros and cons list, then," Lorelai said.

Rory dropped her eyes and tucked her hair behind her ear. "I did. But they're not done yet, not really, and I haven't even talked to Dad and Sherri—"

"You know they'd love to have you."

"I know, but I feel like I should at least ask before I think about it anymore. And there are a bunch of things that I haven't even put on the list yet—we didn't get to spend last summer together, either, so that's a con if I went away, but it'd be a pro for you if I did because you'd get to spend your first months of wedded bliss—"

"Ha! Wedded bliss," Lorelai giggled. "I'm going to have to tell Luke that one."

"You'd have some honeymoon time alone, is what I'm saying," Rory said darkly. "I'm trying to think of everyone, here."

Lorelai took a breath. "Babe, if you want to be in Cambridge for the summer, you should do it. Your dad would love to have you there, you'd get to spend some time with your sister, Marty's there—"

"You know that's not why I—"

"I know," she said gently. "But I understand that it doesn't hurt, either. Whatever you decide to do, babe, you know I'm behind you a hundred per cent. We'll have the weekends, like you said, and if you go then I have an excuse to shop on Newbury Street."

"You sure?"
Lorelai softened. "Babe. This isn't just a summer thing, this is something that's going to be good for you in the long run, too. I don't want you to hold back from doing something that could look stellar on your resume just because I'd miss my playmate for the summer. Call your dad tomorrow, get it all settled."

"You really can have my room," Rory told her. "Just, don't, like, you know in my bed."

She bit her lips together and began to shake with suppressed laughter. "Oh, my God," she gasped. "Like I could get Luke to agree to that anyway."

Rory stared at her mother in open-mouthed shock for a few seconds before bursting into a fit of shrill giggles herself. They had reached the house at this point and collapsed together on the porch steps, unable to catch their breath for laughing. The door swung open behind them and Luke appeared. He stood over them, his hands on his hips, and shook his head.

"What is going on here?"

Rory merely pointed from her mother to herself and back again before she doubled over, pressing her hands to her sides. Lorelai looked up at Luke as she took several huge, hiccupy breaths. "We're—a—little—punch—drunk," she gasped. "Tired."

Luke rolled his eyes. He picked up Rory's school bag and took the boxes holding the cake and pie from Lorelai. He disappeared into the house a moment. Rory wiped tears from her eyes as she caught her breath. She rested her head on her mother's shoulder.

"Should we go in?" she asked.

Lorelai's breath was still shaky. "Give it a minute. He'll be back."

Rory gave her a puzzled look, but, true to Lorelai's word, Luke stepped onto the porch once more and pulled both Lorelais to their feet. He led them into the house, steered them around the living room and toward the kitchen. Rory glanced over her shoulder as they passed: it seemed as though the entire contents of her mother's bedroom had spilled down the stairs and pooled in the living room. She heard her mother groan.

"That living room," Lorelai declared, "looks like the inside of my head."

Luke laughed shortly. "I think the living room is probably cleaner."

Lorelai poked him hard in the back. "You better be nice to me, Flannel Man, or you will not get one of my world famous margaritas."

"World famous, huh?"

"Celebrated on two continents like Diane Court," she said, as they entered the kitchen, where Jess and Ashley sat at the table, snacking. "Hey, you two. You save some of that dip for us?"

"We managed to restrain ourselves, yes," Jess drawled.

Rory dropped into a chair and immediately reached for a chip to help herself to the bowl of steaming dip in the middle of the table. "God, I'm so hungry." Jess snorted at this, and Rory looked at him sheepishly. "I know, shocking."

Lorelai opened the refrigerator. "Hey, Luke," she called, leaning in and shuffling bottles around. "Rory ate a donut on the way here."
"Traitor," Rory said. "I haven't eaten anything all day. I was writing."

"Oh, yeah?" Luke asked. "How's that going?"

"Don't ask," she replied. "Are there any more chips?"

Luke handed her a half-filled bag. "Hey, Marty called a couple of times."

She looked up. "He did?"

"He's a rambler, that one."

"He's something, that's for sure," Rory said. "He's just nervous—he has that play next week, and he's so freaked out by the whole thing, he's acting like the Reverend Jim Ignatowski."

"What play?" Ashley wanted to know.

"You Can't Take It With You," Rory said. "He's Tony."

"That's a great part," she replied. "This your boyfriend?"

"The very one," she said, smiling. "He kinda got pulled into it. He took drama this semester and the professor talked him into auditioning. When she actually cast him, he nearly hyperventilated. But he's going to be great."

"He is," Lorelai chimed in. "He's got the whole Jimmy Stewart physique working in his favor."

She began to giggle. "Rory, start calling him Professor."

Rory mutely shook her head and helped herself to more dip. She listened to the chatter around her as Luke berated Lorelai's deplorable storage skills and she his obvious fashion ignorance that he thought she could discard several key items of her wardrobe just because she hadn't worn them in a while. Jess and Ashley were engaged in a low conversation across the table from Rory, and from the snatches she overheard, they were discussing their plans for the night. She contemplated getting up and retrieving her cell phone to call Marty, but her mother calling her name ended the thought.

"Did I tell you Luke made me a cedar chest for my winter clothes? They're all in the garage right now in this ginormous trunk he made. Luke, my life, when we get the whole addition done, we should get the California closet people out here to organize us," Lorelai said. "I still can't believe Tom's really starting on Monday. It's just impossibly soon."

Rory grunted in agreement. "I can't believe that Mrs. Bedermeir's house is finished already. That's just amazing."

"Rory, you should see it," Lorelai said, her eyes lighting up. "It's beautiful. Tom and his guys did a great job, but really, Mom made that place into the most comfortable, elegant home for Miss Charlotte and everyone. It's perfect. Winky would have loved it." She paused, took a breath. "Speaking of, how's the book coming?"

"Let's just say that Grandma is as gung ho about getting things right for this as she is about everything else in life," Rory said dryly. "It's been sort of—it's hard, making all the pieces fit together, but it's been nice spending so much time with her. I've missed that this year."

"We have all been busy doing our own things," Lorelai said softly. "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."
"Thank you, Ferris," Rory replied. She turned in her seat to reach for more food, and she saw Jess watching her, one eyebrow cocked. "What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing ever changes in this house."

"The giant hole they're about to make in Mom's bedroom wall is proof positive that that's not true anymore," Rory told him. "Just some things don't."

She couldn't read the look on his face. With a sigh, she got to her feet and shuffled towards her book bag. Lorelai had started making the margaritas, Luke was still fussing over something on the stove, and Ashley had commandeered Jess into helping her set the table. Rory felt a quick stab of guilt for not offering herself, but when she stepped out onto the porch, her cell phone in her palm, the cool evening air lifted the weight on her shoulders. For a moment, there was nothing to worry about—no midterms, no Jess, no Emily and her book, no tension with Marty worrying at her. She hit the speed dial, hugged herself with her free arm as she waited for him to answer. Just as his voice mail picked up, Lorelai stumbled out of the house, two margaritas in hand. Rory waved for her to be quiet.

"Hey, it's me," she said. "Just calling to say hi. I'll be home tonight, if you want to call—otherwise I guess I'll just see you tomorrow. I—ah—I hope everything's going okay. Talk to you soon. Bye."

Lorelai sipped her drink. Rory took the other from her and turned away, taking a tentative taste. She could feel her mother's eyes on her, the appraising look. She tilted her head from one side to the other, hoping to ease some of the tightness in her neck. She swallowed a chunk of ice and shivered.

"What?" she said at length. "What's with the staring?"

"Am I staring?" Lorelai asked, all feigned innocence and shock. "I had no idea I was staring."

"Mom," Rory said impatiently. "Just say it."

They regarded each other over their drinks a moment. Lorelai opened her mouth to speak. At the same instant, Luke peeked around the frame of the front door and pointed inside. "Dinner's up," he said.

Surreal, Rory thought, was an inadequate word for the experience of sitting down to dinner with her mother, Luke, Jess, and Jess's girlfriend. There was really no safe place to look—despite the time that had passed, there was still something too fresh, too recent about Jess to make eye contact anything less than unsettling, and locking eyes with Lorelai was an invitation to inappropriate laughter. Her mother was doing most of the heavy lifting in the conversation, and Rory kept her attention fixed to the spot between her mother's eyes, just over the bridge of her nose; when there was no occasion to be looking in that direction and she'd been staring at her plate too long, she turned her attention to Luke's chin. It seemed safe, innocuous. Lorelai shot her more than a few questioning, surreptitious glances in between anecdotes about the Dragonfly, the horses at the Dragonfly, and Kirk's campaign to be employed as the horse wrangler of the Dragonfly.

She was halfway through the enchiladas and rice and beans when the margarita started running through the veins in her arms. The urge to set her fork down, fold her arms on the tabletop, and fall asleep right there was for a moment so overwhelming she began to push her plate away from her. She felt a sense of disconnection, of a gap between the base of her skull and the top of her spine. It was hard to focus her eyes, to keep her head level. Lorelai, watching her, put out a hand and lightly touched Rory's wrist, her expression concerned.
"You okay?" she asked quietly.

Rory closed her eyes as she shook her head. "I'm just a little lightheaded. I don't think the drink was such a good idea," she said, smiling weakly.

Luke was on his feet in an instant. "Of course it wasn't," he said, and with that he took her glass away. "You need to get a little more food in you. I'll get you some water."

She felt herself color with so many eyes on her. "I'm okay, really."

Luke set a tall glass of water beside her plate, rested his hand heavily on the crown of her head. "I know," he said. His smile was kind.

Rory ducked her head. "Thanks, Pops."

"Pops?" Jess grunted.

Luke sat down again, pointing at his nephew. "Don't go getting any ideas."

She excused herself after cake and pie and coffee and lay down in her bedroom to watch the ceiling spin above her. It was odd to have the house so full of sound outside her door—there was movement, and talking, laughing, dishes clattering and music playing, and it wasn't just herself and Lorelai. Rory closed her eyes, smiling to herself. It was strange and vaguely scary in some way, but it was pleasant. She exhaled slowly and let the thoughts just roll around in her head without trying to line them up in order. It was how Lorelai found her a short while later, after the sounds in the kitchen had died down.

"Hey, kid," she said. "Feeling any better?"

Rory opened her eyes and turned her head towards the door. "I'm okay," she said. "And I'm sorry. I feel like a baby."

Lorelai flopped down beside her. "Don't. We all know you're tired with finals and all."

"Mm," she murmured. "Hey, Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"I like having Luke here."

Her mother's eyes shone. "I do, too."

They were silent together for a moment. "You wanted to do a dress fitting?" Rory said.

Lorelai leapt to her feet, rubbing her hands together. "This fabric, Rory, is incredible. When I started last week, I almost didn't want to cut it, that's how incredibly beautiful this fabric is."

Rory stood up slowly. "Well, don't keep me in suspense, lady."

A few moments later, Rory stood on a short stepstool at the foot of her bed, hung in swaths of periwinkle fabric so soft she wanted to wrap it around herself and go to sleep. Lorelai kept pacing circles around her as she talked around the pins in her mouth. Rory watched her; she was in her element, making plans, doing projects. She stopped, mid-circle, and looked critically at her work.

"I may just outdo myself on this one," she said.

"So, does Luke know you're making your dress, too?"
She shook her head. "I haven't decided yet if that's important."

"Of course it is," Rory said. "What about Grandma? Have you told her?"

Lorelai snorted. "Yes, actually. I thought she was going to have a coronary. After all these years, I finally stumbled on the one thing that would kill my mother. But then I showed her the designs I'm building off of and I showed her a swatch of the fabric, and she calmed down. You just know, though, that she and Miss Celine have a back up dress waiting for the day before the wedding when I mess it up so that she can swoop in and save the day."

"I don't really think Grandma is the swooping type," Rory laughed.

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "Oh, Grandma would swoop if swooping were required. And then she would gloat until the end of days."

"How many more movie lines are you going to pirate before the night is over?"

"I really couldn't say."

"Mom?"

"Hmm?"

"How—do you remember, a million years ago, when Dean and I broke up the first time and you and I were fighting and I ran to Grandma's house and—"

"And scared your mother half to death? Yes, I remember," Lorelai said dryly.

"I was sorry about that, too," Rory said. "But do you remember when you came to get me and we had that whole talk about my hypothetical relationship with Taylor Hanson?"

She squinted. "Vaguely."

"You said that you think saying 'I love you' is a big deal and it takes a lot of thought," Rory said. "You said—you said it's scary to be in love."

Lorelai tipped her head to the side and smiled broadly. "You know, I am so smart sometimes. You should put that in a book," she said, pointing, "because that is totally brill."

"You did not just say 'brill.'"

"No, I didn't," Lorelai giggled. "But yes, I'm remembering a little bit, now. Did I ever apologize for the Taylor Hanson reference?"

"No," Rory said. "Do you—do you still think that? I mean, how long were you and Luke together before—" She stopped. "That's none of my business, Mom. Don't answer that."


"Really? That soon?"

"Well, a month and, like, ten years of unspoken lust and longing," she said.

Rory shifted on her feet, trying not to disturb the pins. Her expression was serious. "Did you know you were going to say it? Had you thought about it? And how did you—how did you know when—"
Lorelai sighed. "Oh, Rory. With Luke—I don't know how long it'd been since I told someone that I loved him. I can't remember. I might never have, since you were born. Everything with Luke happened so quickly, you know. One night, he kissed me, and then the next day, we went on a date, and after that, we were together. We skipped the whole dating thing that most people do, that whole time when you figure out if this is someone you can be with and if this is someone you care for and all that—we spent time together, and we went out, yes, but we sort of took it for granted that we were already together. And then, one night, we were in the kitchen, eating pancakes, and it just sort of fell out of my mouth. I hadn't meant to say it. I didn't even know I was going to say it—I just said it, and—I don't know—it was like I immediately knew it was true. So, no, I didn't put a whole lot of thought into it." She smiled wistfully. "I think—I still think it's a big deal, saying I love you. But—I don't—when it comes to Luke? I've never had to think about it." Her eyes were bright as she spoke. "I think—at first, after the whole thing with Jason at the town meeting and all the stuff we went through after that… I wanted to keep it close. I didn't want to make it common." She shook her head. "But it's—that's not something you can wear away just by saying it."

"I like that," Rory said.

"I'm not saying that it's not a huge deal, or anything, obviously."

"Obviously."

Lorelai shrugged. "I think it's different for every person, that moment. Sometimes, maybe you will have to think about it. And other times, you won't and you'll just say it wearing nothing but your underwear and an old tee shirt while you're teasing each other about something stupid."

"Overshare," Rory said, cringing.

"Sorry." Lorelai paused. "It's like cheese."

"Saying I love you is like cheese?"

She nodded. "It's like cheese. You go to a cheese store and you sample all the different kinds of cheese and you think they're all gross and they smell like feet, so you try them with a cracker and they're still just stinky chunks of bacteria—"

"Ew. Like, a lot."

"—and then, suddenly, you find the exactly right cheese-and-cracker combo, and you know it. Everything is right. You don't have to think about if this cheese goes with this cracker, you just realize: cheese is awesome."

"I do like cheese."

"I cannot overstate how vital cheese is to my diet," Lorelai said.

Rory furrowed her brow. "So what you're saying is—what are you saying?" she asked. "I'm all kinds of confused."

Lorelai took Rory's hand and helped her step down. She held her daughter's hands in both of hers and looked at her levelly, her eyes and smile soft. "I'm saying that when you're ready to say it and you really want to say it, you won't have to think about it so much."

She put her arms out to let Lorelai take the top of the dress from her. "Sometimes my head just gets away from me and I can't help it, thinking too much."
"Say it ain't so," Lorelai teased. "Just—don't force anything you aren't ready for. Let things follow their own course."

"When did you get so zen?"

"Right around the third margarita."

When Lorelai and Rory ventured out of the bedroom, the kitchen was empty. Lorelai looked at Rory, her face set in a question mark; a clanking noise and an "ah, geez!" from the direction of the living room ended the mystery. Rory followed Lorelai down the hall as her mother bellowed incoherent syllables, ending on "Lucy!"

Luke and Jess stopped and looked up, their expressions identically nonplussed. Rory leaned against the wall by the desk, shaking her head.

"Boys and their toys," she thought. From the looks of things, she gathered that they were attempting to put Lorelai's bed frame back together in the middle of the living room but had miscalculated the space they'd need.

"Luke!" Lorelai whined. "What are you doing?"

"I'm putting the bed together," he said, as though this were perfectly obvious.

"In the living room?"

"Well, I didn't think the kitchen would be the best place for it," he told her flatly.

"But, Luke, this is our living room. The room where we live," she said, "not the room where we… bed."

He stared at her a moment. "I'm going to pretend you didn't say that in front of your kid and my nephew—not to mention the girl he's seeing—"


Ashley, seated on the stairs, laughed. "Oh, baby, you're so sweet," she teased.

"—and just keep putting the bed together so we have a place to sleep tonight," Luke finished, tossing a deathly glance at Jess.

"Luke, I don't want to lose my living room and my bedroom for the sake of this addition," Lorelai said. "This is not the best plan. You have to know that this is not the best plan. This is, in fact, a completely impractical and rather idiotic and therefore completely un-Luke-like plan." She sighed impatiently. "Rory said we could use her room while the work's being done—"

"Where's Rory gonna sleep?"

"Boston," Rory piped up. "And I say that seriously, I'm not trying to be a smart ass."

Luke got to his feet, scratching at his jaw. "I don't know why I'm not used to being confused at this point," he said wearily.

Lorelai stepped carefully over the bedposts piled up. She took Luke by the hand and rubbed his shoulder lightly with her free hand. "Oh, honey, that's something you never get used to," she said soothingly. "But don't worry, at some point you'll just stop caring. I'll tell you what we're going to do, okay? We're going to take all the pieces of the bed to the garage and put the living room back together, and tonight, you and I can just sleep at the diner."
"Jess and Ashley are going to sleep at the diner," Luke said. "I can't let them drive back to the city tonight, it's—"

"Then you and Mom can have my room and I'll sleep on the couch," Rory offered. Seeing the look on Luke's face, she nearly took a step back. "Or not," she said softly.

Lorelai rested her chin on Luke's shoulder. "How's this: I'll bunk with Rory tonight and you can either sleep out here or figure out some arrangement with Jess and Ashley for the diner and that extra bed."

"I'm not sleeping with you," Jess said. "And Ashley's not either."

Ashley snorted. "Friendly competition is what this nation is all about, Jess."

"You realize that now we have to break up because you said that," Jess replied.

"No need for such drastic measures," Lorelai said. "Luke will just stay here on the couch. Okay? It's all settled. Now let's get the dang bed out to the garage."

Luke touched his forehead to hers. "You're staying out of the garage."

"Not gonna complain about that," she replied. "That means I don't have to help, right?"

Rory went to bed early that night. The moment she closed her eyes, she heard David Cassidy's voice. She groaned and rolled onto her back. She stared at the ceiling, listening to the staccato rhythm of "I Think I Love You." Marty hadn't called her back, she remembered. Lorelai was still with Luke in the living room, laughing as she directed him on where the furniture was supposed to go. Rory shut her eyes tightly and hugged a pillow to her chest. She tried to concentrate on the sounds in the house, the muted noise from the living room and the rustle of leaves outside her window. When Lorelai crept in, Rory shifted to make room for her in the bed, feigning sleepiness. Her mother fell asleep quickly, her breathing deep and even. Rory lay awake, waiting once more for sleep.

It was broad daylight when Rory sat up in bed, blinking and disoriented. She knuckled her eyes and tried to get her bearings. It was morning, she decided, and she had been sleeping, and now she wasn't. She looked down: her mother had gotten up already. It couldn't be that early. She slid out of bed and opened her door.

She'd seen her mother with Luke in the kitchen a hundred times before. They were comfortable together, easy and relaxed. Rory leaned against the doorframe and watched them a moment. She didn't want to disturb them, didn't want to intrude on the moment. It was a foreign sensation, feeling as though she were intruding on her mother's life. She tucked her chin to her chest and let the feeling settle. It was a slight, warm ache in the center of her chest, but it was a rather pleasant one. Lorelai stood beside Luke at the stove, her arms around his middle as he pushed eggs around the pan with a rubber spatula; they were smiling. The thought occurred to Rory that she'd seen other men with her mother in the house—Max, her dad—but the sight of Luke in the kitchen with Lorelai, snorting derisively at something she'd just said, didn't feel like playing house. She smiled and shuffled out of her room to the table.

"Morning."

Lorelai turned. "Hey, babe! You sleep okay?"


"It's May Day," he grunted.
"Which is Luke-ese for 'Stupid fucking crazy townies and their g-d'ed festivals—I'm not going near them,'" Lorelai chirped. "It's really just a bonus for us because now we get Luke's breakfast without having to see Kirk do the Safety Dance."

"But the Kirk Safety Dance is so classic," Rory said. "Coffee?"

Lorelai poured her a cup and sat beside her. "It's just another Sunday in Stars Hollow," she said. She smiled at her daughter, studying her face. She reached out and pushed a lock of hair behind Rory's ear. "You look tired."

"I blame David Cassidy," Rory replied. "But I'm fine. I'm probably going to head back to school pretty soon—I need not to look at my portfolio for a while and there I can literally put it in a drawer for a day and get some reading done instead."

"Just make sure you give yourself some time to breathe," Lorelai smiled.

Luke sent her back to Yale with a box of cookies and the remains of the desserts from the night before. Lorelai gave her a case of Diet Coke and a bag of chocolate covered espresso beans. She hugged Rory by the car after helping her load in the goodies, and when she pulled back, adopted a stern expression.

"Now, we've supplied you with plenty of sugar and caffeine to get you through finals, but we expect you to use them responsibly. The espresso beans are for emergencies only, so I don't want you pulling those out for any old, spur of the moment, thoughtless caffeine fix. That's what the Diet Coke is for. The cookies, you want to use those sparingly—they're good for the long run because they get better with age. However, cake and pie, those require immediate consumption because after thirty-six hours, they're inedible," Lorelai said in mock-seriousness. "I tell you this only so that you may benefit from my wisdom and experience. And trust me, I know of which I speak."

Rory rolled her eyes. "Espresso for emergencies, Diet Coke for caffeine level maintenance, cookies like for occasional use, and cake and pie as soon as humanly possible," she said. "Got it."

She opened the driver's side door, pausing before she got into the car. "You're coming to the play on Friday, right?"

"Of course," Lorelai said. "Wouldn't miss it. I'm planning on doing the Wave before the end of the first act."

"As long as you're there," Rory told her. A thought occurred to her. "Maybe—before the play, we could have dinner."

"Are you suggesting we skip out on Friday night dinner?" Lorelai asked, feigning shock.

She nodded. "Just you and me. Is that okay?"

"That's more than okay," Lorelai said. "Rory, honey, is everything okay with you? You're getting me kind of worried. You're not going to tell me you've suddenly decided to join the circus or the army or something and that's why you've been so distracted lately, are you?"

"Actually, it's a cult that I joined," Rory replied. "I just didn't know how to tell you. I have to shave my head and everything." She hugged her mother again. "I'm really okay. I've just had some things on my mind."

"So you say. You'd tell me—"
"I'd tell you," she said emphatically. "It's just like you said yesterday, you and me not having a good jaw session in awhile."

Lorelai smiled, pleased. "Friday, then."

When she got back to campus, Rory stood several long moments contemplating her dorm room door. She wasn't sure why she felt such a heavy weight of dread at the prospect of going in, and so she stared at the white board she'd hung in September for messages. Marty had drawn a stick figure strangling himself with both hands, the tongue lolling out and down to his feet. It was bizarrely grotesque in its own rudimentary way, and Rory wrinkled her nose in distaste before she gave in and smiled at the sheer absurdity of it. Beside the drawing, he'd written, "help me help me help me I'm about to turn into this." Rory rolled her eyes as she slipped her key in the lock and let herself in.

"Drama queen," she whispered.

There was no answer at his door when she knocked a half hour later, having trucked in her Diet Coke and assorted goodies. She drew a stick figure with a halo reading a book and wrote "being good and studying come down for a break" next to it. As an afterthought, she scribbled, "have food too."

She curled up with a plate of pie and her annotated copy of *Aurora Leigh* to review for her Victorian Writers seminar. It wasn't long before she found herself skimming, easily recalling the discussion they'd had in class about the poem (thanks, in large part, to what Marty termed her "psychotic, neurotic, obsessive-compulsive note-taking system" that incorporated bulleted points from class in the margins). She moved from there to *Jane Eyre*. She settled herself among a pile of pillows on her bed with a notebook and a pen; when she next looked up, startled by the knock at her door, she was surprised to find it had grown dark.

"Come in," she called. She sat up, wincing, as Marty came in with a paper bag in his arms. "Hey there," she said.

He smiled and deposited the bag on her desk before coming to sit beside her. "Hey," he said, kissed her. He glanced at her notebook. "Ah, so the halo wasn't just a self-flattering fiction. She's begun the studying in earnest and has already hyper-extended her knees to prove it."

"I can't help it if I have to sit like this," she said. "But, yes, on both accounts. Studying and hurting. What's in the bag?"

"Food," he said. "I went to that Greek place after rehearsal and picked up some dinner."

"Ooo, tapas!" Rory cooed. He moved to rise, but she laid a hand on his arm and held him where he was. He looked at her expectantly. "Do you have anything to do tonight?"

Marty shook his head. "This is my last night of freedom. The director's daughter has a ballet recital tonight, so we're off until tomorrow."

"Will you stay, then? I'll blow off the studying and we'll watch TV or a movie or something," she said. Off his exaggerated show of shock and horror, she shrugged and cast her eyes down. "My brain has been whirring nonstop. I'm about to combust." She shrugged. "Please? I just want to sit still and be."

He cupped her cheek in his hand. "Then that's what we'll do. Everything okay?"

She leaned into his palm. "Okay. My head has just been noisy." She reached up and pressed her hand to his. "Besides, if this is your last free night before the opening, we should hang out. You're
probably going to be so busy this week, you won't have time to blink."

"And," he added, pushing himself to his feet, "you'll be in your egghead pre-finals brain strain phase and all incommunicado anyway." He paused and affected tearfulness as he spoke again. "It's like our last supper, Rory, before—"

"If you say execution, I'm going to kick you out," she laughed. "Where are my tapas?"

The reprieve from worrying about finals and study and writing was short, and on Monday morning Rory readied herself for class with a feeling of trepidation. She harassed herself as she walked from class to class: she was woefully unprepared, she would never have time to be as prepared as everyone else, she was about to disgrace herself, the Gilmore name, and the hallowed halls of Yale with the sheer inadequacy of her meager brains. As the week continued, however, she found she had little time for self pity and only just enough to finish the things she needed to.

On Wednesday, she sat in Professor Flynn's class, drumming her fingers on the top of the fat folder that held every piece of writing she'd done that semester. It was their last meeting of the year and they had two weeks before their final portfolios were due. The time was spent reading aloud and critiquing the single paged assignment they had due that day. Rory marveled at the ease with which Flynn was able to be both relentless and tactful. She herself escaped mostly unscathed and shouldered her bag at the end of the hour and a half with a sigh of relief. As she turned for the door, Flynn called to her and stopped her.

"So, Miss Gilmore. I hear you've earned yourself a position with the Boston Globe Magazine this summer," she said. "I'm very nearly impressed."

"Thank you," Rory said. "And for the recommendation. I appreciate it."

"And how is your portfolio progressing?"

Rory shifted uncomfortably on her feet. "You know. Painfully."

"As it should," Flynn replied emphatically. "I'm glad to hear it."

"I don't suppose you have any suggestions," Rory said.

Flynn hugged a stack of papers to her chest. "Any suggestions I had were in the comments on the individual papers. It's all on you now." She strode to the door. "If it doesn't make you at least a little uncomfortable, you're probably doing something wrong," she said.

Rory watched her go, feeling as she always did after speaking to Professor Flynn: at once discouraged, annoyed, and determined. It gave her some comfort to remember that Flynn had gone out of her way to recruit her into the writing program and the senior seminar in the fall, and that no matter what the professor told her, Rory still had her internship to prove she was at least marginally good at what she tried to do. Straightening her shoulders, she returned to the dorm and immediately went for her phone.

The conversation with Sherri was pleasant, if not somewhat inane, and long, and mostly concerning how, though it was terrific that Lorelai and Luke were getting married and so soon and they must be so happy and it was just wonderful and romantic, she and Christopher had decided that it would really be the best thing to wait and get married themselves until Gigi was old enough to participate in the ceremony and that would just make the whole thing all the more special and amazing, and didn't Rory agree? When Christopher finally took the phone over from his fiancée, Rory felt winded just from listening to her. She stammered uncertainly for a few moments, talking to her father, before she took a deep breath, announced that she had a favor to ask him, and
described the internship and her plans for the summer. She realized, when she ended on a hurried "soIwaswonderingifIcouldstaywithyouthissummerforafewdaysaweek," that she sounded like Sherri. The chatter was contagious.

"Of course you can stay with us. You know you always have a room here whenever you want." She smiled. "Thanks, Dad. Really."

"It's an amazing job, kid. You should really be proud of yourself."

"Thanks," she said. "I am."

"And I'm proud of you, too. I'm sure your mother is having banners printed up and tee shirts made as we speak," Christopher told her.

"Well, we decided to hold off on the banners until after the wedding," she laughed. "We thought it might distract from the main event."

Christopher cleared his throat. "Gonna be some shindig, huh?"

"It's going to be Mom and Luke," she said. "So it'll be something."

"She happy?"

Rory tucked her chin to her chest. "She's really happy, Dad."

"She should be," he said. "All right, kid. Glad you called. I'll talk to you later?"

"Sure. Love to Gigi, okay?"

By the time Friday rolled around, Rory had seen Marty only four times that week. His visits to her room were late and brief; he was exhausted from the combination of rehearsals and keeping up with his schoolwork. There had been time only for words of encouragement and hugs and fleeting, soft kisses. Sunday night, as they had settled down to sleep squeezed awkwardly in Rory's narrow bed, they had agreed to spend their nights apart until after the play—it would be too distracting otherwise, they decided. And then, Rory thought, as she drove through New Haven Friday morning, things had gotten intense.

She pulled into a parking space in front of a Kinko's and reached for her bag. Her spine tingled just thinking about it, the way he'd kissed her, the way he'd held her, touched her, spoke to her. But, she reminded herself, they had stopped, they hadn't... She sighed as she stepped into the shop. They hadn't, she thought, and she hadn't said certain things. But there would be time, she told herself, later. As she waited for her copies to be made, she wondered if thoughts like that were tempting fate.

At five, Rory called Marty and left a message on his voice mail to wish him luck. She dressed carefully for the evening—a lightweight blue dress, heels, silver jewelry. She curled her hair, made up her eyes. With nothing left to do but wait for her mother, she began to tidy her room. She smoothed the sheets on her bed, cleared the clutter from her desk, hid the various pairs of shoes scattered on her floor, and swept the books off her bedside table. Her skin buzzed; she was full of nervous energy. It was a relief when Lorelai knocked on her door.

"Hey, pretty girl," Lorelai said by way of greeting. "Look at you, all fabulous. If I didn't have such earth-shattering self-confidence I would feel inferior. As it is I just feel underdressed."

Rory glanced at her mother's outfit as she drew a light cardigan over her shoulders. Lorelai's skirt
was loose and floral and the white blouse she wore brought out her freckles and youthfulness. Rory rolled her eyes. "You look beautiful," she said. "And not underdressed at all. Are you ready?"

"Honey, I was born ready. Let's go so we don't miss the start of this thing."

On her way out the door, Rory snagged her purse and a shirt-sized box gift-wrapped and beribboned. Lorelai caught sight of it as she took Rory's arm and began to walk down the hall. Rory heard her intake of breath. She tightened her hold on her daughter's arm, and when she spoke, she affected nonchalance. "Present, huh? For Marty?" she asked.

"No, not for Marty," Rory said just as off-handedly.

"Oh. Well, who for, then?"

"If you're a good girl at dinner, I'll tell you," Rory said.

Lorelai snorted. "Patronize me, babe. I adore the condescension."

"Where's Luke?" Rory wanted to know.

"He dropped me here and went to find some place to eat where he could watch the start of the Sox game. He's very concerned about the state of Dirk Billing, or whoever. I wasn't listening; I was mentally planning one of those fantasy weddings at the pitcher's hill—"

"Mound," Rory corrected her.

"—whatever—at Fenway. It's a good thing we're doing it in Stars Hollow, because let me tell you, babe, that much green does nothing for my complexion. And getting married someplace like that would be license for him to wear the baseball hat and while I adore the baseball hat for the sake of the man beneath it, I am not pledging my eternal troth to a man wearing sporting equipment. It's just not right," Lorelai said emphatically. "Luke was more than happy to come along tonight so long as he got to see the start of the game, so it's all worked out well. We can have our girls' dinner somewhere chic, and Luke can have his beer and BLT on rye, or whatever. He's going to meet us at the theater."

It was a nice restaurant, quiet and dim. Rory and Lorelai sat across from each other at a small table lit with candles in glass lamps. Lorelai immediately reached for the salt shaker and began toying with it to fidget away the interval between the hostess's departure and the waiter's arrival. She ordered a vodka martini with two olives and a Diet Coke with lime for Rory without blinking. Rory, meanwhile, broke open two of the fresh rolls the waiter had brought over, buttered them, and passed one to her mother across the table. For a fraction of a second, the waiter eyed them askance. As he walked away, Lorelai smiled wryly at her daughter.

"Chad thinks we're weird," she said.

"Chad is just jealous," Rory replied. "Secret clubs of two are objects of great envy."

"Especially ours."

"Of course."

They ordered and sipped their drinks in companionable—if uncharacteristic—quiet. Rory leaned forward in her seat several times, poised to speak, only to sit back again hot with embarrassment. Lorelai tipped her head to one side and studied her thoughtfully.
"So, I'm not going to ask what's on your mind because I'm pretty sure you're working up to telling me whatever it is that you want to tell me, but I am going to ask if it's okay with you if we don't talk about wedding arrangements for the next forty-five minutes," she said. "I cannot wait for the wedding and I cannot wait to be married, but I would like to spend some time actively not discussing flowers and seating arrangements and all the ways I've imagined muzzling my mother—" She stopped. "Well, we can talk about all the ways I've imagined muzzling my mother, because that's actually quite amusing, but not talking about wedding arrangements for a while would be nice. I'm starting to feel like if I don't talk about something else for a while that when the day itself actually comes I'm going to be one of those weird horror movie brides who walks around in a blood-covered gown with a huge carving knife dripping with entrails."

Rory wrinkled her nose. "That is an image I could have lived without right before having dinner. You could have just said you'd be a bride of Dracula."

"Lacks poetry," Lorelai told her.

She smiled, shaking her head. "Oh, Mom."

"Oh, Rory."

They talked awhile about mundane things—Rory's finals, her classes, the conversation she'd had with her father earlier that week, about the Inn and Michel and Sookie and their latest battle over a certain copper-bottomed teapot. Lorelai chortled into her martini as she recounted the story. It was only when Lorelai tapped her daughter's hand that Rory realized she had stopped listening and was staring into space.

"Babe?"

She shook herself. "Sorry. I was just—I was thinking about how much everything has changed this year. We're sitting here talking about this inn that you own that wasn't even open yet at this time last year. You're getting married to a man that you weren't even sure you were dating last May—" She stopped. "It's been a whole year, hasn't it?"

Lorelai grinned. "A whole year. Luke is taking me away to celebrate."

"Where?"

"His cabin," Lorelai intoned. She cocked an eyebrow and sipped her drink. "We're going to his cabin."

"Luke has met you, right?" Rory asked. "I mean, he knows you—"

"In more ways than one."

"Mom!"

"Biblical humor is so rarely appreciated," Lorelai sighed. "But, yes, Luke knows that my idea of a good time does not involve bug spray or hiking boots unless said hiking boots are pink and purely for aesthetic purposes. He has promised me that he won't make me do anything remotely outdoorsy if I don't want to and that I won't have to exert myself in any athletic way unless I am so inclined. So no hiking or canoeing or anything like that unless I expressly tell him I want to. And he's promised me all sorts of yummy cooking things, so he's making this a Lorelai-friendly trip. I think he just wanted to get away for awhile. Mom is making him crazy. So, week after next, he and I are headed for the wilderness."

"God help him," Rory said. "But we digress. It's been a year since the inn opened and you and
Luke finally got a clue—"

"Hey!"

"—and everything was so weird with Grandma and Grandpa and the whole lawsuit thing," Rory said. "And there was Dean."

"There was Dean," Lorelai echoed softly.

Rory smoothed her skirt with her palms and stared at the rim of her plate. "I should have come to you, before. When I thought something was going to happen, I should have come to you. But even when I thought something might happen, I didn't really think it would happen."

"I'm just going to nod in response," Lorelai said.

"If it was possible, it still wasn't probable," Rory explained. "But then it was. I don't know how I could have thought that—"

"Rory, hon, you spent your time beating yourself up over this already. You figured it out. Things are different now. I think it's okay to let it go," Lorelai told her, her tone gentle. "I know how you dwell on things, kid, and I don't want this to keep eating at you long past the whole affair." She winced. "Very, very poor choice of words."

"It's okay," Rory said, and she smiled a little. "You're right, too. But I still regret not talking to you. The thing with Dean… That was something else, that was bad, but you and I have always talked, we've always been able to talk. And I don't know—I feel like I've been keeping things in this year, actively not talking about things." She paused. "It's been this huge, eventful year for both of us. You have your whole other life with Luke now, and things are so different—"

"Babe, you know that no matter what is going on in the rest of my life, no matter what, you can always, always come to me—things are different but that is never, ever going to change. I love Luke, but you are my daughter, and nothing gets in the way of that. Luke knows that," Lorelai said.

"And I know that," Rory said. "I do. I think that I've been trying to—I've been trying to do things on my own, to be independent—"

"You've always been independent," Lorelai said. "You and I both have always needed to do things for ourselves even if we have to talk about them until we've lost our voices."

Rory pulled at the ends of her hair, bit her lips together in frustration. "I mean—it seems like everyone around me lately has been going through their own personal thing—Paris has been dealing with her family stuff and the thing with Professor Fleming, and Marty has had the play, and Grandma has her book, and you and Luke have had the whole living situation saga going on… I haven't wanted to burden anyone with the stuff I've been thinking about because it just seems so stupid. And I don't mean to sound like a martyr, I really don't, because it's not anything I would ever really talk about with anyone but you, and I haven't talked about it with you because it's—well, it's awkward and weird and scary and—"

"This is the talk, isn't it?" Lorelai asked. "The talk. You and Marty? You're thinking about…?"

Rory felt herself go hot all over. "We haven't really talked about it, but it's definitely becoming a thing, yeah."

Lorelai nodded, drawing a breath slowly through her nose. Rory could see her gather herself together and stem the sudden rise of panic. She chewed on the inside of her lip before she met
Rory's eyes again. "He hasn't, you know, made you feel—"

Rory sat up straighter. "Oh, no, Mom, he's been—he's been perfect. He's never said anything or done anything to make me uncomfortable and he's never made me feel bad. I can just—I can tell he's been thinking about it. And that he doesn't want me to know he's been thinking about it, because if I know he's been thinking about it, he somehow becomes a big pervert, or lech, or something."

Her mother seemed to relax slightly. "Okay. Well, good then. Because you know I'd have to dismember him if you said anything to the contrary of what you just did. So. He's been thinking about it. You've been thinking about it. But you haven't… talked about it?"

Rory scratched her forehead. "The one time we talked about sex, it was before we were dating and before we were together and it was—it felt really weird. And it's so embarrassing. Sitting here, talking to you about this, this is embarrassing. Like, it would just be so much easier for me—with everything, not just this—if I could stop talking and stop thinking and just do something for a change."

Lorelai's smile was sympathetic and sad. "Oh, hon. That's just who you are."

"Well, it's annoying," Rory said flatly. "I hate it. It makes my head hurt."

Lorelai shook her head, her eyes closed, and was quiet a moment. "What did he say when you told him you were going to spend most of the summer in Boston?"

Rory beamed. "Oh, he was so—he dorked out, big-time. Classic Marty. Wants me to meet all his brothers and his parents and he wants to show me all the 'cool' places to hang out in Cambridge." She laughed. "He said, 'this is my Stars Hollow. I'm telling you, it's way cooler than yours.'"

"Oh, that is just wrong. Why didn't he end up at Harvard, if that's how he feels?"

As she remembered the story, Rory began to giggle. "So, you know how in Sixteen Candles Farmer Ted says that he's sort of the king of the dip shits?" Lorelai nodded. "Well, Marty says that he was the king of the dip shits—he was the leader of the geeks, or something, like the coolest of the uncool. And when he was sixteen, he finally got the courage to ask out this girl he'd had a crush on forever and on their first date, he got pantsed by a group of Harvard Divinity students and he's just hated the entire school since then."

"You're kidding." Lorelai stopped. "That story is too good not to be true."

"It is," Rory agreed. "He still gets all mad when he tells it or you mention Harvard. Or the color crimson. It's pretty funny. It worked out okay, I guess, because he ended up dating the girl for two years."

"Must have been impressive underpants he was wearing," Lorelai said.

Rory snorted in laughter. "But she broke his heart, he said. He wouldn't elaborate." She sighed. "You know he can be the most—he can be just the most ridiculous person ever. But that's sort of what makes him…" She looked up. "Being with him is so easy, Mom. It's not like it was with anyone else. And I want—I want to show him—"

"I know, Rory," Lorelai told her. "And as long as you're happy, I'm happy for you." She gulped the rest of her martini in one fluid motion. "You have—I mean, if you two are going to—you have—you're… prepared, right? Or do you need—"

"Oh, God, no," Rory said. "It's—I don't, but there's always, in the girls' bathroom, there's a basket.
With the things."

Lorelai held her breath a moment. "Okay. Good. I'm glad we had this talk."

"You are not," Rory said.

She looked at Rory levelly. "Yes, I am. If you can't come to me with these sorts of things, Rory… You should always feel like you can come to me with anything. Last year…" She looked down. "I'm not going to lie to you, hon, I was as upset that I didn't know what was going on with you as I was about anything else. I'm not blaming you for that—I'm telling you now because I just want you to know how important it is to me that you feel like you can tell me things, no matter how awkward or weird you think it's going to be. Okay?"

Rory nodded. She immediately began to talk about the play, to steer the conversation into something a little more comfortable and a lot less tense. They ordered their desserts and coffee and Lorelai's posture slowly loosened and the color returned to her face. When the waiter had brought the cakes they'd ordered and topped off their coffee, Rory reached beneath her chair and produced the gift-wrapped box. Lorelai clapped her hands; her eyes lit up as she asked if it was for her.

"It is," Rory said. "I know it's not Mother's Day yet, but I wanted to give this to you now since we're doing this whole dinner thing and it's just you and me and it's not really a present sort of present—"

"Rory, please, you're killing me," Lorelai said. "Hand it over already!"

She wasn't sure why her hands shook or why she had such odd quiverings behind her ribcage, why she felt so suddenly drawn as she passed the box to her mother and Lorelai decimated the wrapping paper and lifted the lid. Her breath came more quickly as Lorelai looked into the box, her brow knit in a question mark. Rory wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. She felt the weight of the moment on the top of her head, in the center of her chest. She was cold, exposed. Lorelai took the manuscript in her hands and dropped the box to the floor.

"The Book of Lorelai," she read. She flipped the cover and read the dedication. "For the reigning Lorelai, without whom there would be no book." She looked up at Rory. "Is this your portfolio, sweets?"

Rory swallowed thickly. "It's my portfolio, yes. I had it bound and covered for you today."

She smiled warmly as she turned the page and scanned the table of contents, running her finger down the page. "Suppositions," she read.

"That's from last semester," Rory supplied. "But I wanted you to have it."

"'Rumplestilskin in the Potting Shed,'" she continued, "'Chez Gilmore,' 'Town and Town Again,' 'A House Made Entirely of Cheese'…" She trailed off as she read the remainder to herself. "'Everybody Comes to Luke's,'" she read. She laughed aloud. "I like this last one: 'She's Gonna Make It After All: the Mary Tyler Moore of Stars Hollow, CT.' Is that you?"

"No, Mom, that's you," Rory said.

Lorelai looked at her blankly a moment. "You mean… These aren't—" she said slowly.

"They're all about me because they're all about you," Rory said.

Lorelai lowered her chin to her chest and chewed on her lower lip. Rory heard her take a shaky breath. She hitched her chair closer to her mother's, and Lorelai looked up, her eyes bright with
tears. "Rory, this is possibly the best gift I have ever, ever been given. Are they really…?"

Rory shrugged, embarrassed. "The class, this semester, was about narrative of location. Personal essays, creative non-fiction, whatever you want to call it, focused on place. Professor Flynn says that good writers don’t write about the thing they seem to be writing about, so if you’re writing about a place, you’re really writing about something bigger than the place itself. You’re telling your story, or someone else's story, or you’re making an analogy, or something like that. When I wrote about the places I know best, the essays, they just all started being about you and about you and me… I don’t know. I ended up who I am and where I am and doing all the things I do because—well, you know. And it’s all in there," she said, attempting a dismissive hand gesture. "I just wanted you to have these."

For several moments, Lorelai couldn’t speak; she stroked the binding of the manuscript, faintly shaking her head. She took a deep breath and looked up at length. She gave Rory a watery smile and put her arms around her daughter, hugged her tightly. "Thank you, Rory."

They had to hurry out of the restaurant and to the theater on campus, having dawdled over their food and conversation longer than they should have. Luke was waiting for them in the theater lobby, standing with his back to the front door as he examined the construction of the box office. His hands were jammed in the back pocket of his jeans and so caused the hem of his blazer to hike up slightly. Lorelai stumbled to a halt and grabbed Rory roughly by the elbow.

"There is nothing that man can wear that he doesn't look fantastic in, babe, but my God, when he wears the blazer with the white shirt and jeans, it is damn near impossible for me to put sentences together," Lorelai breathed.

"I find that damn near impossible," Rory said.

"Seriously, Rory, he is so scorching it's blinding."

"Seriously, Mom, he's going to be my step-dad."

Lorelai shook herself. "Let's go get our seats," she said. She came up behind Luke and slipped her hand in his. "Hey, stranger. Wanna find a dark corner and go make out?"

Luke turned and cocked an eyebrow at his fiancée. "Isn't there a play going on?"

Rory made a face and passed them to enter the darkened theater. "Could you two not do that, please?"

They had good seats. Rory let Luke take the aisle and she sat between her mother and a girl she knew from the paper there to review the play. They exchanged pleasantries, and Rory quickly flipped through her program. The lights descended completely, a hush fell over the theater, and the curtain rose.

He looked taller on stage, and his voice had a quality she hadn’t heard in it before. The confidence she knew he had, that he so rarely displayed around others, was evident in his carriage, in the way he walked, the timbre of his voice. He seemed at ease. Rory was aware that her critical faculties were somewhat compromised where Marty was concerned, but in his scenes with Alice, she thought him the superior performer of the two. The tall, goofily handsome boy on stage was both the Marty she knew and a new Marty all at once.

At the close of the first act, Rory's neighbor rose. "I'm going to go for a smoke. You want?"

"No, thanks," Rory said. "What do you think?"
She shrugged. "Not bad. But it's not over yet."

Lorelai tapped her shoulder. "He's good, sweets."

"He's good," Rory echoed, smiling.

They had arranged to meet in the lobby after the play. Rory stood clutching her purse in both hands, scanning the crowd as she waited and bounced on the balls of her feet. Lorelai stood just behind her with Luke, and she yawned and slumped against his side. Rory looked back at her.

"You don't have to stay, you know," she said. "He'll just be glad to know you came."

"But I wanted to meet his family," Lorelai said. "His parents and those infamous brothers."

Rory shook her head. "They couldn't come tonight. They'll be at the matinee tomorrow."

"What? Why?"


"Exactly," Rory said. "I'm sure Grandma will give you a full report tomorrow after she and Grandpa get to see it. They'll probably end up meeting the whole clan."

Lorelai reluctantly agreed to go; as she hugged her mother goodbye, Rory suspected her lingering had more to do with the discussion they'd had at dinner and the manuscript she carried tightly under her arm. Lorelai's embrace was a little more firm, more crushing than it had been in a long while. She whispered thanks and call mes and love yous before she stepped back, tucked her hair behind her ears, and linked her arm through Luke's. As Rory began to walk them to the door, she heard a familiar shout.

"Lorelais Gilmore!"

She turned on her heel to see Marty jogging towards them, grinning as he slowed his steps. Rory didn't wait for him to reach them and walked into a hug, wrapping her arms around his middle. He laughed as he put his arms around her. Rory pressed her cheek to his shoulder. "Hi," she said.


Lorelai clucked sympathetically. "There'll be other opportunities," she said. She gave him a tentative pat on the shoulder. "You were great."

Luke put out a hand and shook Marty's vigorously. "Nice job, there, buddy."

"Thanks," he said shyly, and took a step back. "Thanks for coming, really. It was wicked nice of you."

"Well, we're wicked glad we came," Lorelai said. She leaned forward and dropped a kiss on Rory's cheek. "We'll talk later? Great job, Marty, really. You had me so enthralled I forgot all about the Wave."

Marty looked to Rory, who shook her head. "It's the Gilmore way of saying 'excellent performance.'"

Luke, impatient to go, negotiated Lorelai towards the door with last goodbyes. Rory slipped her hand into Marty's as she watched them go, her chest tight when Lorelai looked over her shoulder,
smiled a watery smile, and mouthed thank you. Rory waved. Marty tightened his hand over hers; she looked up and kissed his cheek.

"You were amazing," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Amazing. What do you want to do now? Isn't there a cast party?"

Marty shook his head. "Sunday after the last show, we'll have one. A bunch of people are going out for drinks, but I kinda just—I don't really feel like being around people right now."

Rory tugged on his hand. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," he said with a smile. "I'm just not feeling very sociable."

"Okay. Well, I can drive you back to the dorm if you want to crash," she said. "Unless you think you could stand the burden of my presence for a few hours—"

"A few hours?" he asked. "Is that all you've got?" He put his arm around her as he walked her to the door. "The burden of your presence—such a martyr you are."

She shrugged awkwardly. "Well, I wouldn't want to impinge on your artistic need for space."

"Space is overrated."

"Good," she said. She leaned into him. They reached the car after a few moments. Rory fumbled for her keys in her purse. "Hey, I got you something. It's little, though, so don't get too excited."

"Rory, you know how I feel about jewelry," Marty said dryly.

"Oh, hush." She thrust the small item at him. "Here."

Marty took it from her with a momentarily baffled expression. His face broke into a wide, lopsided, goofy grin. He looked at her, his eyes soft. "A Homer Simpson Pez dispenser," he said. "You got me a Homer Simpson Pez dispenser."

Rory smoothed the shoulder of Marty's shirt and didn't meet his eye. "This does not mean that I in any way condone your weird Simpson collection, though."

He caught her hands in his. "No? So what does it mean?"

"You mean other than congratulations on a job well done?" she asked. "Just—you know."

"What?" He narrowed his eyes, looked at her closely, still holding her hands fast against his chest.

Rory lifted her chin and met his gaze. "Just... that I—that I love you. And you like The Simpsons and so, you know... Pez."

Marty leaned down and just touched his lips to hers. "Thank you," he said.

She blinked, unconsciously jerking her head back. Her throat burned. "Oh. You're welcome," she said, and her voice sounded high and thin.

He chuckled as he pressed a kiss to her temple. "Thank you for the Pez," he said, speaking low in her ear. She shivered. He pulled back and squeezed her hands, still clasped in his and trapped between them. "And you know I love you, too, right?"
Rory's chest flooded with heat. Her laugh was relieved, shaky. She closed her eyes as she rested her forehead against his. "I think I did, yeah," she said. She kissed him, hard, her eyes closed. "Let's go. Please?"

The dorm was quiet, many of the windows dark, when they climbed the stairs together to Rory's room. It was early by campus standards, the hour when students were trickling out of buildings and roaming university lanes and quads on their ways to their chosen entertainment. Rory unlocked her door, hearing the click of the key in the lock startlingly loud in the silent hall. She swallowed thickly; nervous tremors rippled through her veins, her bones, shook her hands and constricted her breathing. Marty followed her in, yawning and scratching his head.

Rory tossed her keys on her desk. She shrugged out of her cardigan and draped it over her chair, rubbed her arms with the palms of her hands. The room was lit only by the light peeking in from beneath the half-closed shade. Marty closed the door. He leaned against the foot of the bed, one foot crossed over the other, and bit his lips together.

"So," he said.

"There's supposed to be a big thing at the pub tonight, I guess," Rory said abruptly.

He furrowed his brow. "Did you want to go?"

"No," she said. "I'm just saying that's probably why it's so quiet here tonight, except that I didn't say that so the connection wasn't clear, obviously, but I didn't mean to say that—"

"Rory," Marty interrupted her gently, "you're babbling."

She smiled sheepishly. "I am. Sorry."

"Being a champion babbler myself, I am happy to hear somebody else do it for a change if only because it means that for a very brief time I could potentially be the most level-headed and sanest person in the room," he said. "Babble on, if you will." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "I'm going to go upstairs and change."

"No, don't," Rory said quickly, more loudly than she'd intended, and took a step forward. She answered his questioning look, her eyes cast down, and wrung her hands. "I want you to stay."

"Then I'll stay," he said. His tone was affable. "You want to get some food, watch TV or something?"

Rory shook her head. "No," she said. "Not right now."

Marty stood up straight. "Oh." He swallowed. Rory could see him pale even in the dark. "Okay."

She took another step towards him. She was vibrating, her body humming; she watched her outstretched hand against Marty's cheek, her fingertips sweep his brow, the lines of his jaw. Her other hand at his throat, she felt his pulse beneath her palm. She slipped her arms around his neck as he closed the distance between them and kissed her. He held her, and she felt his hands hard and firm against her back and shoulder. His mouth was hot, sweet, fixed against hers so fast it nearly hurt. Rory heard her breath quicken, the sound made low in her throat, and she slid her hand up into his hair, tugging gently at his curls.

She pulled back, breathless. "You cut your hair," she said. She combed it back a little. "I like it. It's short."
"Studly," he said. "For the play."

"Mm. I like it," she said again. She kissed him again, cupped his face in her hands, and kissed his forehead.

He murmured her name. "Should we talk—"

She shook her head mutely and traced a fingertip over his lower lip. "We talk too much."

His eyes widened. He loosened his hold on her and rubbed the small of her back with his thumbs. They locked eyes, reading each other in the darkened room. Rory willed Marty to see the silent confirmation, the acquiescence and need and more than that the raw emotion churning in her belly. It sent heat coursing through her. It emboldened her, and she turned in his arms, gathered her hair up and swept it over her shoulder. She cast a glance back at him.

Marty cleared his throat but took the hint. He struggled with the zipper of her dress, his fingers fumbling at her shoulder blades a moment. Rory choked on a giggle. Marty sighed, and the laugh died in her throat feeling the warmth of his breath on her neck. When he'd successfully eased the zipper down, Rory gave the top of the dress a short tug that freed it and helped it fall from her torso and over her hips. She stood, her back to Marty, in the puddle of the dress, in her strapless bra, panties, and heels, and felt his gaze settle at the nape of her neck. She tossed her hair, let her curls sweep across her shoulders once more, and breathed deeply. She turned to look at him in profile.

The expression on Marty's face, warm and overwhelmed and sweet and lovely, made her ache. She crossed her arms over her middle and waited.

He seemed to return to himself slightly. "Do you—I mean, should I—because I don't have, and that's—"

Rory winced. It suddenly seemed so crass, the same embarrassing subject she'd canvassed before with her mother. "Not here. The girls' room—" She stooped to pull her dress back up.

Marty took hold of her elbow. "I'll go. You stay." He laid his hand flush against her neck, passed his thumb across the dip in her collarbone. "I will literally be right back."

She leaned back against the bed when the door slammed behind him. She felt the comforter scratching the small of her back above the band of her underwear. She felt ridiculous, suddenly, standing there in her lace things with her high heels still on, her dress still in a heap at her ankles. She kept one arm crossed over her stomach as she reached down for the dress, stepping out of it as she did. She snapped it out in front of her with both hands and draped it over her desk chair. She stared at it, chewed on her lower lip. The minutes felt eternally long: the girls' room was not so far away, Marty should have gotten the condom—she grimaced at the word—by now, should have been back. She wondered idly if she should unmake her bed.

The door swinging inward startled her, and she immediately, instinctively covered herself with her arms. Marty closed the door quickly, his face red and embarrassed. He cleared his throat again as he stepped closer.

"Hi. Sorry. There was this girl? In the bathroom? And she was crying and—you don't care," he said. "Just—mission successful, I guess." He looked at his feet, toed off his shoes.

"Did she yell at you?" Rory asked. "For going in?"

"She yelled at me for having a penis," Marty said. "I'm thinking things aren't going so hot in her
love life at the moment."

Rory nodded silently. She scratched her shoulder, still protecting her chest and middle with her arms. "I thought you were gone a while."

"Sorry," he said again. He held her gaze levelly a moment. When he spoke, his voice was thick, strange. "Rory. Why are you hiding?"

Her face flooded with color. "I don't—I'm—I'm just not wearing very many clothes," she said. "And you sorta are." He immediately looked down and began to work at the buttons on his shirtfront. "Marty, wait," she said, beckoning him. She felt him watching her as she undid the buttons herself, pushed the shirt away from his shoulders. He wore a white tank undershirt; she grazed the fabric with her nails, down from the collar towards his navel. She felt his abdomen contract as she slid her hands beneath the tee and moved upward, her palms against his skin. "We were talking again," she said softly. "I'm all for talk in general, and I'm rather fond of our talking in particular, but—"

"But talking's entirely overrated," he finished, raised his arms as she pushed the shirt up over his head.

Rory closed her eyes as he reached for her, drove his hand into her hair and cradled her head as he roughly pulled her to him. She put her hand out, blindly searching for the edge of her comforter to draw the covers back. Had she coherent thought enough to notice, she would have been amused at the way the both of them tried to do so many things at once—she, working at the fly of his jeans and kicking off her heels, he, walking her back towards the head of the bed and straining to unclasp the back of her bra, both of them still locked in a heated, nearly desperate kiss. As it was, Rory was only vaguely aware that everything happened simultaneously. Marty was stepping out of his jeans and lifting her up; her shoes and bra were both gone, kicked elsewhere; she was locking her ankles behind his back and he was easing her onto the bed, pulling the covers further back. He laid her down, hovered over her, broke from her.

"My God, but you're beautiful," he said reverently.

Rory ran her fingers over his chin, his lower lip. "Back atcha," she whispered. She arched her back slightly, closing her eyes again, as Marty skimmed his hands along her sides. "Hey," she said. "Slow?"

He smiled and kissed her softly. "Slow."

It didn't feel the way she remembered it. There was no hurried, frenzied movement, no fraught silence. The desperation wasn't weighed down with despair. There was heat, and breath, and skin against skin, lips and teeth and tongue and long, slow kisses, gentle touches. There were whispers and sighs; there was soft laughter. There were hands clasped tightly together, limbs tangled. There were moments of slight awkwardness, of almost-but-not-quite-falling off the bed. There was pain: brief, sharp, searing. But it lasted the space of a breath and it was gone, and in its place was warmth and sensations so intensely felt, so delicious and sweet that the pleasure was nearly painful while it lasted.

He held her, after, and she listened to him breathing. He murmured her name against her temple, stroked her hair. Rory shifted in his arms and pressed her hand flat to his chest, felt Marty's heart thudding comfortably beneath her palm. She kissed his shoulder.

"That," she announced, "was perfect."

Marty chuckled. "Yeah?"
She nodded, rubbing her cheek against him. "Perfect. Thank you."

"Oh, thank you," he said, laughing again. Marty placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face to him. "I love you."

She kissed him. "I love you." She held his hand to her face. "God, I don't want it ever to be tomorrow."

"I have a feeling tomorrow's not going to be so bad," he told her. "Except for the part where I have to look your grandparents in the eye."

Rory exhaled shortly. "Well, I think as long as you don't lead off the conversation with 'I made sweet, sweet love to your only grandchild last night,' or any variation thereof, you'll be okay." She sighed and hugged him tightly. "Would you judge me if I told you I was hungry?"

"I would only judge you if you told me you had post-nookie munchies," Marty said. "Other than that, no." He moved, made to get up. "I'll get the phone. It's before one, the pizza place'll still deliver."

She half-sat up with him. "No," she said quickly. "Don't get up yet. I don't want to get up yet."

He gave her a questioning look but acquiesced, folded her in his arms once more as he settled on the pillow. He smoothed one hand along the length of her arm. "Your skin," he said. "You can see right into you. And I had no idea there was so much of you. Damn, woman, your legs go on for days."

"I like to keep some things to myself," she said.

"Do you?" He angled to look at her.

She propped herself up on one arm. "Well, I am willing to share."

Marty grinned at her. "You sure you don't want me to call?"

"You'll come right back?"

"I'll get the phone and come right back," he said. "I'll even make the call from here." He kissed her forehead. "Promise. And trust me, Rory: I'm going nowhere."

She tugged at his lower lip. "Good. I'll hold you to that."

Hours later, happy, sated, warm, Rory fell asleep tucked under Marty's arm, spooned against him. She held Marty's hand over her heart, clasped between her own and pressed tightly to her chest. The silence was velvet, comfortable—her head no longer rang with worry or music or things left unsaid.

When she woke in the morning, Marty still slept beside her, his arm slung comfortably over her middle. He slept with his mouth open, and there were imprints from the sheets on his face and a cowlick sticking up on the crown of his head. Rory smiled at him, traced his eyes with the tip of her finger. The light coming in from under the shade was thin, still. There was time yet, she thought, wriggling down beneath the covers, pulling Marty's arm around her. She fell asleep again, her head pillowed on his chest, and even in her dreams she couldn't keep from smiling.
To Emily, June was a month for traveling. It was a month for confirming reservations, for packing, for driving to the Cape. It was the month her flowers bloomed. June was a month of outdoor social events—teas and garden parties, lunches on the verandah. June was a month for weddings.

There were reasons people got married in June. The weather, for one—ceremonies could be held outdoors in the afternoon or evening and no one would wilt in the heat. Rain remained only a distant threat in June, rather than a possibility to prepare for. There was wind in June, friendly, soft wind. There were less questions regarding dresses and suits and the right weight of clothes in June. June was a time for weddings to happen, not for weddings to be planned. The phrase "a June bride," Emily knew, existed because people got married in June. She got married in June.

June was certainly not the month to be making last minute changes to the menu. One shouldn't debate strawberries and raspberries in June, nor base her decision on whichever Jackson thought looked better that week. By June, alterations on dresses should be finished—there should be no more tweaking the hem because of an accident with the measuring tape that led to the dress dragging a fraction of an inch in front where it shouldn't. In June, RSVPs should already be counted, and seating arrangements should already have been made, and everything should be set in stone, ready, and perfect.

People, Emily thought darkly, got married in June. They did not plan weddings in June. People who planned weddings in June ended up worrying about thunder and lightening storms. They worried about humidity, and whether or not said humidity would make their hair get horrendously huge like in that episode of Friends where they're all in Bermuda or the Bahamas or wherever and Monica's hair swells up to eight times its natural size—although what Lorelai was talking about when she said that, Emily had no idea.

People who planned weddings in June still had too many details left to consider, and it was really all very ridiculous.

Lorelai, Emily had to constantly remind herself, was not, nor had she ever been, people.

She had tried to talk her daughter out of it. "What about bees?" she'd asked.

Lorelai had looked at her, utterly baffled. "I don't know, Mom. What about bees?"

"What are you going to do about bees? Bees, Lorelai! With all the flowers and the people—bees can be very dangerous!"

"Well, Mom, then we'll keep an EpiPen handy in case someone gets stung and goes into anaphylactic shock and we have to shoot him full of adrenaline to keep him from swallowing his tongue," Lorelai said. "What is a wedding, after all, without a thrilling floor show? It'll make it all the more memorable."

Bees, Emily conceded, had been a weak approach. "You know it's going to be dreadfully hot."

"That's why we're having the ceremony in the evening, Mom," Lorelai said. "Evening means less hot. And," she added, seeing her mother prepared to continue, "you know, if it's hot, people will sweat. Nature's little cooling system."

"Lorelai!"
She rolled her eyes. "Sorry. If it's hot, we'll provide everyone with big paper fans and talcum powder, and people can just sit around, waving their fans and patting their bosoms with handkerchiefs and saying things like, 'Lawd, Millicent, has the heat evah been so dreadful?'" She spoke the last in an affected Southern accent.

"Really, Lorelai. You have no common sense."


"You know he's just going to melt in his tux."

Lorelai had choked slightly on the iced tea she was drinking. "Well, no, Mom, he's not."

"No? Are you psychic now? Is that how you can so successfully plan a late summer wedding and account for all these minor details, as you call them?" Emily asked.

She had averted her eyes guiltily. "Well, no, Mom, although psychic powers would come in handy for conversations like this. I just know that Luke won't be melting in his tux because Luke isn't wearing a tux."

At that point, Emily just had to leave the room.

She knew that Lorelai understood, however dimly and in whatever back corner of her brain where she stored such unpleasant information, that the wedding was the last important thing Emily could plan for her daughter. There had been the baptism, of course, and the multitudes of birthday parties, but upon the advent of Rory, all such grand celebrations had ended. There had been no coming out party, not even a sweet sixteen. There had never been a graduation party or another birthday party. Emily tsked in distaste, thinking of the last wedding shower and bachelorette party Lorelai had had—neither of which Emily had really been asked to be involved in. The reception in February had been one thing, she thought. That she'd at least had control over, and it went off perfectly (if the reception room was a little bare, no one seemed to notice but her, and after a few champagne cocktails, she'd forgotten until the next morning as well). But it somehow wasn't enough, now. The closer the wedding date came, the more useless and insignificant Emily began to feel.

She'd wanted to take Lorelai to New York to shop for a gown. When Lorelai told her in January that she would be wearing the most fabulous dress known to man, Emily had just assumed that meant something with a designer name—a Vera Wang, at the very least, though she knew certain other names were becoming en vogue now as well, but Caroline Herrera just didn't have the ring of a Vera Wang. But then she'd had tea with her daughter at the Dragonfly on an afternoon in May, just after the completion of Win's house, and Lorelai had mentioned in a deliberately casual tone that she'd just begun work on her dress and she'd really like Emily's opinion. Lorelai watched her carefully over the rim of her coffee cup; Emily felt herself go white to the lips, immediately unsure if the smirk she saw as Lorelai sipped her coffee was real or imagined.

Unable to speak, she pushed herself away from the table and strode purposefully to the door. Lorelai followed, calling out to her. Emily had stopped on the threshold, her back to her daughter. She didn't trust her voice: her throat was constricted, choked with tears pushed ever closer to the surface by the palpitations in her chest. Before she turned, she straightened her head and smoothed her skirt. The look on her face was a practiced one, haughty and cold.

"Yes, Lorelai?"

Lorelai chewed her lower lip. "I'm sorry if I upset you."
"Upset? No, Lorelai, you didn't *upset* me."

"No? Then why—"

"You've offended me is what you've done," she said; she could hear her voice rising and the anger thickening it. "For heaven's sake, Lorelai, are you ever going to let me do *anything* for you?"

The sympathetic head-tilt and soft smile was infuriating. "Mom. You do lots of things for me. You know that. You probably have a list in your purse."

"You're getting *married*, Lorelai."

"No, really? Damn. And I was so looking forward to getting bat mitzvahed."

"How can you wear a handmade dress at your wedding? Have you any idea how simple that is, how crass? I wanted to take you to New York, to choose something lovely and have it altered or if we couldn't find anything then hire someone to make it for you—that is what you do for a wedding, Lorelai, not slap together a dress in your kitchen." She sighed. "This is what mothers are supposed to do when their daughters get married, Lorelai—and it's just unkind of you, is what it is."

Lorelai looked down at her toes, her hands on her hips. When she raised her chin again, her features were carefully neutral, controlled. "Mother, while I appreciate that you would like to do something nice and buy me a wedding dress, I don't need you to do that for me. I am not going to *slap together* anything. I've chosen the designs I'm working from, I've hand-picked the fabric, I've thought this through very, very carefully." She paused. "This is important to me, Mom."

"But why?"

"Because of the chuppah."

"The chuppah?"

"It's a long story, and I'll tell you all about it sometime, but for right now, can you put the self-righteousness in the freezer for awhile and let me show you what I've done so far? You can thaw it out in a few weeks and it'll be just as fresh," Lorelai said.

It had only been drawings and swatches that day, but Emily kept tabs on the dress as it progressed. Lorelai only worked on it during the day and, before the moving and construction began on the house, hid it in the downstairs bathroom, explaining to Emily that she could lock it from the outside and that Luke didn't have a key. When the time came, she'd have to transfer all her things to Sookie's house, but in the meantime, the bathroom was working just fine.

Emily had to admit the dress was quite something. It was classic, all clean lines and elegant falls of fabric, and the color suited Lorelai's complexion perfectly. The lighting in the room had been terrible, of course, but even under the terrible lighting she could see that it was going to be lovely. One afternoon in late May, Lorelai called her over to show her the progress she was making. They stood in the bathroom, admiring the gown draped over the dressmaker's bust. Lorelai had stroked the fabric with a wistful smile as she pointed out the details, and for an instant, Emily didn't care that the dress didn't have a designer name attached.

"Oh, but I named it," Lorelai had told her. "I'm calling it Pretty Pretty Princess for now, but when it's put together a little more, it's really going to need a better name. Something silky," she said.

"Grace Kelly," Emily had idly fingered an edge of the fabric.
"What?"

She looked up to find Lorelai's eyes fixed on her. "Well, if you're calling it *Pretty Pretty Princess,*" she said, with a note of derision, "you might as well just call it Grace Kelly, because that's what she was."

"Mom, that is so brilliant," Lorelai said, marveling. She laid one hand on the shoulder of her dressmaker's mannequin, the other on Emily's wrist. "Hello, Lorelai's wedding dress. I dub thee Grace Kelly from henceforth on."

"You are the strangest girl," Emily sighed. "Will you at least let me take you into the city to buy some decent shoes?"

Lorelai shrugged. "Well, if you insist," she'd said with a grin.

When she and Richard left for the Cape, Emily decided to stop thinking about Lorelai's wedding. If it wasn't going to be when it should be, and she had already done her part by choosing and printing and sending the invitations, and Lorelai was being so impossible and doing everything on her own, there was no reason Emily needed to expend any more time on it either. She would go to the Cape and work on her novel and spend time with her husband and relax.

When it came right down to it, though, she'd never really been very good at relaxing.

She sat in the kitchen of their rented bungalow, drinking her third (fourth?) cup of coffee of the morning. She drummed her fingers on the tabletop. She had an engagement to play tennis with Bitty Charleston that afternoon, but that was still a few hours away. She'd read the paper already and gone over the menu and the shopping list with the cook. She'd called Rory. Richard still had her manuscript. How long could it take a man who read as much as Richard did to get through a manuscript? Especially one that wasn't more than half finished?

Emily was just about to rise from her chair and begin pacing when Richard ambled into the room. He still wore his reading spectacles and held the sheaf of papers that contained Emily's work of the last few months. He was absently patting his chest as he walked, as though looking for something in his breast pocket.

He peered at Emily over the top of his classes. "I seem to have misplaced my pen."

She handed him a ball-point she'd been using on the newspaper's daily crossword puzzle. She watched him scratch something on the manuscript. He returned the pen and took off his glasses.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Richard!" she cried. "Well?"

"You have a grammatical mistake here," he said. "I've corrected it for you."

Emily stared, mouth agape. "You've had it three hours and all you can think to say is that I have a grammatical mistake?"

He blinked. "What would you like me to say, my dear?"

"Something! Anything! What do you think?" she demanded.

He weighed his words carefully before he spoke. It riled her. "I think," he began slowly, "I would have liked to have known this Winifred person and her husband. They seem quite the interesting pair."

Emily's lips twitched. "They were at that. But the story, Richard. What do you think of the story?"
He laid the manuscript down. "I think the story is very fine, Emily. In need of some editing, but very fine."

She blushed, surprised at how relieved she was to hear his good opinion—she'd feared that he would take his honesty a step too far, as he was wont to do on occasions like this. "Yes, well, it's been some time since Rory has been able to work with me now that she has that internship, and she's been my editing guide up till now." She paused, clasped her hands. "Oh, Richard, do you really think so?"

"I look forward to reading more," he answered. "It will be an exceptional book, Emily. And now, I am off to humiliate the young folks at the golf course."

He left her with her novel and a kiss on the head. Emily ran her fingers along the lines of print—the electric typewriter had really been a good investment, no matter how much Rory had protested in favor of a laptop. Emily sighed. How she had gotten to this point, taking this project so seriously, immersing herself in it, she was unsure. It had been because of the letters, at first; they were good letters, full of wit and color and vivacity, and they deserved to be read. It had been for Win, too, who had so little left at the end of a life spent cataloguing the thoughts and motions of others. Win would have liked this project.

Over the last few months, however, it had turned into something more. Emily found the work of revising the letters engaging, and the story seemed to fill itself in for her. The scenarios of what Win did and how she looked and moved and read Harry's letters—it was all-consuming. Emily found herself thinking of it at the oddest times: in the middle of a DAR function or while she was getting her hair done, even in the shower. It wasn't something she felt she could explain to her husband. She saw it all so clearly, heard it all so precisely. It lived for her.

It should have felt silly. Emily Gilmore was not a woman who fantasized or daydreamed. Romance like that was the domain of younger people, those who were capable of changing their lives, who had not yet been disillusioned by the hard realities of day-to-day play pretend in her head all day long, every day, wasn't her province. She was a woman with a grown daughter, a grandchild, a woman who had been disappointed in her expectations of how certain things in her life had transpired—Lorelai's entire life after age fifteen, for one, her separation from Richard, for had come to terms with the majority of it, this was true, and if she were forced to say so under the threat of scalping, she wouldn't have it any other way given all the outcomes and in spite of the pain. It didn't do to dwell on things, though she did, or idly wonder how things could be different, though she had. This actively constructing some fictional world, however, built around two people who would rather eat crow than honestly admit how deeply they cared for each other, was something else altogether.

It had made Emily wonder if it was really possible to start all over again whenever a person wanted to. Was that what she'd done? Leaving Richard, coming back again? Having a job, working for Win after all those years of housewifery? Writing?

She set the manuscript aside, put it in the silverware was overwhelming herself with thoughts like that. Perhaps that was why she concentrated on the wedding the way she did. That at least was familiar.

As was tennis with Bitty Charleston, who would be expecting tea after the set. Emily became purposeful, called the cook in from the garden. Raspberries or strawberries with their shortcake?

Dear Mr. B—

Have you read Richardson's Pamela? Dreadful stuff. Only a middle-aged man would believe a sixteen-year-old girl should behave the way Pamela Andrews does. Her Mr. B is nothing short of
a villain. And you? I'm inclined to think you'd aspire to villainy if you thought you could successfully get away with it. Your better angels keep you in check.

Am I to assume from your silence lately that my letters have gone astray? Or that you've grown tired of me? You're too stubborn to let the war prevent you from writing. Set my mind at ease, will you? Wondering like this will give me prematurely gray hair, and I'd hate to have to blame you for that. I'm sure my mother would be less than pleased.

In all seriousness (a rarity we avoid at all costs, I know), this business of not writing for some unfounded belief that I am better off not hearing from you and that I will in the end only regret having known you really must end. I won't have it. I mean to harass you unmercifully until the end of days, and protesting through silence is as useless as it is silly and beneath you.

I expect a reply. I am wholly unused to failing expectations, and I don't intend to become accustomed to them now.

—Red

This particular letter fell somewhere near the end of Harry's second year away. His letters had become increasingly bleak and short, without the natural verve he'd had at the start. The more sordid corner of Emily's imagination attributed this to a drunken liaison with a French waitress that resulted in saw, however, a pair of broken blue eyes, distraught and betrayed, and knew that neither the Win of her creation nor the Win she'd known in life would have stood for it. Further, a man as far gone as Harry wouldn't submit to the baser impulse to stray, not when he felt that he'd met his match. She decided that he'd stopped trusting himself in the midst of the violence and death, that he didn't want to mar the bright, simple bond he and Win had with the sense of hopelessness he'd acquired as the war progressed.

It was such a man thing to do, she thought, to pull back instead of attempt resolution. She frowned as she framed the scene in her mind, pictured Harry reading the letter both delighted and torn. Really, it was all just too depressing, Emily thought. She reached for the phone.

"You know, Grandma," Rory said, some time later, "you might be onto something with that. I'll pick up some of his poetry and thumb through it, see what he was writing at the time."

"When do you think you might be able to come down and see us?" Emily asked. She hoped that she sounded less pathetically eager to Rory than she did to herself.

"This weekend, actually, if that's okay with you," Rory said. "This has been the longest week ever, and seeing as it's only Tuesday, I think a little beach time would be nice, and it's been so long since I've seen you and Grandpa, I miss you both."

"We miss you, too," Emily said. "And any time you'd like to come down you're welcome. You and your mother."

"You should call her," Rory said. "I'm sure she'd love it."

Emily thought about this a moment after hanging up with Rory. She wandered to the den that Richard had claimed as his and stood in the doorway. "What would you think about having the girls down for a weekend?"

"I think barbecue," Richard said. "Let's."

And so she had the phone in her hand again, feeling slightly tired of chasing after people instead of being called upon herself.
"Dragonfly Inn, Lorelai speaking."

"Hello, Lorelai."

"Mom! Hey, how's the Cape? You and Dad having fun? We're not going to see you topless on the cover of any tabloids, are we?"

"I should say not," she replied, aghast. "Really, Lorelai."

"You know me, Mom. Just like to spice things up."

"Yes, well how do you feel about spicing up a weekend down here with us?" she asked. She was about to continue when Lorelai heaved a sigh.

"Oh, Mom, you have no idea how fabulous that would be," Lorelai groaned. "I can't even tell you—my God, it's been the most hectic month. I'm exhausted."

Emily blinked rapidly. "You want to come, then."

"If you're offering, I'm accepting," Lorelai said. "Mom, can you hang on a sec?" There were muted noises for a few moments before Lorelai again sighed gustily. "I swear, I'm going to kill everyone."

"That's hardly wise," Emily said dryly. "Come this weekend. Rory will be here. Your father wants to barbecue."

"Oh, even better," Lorelai said.

"And Luke? Would he like to come as well?"

"You don't want Luke around right now, Mom. He's insanely grumpy. He makes psycho Jack Torrence look like Elmo."

"You don't sound terribly bothered by it."

"What can I say, Mom? The blush has yet to fall from the rose. That, and he's not here right now and it's much easier to put up with his moods when he's not in the immediate vicinity. When he's around, then it's, you know 'here's Johnny!'"

Emily paused. "Yes, well, I'm sure that's... unpleasant."

"You're telling me. I will not hide in the bathroom like some meek Shelly Duval, however... you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No, but I rarely do," Emily sighed. "Will you come, then?"

"If you build it, Mom, we will come."

"Lorelai."

"We're there," she said sheepishly. "Bye, Mom."

The impending visit gave her something else to do for the next few days, a welcome interruption to the rather bland routine she and Richard enjoyed at the Cape. There were bedrooms to be prepared, and menus, and new deck chairs to get, and a grill to set up. Planning was a language Emily liked, one she spoke fluently, and by the time Thursday evening arrived, she was pleasantly wearied of getting things ready. She sat down to her desk and surveyed her papers with a slight
sigh. What would happen to it all, she wondered. Where would the stories go when she was done with them?

Dear Red,

I won't attempt an explanation for my silence, and I don't think you really want one. I won't apologize, either, because I can't in my right mind apologize for something I did with the best intentions and the sincere belief that it was the only thing to do. In the end, though, I value your letters, your words, your very person, more than anything else in this sorry excuse for a world, and perhaps it's selfish, but I'm finding I really can't do without them.

When this war is over, we're going to go fishing, you and I. Some afternoon, I'll stop by your mother's house in whatever vehicle I can wrangle that day, and I'll lean on the horn until you come out looking fresh and bright as you do. We'll stop somewhere and buy a lunch, and then we'll drive to the lake. We'll sit on the dock, and we'll cast our lines out, and we'll sit together in the sun, waiting for the fish to bite. It will be an afternoon that lasts forever and we'll forget to go home until it's growing dark and you know your mother will be angry and you won't be allowed to see me for a week because I've kept you out scandalously late, but we won't care (much) because we'll have had a perfect afternoon, sitting by the water in the sun with our lines out before us.

Or we'll go dancing, some night. The music will be too loud and the room will be too hot, and there'll be a crowd, but it won't matter. We'll drink slow gin fizzes or whiskey sours or whatever it is that's popular to drink and we'll laugh, and I'll try to kiss you, most likely. And we'll forget to go home until it's growing light and you know your mother will be angry and you won't be allowed to see me for a week because I've kept you out scandalously late, but we won't care (much) because we'll have had a perfect night dancing by the window to music we never really hear.

Yours,

Harry

PS Just in case you're worried, fishing need not involve actual fish.

Emily was in the garden, cutting blossoms for her table, when she heard the first car pull up. She hurried through the house, still wearing her gardening gloves, to the driveway. She stopped short in the front doorway when she saw Lorelai swing the driver's side door of her Jeep open and stumble out. Her daughter smiled brightly at her and waved before she disappeared behind the front seat again in search of her overnight bag. Emily crossed her arms over her chest, forgetful of the dirt on her gloves, and watched Lorelai with a sour expression as she approached.

Lorelai's smile had changed imperceptibly from genuine and relaxed to stiff and forced during the short walk to the door. "Hi, Mom," she said tightly. "What's up?"

"Where is Luke?"

Lorelai dropped the pretense of smiling and rolled her eyes, slumped her shoulders. "Luke is in Stars Hollow, Mom. He had to work this weekend."

Emily narrowed her eyes. "You're not fighting again?"

"No, we're not fighting again!" Lorelai cried, a bit defensively, Emily thought.

"Are you sure?"

"Hey, it's nice to see you, too, Mom, and I would love to put my things down and get a cup of
coffee, thanks so much for asking,” Lorelai said, her voice flat. "Can I come in, please?"

She paused a moment and looked at Lorelai’s bag critically. "You do realize you’re only here for the weekend,” she drawled, gesturing to the rather overly-fat bag.

"Mom. I'll take you down if you're keeping me from the coffee."

Emily stepped aside and closed the door behind her. She gestured for Lorelai to follow her into the kitchen, where Lorelai dropped her bag unceremoniously on a chair and fell into another with a sigh. Emily held her tongue as she went about arranging the coffee service and pouring the fresh brew into a china pot.

"Mom, seriously?" Lorelai said. "I'll totally just drink it out of a trough, so there's no need for the fancy."

Emily didn't reply as she carried the tray to the table. "Would you like to sit on the patio outside?"

"I really wouldn't," Lorelai replied. "In a bit. Right now, I want to keep sitting. I'm exhausted."

"And why, might a person ask, are you so tired?"

Lorelai poured herself a cup of coffee and took a long swallow before she answered. "Hellish few weeks at the inn."

"And the house?"

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Dear mother of pearl, is that a way bigger pain in the ass than I ever expected. Which was stupid, because the Dragonfly was under construction not that long ago and I remember what that was like, so I'm not sure why I thought this would be all pie-like and easy."

"I imagine because you knew Luke would be there as well," Emily said lightly. She sipped her coffee and eyed Lorelai over the rim of her cup.

"Yes, because that somehow makes all the difference," Lorelai drawled. She paused. "Well, it does, I guess." She looked at her mother. "You want to ask, Mom, so just go ahead and ask."

Emily pursed her lips a moment before giving it. "It's just that when I spoke to you earlier in the week you made it sound as though Luke would definitely be coming with you, and I just don't understand why, if things are going well, he wouldn't be here with you right now."

Lorelai sipped her coffee and exhaled shortly. She pushed a lock of hair out of her eyes, and Emily could see her reigning in her irritation slightly. "Well," she began, "you know that Luke and I were supposed to go away together."

"I do know that, yes," Emily said.

"And Luke took the whole weekend off, Friday morning to Monday morning, so that he could go with me. It was a little bit of a pain in the ass for him because it's tourist season in the Hollow right now, but he arranged it all anyway. He was great. And then, the day before we were supposed to go, we had a little emergency at the Inn," Lorelai said. She sighed heavily. "Little meaning disgusting. Three of our toilets just spontaneously exploded. Like, exploded, exploded. Porcelain flying through the air. Water all over the place."

Emily's mouth dropped open. "What on earth—"
Lorelai put a hand to her forehead. "Oh, there was some sort of build up in the septic system, gas or something, I don't know, but it just—exploded. It was bad. And I couldn't just leave, not with all that was going on, so I had to sort of cancel the weekend Luke had planned for us."

"You sort of had to cancel," Emily said.

"I did cancel. Well, I postponed, technically, but we still didn't end up going when we were supposed to," Lorelai said. "And then, this weekend, Luke had already given most of the weekend off to a lot of his staff in exchange for when he'd be gone, so he has to be at work this weekend so that the diner can even stay open, and it's just—it's a whole thing," she finished. "It sucks, but it is what it is."

Emily refilled their cups. "And is Luke angry with you?"

Lorelai poured cream into her coffee, her mouth set in a hard line. "He's not—he's not pleased, or anything, but he's not really mad at me. He knows I don't have any control over the explosive tendencies of the Inn's plumbing." She stirred her coffee. "I really wanted to go. I think he knows that."

"And he's all right with you being here now?"

"If he's not, he didn't say anything," Lorelai replied. "I needed to get away from that inn. And the town. And my life. That he definitely knows. It's just been crazy, with the whole flying poo fiasco. It would be better if he were here, but he's not, so we'll see each other on Sunday and we'll go away together another weekend and hopefully the gods of fecal matter—"

"Lorelai!"

"—will not conspire against us again." She shrugged. "I told him I would stay home with him, but he told me to come see Rory, that that was more important."

Emily softened slightly. "That was an extremely generous thing to say."

"That's Luke."

They fell into idle chatter a few moments before they heard the sound of wheels on gravel outside. Rory was at the door, letting herself in, before they rose from their chairs. She hurried into the kitchen, breathless and smiling. "Oh, man," she said, "I'll give you both a proper hello in a sec, but first I really hafta pee."

Emily closed her eyes and shook her head. "Little apples," she sighed.

Lorelai snorted into her coffee cup. "Says the original mother tree."

It was a bright day, the sky hard and blue and cloudless; the breeze coming in off the water kept the Gilmores cool as they reclined in chairs on the beach. The women sat in a row, Lorelai, Rory, Emily, all wearing sunglasses and hats, all with books spread open on their laps and bottles of water in their hands. Richard snored under an umbrella just behind them, dozing after the filling lunch he'd just had. Lorelai was recounting in graphic detail the story of the exploding toilets for Rory complete with sound effects. Emily closed her eyes and leant her head back. This, she thought, was what people meant when they talked about relaxing.

"And then I had to shower for, like, hours and hours and hours," Lorelai finished.

"You made a rhyme!" Rory giggled. "And, while I know it was traumatic for you, the story seriously gets better every time you tell it."
"How many times have you heard it, Rory?" Emily asked.

Rory feigned thoughtfulness. "At least half a dozen. My favorite addition is about reading the patterns on the wall for omens."

"You didn't think that was a little over the top?" Lorelai asked.

"If the image of the Shit Demon Caldron of Death wasn't over the top, I think playing fortune-teller with the bathroom walls is all good," Rory chuckled. "What do you think, Grandma?" The Lorelais leaned forward in their chairs to peer at Emily.

She raised an eyebrow. "I think your mother should consider installing bidets," she said. She had no idea why her daughter and granddaughter found this so funny.

It was one of the more pleasant days of recent memory. Emily had reconciled herself years ago to monotony, to the point that she found a certain comfort in its stability and the no-nonsense quality of it, but she had to admit that change was refreshing. The girls were exuberant and joyful together, constantly falling into fits of laughter, jabbering on like teenagers at the mall. She felt younger in their presence, and more than that extraordinarily pleased to see them both so happy. Rory seemed weary but upbeat; she found the work at the magazine, she said, interesting and challenging and fun. She added that living with a two-year-old was a similar and more tiring experience. And smelled slightly less appetizing. Lorelai, Emily thought with a chagrined sigh, was Lorelai: chatty, goofy, entirely ridiculous. It was pleasant to listen to them trading witticisms, gratifying to be occasionally included.

It was after dinner and port that Lorelai herded Emily and Rory into her bedroom and told them to sit tight. She disappeared into the bathroom. Emily looked a question mark at Rory, who shrugged. They sat together, side by side on the bed, talking idly about the book. Rory thought Harry's poetry particularly depressing during the period when the letters had temporarily ceased.

"But really, Grandma, I don't know how much that will help you, because all Harry's war poetry was depressing," Rory said. "This was just… uber-depressing."

They heard a slight crash from the bathroom. Emily rolled her eyes. "For heaven's sake, Lorelai, what on earth is going on in there?"

The bathroom door swung open. "Just a little sartorial mishap," Lorelai said. She peeked around the door. "Okay, so, I need you to be honest about this." Off Emily's look, she nodded. "And I mean that in all sincerity. Honesty, no holds barred, okay?"

Rory furrowed her brow. "Mom?"

Lorelai took a deep breath and stepped out from behind the door, the expression on her face both tremulous and tentative. "It's the first time I've tried it on all put together, and in front of anyone," she said. She shuffled into the bedroom and folded her hands demurely in front of her. "What do you think?"

Both Emily and Rory were on their feet. Rory clasped her hands in front of her, hopped up and down on the tips of her toes as she cooed in delight. She clapped her hands, laughing. "Mom!" she cried. "You look beautiful!"

Lorelai bit her lower lip. Her eyes were bright. "You think?"

Rory held out her arms to her and stepped into a hug. "You're in your wedding dress!"
Lorelai rocked Rory a moment, looking over her daughter's shoulder at her mother. "Mom?"

It fit her beautifully: the bust and waist hugged her curves, but not in any way overtly suggestive—rather, they accentuated how fit and young and lovely she was; the skirt fell from her hips in smooth cascades, the lines clean, deliberate. The color, a rich ivory, complimented Lorelai's complexion, set off her freckles and her eyes. Emily saw hints of fine needlework, detailing that was barely visible but accented the cut of the dress. Lorelai disentangled herself from Rory and smoothed the front of the dress with her hands.

"What do you think?" she asked in a small voice.

Emily said nothing a moment, but stood shaking her head. She cleared her throat. "It's lovely."

Lorelai's face broke open in a watery smile. "Really? You think so? It passes the Emily Gilmore muster?"

"Does it really matter whether or not it passes my muster?" Emily asked.

She saw her daughter's expression falter. "Yeah, Mom. It does." She paused, pouting. "I mean, I know you'd rather I get married in Caroline Herrera, or something, but this is my wedding dress, and I would like it if you didn't think it was heinous."

"I don't think it's heinous," Emily said gently. "I think you've done a very fine job. Caroline Herrera should be taking notes."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "Yes. Shall we go downstairs for some coffee?"

Emily and Rory helped Lorelai out of her dress and the three women wandered down to the kitchen for their after-dinner coffee. Lorelai listened as her mother and daughter talked about their novel, nodding occasionally in agreement, but mainly she was quiet, blowing into her coffee. Her lack of contribution to the conversation distracted Emily—Lorelai's brow and mouth were set in thoughtful lines, and Emily found it drew her attention away from the topic at hand more than any witty aside or silly pun could.

"Lorelai, may a person ask what it is you're thinking of?" she asked.

Lorelai looked up from her cup, startled slightly. She sat up straighter in her chair. "Oh, just—I was just thinking—nothing," she said. She shook her head, more sheepish now than thoughtful. "Really, nothing."

"Come on, Mom," Rory said, teasing. "It's just us girls. Grandpa's already snoring in the study."

"He is at that," Emily intoned. "It's not even eight o'clock yet."

"It's seriously nothing. Less than nothing. I just—you're talking about the book, which I want to read, but I don't want to read it until it's all done, so I zoned out, a little. Like Angela Chase in English class."

"If it's nothing," Emily said, "then it won't hurt to share it, now, will it?"

Lorelai sputtered a moment. "I was just wondering—thinking—whatever, but about—about TiVo."

"TiVo?"
"I'm thinking about getting TiVo," she said. "And how weird our recommendations are going to be, after Luke and I program in the shows we watch. I mean, hello, between his sports stuff and my shows, like, you know, Veronica Mars, we're going to end up with stuff like—like—like Space Balls."

"Space Balls?" Emily asked.

"Since when do you watch Veronica Mars?" Rory asked.

She smiled enigmatically and sipped her coffee. "That's what I was thinking about. It's a really good show. That Kristen Bell, she's sassy." With that, Lorelai rose. "But I'm-a going to bed. I'll see you both in the morning."

Emily watched her go. "She's very happy these days," she remarked.

Rory nodded. "She is. She's working too hard, between the wedding and the inn and the addition to the house, though. Luke says she never sleeps anymore."

"This incident with the—the exploding bathrooms," Emily said, "was it really so bad as she makes it out to be?"

"It was bad, Grandma. They had reservations for those rooms and there was nowhere to put those people for two weeks. Mom actually downplayed it—not the messy part, with the stuff everywhere, because that was disgusting, but it really did some damage."

"Is she doing all right, financially speaking?"

Rory shifted uncomfortably. "She doesn't talk about that sort of thing with me."

"But you have a guess?"

She sighed. "I know that last fall things were going okay—they were understaffed all the time and they had to raise their minimum hiring wage because they weren't making competitive offers, but by Thanksgiving the booking had picked up and they were doing all right. They added that extra room, out back, so that helped, but there's no cushion with all the loans and everything. Mom thought she and Sookie would break even even after a year, but I don't know that they did." Rory toyed with her coffee cup, ran her finger around the rim. "Luke put up all the money for the addition—"

"Even after that loan he gave your mother last year?"

Her granddaughter's mouth quirked in a smile. "You're just all full of questions tonight, Grandma."

"It's not as though your mother tells me these things, you know."

"I know," she said softly. "But it's not as though she tells anyone else, either. I picked this all up from things I've overheard or that Luke's told me, and even he hasn't really had a conversation about it with her."

"Is he worried?" Emily asked.

"No, I don't think so. He told me not to worry, anyway," she said. "But he would say that even if he and Mom were walking around in barrels." She looked up. "I know that the diner does well, consistently, so Luke's income is pretty steady, and that even though he had to use a lot of his savings, Kirk says he has a solid investment portfolio and it won't take too long for him to recoup some of that."
"Kirk?"

"Kirk, the guy from town?" Rory said. "He said he heard it from Taylor, the town magistrate, and I don't know how he knows, but it's probably reliable information. Anyway—they're not necessarily in the best shape right now at the inn, but Mom's plan has always been optimistic. Between she and Luke, they're going to be okay." She paused. "I mean, at least she's not losing her staff on a regular basis anymore, and the restaurant's been making great reviews, so there's that going in her favor. It's just going to take a lot longer than any of us thought, and it feels like that's not such a great thing with the wedding coming up, but I think in the end everything will even out."

Emily sat silently a few moments, her lips pursed tightly together. "Has your mother—has she mentioned—she or Luke—how these sorts of things will figure into their plans if they have children?"

Rory's eyebrows shot up. "Children?"

"They are planning on having children, aren't they?"

Her eyes faltered. "I haven't asked, but I wouldn't be surprised. They should. They'd be great parents together. And if they do, they'll take care of whatever they have to, money-wise. I know Luke, Grandma, and if he knew he was having a baby—or, I mean, Mom was having a baby with him—he'd plan ahead. He probably wouldn't tell anyone, but he'd do it."

Emily pushed out of her seat and took the dirty cups to the sink. She braced herself against the countertop with the palms of her hand, hot anger suddenly swelling in her throat. "They're both so damned independent!" she cried. "Can't they ever just ask for anything?"

Rory laughed. "And you're surprised?"

She looked over at her granddaughter. "What?"

"Grandma," she said gently. "This is how they are. It's what they do. Stuff happens all the time—stuff nobody ever knows about, I'm sure, and they deal with it. You know how independent Mom is, and Luke's the same way. At least they're together, now: the two of them working together is better than either one of them fighting out this stuff alone. Yeah, it can be annoying, but they're taking care of each other."

Emily pouted. "Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, Rory."

"I know."

She let her shoulders fall. "Well, good. Let's go to bed, shall we? We'll have the whole day tomorrow to bully your mother into some downtime." She walked down the hall with her arm around Rory. They stopped together at the bottom of the stairs. "Rory, what on earth is a TiVo?"

The subject of the honeymoon came up the next afternoon, when the Gilmore women were walking up from the beach to the house. Lorelai had successfully negotiated the conversation away from the wedding for most of the morning, but as she trudged back up to the house she whined that she didn't know when she'd have a vacation again.

"What about your honeymoon?" Emily inquired.

"What about it?"
"Aren't you going on a honeymoon, Lorelai?"

"We are," she said. "I don't know where, though."

Emily looked at her askance. "How can you not know where you're going on your honeymoon?"

Rory giggled. "Luke won't tell her."

Lorelai shot her a look. "No, he won't, and you're taking far too much pleasure out of that. There is a good reason for it."

"Which is?" Emily asked.

"He thinks I can't keep a secret, and we're telling no one where we're going," Lorelai said.

"You're not telling anyone where you're going? Lorelai, that's not safe."

She grinned. "No, Mom, that's not what I said. We're telling no one."

"Lorelai, I really have no idea what you're talking about," Emily sighed. "Please don't be cryptic."

"We're telling no one," she said again. "And by no one, we mean Rory, Jess, and you and Dad, just in case of emergencies. If we said we weren't telling anyone, then that would be a lie, but if we say we're telling no one, we're not really lying, we're just going by a different definition of no one. It's genius, I swear." She tossed her hair. "So, if someone asks you where we went, you can just shrug and say 'oh, they told no one where they're honeymooning; no one knows.' And since you're no one, you really do know! This way, we won't have people calling us from the diner or the inn, but if there's a real emergency and we need to come home, the most important people will be able to get in contact with us."

Emily considered this a moment. "I can see why you might do that, but why won't Luke tell you?"

"Because he doesn't think she can keep it a secret before they go," Rory supplied. "He thinks she'll tell Sookie or someone and ruin the whole plan."

"Which is just so ridiculous," she whined. "I mean, really, I can totally—"

"Not keep a secret," Rory interrupted.

"You know, I'm starting to feel like Rodney Dangerfield."

Emily looked a question at Rory, who rolled her eyes. "She gets no respect," she said. "When is Luke going to tell you?"

"When we get to the airport, apparently," Lorelai muttered. "It's all very demeaning." She slipped her shoes off as they entered the house. "But I'm sure he'll tell you as soon as he has everything confirmed, Mom."

"Is he really not wearing a tux at his own wedding, Lorelai?"

In response, Lorelai only laughed.

Dear Mr. B,

It's a clear night, here, and hot. My mother is currently wilting in a cool bath upstairs with mint leaves in the water and packs of ice over her eyes. Why she feels the need to rest, I've no idea, as
she wasn't the one on her hands and knees in the victory garden all day, positively baking in the sun. I am Red tonight in more ways than one.

Have I told you I've taken up a job at the public library, in their town archives? The books all smell dreadfully old and musty, and the light in there is terrible. There are some documents I just can't make out, but I will, eventually. Your great-great-grandfather had terrible handwriting in particular, but I have complete confidence I'll crack him eventually. I always do.

I'm afraid this is a boring, horrendously boring letter. I've nothing really to say—only that I'm here, and it's summer, and you're far away—it's summer where you are, too, I know, but somehow it feels as if it can't be—and it seems to me that, near or far, we're both lonely. How lucky we are to have found another lonely person to listen to our complaints.

Regardless of what my mother might say, when this war is over and you keep me out far too late and set people to talking, I think a week of being locked in my ivory tower is just far too long. What a relief it is to know that even ivory towers must have windows and that forbidden things are not necessarily impossible to achieve. Take me dancing, take me for a midnight picnic (instead of fishing, which, even without fish, is unappealing at best)—my mother can tell me I'm not allowed to see you for ten years and it won't keep me from doing just as I please, should it be seeing you or not.

I'll write again when I have something slightly more interesting to say, when I'm not wasting paper just for the sake of scrawling my name.

Keep writing.

Yours,

Red

It was quieter when the girls left, which Emily knew shouldn't surprise her. Nor should it surprise her, she knew, that the older she and they got, the more she enjoyed their company, their gossip, their chatter. In spite of everything, after all the years of silence and anger between her and Lorelai, she felt closer to her daughter than ever—she understood her now better than she used to, though she wasn't sure what had changed. Lorelai claimed that Emily herself had changed, that she'd become softer somehow, more giving and less critical, more allowing of the frailties of others—Emily wasn't so sure that all that was true. She didn't think she'd changed so much; she only felt she understood now where she stood in the universe, and that change was incremental. She was a wife and a mother and a grandmother, and those were definitions constantly in flux in the Gilmore family. When she knew that to be true, Emily thought, it became easier to be all three.

She told Richard she was going home for a DAR function she couldn't get out of, which was only partly the truth. She decided to drive up from the Cape, rather than hire a chauffeur or take the train; there was something rather liberating in the whole affair, something clandestine. At home, she changed and showered and went to the hotel for the reception, and when her function was nearly over, she excused herself on the pretense of a family obligation. The drive to Stars Hollow was short. Emily knew it would be faster to go to the Dragonfly directly, but she liked driving through the center of town, honking at Gypsy and slowing down for a momentary bitch session with her old landlord and surprising friend; she enjoyed driving past the persnickety grocer and his silly soda shop, slowing down with great effect and sarcasm that was always lost on him; she was always comforted by the sight of Luke in his diner as she drove past, solid and reliable and irritated with the world, a condition she understood; she paid her silent homage to Win in her drive as well, rolling past the house that was intended for her little departed friend. It helped to see the house standing and complete, and that there were people there that could enjoy it, people she could talk to about Win if she felt the need. She passed Win's house at a crawl and took a short
detour to Lorelai's house, just to check, and found it overrun with construction workers in a way that worryingly resembled an ant hill. The Dragonfly, by contrast, seemed serenely quiet when she pulled her car up beside the stables.

Lorelai was in the kitchen with Sookie, tasting cake frosting. "God," she said loudly, "this is like pure cocoa powder! It's almost disgusting, and I love it!"


"Sookie, have we not learned this lesson before? Joking that my mother is in the room is not in any way going to distract me from—"

"Hello, Lorelai."

Lorelai dropped her spoon with a shriek. She turned, her smile tight and false. "Mom!" she said, her voice unnaturally high. "Hi! What brings you here?"

"I had a DAR event in Hartford I couldn't miss. I wondered if you had a moment?"

"Do I have a moment?" Lorelai repeated. "A moment, huh? Do I have a moment? Let me think about this, a moment, a moment, huh…"

"Lorelai."

"Of course I have a moment, Mom. Would you like to sit outside? Maybe have a cup of tea?"

"That would be lovely."

They made easy small talk for a few moments before Lorelai very directly cut to the point. "So, Mom. What're you doing here?"

Emily smoothed her hair into place. "I have something for you."

"Something for me? Why? What's the occasion?" she asked, delighted.

"It's a gift for your wedding."

"For the wedding? But, Mom—"

She reached down into her purse for the small box she'd brought with her when she left her house that morning. "It's not your wedding present, I feel I should clarify that for you. Your father and I have something lovely for you and Luke—"

"This isn't the gift you bought me for the Wedding That Wasn't, is it?" Lorelai asked. "You never did tell me what that was."

"You'll find out eventually," Emily said dryly. "This is something that's just for you. Consider it a bridal present. I know that you have your dress taken care of—"

"Yes, Mom, I do."

"—and you probably also have your something old, something new, borrowed, and blue, all those things?"

Lorelai nodded. "The dress and the shoes will be new, and I'm borrowing an anklet of Rory's. The blue is going to be… well, let's just say it's under the dress."
"And the old?"

She shrugged. "I don't have that yet."

Emily pushed the box towards her. "Consider these your old, then." She spoke as Lorelai lifted the lid and stared at the contents of the box wordlessly, her eyes wide. "They were my grandmother's. When my mother married my father, Grandmother gave them to her to wear. I wore them when you were christened. I would have given you the tiara, but it seems a little ostentatious for what you'll be wearing..." She trailed off. "These seemed to suit you better."

Lorelai lifted the combs from the box gingerly, with shaking fingers. Emily couldn't count the number of times she'd worn them, securing some elaborate upsweep of curls, a French twist or chignon from one formal event or another. Lorelai ran her fingertips along the pearls and diamonds interwoven above the teeth of the combs. Emily could see the way they would look set in Lorelai's dark hair, pale and shimmering at once. Her daughter took a slightly ragged breath and looked up. The jeweled combs rested in the palm of her hands and she held them cupped with a reverence Emily had never seen before.

"I used to—I remember seeing you and Daddy leave for the symphony fundraiser or the hospital wing dedication or whatever huge event you were going to, how you would always slip these into your hair on your way out the door," she said softly. "I remember these. I—I remember the times you would let me watch you get ready, when you would lay out all your jewelry, how much you loved these." She stroked them gently once more. "These were always my favorite, too. I thought they looked so beautiful in your hair. They always made me think of—of Rita Hayworth or Ava Gardner or some other glamorous movie star, you know? I always thought if I could wear these, I'd be—I'd be—"

"Grace Kelly," Emily suggested. "I did always love these. But it's long past time you have them," she said. "They'll look lovely with your dress, that ring." She held out her hand, gesturing that Lorelai show her the ring. Emily hoped Lorelai wouldn't see the slight tremble in her own hands when her daughter laid her hand in hers. She feigned a critical expression. "It's really quite lovely—an exquisite setting." She turned the platinum band slightly. "The stones are good quality, too—sapphires can be difficult to match, you know, but these look—" She stopped abruptly. "It's a beautiful ring, Lorelai. Was it in Luke's family?"

She shook her head, her hair swinging lightly at her shoulders. "No—Luke's dad couldn't afford a ring when he asked Luke's mom to marry him," she said. "And then after Luke and his sister were born, she was ill. Luke says it just stopped being important. He says his dad regretted it, after." She wiggled her fingers in Emily's hand. "He got this one at an antique jewelry store, but—"

"It seems made for you," Emily finished. "I quite agree." She paused. "Regardless of what Luke does or does not wear—" Lorelai snorted in laughter. "—or what your dress looks like, though I do like it very much, it will be a beautiful wedding." She released Lorelai's hand, only then aware that she had been gripping it tightly between her own.

Lorelai smiled. "Thank you, Mom. Really." She put the combs back in the box. "And thank you for these."

"Wear them well," Emily said. She got to her feet. "I should go. Your father's waiting."

Lorelai walked her to her car, chatting idly about the weather at the Cape. As Emily put her hand out to open the car door, Lorelai pulled her mother into a tight hug. "Thank you, Mommy."

Emily raised a hand uncertainly, smoothed Lorelai's hair down from the crown of her head to her
shoulders. "You're welcome, Lorelai." She took a breath, held it. "I love you."

Her arms tightened convulsively around Emily. "I love you, Mom."

She drove back to the Cape feeling curiously light.
July

The end of June had been humid and hot, and the strange, sickly sweet smell the occasional faint breezes carried made Luke anything but sad to see it go. June had always been his favorite of the summer months: there was the residual giddy feeling of possibility left over from years in grade school and last days of classes, and even he had to admit that Stars Hollow blossomed in the most surprising and lovely ways. He wasn't a flower guy and he didn't understand people who liked gardening for fun any more than he understood people who considered golf a serious sport, but the town decked itself out in the frilliest, pinkest, whitest, frothiest blooms, and he couldn't deny it pleased some latent part of his brain. The June that had just passed, however, was of a different character altogether. Everything that should have been pretty and sweet was wilted, limp, soggy, and possessed of a faintly rotten odor. The heat was so all-consuming that the lethargy that came over almost everyone Luke knew seemed to take over the buildings and streets and trees. The whole town drooped.

He contemplated the heat as he sprawled flat on his back on the floor of his new bedroom. Lorelai's old room was now longer and wider, and the ceiling sloped up more towards the back side of the room. He tried to remember the way it had been arranged before, the comfortable mess and girly floral decoration. The sheer expanse of white around him obliterated the old room—sunlight slanted against the sheetrock and glared hollowly off the opposite walls and bare wood floor. Luke folded his hands over his stomach and tipped his head, trying to picture how it would look after Lorelai was through with it, but the reflections off the walls were too bright, too unrelenting, and he gave in, closed his eyes, and enjoyed a moment of pure, blissfully self-indulgent misery.

No matter how many years he’d lived in Stars Hollow, the heat and humidity were always a surprise. He’d been through it literally dozens of times before, seen the seasons change every year, and empirically, he knew it was going to be hot. He knew this the same way that he knew that Kirk would come into the diner every day at the same time and perform the same obnoxious rituals as the day before. Yet he always let himself be taken by surprise at how miserable the heat could be and how irritated he could get; he was perpetually unprepared for the inevitable sameness in each summer. After tucking his chin to his chest and walking his way through the cold winters with his eyes cast down, determined to get through the worst of it, he saw summer as a softer reprieve. He was fooling himself, he knew: June had already smacked him upside the head for his naïveté, and July was looking just as torturous.

The front door slammed downstairs, and at the click of heels on hardwood in the foyer, Luke knew he should get up.

"Luke?" Her voice was weary.

"Up here."

He listened to Lorelai coming up the stairs. First one shoe landed with a dull thud, then the other. He heard the distinct sound of a zipper, imagined he could hear the whisper of the fabric as she pushed the skirt she wore down over her hips and climbed the remaining stairs. She was struggling to yank her shirt over her head as she came in the room. When she emerged, red and perspiring, she didn't return Luke’s lazy grin, her face puckered in a sour expression. She fairly collapsed to the floor beside him, rested her head on the center of his chest.

"Oh, my hell. It is so friggin' hot. I want to die," she mumbled. "Hate."

Luke stroked her hair away from her forehead. "Right there with you."
"Too hot for clothes," she continued. "Take 'em off."

"You did," he told her. "Thank you, by the way."

Lorelai scowled. "Har-dee-har-har. I meant you, you goon. Just looking at you makes me hot," she said, gesturing with one hand to his jeans and tee shirt.

"Thank you. Nice to know we haven't lost the passion."

She sat up and stared at him balefully. "I feel like we've entered the Outer Limits and we've swapped personalities, here. Me, all grunty, you all quick with the quipping. You aren't suddenly overcome by a desire to wear high heels and toss your hair, are you?"

He lifted one eyebrow. "Now that you mention it…"

"Oh, stop," she said. "C'mere." She took his hands in hers and pulled him to sit up, rolled his shirt off, and in one swift movement, had him flat on his back again and herself seated atop his thighs. She worked the button in his jeans, muttering to herself. "Just too hot. Stroke hot."

Luke lifted his hips to allow Lorelai to undress him more easily, settled one arm behind his head and the opposite hand lightly on her waist as she straddled him, her knees pressed to his ribcage. He rubbed his thumb against the elastic waistband of her underwear and studied her a moment.

Her mission to get them as close to naked as possible successfully completed, she stared out the window, her eyes vacant and her face slack. He squeezed her ribcage, and she looked back at him apologetically.

"I'm just tired, babe. I'm tired because I'm hot, and because I'm hot, I can't think, and because of all that together and the communal stupidity of people, I hate everyone who is not you, Rory, or—well, me, actually. This heat makes me stupid."

He traced his fingers along the small of her back. "I doubt that."

"You weren't at the inn today," she replied, blowing a lock of hair out of her eyes. "I just couldn't—I couldn't speak. This weather violently sucks."

Luke pulled her down beside him and held her loosely with one arm. She wriggled a little closer, and he knew that, despite the heat and the foul mood it was putting her in, she wanted contact. He encouraged her wordlessly, sliding his hand down her back to cup her ass and draw her in. With a sigh, she threw one leg over his and pressed her cheek to his chest, laid her arm across his middle and hooked her foot around his calf. He kissed her forehead, toyed with the curls over her ear.

"Let's go away," he said abruptly. "Let's say we're going to do it and actually do it."

"Go away where?" she asked.

"The cabin, like we said. For the fourth. We'll make a really long weekend of it—the Friday before, maybe the Tuesday after—what do you say?" he asked.

"Okay," she said, without hesitation.

"Yeah?"

She closed her eyes and sank further into him. "I think that sounds nice."

"Really?"
"Yes, really, Luke," she retorted, her tone more than slightly pissy. "I promised you, and I really do want to go, and yes, it's a little close to the wedding, but it's not like that's not covered or as if my mother will let one single detail fall through the cracks if we go away. There's nothing really going on that Michel can't handle at the inn, and Rory's going to be in Cambridge with Marty. And," she said, raising her head, "if that's not good enough reason, I'll throw in the fact that we haven't had any down time together lately and I'd like to be alone with my guy. Why is that so hard to believe?"

She was flushed, her skin slightly damp. Luke tucked a lock of hair behind her ear and took in the set of her mouth and the slightly irritated flash in her eyes. "I just know how you are about town stuff—"

Lorelai rolled her eyes. "Oh, like Taylor doesn't have all the three hundred and however many other days planned out to make up for the few we'll miss. They have fireworks at this lake of yours?"

"They do."

"Coffee?"

"It could be arranged."

"And you'll be there?"

"Yeah," he said softly, feeling chastised.

"That's all I need, then," she told him. "It's settled. We're going. Come hell, high water, or exploding toilets, we're going." She fell back to his shoulder and, without warning, dug her nails into his side. "You seriously underestimate where you are on my list of priorities, sometimes, you know that? Give me a little more credit than that, Luke."

The heat wore her patience thin, he knew. Though she was liable to snap in certain moods and tempers, she still managed to contain it in frivolous language; now, the veneer of sarcasm and wit had momentarily been stripped away to leave the truth bare. They'd had their share of moments of naked honesty, but there was a pattern to those that Luke felt more comfortable with: fight, ignore, fight again, talk, make up, make love, return to regularly scheduled relationship. The barbs they traded in day-to-day conversation were always cushioned—they were more fluent in their language of subtext than anything else. Striking out as she'd done, without provocation or premeditation, stung them both. Luke gathered her closer, pressed his lips to her hair.

"Will you go fishing?" he asked.

"If the fish are peanuts and they're in a bowl nearby, yes. Otherwise, it's unlikely," she said. Her voice was slightly raw. "I love you."

"I know," he replied. "I love you back."

"Luke?"

"Hm?"

"I'm hot."

"You hungry?" he asked. She nodded into his shoulder, and he could feel the petulant look on her face as she rubbed her nose against his skin and kissed him lightly. "Go take a cool shower. When you get out, there'll be dinner."
"Something light," she said, as he pulled her to her feet. "Because—"

"It's hot," he finished. "I know." He dipped his head and kissed her briefly. "Go cool off."

She scanned his face, her own enigmatic. "Thank you," she said. She padded to the door in her bare feet, paused on the threshold, and looked back at him. "Luke," she said. "This is going to be our bedroom."

He grinned. "Yeah, it is."

It was almost a full forty-five minutes before Lorelai stepped out of the shower. Luke waited in the kitchen, redressed in his jeans and tee shirt, a bottle of beer sweating in his hand. He ran the wet bottle across his forehead, his eyes closed, and sighed.

"So cliché, my life." Lorelai grinned at him. She stood just outside Rory's door, leaning against the wall. "Starring in a beer commercial in our kitchen, are you?"

"Is that what I'm doing?"

She took a few steps towards him and reached for the bottle. "Hot weather, refreshing alcoholic beverage, hot guy—"

"Hot guy?"

She shrugged and took a sip. "Call it like I see it." She gave him back the bottle. "You should take a shower, too. I can wait."

"You feel better?"

"I do. I needed that." She had changed into a thin gray tank top and shorter than decent shorts faded to pale blue. Her hair was piled high on her head, and Luke followed the line of her neck and shoulders with his eyes, felt a familiar tug in his chest. She smiled questioningly at him, her head tipped to one side. "You want to shower, or what?"

"Maybe later," he said, his voice faint. "So, dinner." He rose and stepped towards the fridge. "Can I say that as a fan of the whole underwear look that I'm slightly disappointed it's all covered up?"

Lorelai slapped his rear and reached past him into the fridge to grab a beer. "Not covered," she said. "Abandoned altogether."

"What?" He stopped mid-movement, his hand hovering over a plastic container of potato salad and his head a quarter of an inch from the top of the fridge.


He swallowed thickly and continued to stack the cartons he'd brought from the diner that afternoon. They were already damp with condensation, slippery in his hands. As he backed away from the fridge and closed the door with his foot, Luke concentrated on hanging on to the containers of food, on forgetting that his temperature had risen at least five degrees in the already stifling heat and the pressure in his head and chest and groin could possibly cause him to spontaneously combust right there in the kitchen. From the corner of his eye he saw Lorelai tip her head back against the cabinet behind her and spread her legs as she kicked her heels at the cubbies beneath the counter.
"Mm. I see mayonnaisey goodness," she sighed. "Excellent." She rested her beer on her thigh and shivered. "Have you ever noticed that, as nice as it is to come in from the cold and warm up, it's not quite as, oh, I don't know, satisfying, as cooling off when you're hot?" she asked. She dragged the bottle along the outside of her thigh. "Almost makes me like the heat." She paused. "Almost." Smiling softly at Luke, she propped her chin on her shoulder and closed her eyes. "Don'tcha think?"

Luke cupped Lorelai's knee, slipped his fingers under and into the crease between her calf and thigh. With the other hand, he took the lids off the salads and lined them up on the counter. He kneaded the thin, soft skin behind her knee. "I know what you're doing," he said.

She lifted her leg and brushed the top of her foot up his arm. "And what am I doing?"

Still massaging the back of her knee, he reached towards the cabinet beside her for plates. "What you're doing is trying to get me worked up."

"Oh, aren't we so sure of ourselves?"

He cocked an eyebrow. "You took a shower, you're in a better mood, and you're—"

"What? Doing my best to get you so hot and bothered you take me right here on the kitchen floor?" she asked.

"Something like that."

She caught his wrist as he began to pull away and pressed his hand firmly to her thigh. "Can you blame me?"

Luke would be the first to admit that June had been slightly strained, through no fault of his or Lorelai's. Things had not gone according to plan from the start and continued spiraling slightly out of their control for the rest of the month. It didn't help that they were bunking in Rory's room and were both highly aware of the fact that it was somehow sacred space that they couldn't violate, and so they'd slept barely touching each other for weeks on end. Why they'd so determinedly abstained from talking about it—as well as from the act altogether, at least there in Rory's room—they had never discussed. It was a tacit agreement that having sex in Rory's room was somehow inappropriate and strange. It didn't leave them many other options other than romps in the living room (which Lorelai pointed out did get kind of old) or trysts in the apartment over the diner (which Luke pointed out was practically a giant billboard advertising their sex life to inquisitive and gossipy townies). Between unforeseen plumbing disasters, a larger than usual influx of tourists, a spontaneous trip to the Cape for Lorelai, and a general lack of personal, private space, they were both tense and on edge.

"No," he replied. He stroked her knee idly with his thumb. "It's—you know, we didn't plan this all that well."

She reached for a container of salad and pinched out a chunk of potato with her index finger and thumb. "Plan what?"

He gestured between them. "This. Our—our relationship."

Lorelai smothered a smile. "Oh, how I love hearing words like that come from that gorgeous mouth of yours. But I don't know what you mean."

"Just, you know, we got together and we've been together and we're—"

"Together?" she ventured, no longer trying to hide her amusement.
Luke took his hand away and retreated to the refrigerator. "Yes," he said tersely. "But it all happened during the first year your new business was open, and that's just a bad time to start anything."

"Other than the business itself," Lorelai said. "I'm not following you on this one."

He rubbed his eyes. "Stuff keeps coming up. Keeps—I don't know, getting in the way." He leaned his head back against the door of the fridge. "You know what I'm talking about, Lorelai."

She licked the tip of her finger clean of potato salad. "I do. And I think partly you're right, that the first year of a business is its most unpredictable, but I also think that things happening is just what we're going to have to deal with on a permanent basis. That's just what life is, Luke. Things happen." She helped herself to another bite. "I do believe that would be the makings of a great country song."

He opened a drawer and grabbed a fork. "Stop eating with your fingers."

"Thank you," she said. She turned and began to put the lids back on the containers he'd just opened, her movements slow and deliberate. When they were covered and neatly stacked, she raised her head. "But I'm really more interested in ravishing you at the moment." Her eyes were dark, her stare provocative. She crooked a finger at him.

"I thought you were hungry," he said. He took his cue, advancing slowly. "And hot."

"I'm always hot," Lorelai told him, leaning back and bracing herself on the palms of her hands. "Aren't I, lover?"

Luke stepped between her knees and rested his hands heavily on her thighs. "Generally, yes. Don't call me that."

"Just generally?" She straightened up once more and slung her arms over his shoulders. She held his gaze silently a long moment. "We'll get better at it. And I think I will call you that."

"Get better at what?" he asked, sliding his hands up her thighs and teasing his fingers under the hem of her shorts.

"Dealing with things when they happen. We got better at everything else. In fact, I think we're ready for prime time." She scooted forward on the counter. "Or slightly later."

He drew his left hand back towards her knee and ran his palm down her calf, circled her ankle. "How so?" he asked, watching her extend her leg in an effort to tempt his hand higher once more.

"Reality TV," she said. She began to massage the muscles at the nape of his neck. "One of those competition shows like The Amazing Race. We'd win."

"Would we?"

She bit her lip as the hand still on her thigh moved towards her hip even as Luke inched it beneath her, grasped the back of her leg as though to lift her up. "Definitely," she breathed. Her voice, throaty as she spoke, caught slightly. "We're problem-solvers."

Luke eased her forward, forgetful of the heat, conscious only of the rise and fall of Lorelai's chest and her ragged breathing, of the way she was curling around him, the hairsbreadth of space between her mouth and his. He swallowed hard, wondering how the atmosphere had changed so quickly; Lorelai closed her eyes and the brush of her eyelashes against his cheek as she erased the
last space between them reminded him that the air was always different wherever she was no matter the weather. She tugged gently on his lower lip, simultaneously hooked her leg around his waist, and pulled him flush against her. As he lifted her up and she wrapped herself more tightly to him with her arms and legs and tongue, he staggered back, fell against the refrigerator, overcome.

"Where?" he asked, when he found his voice.

She threw her head back and her eyes shone. "God, I don't—throw me up against a wall for all I care." Fisting her hand in his hair, she tipped his head away from her and kissed him again, leveraged herself higher on his waist with her hips.

He grunted. "Floor's good."

"Second that."

When they parted, they lay silently side-by-side, both flat on their backs and winded. Lorelai pushed her hair off her forehead and turned to look at him. "So," she said. "Huh."


"That was—"

"Yeah," he said again.

"—different," she finished. She turned to stare at the ceiling again. "Intense."

He cleared his throat. "Sorry about—"

"It happens," she told him, waving a hand dismissively. "How's your head?"

"Gonna hurt in a bit." He reached out blindly, rested his hand the first place he felt skin, brushed his fingers across her abdomen. "You?"

Lorelai folded her hand into his. "Better than yours. Your hand's a good pillow. Among other things," she said. "My ass, however, is another story."

"Ah, geez." He raised his head and surveyed the small space they occupied between the table and counter. "We're lucky we didn't break anything."

She rolled onto her side and cushioned her cheek on her arm. "We should probably move at some point. Shower. Get a little less naked." She closed her eyes. "If we ever do this again, we're going to carpet the damned floor first."

Luke hauled himself across the floor, swallowing over the hitching whine of pain in his throat. He pulled Lorelai into him and she curled against his side, sighed on his shoulder. "How're you feeling, really?"

"Mm, sleepy. Hungry. Relaxed," she said. She skimmed her hand over his chest. "Thinking I should go without underwear more often."

"Was this whole thing just an elaborate seduction plot?" he asked.

She turned his face to hers and kissed him softly, kissed his forehead and eyes and cheeks and chin. "Only partly. I really was hot. The central air was on the fritz today and the inn was just unbearable. I called Harley and had her come in early, and she's all, 'oh, sure, Ms. Gilmore! I'm totally used to the heat, because, like, Central Florida? Where I grew up? Totally worse than this,
you have no idea." She spoke in a high, lilting imitation of her night manager, rolling her eyes. "But everything else was premeditated, yes. I had no idea I was going to get a long weekend out of it." She propped herself up on one elbow and tapped her fingers against his chest. Her eyes roved over his face. "You serious about that?"

Luke took her in, her heavy-lidded eyes and swollen lips, the curve of her cheek and rosy glow of her skin, the tumble of her dark curls falling from an elastic band. The ache in his side, one unrelated to the hard surface beneath him, crept higher. "If you want."

She grinned. "I want." She leaned down to kiss him again. "But," she said, her mouth against his, "at the moment, what I want is you to come upstairs with me to hose ourselves down"—he snorted at this—"and then to take me to some cheap, cheesy restaurant with fabulously bad food and really cold air conditioning and then to a movie for more fabulously bad food and really cold air conditioning."

"And then?"

"And then," she said, raising one shoulder, "we'll see." She played with his hair with one hand, teasing the locks into odd spikes and twists. "So," she began, "you're sweaty."

"So are you," he told her, softly nipping at her shoulder. "That a problem?"

She fell against him again. "Nope. I'm just saying: this was fun. Good, sweaty fun."

"I enjoyed myself."

"I kinda noticed that," she laughed. "But all around, a positive experience, however unexpected."

"A little uncomfortable."

"And yet," she said. She struggled to sit up, groaning. "So, two weekends away in two months, plus the honeymoon? My staff is going to hate me."

"I think the fact that you employ them will help them overlook that."

With a look over her shoulder at him, Lorelai pushed herself to her feet and pulled him with her. "Come on, nympho. Let's go wash the sex off."

In the next few days, hurried arrangements were made for the upcoming weekend—including Rory's decision to come home while the house would be empty, under the proviso that Marty not be a sleepover guest (though Luke heard Lorelai amend this to not be seen as a sleepover guest)—and late on the afternoon of July first, Luke pulled his truck into the drive at home and honked. Lorelai leaned out the front window, a look of consternation on her face.

"What is this, a cattle call?" she yelled.

"Do you have any idea what kind of traffic we're going to hit on a holiday weekend?" he yelled back.

"And what is traffic when you have the pleasure of my company?" she called, disappearing back into the house.

Luke jogged inside and surveyed the living room. It looked only half-ransacked, which was half better than he'd expected. He shouldered the duffel bag he'd left at the bottom of the stairs that morning, wandered towards the kitchen. "Lorelai?"
"Here," she said, popping her head around Rory's door. "Ready. Did you pack the books?"

"I packed the books."

"And the—"

"I have everything on the list," he said. "And I have a cab full of groceries out there, sitting in the heat. You ready?"

She leaned forward and pressed her lips briefly to his. "I said I was. Just have to put my shoes on."

He sighed. "Ready implies nothing left to do, you know."

"I don't have anything left to do," she said. "Just put on my shoes."

I-84 North was clogged and traffic was intermittently stopped the closer it came to the Mass Pike. The Pike, when they came to it, was a gridlock of sports utilities and campers and convertibles up to the ticket booths. Lorelai leaned out her window, craning to see where they were in the order of things. She sat with her heels on the edge of the seat, her arms wrapped around her legs. Turning from the window, she laid her cheek on her knee and gazed at Luke.

"I told you there'd be traffic," he said. "Fucking gas-guzzlers."

"And this baby is a model of environmental efficiency," Lorelai teased. She closed her eyes. "The heat's making me sleepy."

"If you want to sleep, sleep."

"But then who would entertain you?" she asked. "I'm fine." She paused, staring blankly at the back end of the trailer in line before them. Luke glanced at her sidelong, watched her as she tugged at the hems of her jeans, fingered the fraying edges of the fabric. She leaned forward to hide behind the curtain of her dark curls a long moment. He felt himself tense in the silence as he edged the truck a yard or two along. She flipped her hair back and studied his profile. "Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever wondered if we're—that we might, I don't know, unravel? After we're married?" Her voice was tentative. "Like all those couples in Victorian novels that get married and then realize that they hate each other?"

Luke remained carefully still, his hand on the steering wheel, his elbow propped on the ledge of the open window. "Nope."

"You never even thought about it?"

He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Have you?"

She folded her arms atop her knees and stared blankly over the jammed turnpike. "Not seriously. It's just—something Sookie said to me the other day made me think, a little."

"What did she say?" he asked, biting back the growl of irritation in his throat.

"I mentioned something to her about 'after the honeymoon,' and she said we needed to get through the wedding first. She didn't—"

"What?"
She gave him a look that he could never decide that he liked or not, one that was at once amused, conciliating, and affectionate. That she was often amused by his anger, he was used to, though it was still more often irritating than not, and that she was patronizing him when she tried to calm him down he'd never appreciated, but that she could look at him with that particular tilt to her smile could nearly compensate for the other two. Nearly. "She didn't mean anything by it. She was frosting a cake, and she wasn't really thinking. You know how she gets when she's baking—it's like trying to have a conversation with, like, a marathon runner."

"A marathon runner?"

"Yeah. Concentrating on running but not consciously thinking about it. That's Sookie in the kitchen." She pushed her hair behind her ears and sighed. "She was just talking out loud. Because of, you know… before."

"I know about before," he said tersely.

"It just made me think, a little. I mean, as much as I would love to live in the media spotlight and I'm more than deserving of the adoration of the masses—" He grunted. "—I don't have any plans to pull a Jennifer Wilbanks and then nearly get indicted on faking a federal crime. I know I've done the running part before—" Again, he made a noise deep in his throat. "—but I like to think of myself as something of a trailblazer and I have no desire to be known as a copycat runaway bride. So, that's reason number one, but more important, reason number two: you're the guy waiting at the other end of the aisle." She reached out and touched his wrist, swept her fingers over the top of his hand as it rested on the gearshift. "But it did make me wonder if things will change."

He said nothing a moment. Traffic began to move, and as he eased the truck forward in line towards the automated ticket machines, Luke felt a familiar numbness in his fingers. It was a sensation he hadn't experienced recently, but it was immediate, cold. He remembered how it took a sudden hold on him when Lorelai told him Max had asked her to marry him, the way his hands seemed inexplicably deadened even as he shook coffee grounds from a can into the filter—it had happened before and it would happen after, but never with such abrupt, seizing strength as it had at that moment in the diner. He could go about the motions, but he was powerless, and in his impotence, resigned. Sitting in his truck on the Mass Pike with Lorelai's hand resting lightly on his wrist, the numbness made him nauseated. It was weakness, at its root, something he'd never had the stomach for.

"What would change?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Don't know. It just—it seems like something should change, right? Because it's a big deal." She paused. "But it doesn't have to. I like the way things are."

"I'm pretty good with them myself," he replied. He leaned out for the ticket and tucked it into the breast pocket of his flannel. He pulled onto the Pike bound east, shifted awkwardly in his seat. "I don't know what you want me to say, Lorelai."

"I don't—you don't have to say anything. Or worry, I swear. We're good. We're solid. Just try and get rid of me."

Luke glanced over his shoulder and changed lanes. "We talked about this before."

"What?"

"The stuff—all the shit that happened before. That's not—that's not now. It didn't happen with us.
We're not gonna unravel. Nothing's gonna change," he said, aware of the grim determination in his voice. He cast a sidelong glance at her. She was wearing that face again. "Stop looking at me like that."

She slid across the seat and draped one arm across his shoulders, reached the other over his middle in an awkward embrace, and lay her head on his shoulder, facing away from him. "I'm glad it's you."

He relaxed into her arms. "Believe me, me too." He kissed the top of her head. "Now go back over there and buckle up. It's not safe, riding like that."

"Heh," she chortled. "Dirty."

"Ah, geez."

Though it was well past seven when they reached the end of the long, rutted lane that led to the family cabin, the evening was still faintly light, the last of the dying sun that worked itself under the canopy of trees a thin, brittle pink. The road approached the back of the house, cutting through the evergreens that encircled the property before the hill sloped down towards the small expanse of beach and the dock below. Luke parked the truck at the bottom of the back porch stairs, where he always did, and swung down to the uneven, stony path. He jogged around the front of the car to open Lorelai's door for her.

"Pretty," she breathed. "Oh, and smell that."

"Smell what?" he asked, handing her out.

"Earthy, lakey, piney, woody good smells," she told him. She inhaled deeply, hung on his arm as he led her up the back stairs to the door. "Why haven't I been here before?"

"What about you exactly screams nature girl?"

"Oh, hush," she said. She followed him over the threshold.

Luke stepped quickly through the main room, sweeping the coverings from the furniture as he went. "Stay by the door, I have to go find the fuse box and get the lights up." With that, he walked into a coffee table and stumbled into a doorframe, issued a string of curses at the shooting pain in his shin and the sharp tingle in his forehead.

"Luke?"

He pressed his palm to the center of his forehead. "I'm okay."

"You want help? A flashlight?"

"You have one handy?" he asked.

She paused. "It's the thought, my life."

"Just—stay there a sec."

When he'd successfully turned the electricity on, he returned to the living room. Lorelai stood in the back door, fumbling with her cell phone. She looked up as Luke hit the lights and the darkness flickered and died.

"I'm getting no signal out here," she said. "I was hoping to call Rory, but—Luke! you're
bleeding!” she cried. She snapped her phone shut and came towards him, arms extended.

He touched his forehead with the tips of his fingers, looking up as though he could see the wound himself. Lorelai cupped his cheeks in her hands and drew him towards her. "Just nicked myself," he said.

She pressed a line of kisses to his hairline. "I think you'll live. But we should clean it anyway. You have first aid stuff here?"

"Bathroom," he said. "But it can wait, I want to bring the rest of the stuff in." Off her dubious look, he rolled his eyes. "It's hardly even a cut, Lorelai."

"Tell that to the emergency room doctor when they have to amputate your head because you've contracted some nasty case of gangrene."

It was another fifteen minutes of hauling in the food for the weekend and their bags after Luke located the first aid kit and let Lorelai fuss over him, which he cowed to only when she began singing tuneless songs about gangrene, staph infections, and the bubonic plague. He wouldn't let her put a band-aid on his forehead; he had to maintain at least a semblance of dignity, he said.

Lorelai followed him through the cabin as he lugged her bag into the back bedroom. "I know what you're going to say."

"That your bag—"

"—is impractically heavy. But I swear, it's all necessities. Like, towels, I didn't know if we'd need towels. Or sheets. Or pillows. But those are in the truck. And shoes," she added. "So can we save the lecture for another day? I'd like to take a shower."

"Go right ahead," he said. "I'll get dinner going."

She looked around warily, one hand on her hip. "So, where's the bathroom?"


"Excuse me?" Lorelai squeaked.

"Lorelai," he said. "They're communal, but they tend to be pretty clean. Bad water pressure, though." He smiled. "Nothing like an outdoor shower."

Lorelai paled. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm joking."

"Luke? Seriously?"

He looked at her from beneath brows set in quiet amusement. "Seriously. It's right through that door," he said, pointing. "But I had you for a minute there, didn't I?"

"You suck."

"I try."

He kept the grill on the front porch overlooking the lake—this was a vantage point he always savored, the bright expanse of water and the pinpoints of light from cottages on the other side, the surrounding woods and the pebbly sand. When he was small, he always thought of the lake and the cabin as some secreted fortress, a protective enclave where he could retreat when he needed
peace and rest. It still seemed that way, though certain things had changed; people in the
neighboring houses had begun to rent their places to vacationers, and the beach was occasionally
overrun with loud strangers. It wasn't the way things were done during his dad's time, when
cabins were like season tickets to the Red Sox, more likely inherited than purchased or given
away; the same people had been coming here for as long as Luke could remember. Neither Luke
nor his father were exactly friendly with their neighbors, but each recognized the other as
members of an exclusive club that only acquired new blood when families expanded.

As Luke rolled out the dough that he'd brought with him and listened to the sounds of Lorelai
showering in the next room—singing "Vacation" at the top of her lungs—he tried to remember all
the time he'd spent here. He couldn't recall the exact first time, and his recollection of the time here
in the years before his mother's death was equally fuzzy. It startled him somewhat to realize that
few of his memories of this particular place involved Liz. He wasn't sure if the memories he had of
his mother, fanning herself in the shade on the front porch as he and his father returned from a day
of fishing, sweeping the dust bunnies away and snapping clean sheets in the air as she made the
beds, were manufactured or true. In the end, he supposed the distinction didn't matter, but the
confusion between what he remembered and what he wished to was vaguely depressing. Other
memories were more stable. He could picture his father manning the boat, showing him the back
trails in the woods that were better for hiking, standing over the old charcoal grill with a pair of
tongs in hand and an imperious expression on his face. He was at a loss to place Liz here, and it
unsettled him. She'd never returned to the lake after their mother passed away—the weekends that
Luke and his father drove up from Stars Hollow she spent sleeping over at Crazy Carrie's or some
other brain-dead hippie groupie she'd fallen in with at school. It had been over twenty years, he
realized, since someone other than himself or his father had set foot over the threshold. Until
today, he corrected himself, and he began to whistle as he finished patting out the dough.

He went through the motions of lighting the grill—propane, cleaner and easier than charcoal, and
more than likely less carcinogenic—and laying the two flat discs of dough he'd rolled across the
top. He listened to the sounds of the house, the woods, the lake, as he rummaged through the
cooler for a beer; the lake and the woods sounded as they always had, still and stirring at the same
time, full of silent movement rarely broken by anything louder than the distant hum of a motorboat
pulling away from a dock. The house, however, was suddenly noisier than it had ever been.
Lorelai's movements were distinct enough that he could hear her cursing as she rifled through her
overnight bag, brushed her teeth, dried her hair. The silent sanctuary he was used to was half-
overcome by the sheer volume of her presence, by the space she took up just being Lorelai. Her
noises were as familiar to him now as those of the lake and the woods had been for years and,
strangely, just as comforting.

She emerged barefoot and in her pajamas not long after he turned the dough. Luke gave her
uniform a once-over, unsurprised: she wore a white tank top emblazoned with the words "java
freak" in red script and pale blue cotton pants with tiny pictures of full and steaming coffee cups
on them, and she'd pulled her hair into a high, messy knot and traded her contacts for glasses. She
was pale and relaxed, here at his family's cabin. Luke said nothing as he studied her, only half-
aware he was staring. She gave him a questioning smile.

"What's up?" she asked.

He shrugged and focused his attention on the grill. "Nothing."

Lorelai sat on one of the chairs Luke brought out from the kitchen, stretched her legs out before
her and propped her feet on the other. "Whatcha making?"

"Pizza."

"Made some dough this morning, brought it in the cooler. Cut it in half. Toasting it on the grill now, and when that's done, I'll do it up," he told her. "I saw it on the food channel."

"My, my, Luke Danes. You're surprising sometimes, you know that?"

He shuffled his feet and poked at the pizza shells with the tip of his finger. "Nah."

Lorelai closed her eyes and propped her chin on her shoulder, exhaling slowly through her nose as she did. "Oh, I like it here. Very On Golden Pond." / She opened her eyes. "Listen to me, mister. You're my knight in shining armor. Don't you forget it." She pushed a lock of hair behind her ear and twisted the ring on her finger. "I'm going to be right behind you, and away we're gonna go, go, go."

Luke looked at her over his shoulder, took in her soft smile and the slightly faraway shine of her eyes. "A knight, huh?"

She nodded. "Henry Fonda to my Katharine Hepburn. Away we're gonna go, go, go," she said again, sighing. "Can I have a beer?"

He fished a bottle out of the cooler near his feet and handed it back to her. "You find the shower sufficient?" he asked.

"Mm," she replied, wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. "Kinda dark, but it was nice. It's not as hot out here as it is in Stars Hollow." She took another swallow of her drink. "Is it always this quiet?"

"Pretty much."

"Luke? Have you lost the capacity for complete sentences since I got in the shower?" she asked.

He looked at her over his shoulder. She was grinning at him, her chin tilted towards him. He shook his head. "Nope."

"It's okay," she said. "I know this has been, like, your man country since—and, whatever, you don't need to go out of your way and do stuff differently just because I'm here now." She watched him brush olive oil across the pizza shell. "Okay?"

"Man country?" he asked, laying slices of tomato on the crisped dough.

She hesitated. "Well, it has, right? Since—you know, since—"

"Since my mom died," he finished. He dropped a few curls of fresh basil leaves on top of the tomatoes. "It's okay, Lorelai. You can say it."

She was quiet a moment. "I just don't want you to feel like you have to entertain me. I happen to find myself plenty amusing—enough so that I can keep myself occupied for days at a time. I'm very self-sufficient. And suddenly thinking how dirty that sounds," she said. "But really. I'm like—"

Luke slid the finished pizzas onto a platter and set it down on the side shelf of the grill. He turned and leaned over Lorelai, kissed her forehead. "You're babbling, love." He rested his hands on her shoulders. "I didn't come here to be alone in man country, which, please, don't ever say that again, I came here to spend some time alone with my girl. Okay?"

"You are so cute sometimes you make me sick," she said, cupping his face in her hands. She
kissed him lightly on the tip of his nose. "Thank you."

He pulled her to her feet. "Now get your ass in there and open the wine."

"Wine? You feeling a little sexy tonight, lover?"

"Haven't we talked about that word?"

"What word, lover?"

"Why do I bother?" he asked the air.

Lorelai looked back at him as she stepped into the kitchen. "I've asked myself that about you many times before, my life."

"And?"

She shrugged and continued into the house. "I think you're infatuated with me."

It was growing dark as Lorelai poured the wine and Luke set out plates and silverware. He began to protest when Lorelai reached for the light switch to turn off the overhead lamps. She held up a warning finger and produced a packet of matches from her hip pocket. Luke lifted a questioning eyebrow at her.

"I picked them up at the gas station in Massachusetts," she said. "They were complimentary with the condom/cigarette combo I bought—it's in the bedroom, and I love the name. The 'Oh Baby, Oh Baby Kit.'" She kept a straight face as she lit two hurricane candles she'd found under the kitchen sink. "Very apt, don't you think?"

"Not if that's all there is in it," he replied.

Lorelai began to laugh so hard she had to sit on the kitchen floor and catch her breath.

They talked over what they might do for the weekend as they ate the grilled pizzas by the light of the candles. Lorelai sighed. "I really don't care what we do while we're here. It's just nice to be away. And not sleeping in Rory's room."

"So you'll go fishing with me?" he asked.

She paused, her wine glass raised halfway to her lips. "I will sit with you in the boat while you fish, but I'm really not an angler."

"I know."

"Yes, but do you also know that it's your job to make me feel good about myself when my confidence is lacking?"

"Well, if I ever see that happen, I'll jump right in. Hasn't yet," he said.

Lorelai drained the wine in her glass after they'd eaten and Luke was wrapping the leftovers for the fridge. She stood by the table, one hand on her hip, gazing thoughtfully out the wide window that fronted the beach. There was something wistful and nostalgic in her expression, lit from the candles below, that made her seem ethereal, distant. Luke again felt the familiar fire in his chest, the sudden winged hollowness that he'd never quite gotten used to. And when she turned to him, feeling his eyes on her, and rested her chin on her shoulder with that infuriating, lovely smile, she was no longer far away but within arm's reach, luminous and soft and teasing.
"You're staring again," she said quietly.

He shrugged as he walked towards her, pulled her into him. "Not allowed to look anymore?" he asked.

"Didn't say that," she told him, and she twined her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek to his. "You're just very mysterious this week. You're all silent-broody-Jane-Austen-hero guy."

Luke tightened his hold on her. "I'm just thinking."

He felt her smile. "You just keep thinking, Butch, that's what you're good at."

"Ah, would you two give that a rest already?" he moaned, dropping his head to the crook of her neck.

"Now what fun would that be?" she asked him, slid her hand beneath the bill of his hat to flip it off and cradle his head in her palm.

Straightening up, he asked if she wanted to take a walk with him. "Go down to the beach, maybe?"

"Mm-mm," she said as she shook her head. She rubbed her thumbs along the sides of his neck, dropping light kisses on his face as she spoke. "You go. I'll get the bed all warmed up for you."

She kissed him squarely on the mouth, gently bit his lower lip. "I promise I'll be Dale Evans to your Roy Rogers—"

"That's cowboy stuff, not—"

"Can you honestly say you have a better reference having to do with fish?" she asked.

"Tomorrow, I'll be your devoted sidekick all you want, but I think I just want to lie down for a while."

He kissed her. "I won't be long."

"When you get back we can put the 'Oh Baby' kit to shame," she said, smirking. "Go. But tell me you brought ice cream, first."

"In the freezer."

He was halfway down the front stairs when he heard her holler of delight. "Ben and Jerry's, woo hoo!"

It was his habit to jog down the hill from the cabin to the beach every first evening he arrived. He couldn't remember how this had started, but for as long as he could remember he'd been arriving breathless at the shore at the hour after sundown when the sky was velvet purple. He kicked off his shoes, pulled off his socks, and strode slowly towards the water, his hands in his pockets. The few moments he spent at the water's edge sitting down on his haunches, balanced precariously on the balls of his feet, were blissfully thoughtless ones. This was the time he let himself slow down, when things settled inside him and fell away, when the stillness and the quietude of the lake and surrounding woods worked its way beneath his skin and calmed whatever irritation had pushed him to become a recluse for a handful of days. Stars Hollow and the small bumps and hitches that had marked his summer and Lorelai's were all distant here, and he left them at the edges of this smaller, tidier place, annoyances to think about later, after.

When he pushed himself to his feet and retrieved his shoes and socks, he searched the sand for the right stone. He found it at the very edge of the beach, oblong and smooth and grey. He jogged
once again to the water. After a deep breath, he pulled his arm back and whipped it forward, releasing the stone. He turned back towards the cabin without watching to see it skip across the surface of the water; he didn't wait to listen for the watery thunk as it slipped beneath the water.

Lorelai was already in bed, propped up on a pile of pillows almost as big as the bed itself, a magazine spread on her knees. She didn't look up when he came into the room. "Did you know that communication is the key to the perfect orgasm?" she asked conversationally. "Thank God I have *Cosmo* to tell me these things, because I would be just lost without insights like that." She closed the magazine and watched Luke as he unbuttoned his flannel and toed off his shoes again. "What kind of communication, though? Do they mean general commands, or are they talking about something more specific, more technical, like a GPS system for my girlie parts?"

He pushed his jeans down and rolled his eyes as he walked towards the bathroom. "You have sex on the brain," he told her.

"Generally I like to have it on the bed, but the floor or the couch work in a pinch."

"If you give me a second, I can help you out with that," he called, fishing his toothbrush from the traveling kit he kept such things in.

"Luke, I'm going to need more than a second to figure out the best method of communication in order to achieve the perfect orgasm. I wish I had some paper. I could chart a map," she said, her tone mock-thoughtful.

"Have I ever needed a map?"

"No, my life, but who am I to question the wisdom of *Cosmo*?" she called.

Luke finished brushing his teeth and turned off the bathroom light. He stood in the door, leaning against the wooden frame, and crossed his arms over his chest. Lorelai held his stare, her expression arch and challenging. "It was good we came," he said, at length.

She lifted an eyebrow and pursed her lips. "And it'll be good when we—"

He took three long steps and climbed onto the bed, hovered over her. "No kits," he said, "no magazines. Now, if you'll please stop talking."

Kicking the sheets aside, she ran her hands along his abdomen. "Communication is occasionally overrated anyway."

He woke early, momentarily disoriented by the sweet, damp scent of the room and the difference in the slanting light that shone weakly through the blinds. Lorelai turned restlessly in her sleep, curled herself even tighter around her pillow, and the movement swiftly reminded him of the wheres and whys. He turned on his side and spooned her back, smiling into her hair as she sighed and relaxed against him. Luke closed his eyes again, awake but unwilling to leave the warm cocoon of the bed.

The noises that Lorelai made in her sleep had been from the first night he spent with her one of her more endearing and unusual qualities. The way she sighed, the clicking noises she made in the back of her throat, the periods of incessant, whining moans she had each night, the occasional snort or snore or smacking of her mouth could combine to make her the loudest woman he'd ever encountered asleep. On nights he couldn't sleep, he was comforted rather than annoyed by the strange cacophony she made; it was proof of her presence, a reminder that, whatever was causing his insomnia, she was simply there with him.

She shifted in his arms, angling for a more comfortable position. Luke eased an arm under her
neck and rested his hand on her shoulder, his other at her hip. She sighed again and pushed back at him, nestled herself in the curve of his arm, tangled her legs in his. Luke was close to sleep again when Lorelai's hip jerked slightly under his hand. He pressed his hand lower and into her abdomen to soothe her when he realized—she was laughing.

This was a recent phenomenon. As he listened to her chuckle quietly, giggling in intermittent fits, he tried to figure out exactly when this had begun, or when he'd first noticed it. Sometime back in May, to the best that he could remember, Lorelai had woken him up with what he thought were convulsions—for a few panicked seconds, he thought she was choking in her sleep. Without opening her eyes, she'd turned on her side and pushed her forehead into his shoulder, and he'd realized that she was shaking with suppressed laughter that surfaced an instant later in an odd, hiccuppung shortle.

It shouldn't have been surprising—more perplexing was Lorelai's denial of it the next morning. She'd shrugged it off. When he'd asked her what she was dreaming of, she'd only shaken her head and claimed she couldn't remember. The few times he'd brought it up since, Lorelai had dismissed it—whatever it was, she told him, she never remembered and it wasn't keeping her awake, and it was a little weird but it was better than crying.

He kissed her lightly on the temple, now, and began the complicated process of extracting himself from the bed without waking her. When he'd freed his arm again and twitched his legs away from hers, Lorelai lolled onto her back and threw an arm out to one side. Luke pulled on his jeans and padded in his bare feet to the kitchen. The morning routine then began: put the kettle on, find the tea, sugar, milk. He hoisted himself onto the counter and watched the sun rise over the lake.

He'd always liked the kitchen best of all the rooms—there weren't many, it wasn't as though his father had left him a palatial estate, but with two bedrooms, a living room, a bath and a half, and the kitchen with the porch out front, it had always been more than big enough to suit the whole family. The back porch, the arrival point for each visit, lead up to the living room and the bedrooms off of that; the kitchen took up the entire front half of the house. There was a couch along the wall adjacent to the main bedroom, and an old, roughly-hewn dining set Luke's father had purchased more for its functionality than appearance and that his mother had fondly referred to as "rustic." It was, he knew, an unremarkable room; like the others, it was sparetly furnished, carelessly decorated, comfortable and serviceable. A lot like his dad, his mother would have said.

Lorelai found him some time later in much the same position, an empty mug and a pile of orange rinds beside him on the counter. She shuffled into the kitchen, knuckling her eyes and yawning. "Coffee?"

He smiled ruefully. "Good morning to you, too."

She came to stand in front of him, resting her hands on his knees as she leaned forward and buried her face in his neck. "Morning. Coffee?"

"You sleep okay?" he asked.

"Better than okay," she replied. "But still, eyes don't open without coffee."

"What if I told you I forgot the coffee?" he asked.

Lorelai raised her head and faced him with her eyes still firmly buttoned shut, her nose scrunched in an expression of irritation. "You know how in Aliens that thing just bursts out of the guy's chest? Something like that happens when I'm deprived of coffee. Do you want that to happen to my chest?"
He kissed her forehead. "No, I actually really like your chest."

"Luke? Please?"

He slid off the counter. "You sit here. Pancakes?"

"Mm, and eggs. I'm starved. Is there any of that pizza left?"

He eyed her askance over his shoulder as he measured grounds into a coffee filter. He paused and reached for an apple. "You're not having pizza for breakfast," he said, tossing the apple. "Have this if you can't wait."

She nearly fell off the counter in her attempt to catch it. "You're kidding, right? It's too early for fruit that's not juiced." She set it on the counter and stared at it in distaste. "You know, I had a nightmare about coffee last night."

"A nightmare about coffee?"

"I don't remember a whole lot, but it ended with Kirk wheeling me out of the diner on a stretcher, and I was screaming like Charlton Heston in Soylent Green. Something about the coffee being urine," she said. She raked her hands through her hair. "And yet, I still wake up without the craving dampened in the least." Luke cocked an eyebrow at her, shaking his head. She wrinkled her nose in response, sighed. "I know. I'm weird," she said.

"Was that what you were laughing about?" he asked, his tone carefully light.

Lorelai vaulted off the counter and moved towards the fridge. "Was I doing that again?"

"When I woke up."

"I didn't wake you, did I?"

He lit the burner on the stove. "Nah. Just curious."

She stared blankly before her a moment, a cart of orange juice in her hands. "You and me both, buddy."

He decided to leave it at that and began to make her breakfast. Lorelai stood beside him, her eyes fixed on the coffee maker. After a moment, she tucked her arm in his and rested her cheek against his shoulder, and he felt restive, warm—this was new to his routine here but already familiar and easy. They remained this way, companionably silent, listening to the sizzle of butter and bacon on the stove, the early morning birdsong, the gurgle of the coffee as it perked, the distant lap of water against the dock on the beach below, until Lorelai poured herself a generous cup of coffee, kissed Luke on the cheek, and slipped wordlessly out onto the porch. She was smiling when he called her in to eat, rubbing her eyes. She helped herself to more coffee before she sat down and picked up her fork.

"You okay?" he asked. "You're quiet. It's weird."

She leaned over the table and kissed him briefly. "I'm good. Still a little sleepy, that's all. Either that, or you've finally started to rub off on me."

Lorelai quizzed him on the beach and the surrounding area while she ate, asking him where he liked to go best and what he usually did when he was here, what other people did, where the fireworks he'd promised would be. When she'd finished her third cup of coffee and the last of her pancakes, she pushed the dishes aside.
"This laughing thing is wearing me out."

"It's never happened before?"

She shrugged and rose, gathered the dirty plates and brought them to the sink. "Not that I know of. But it's not like I've been in a position to have someone tell me before, either."

"Huh."

"And so say I," she said. She leaned her elbows on the sink, tilted her head back. "I really like it here. I was afraid it was going to be like living in a tree, all Butterfly Whoever, but it's really homey. Cozy." She closed her eyes. "You know, I'm tired, but I feel rested, if that makes sense."

"I get it. I'm glad it's—" He paused, searching for the right word. "—I'm glad it's comfortable."

"Very," she smiled. "This is a Luke place."

Luke pushed himself to his feet and crossed to stand before her, planted his feet on either side of hers, her legs together between his. He rested his hands heavily on her hips. "You'd tell me if there was anything to worry about, right?"

Lorelai smiled softly at him, trailed her fingers up and down his forearms before launching herself at him in a crushing embrace. She spoke without looking him in the eye, her cheek pressed to his shoulder. "I would." She was silent again, and he rubbed her back, his breath catching painfully in his chest, uncertainty a sudden weight on his back. Lorelai straightened up and kissed him. "You want to shower before we head down to the beach?"

"Is that your way of telling me I'm less than fresh?"

She merely raised her eyes heavenward and lifted one shoulder. "I'm just making a suggestion, my life. Far be it from me to prevent you from being the burly mountain man that you are, stench and all."

"I can take a hint," he said, slapping her on the rear. "Be ready to go when I'm done, though."

He was unprepared, on returning to the kitchen, to find Lorelai hanging precariously from the porch railing outside. He swallowed the instinct to yell, afraid it would send her falling flat on her ass on the ground below. The sight of her—all long legs and slender arms in her short-shorts and halter top, her hair loose, longer than usual, falling across the bare slope of her back—was less arresting given her current position and the cell phone she clutched in one hand.

"Oh, I'm glad to hear you enjoyed it, Marty—it's always nice to have another convert to the Ab Fab tribe. Any chance Rory's going to be done with that shower soon?... no, I know, I wasn't implying that you were—if you could just—sure, Marty, that would be great. Tell her that the service out here sucks, so she shouldn't be too alarmed if she calls twenty times in a row and doesn't get me, which tell her, big fat hint, okay?" Luke cleared his throat, and at this she turned, rolled her eyes back and stuck her tongue out, tilted the phone away from her mouth and sighed gustily. "Yep. Okay, good. Thanks, Marty. Oh, yeah, you, too."

She snapped the phone shut, and Luke immediately stepped forward. "You trying to break your neck?"

"Mm, I was actually going for a lower back injury. That would get me the really good drugs," she said. "Help me down?"

He caught her around the waist as she made an awkward hop, bracing her hands on his shoulders.
She stumbled, fell against his chest with a sighing half-laugh. She gestured sheepishly with the cell phone.

"Sorry. I just wanted to check in with Rory. I feel so bad, I didn't know there'd be no signal out here and I hate being out of range and her not knowing—I woke up this morning feeling oddly overprotective and I just need to know she's not, you know, falling into knives, or something."

"This about Marty?"

"No, of course not," she scoffed. "Marty's great. He's a gentleman. He's just home alone with my daughter and for some reason I'm just insanely hormonal and my maternal instincts are in overdrive."

Luke took her by the wrist and led her back into the house. "What's with the acrobatics?"

"Standing like that, I can get half a bar instead of no bar. It's higher." She leaned on the counter and watched him as he put their lunch in a cooler. She gave him a surreptitious up and down glance. "I'm sorry. Are you actually wearing swim trunks?"

"What am I supposed to wear to the beach?" he wanted to know.

She grinned wickedly. "I can think of a few things. Or one thing. Actually, I'm thinking of nothing." She leaned over the counter and laid a hand flat on the center of his chest. "I just never thought I'd see you in anything mesh. Except, of course, the fishnets. But we both know those will never see the light of day."

"Ah, geez." They walked down to the beach, Lorelai keeping a running commentary as they descended the hill as to the number of bugs (few), the state of her flip flops (sorry), the smell of the air (oddly sweet), and the appearance of Luke's ass in swim trunks (commendable). She swung the cooler lightly in one hand, holding his tightly in the other. "It's beautiful here, Luke."

"It's not bad."

She squeezed his hand. "I love it. Are you going to make me wear a life vest?"

"Are you planning on falling overboard?"

"Planning, no, but I do like to be spontaneous," she laughed.

Once out on the water, Lorelai again became quiet, thoughtful. Luke motored the boat around the small inlet that comprised the beach and houses near his and out further. As Lorelai rooted through her bag for a book, she muttered about murder on the open water and sunstroke until Luke produced an umbrella from under the seat and held it out to her.

"My husband-to-be, the Boy Scout," she cooed.

He eyed her askance. "Are you okay?"

"What makes you ask that? Again?"

"The way you're acting," he said. "You're all over the place."

Looking out over the water, she seemed to consider this. "I'm just a little hormonal, like I said."

"Anything I can do?"

"Keep me in chocolate and coffee until it passes," she said. "Or rather, on a permanent basis."
"Keep me in chocolate and coffee until it passes," she said. "Or rather, on a permanent basis."

He chuckled. "I can do that. You gonna read?"

"Indubitably. Let's see what sort of skanky behavior Newland's getting up to now."

After lunch and several chapters of *The Age of Innocence*, full and sleepy from the food and hot sun, Lorelai coaxed Luke to lay down with her and let the boat drift where it would. She settled herself against his chest, her eyes closed. Luke stroked her hair and remarked that he'd never been so lazy in his life as he was with her.

"Don't think of it as lazy," she said. "Think of it as a concentrated period of relaxation making up for too many years of hard work with no break."

"You can spin anything, can't you?"

"Just about. Should get me a job at the White House, huh?"

And the day passed this way, quiet and slow—they read aloud, they talked, they were silent, all in equal degrees. They had their dinner on the shore and watched the pre-fourth fireworks, stretched out on a blanket Lorelai had spread out for them; she huddled close to Luke and complained of cold as the last of the fireworks fizzled and the noises died.

"You wouldn't be cold if you were dressed more appropriately," he groused. She waved a dismissive hand. "I have a sweatshirt on," she told him.

"And shorts that would get you arrested anywhere but at a beach."

"I doubt they'd get me arrested. Maybe sent home from school with a note for my parents—which has been known to happen in my life—but not arrested. Besides, it's your fault, so it's not fair of you to pick on me."

"How is it my fault? Did I not tell you to put long pants on?" he returned.

"Yes, you did, but I put these on specifically for your benefit."

"Mine, huh?"

She tipped her head, conceding. "Well, mine via yours. You get all friendly when I show a little leg." He snorted at the 'little,' and she wagged a finger at him. "You do. And I like it when you get all friendly, and you like it when I like it when you get all friendly, so being cold is a small price to pay for all that liking of friendliness. Besides, it's only cold down here by the water. It's still warm up at the house."

Rather than reply, he tightened his arms around her and pulled the blanket beneath them over her legs. She threw one leg over his, tucked the blanket more securely about her, and made a wordless noise of contentment.

Luke was beginning to doze, later, when Lorelai shifted restlessly in his arms. "You want to go back up?" he asked.

"No. I'm fine out here."

"Just let me know."

"Okay." She paused. "Luke? I have to tell you something."
She spoke hesitantly, her voice small. Luke bodily tensed, and irrational panic began to bubble and churn in his stomach, rose in his throat like bile. Lorelai, feeling him suddenly rigid beside her, rested one hand on his abdomen, fingering the line of buttons on his shirt. "You have to tell me something," he echoed.

"It's not bad," she said.

"It's not bad."

"No, I promise. It's just something that I did that I need to tell you about."

"Something you did," he said, his voice flat.

She swallowed hard. "Something I stopped doing, actually." She waited. "You're not going to repeat that one?"

"Could you lose the cute and just tell me?"

She sat up, raked her hands through her hair, and looked at him with serious eyes, her mouth puckered in a guilty pout. "I stopped taking the pill."

"You stopped…"

"Taking the pill, yes," she said patiently. "I'm not on the pill anymore."

"The pill," he said. "The—you mean—you know, that pill?"

He saw her struggling to suppress a smile and laugh, and the panic roiling in his stomach thickened to irritation. "Yes, Luke, also known as the birth control pill."

"When?"

Lorelai ducked her head, averted her eyes. "May."

"May? May?" he repeated. He mentally began to count how many times they'd been together since May. "Jesus, Lorelai. So, we've been—"

"Jumping without a parachute for two months," she supplied. "Yes."

Luke sat up, propped his elbows on his knees, and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. "Two months," he said. "And you're telling me now." She was silent. He dropped his hands and looked at her. "You're telling me now."

She looked away. "Yes, I'm telling you now. I would have told you before—"

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I forgot, okay?" she cried. "I know how incredibly stupid that sounds, I do, but for crap's sake, Luke, it's not like there haven't been a hundred other things on my mind lately. I just—I ran out of the prescription, and the doctor wouldn't phone in any more refills until I'd had a physical, and then the toilets exploded and I didn't have time for an appointment, and then I just—I just forgot."

"This whole time," he said, "you just forgot. For two months, you forgot."

She scowled. "Don't do that, don't condescend. I know how I fucked up, okay? It's my body, believe me, I know. I don't have a better excuse. The times I remembered were, like, three in the
morning moments where I woke up and remembered that I forgot to take it, but I didn't forget because I wasn't, and I'd promise myself to tell you in the morning." She tugged a lock of her hair, her face screwed into an expression of extreme frustration. "I'd fall asleep, and I'd forget again. That's all. It's not like we live in Port Charles and I'm secretly trying to get pregnant so you'll be forced to marry me, since I like to think you're doing it willingly. Luke, I swear that's all it is."

"Two months," he said again. He raised his eyes heavenward and took several deep breaths. His insides still burned; he felt as though he were slowly coiling into himself, strangled by the sudden heat within. "Why are you telling me now?"

Her gaze was level. "Because if you're jumping without a parachute eventually something's gonna land."

"Something's gonna land? Has something landed?" he asked, his voice thin, cracked, an octave above its normal register.

She shook her head, smiling ruefully. "Probably should have put that in the headline, huh?" she said. "Most definitely not. I just had my monthly unpleasantness."

"Your…?" he asked, brow furrowed.

"My period, Luke. You do know how the menstruation process works, right?" she asked.

"Could you be serious for longer than five seconds at a stretch?" he spat. "Could you stop talking in fucking code?"

Lorelai sat back slightly. "I could, yes. Could you be a little less scary right now?"

He sighed. "I don't mean to be scary. I'm just—geez, Lorelai, two months?"

"I'm not trying to be flip, here, but can we please move past that and onto what's going to happen now that you know?" she asked.

Luke stared at her a moment and got to his feet. "I'm going for a walk."

"Luke, please, don't—don't do the retreat, silent guy thing. Please? This doesn't have to be a big deal," she said, kneeling, her hands clasped together. "Please?"

He inhaled slowly through his nose. "I need a minute."

Her face fell. "Okay. I'll just—I'll meet you back at the house, then."

"I won't be long," he told her.

Away from the beach, the air was more humid, dank. It was difficult to make out a path as the trees grew closer and the canopy overhead thickened. When he was nearly beyond his knowledge of the property, Luke dropped to sit beneath a tree, folded his hands over his hat and hunched forward, dug his heels into the loose, sandy ground. He just needed to sit, he told himself. He needed to sit and he needed to think.

He wasn't mad—he wasn't upset—why he should be, Luke wasn't entirely sure. Discomfited, strange, caught, concerned, slightly panicked, those were all battling for supremacy and seemed much more valid. Still, he'd felt the need to put space between him and Lorelai. It was too easy not to think when she was near, not to roll the news around in his head for hours until he knew what to do, what to think. She could be distracting even on the occasions when she wasn't trying. It wasn't just that he still had to wonder, every so often, how one body could contain quite so much
personality; the woman was just so damned physical, she couldn't be ignored.

It was something he hadn't quite considered before he moved in with Lorelai, though he'd noticed it in a rather thoughtless, incidental way, the fact that his relationships in the past had never really been quite so physically intimate. It wasn't about sex—that wasn't the sort of intimacy his life had been lacking before Lorelai. It was hard not to notice how comfortable she was with her body, how easily she moved in her own skin; in the years they'd been friends he'd seen how carelessly she was able to embrace others, to take Sookie by the arm and lead her out of the path of a moving vehicle, to smooth Rory's hair, to pat Kirk on the shoulder, to throw her arms around a guy bringing ice to her daughter's birthday party. His family had never really been demonstrative—his father, he corrected himself, had never really been demonstrative, though his mother was quick with a hug and Liz was the kid in the department story who had to touch absolutely everything. Luke himself tended more towards his father's way of acting: he rarely showed affection in public, and Luke had rarely felt inclined to hold a girlfriend's hand, to kiss her anywhere but behind the privacy of closed doors, to lay claim to her somehow in mixed company with a hand on her knee or an arm over her shoulder. It was different with Lorelai.

She was simply a tactile person. She thought nothing of grabbing his hand over the dinner table as she made a point or cutting him off mid-rant in the center aisle of Doose's Market with either a swift slap on the ass or a brief kiss square on the mouth. Luke knew it to be something that most people misunderstood in Lorelai: others often took her physical exuberance as a constant ability to live in the moment without regard for anything else. Lorelai was spontaneous, but she was anything but shortsighted. Her tendency to act on impulse was just another way she embraced life, one more way she lived full-out, evidence that Lorelai didn't give affection half-heartedly.

This, however, was at the moment beside the point. He had things to process, and he couldn't do it with her in any sort of proximity to him. The longer he sat in the strange, purple light, feeling the chill set into his skin and sink lower, the less able he was to string together any sort of coherent, verbalized thought, despite the distance. The possibility that had loomed just at the edge of their relationship was suddenly close, present and startling and huge. He let the idea sit, let his thoughts go where they would without trying to give them direction or language or figure out what it all meant. After a time, there was only quiet within, and the strange wordless rustling of the woods around him became white noise in his mind; he pushed himself to rise and turn back to the cabin.

He stood at the edge of the property a few moments, watching her before he approached. She paced the front porch, her strides short and shuffling. She held her body in that way that he wasn't sure she'd adopted from Rory or that Rory had learned from her, one arm held close to her chest, the other elbow propped on the wrist, her hand cupped at her chin as she tugged at her lower lip with her index finger and thumb. The difference in the way each Lorelai did it, he'd always thought, showed the divide between them—Rory hunched, her posture almost simian as she worried her fingers at her lower lip, and Lorelai always stood up straight. Lorelai had learned years ago how to face life with her shoulders back, and this was something Rory hadn't yet done. He'd always admired Lorelai's refusal to slump.

As he approached the house, he cleared his throat, alerting her to his presence. She ceased pacing, dropped her arms, and waited for him. Luke cast a furtive glance at her; it was dark, but the thin moonlight wasn't what made her expression hard to read. She cocked an eyebrow at him, challenging him to speak.

"Hi," he said.

The corner of her mouth twitched. "Ladies and gentlemen, behold the master equivocator," she said. "Hi yourself." She tipped her head to one side. "So, are you going to tell me what that was about, the leaving and the going away? Where've you been?"
He waved expansively. "Out," he said. "I just needed—I needed a minute."

"So you said. If you're mad, I understand that, I just need you to tell me."

Luke lifted his hat and scratched at his scalp. "I'm not—I'm not mad. I'm concerned. We haven't been safe."

"Safe? Luke, it's not like we're a couple of irresponsible teenagers—I've been an irresponsible teenager, I know what that looks like, and we're nowhere near it. For one thing, the sex is way better—"

He sighed. "I'm not joking."

"I know you're not, and neither am I. For another thing," she continued, "I know that if I did, somehow, in these last two months, manage to get pregnant, you wouldn't turn into Steve McQueen and get all freaked—you and me, this is it, we're not going anywhere, and we both know that, whether you throw a baby into the mix or not." She held up a hand when he opened his mouth to speak. "Also, no matter what you think, it wouldn't be a mistake if it happened this way."

"Not a mistake," he said, "but still an accident."

"An unexpected surprise." She paused. "Well, that's redundant. I mean a pleasant, happy sort of surprise. Look at Rory—she wasn't planned, nowhere near it, and some people would say she was a mistake, but look at how fabulous and amazing she is. Luke, it could only be a good thing. Right?"

He stared at her for a beat, hated himself for the look on her face, painfully hopeful and nervous and sad. He reached for her, and she stepped forward and into him without hesitation. Holding her tightly to him, he spoke low in her ear. "Better than that," he said. He leaned back slightly better to look her in the eye. "But it's still not safe, what we've been doing."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sorry, I think I've seen that tree before."

"I just mean that, for the sake of argument—"

"Heavens to murgatroid, like we need another one of those."

"—say you were pregnant."

"I'm not," she said immediately. "I'm telling you. Right now? It's not possible. I had my period like, ten days ago." He looked at her levelly a moment. "Sorry. You were saying, I'm hypothetically pregnant."

"Thank you. Just say you were, and you didn't know—hell, Lorelai, you've been drinking coffee and wine all weekend, who knows what kind of damage can get done in forty-eight hours if you don't know—" He stopped, scowled at her. "Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like I'm Peter Rabbit."

She rested her hands lightly at the crooks of his elbows, squeezed him lightly, and tilted forward on the tips of her toes, pressing herself closer to him. She managed to continue looking at him as though he were Peter Rabbit and be simultaneously serious and pouting. "Luke, if I thought there was the remotest chance that I was pregnant—we're talking remote like the possibility of life on
Jupiter, here—I wouldn't be. Well, coffee, but not alcohol. The remotest chance. Life on Jupiter, Luke—Pluto, even, and we're not even sure that's a planet anymore. I swear. And I promise, I'll be careful. I'll be super careful. I'll be uber careful, even. The carefulest of careful." Off his doubtful look, she made a noise of impatience. "Or we can invest in parachutes, if that will make you feel better."

"Parachutes? What the hell—" She raised her brows at him. "Oh. Well, if you think—"

"I'm fine free-falling," she said, and she winced. "I killed the metaphor."

"I think you did." He tugged the ends of her hair, sighing. "But I'm good to go, too."

Lorelai's eyes were bright. She affected carelessness as she spoke, tilting her chin up and her face away from him. "What an interesting way to phrase it," she said.

Luke took one of her hands in both of his and led her into the house, back to the bedroom. The darkness here had a different quality—a thickness that enveloped them as they sought each other out. He held her so closely to him, his eyes open, that she was a barely visible form in the dark. Lorelai pushed him back, took his hands, guided him along her curves as she moved. Her skin was softer than the darkness, smoother, and he felt rather than saw the pearly luminescence she took on beneath his hands. She kissed him breathless, whispered an endearment against his ear, and suddenly she stilled, digging her nails into his shoulders. Her sharp cry seemed to sever something in the darkness, and he saw her clearly above him, silhouetted in the new silver light, her hair tumbling down her back and her face alight with some emotion he couldn't quite define.

They sat up late into the night, talking and not talking, Lorelai eating ice cream out of the pint container Luke brought back for her when he got up to get himself a glass of water. As much as he hated humidity and the interminable length of the summer months, it was moments like this that Luke could appreciate the heat. Sitting like this, his back against the ancient headboard, he remembered the first night that Lorelai had spent in his apartment, how he and she sprawled on his leather couch and continued making tentative steps on this strange trip they had started together. The heat of that night, he remembered, was not unlike this: the air had felt thick and he'd eaten cold pizza in bed with Lorelai, holding her in his narrow twin bed as he threw back sheets damp with sweat, hating the clammy feel of the fabric on his legs even as he relished the slickness of her skin against his.

She settled herself now back against his chest, reached up with one hand and stroked his cheek as she ran her foot along his calf, a newly habitual gesture. Luke rested his chin on her hair, closed his eyes. He let the night settle on his skin. The slight breeze drifting in beneath the curtains was heavy, thick now not only with the smells of summer and the iridescent sheen of humidity but also the dense feeling of possibility. Lorelai shifted in his arms, and he tightened his hold on her. She was warmth and softness and she gave the night air a sweetness of oranges and vanilla and honeysuckle. She trailed her fingers along his arms, danced her fingertips and nails over his skin, making him shiver. She felt him react and laughed.

"We should have done this before, my life," she said.

"Seems to me we do this quite a bit," he replied.

She kicked him lightly with her heel. "Not this," she told him, gesturing down the length of her torso, "this." She waved her arm. "Here."

"You've said that."

"Well, it's true." She yawned. "And I think we need to schedule regular periods of nakedness in
our day. It's really quite something."

Luke snorted at the thought, considered it a moment. "Huh. It still amazes me that I get to see you naked, you know," he said.

"Oh?" she asked, amused. "Why is that?"

He shrugged. "Just, you know, thinking of all the years I looked at you from afar—"

"You were looking at me naked from afar?"

"Lorelai," he said darkly.

"You know you can get arrested for that," she told him. "Wait, should I feel violated?"

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm trying to be sentimental, here," he said.

"Oh, I know," Lorelai smiled. "But I also know how uncomfortable that makes you, so I was just trying to lighten the mood with some inappropriate banter. Plus, when you use words like afar, which is so completely not you, it makes me feel like I'm in a Merchant-Ivory film." She kissed his cheek. "I appreciate the effort, though."

"Thank you," he said.

She paused. "You're not looking at other women naked from afar now that you get to look at me naked up close, are you?"

Luke tried to smother a smile. "I'm going to take that as a rhetorical question because the only answers I'm coming up with right now are really inappropriate and potentially disturbing."


"No."

"Oh, come on! Why not?"

"Because we're not nineteen," he told her.

"Interesting. So the last time Luke went skinny-dipping was at nineteen. What's happened to your youthful sense of frivolity and nudity, my life?"

He looked at her. "What about you?"

"Twenty-four," she replied promptly. "Man, did that night suck."

"Why?"

She sighed. "Oh, it was my one Friday night off of the month, and Rory and I were going to—I don't remember what our plans were, but we had plans. And then Sookie set me up on this blind date with this pastry chef she knew in Hartford, who was—he wasn't worth whatever I was going to have to give up doing with Rory, and then Sookie, in the only one absolutely wretched moment she's ever had as my friend since I've known her, somehow got Rory worked up into a state about how lonely I was and didn't she want me to be happy and not lonely…" She shook her head at the memory. "I was so furious, I didn't speak to her for a month. But I couldn't not go on the date at that point because Rory was just—she was just so, so upset. She had it in her head that I needed to go on this date, that if I didn't go on this date I would die and it'd be her fault, and she just wouldn't let it go. So I went. And the guy turns out to be one of those jackass guys who won't
date a girl who lives in a potting shed and cleans toilets for a living."

Luke's jaw tightened. "I hate this guy. And I gotta say, Sookie's really on my shitlist right now."

She smiled softly. "She means well, always, Luke. And this was, like, twelve years ago, so it's water so far under the bridge it's in France getting purified for bottling right now. Anyway, the date went badly and he made me pay for my half, which I couldn't afford, but I did, and then I took the bus home from Hartford, and it was awful. I was having one of those moments where, no matter how good I knew I had it, no matter how much I loved my life, I was seeing what it must have looked like to other people, and I just couldn't—I couldn't speak. I don't know how to describe it, it was—it was one of the only moments in the history of my life that I can honestly say I thought my mother was right, if this is really how it is, she'd been right about everything. And that made me crazy. So I get off the bus in Stars Hollow, go to the packy for a few nips, and head to the lake. Got a little drunk, went for a swim, cleared my head." She paused. "God, I haven't thought of that in years."

Luke squeezed the back of her neck gently. "It was tough then, I know. I remember."

She chuckled a little as she leaned back against him once more. "Do you know how long it took me to figure out you were undercharging us? For everything?" She looked back at him, the expression on her face slightly rueful. "You're blushing," she teased.

"I didn't know you knew," he said, his voice thick.

"I didn't, for a while. And then someone else gave us the check one day and you came barreling across the diner before I could even look at it and said it wasn't ours, and you wrote out a new one, and the other guy working for you looked at you like you were eight kinds of mental. And I just got it. What drove me nuts for a few days was that there was no nice way to thank you without embarrassing you, and there was no way to insist that you stop doing it without looking ungrateful and embarrassing you."

"I don't remember—"

She shrugged. "I didn't end up doing anything. Except I stopped calling you Duke."

"Is that why?"

"Well, you hated it."

"Yeah, I kinda did."

Lorelai grinned and shifted down, pressed her forehead into the crook of his neck. "Stopped calling you Duke, started to try and figure you out."

"And how'd that go?" he asked, stroking her hair.

She snapped her fingers. "Like that."

"That's a little pathetic for me, then."

She raised her head and gave him a slow, lingering kiss. "There was more to it than that," she said softly. "Still is. But that's when I knew what a good person you were. Are. You're still blushing," she laughed. "See, this is why I didn't say anything to you then. You're totally my Boo Radley. Without the weird, violent, criminal streak."

"So you keep saying."
"Go skinny-dipping with me."

"Now?" he asked.

Her eyes widened. "Hey, if you're agreeing, we're going to go now before you have the chance to change your mind."

"This is a one time thing," he warned.

She was already out of bed and shimmying into a long tee shirt, throwing clothes at him. "Oh, man, I wish I had a camera."

The rest of the weekend passed all too quickly; the days were unremarkable, unvaried, but restorative, as time spent here always was for Luke—more than that, they were fun, a word he hadn't associated with the cabin and the lake since he was a kid. The weekend was a novelty for Lorelai, and watching her, being with her, gave the place a new sort of shine in addition to everything that had always been comfortable about it. It began to feel more like it had when he was younger—not a last resort, but a place to go and simply be.

He wasn't anxious to get back to Stars Hollow and the sure-to-be constant discussion of the wedding. That it was imminent meant that he could no longer put off talk of it without seeming like a prick not entirely anxious to go through with it at all. And while normally such public opinion wouldn't bother him, he remembered still the conversation he and Lorelai had had after their last huge fight during which Lorelai told him he'd made her question his attitude towards the whole married thing. Though he was sure she'd blow off the gossip at this point, he thought he owed it to her.

He was able, for nearly two weeks after their return, to maintain a tolerant, if not cheerful, disposition. It fizzled when, a week before the day of, Lorelai turned up at the diner with a large overnight bag slung over her shoulder and a chagrined expression on her face. Luke only watched her as she skirted the counter, not meeting his eye as she smiled brightly in greeting, and hauled her burden upstairs. He waited just long enough to hear her footsteps growing impatient and ever louder on the floorboards above before he joined her in the apartment. She was unpacking the bag—packed to near bursting with tee shirts and flannels—and laying the clothes neatly in his old bureau.

"What are you doing?" Luke asked.

She didn't look up. "I've decided that you're going to stay here for the week. I think I have everything you'll need here, but you should check. If there's anything missing—"

"You've decided what?"

"You'll thank me," Lorelai said.

"That's unlikely."

She sighed and sank to the bed, leaning back against the wall. "Luke, I don't want to fight about this."

"I didn't know we were fighting yet."

He watched her slide down the wall and burrow among his pillows. It was then he noticed that she seemed pale, drawn, that her bright alertness was merely a shiny façade. Her eyes were slightly glassy, her movements stiff. She knuckled her eyes and attempted to dredge some
semblance of her normal energy up from the depths of its typically bottomless well. "I've brought the fight into being just by thinking about it. Like the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man." Her voice was flat.

Luke crossed the apartment, sat beside her, and took her by the hands to pull her into a loose embrace. She fell against his shoulder heavily and rubbed her cheek into the collar of his flannel. "Talk," he said.

She drew a deep breath as she sat upright and straightened her shoulders; her moment of weakness, of exposure, was over, and Luke saw that particular tilt to her chin that signaled resolve and forbearance. She kissed his cheek and got to her feet. "You'll stay here this week, I'll stay at the house, and that way we can do what we need to do and get it done and not kill anyone in the process." She walked away from him, towards the bathroom, as she spoke. He caught sight of a Hello! Kitty cosmetics bag as she unzipped it and began to place things into his medicine cabinet.

"Why?"

She shrugged. "It made sense to me this morning."

"That's not really an explanation that, you know, explains anything."

She smiled and ignored him. "Feel free to say you'll miss me."

"I will," he shot back, "which is why it's a stupid plan."

"I think the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man just entered the room," Lorelai sighed. "I know it seems stupid, Luke, but—"

"Because it is stupid. I don't wanna spend the week before we get married sleeping alone," he said, irritated at the sullenness he heard in his voice.

"I know," she said. "But seriously, my life, it's not going to be a fun week at the house. My mother is going to be in and out constantly, and Rory and Ashley will both be there, too, and more than likely Sookie and Lane will be dropping by more than a couple of times a day. I'm going to be—to be busy entertaining them—not to mention all the stuff that I have to do to get everything ready for the ceremony and the reception. You don't want to be there," she told him, closing the medicine cabinet. She zipped the Hello! Kitty bag closed and lobbed it in his direction; he caught it with one hand. "You're much better off bunking here with Jess."

He tossed the bag back at her, hitting her square on the ass. He flopped back onto the bed and sighed gustily. "Better off or not I'd much rather be bunking with you." He raised his head. "Jess doesn't exactly—"

"If that's a dirty joke, Luke Danes, I beg you not to finish it," she said. She crawled onto the bed beside him. "Because, ew. A lot." He didn't reply, just stared at the ceiling. Lorelai watched him for a moment before she wriggled across the mattress and insinuated herself against his side. After a moment of hesitation, Luke responded, raising his arm to allow her to cuddle closer and to wrap her in a tight embrace. "It just seems easier."

"Right," he grunted. "We should have eloped and gotten it over with, anyway."

Lorelai sighed his name. She shifted in his arms, tucked her forehead against his neck. She pressed her lips to his throat. "You don't get a marriage over with, my life." Her voice was low in his ear, her breath hot as it tickled his jaw.

"Marriage, no. A wedding, yes."
She threw her leg over his hip, curled it across his mid-section. She said nothing for what seemed
to Luke an unnaturally long time. When she spoke, she kept her voice light. "Luke, you know that
I'm not—that I haven't been fantasizing about the perfect wedding since I was three, or anything,
right? That that's not what this whole thing is about?"

"I know."

"I just think that it's important."

"I know," he said again. It wasn't the first time they'd had the conversation.

"And besides, you know you wouldn't want to elope, Luke." She propped herself up on one
elbow and laid her other hand flat against his cheek, turned him to look at her. "Under all that
stubble and flannel and poo-pooing of tradition—"

"Don't say poo-pooing," he said.

"Stop interrupting me," she shot back. "Under all that stubble and flannel and poo-pooing of
tradition beats the heart of a sentimental dorkhead who is so enamored of me he can't help
himself."

"Is that so?" he asked.

Lorelai moved to lay on top of him. She rested her chin against Luke's and folded her hands
across his chest. "It's so. What you're really worried about is you'll be so overcome with emotion
you'll weep."

"I am not."

She began to giggle. "Oh, I can just see it. 'My love for you is like a red, red rose…'"

"Stop," he said. He took her hand and folded it in his. He spoke without meeting her eye, studying
their joined hands instead. "It's just—the vows, the things we'll say, that's for us, those…
feelings… those are ours. Having people there for that part of it—I don't know," he finished
lamely. "It seems like it should be different."

Lorelai squeezed his hand. "I understand that, my life, I do."

"But?"

"I just want everyone to see."

"See what?"

"My striptease," she replied.

"Lorelai."

"Having people there won't make it any less ours Luke. It's just a way of making it more, you
know?" She paused. "Luke, please? I know you know all this."

He rubbed her back. "I do. I just—it's just a little overwhelming, thinking about people seeing us
say private things to each other."

"So don't think about them," she said. "I promise you, I'll be stunning, so it'll be a good distraction
for you."
Luke mumbled against her forehead, defeated. "You really going to make me live alone for a week?"

"You won't be alone," she reminded him. "You'll have Jess."

"Which is such a comfort."

She gently bit his lower lip. "You want comfort?" she asked, cocking an eyebrow. "It can be arranged."

Jess arrived that afternoon. He snorted at the new living arrangement. "Man," he said, "do the Gilmore women have you whipped or what?" He paused. "More than they did before, which is impressive."


"Whatever helps you sleep at night."

That had been the last extended amount of time he'd spent with Lorelai that week. It seemed to Luke that the closer they came to their wedding day, the less time he and Lorelai were able to be in the same place at once, even in the company of others. For what Lorelai called "a non-elaborate while elegant and still Luke-friendly affair," there was a lot of running around, and for what, he couldn't fathom. After she'd talked him into asking Jackson to serve as a groomsman and coerced him into allowing Liz to perform the ceremony (as an ordained minister of some new age "faith group" with a fruity name like Children of the Universe or something) when the wedding talk began, Lorelai had thankfully left Luke out of the planning process. She kept him informed of her decisions, prefacing them always with a remark about his astounding enthusiasm for the whole thing, but she'd kept his interests in mind and defended him from dealing with Emily after his future mother-in-law spent a week early on calling him multiple times a day with suggestions for "suitable attire."

He now had a night, a day, and another night left to grit his teeth and get through until the wedding. Sitting in the diner, wilting in the heat despite the late hour, the thought made Luke close his eyes and bang his head against the wood behind him with a resounding thwack. Jess looked up from the pair of cards that lay on the floor between them.

"What's with you?" he wanted to know.


They were hiding together, Luke with his back against the cabinet beneath the cash register, Jess facing him as he leaned back into the cubby holes under the back counter. On the other side of the divide, Kirk, TJ, TJ's younger brother, Jackson, Bootsie, Andrew, the rabbi, the reverend, and the troubadour were carousing around two kegs: one contained hard cider, the other non-alcoholic beer. It was, Luke knew, the worst bachelor party in the history of the event. He and Jess had retreated to their current stronghold with a pack of cards not long after the debate over Betty and Veronica began. No one had missed them. Luke concluded that it was better this way not only because he would eventually have resorted to homicide with so many irritating people packed into such a small space discussing such an inane issue—and everyone knew that Veronica had the body—but also because he and Jess were entirely lacking as partiers at the moment. Jess had rather unexpectedly taken a week off from work to be around before the wedding, and there had, in an equally surprising turn of events, been a sudden rush of tourists in town laying siege to the diner. Both men felt worn inside and out and decidedly not up to mediating a discussion over which Angel was the most inferior replacement after Farrah left Charlie's agency.
"I'm kicking your ass here, man. You're not even trying," Jess said.

Luke squinted at the cards. "I'm getting bad hands."

"You're playing crappy cards."

"Either way, you win."

"Yes, I do," he said. "You want a beer?"

"You realize that beer over there is basically warm piss in a tin can," Luke said. "And no way am I drinking hard cider."

"Also warm piss in a tin can," Jess said. "Nah. I'll go upstairs, grab a couple bottles." He threw his chest out in mock heroism. "Unlike you, I think I can take 'em if they attack."

Luke swatted at Jess's ankles as he walked past towards the back stairs. As the curtain fell back into place, the phone began to ring. He ducked into the kitchen as he answered, his voice low, "Hey."

"This is how you answer the phone now?" Lorelai asked.

"Only when I know it's you. Having fun?"

She snorted. "Actually, no. I should be, but I'm in a funk—I'm Jennifer Grey in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off.*"

"Where are you?"

"At a bar in Hartford by the train station." She lowered her voice and spoke in the husky drawl she always adopted when imitating men. "Dollar well drinks after ten on Thursdays, dude. Frat city!"

"Well drinks?"

"Drinks made with the cheapest of the cheap—bottom drawer liquor," she said disdainfully. "I'm not drinking, it's not worth it." She sighed. "But Lane's band is actually kicking some cover tune ass with Dave *and* Gil on guitar, and Rory and Ashley are just lapping the vodka up like it's Kool Aid. My baby girl, a veritable stumbling drunk. I'm so proud."

He chuckled. "She and Ashley are getting along okay?"

"Oh, honey, once the drinking begins, Rory and Ashley get along with *everyone.*** Lorelai paused. "This is my last fling with single living, I really should be having more fun than this."

"Single living, she says.

"Well, only technically speaking," she conceded. "I lost Sookie again. She keeps wandering off. I'm afraid I'm going to find her at the bottom of the stairs—"

"Liz still there with you?" Luke asked.

"Mm hm." Lorelai took an audible sip of something over a mound of ice that Luke could hear clinking in the glass. "She's reading palms at the pool table in the back. Hand to God, Luke. Miss Patty and Babette are cool handing some barely legal drinkers out of their tip money at the other one, and if those boys are not careful, they're going to end up going home in Patty's back pocket
before the night is over, too."

"That is an image I could have lived without, thank you, love."

"I do my best to make you squirm," Lorelai replied, laughing. "And, if I remember rightly, often
succeed." She sipped her drink again. "The conversation just took a dirty turn, by the way."

"So I gathered."

"I didn't want you to miss the all-important segue."

"That’s very thoughtful of you," he said. "You want to bail? I can come get you."

"What? Leave your merry band of revelers?" Lorelai asked. "What will Little John and the Friar—
Friars, actually—do without their mighty Prince of Thieves?"

"Kirk is Little John?"

"I was thinking Jackson," Lorelai said, "since Kirk’s really more of a damsel in distress than
sidekick."

Luke rubbed his eyes wearily. "How did I become Robin Hood?"

"I'm a little punchy." Again, she sighed. "Is it me or has this week just sucked?"

"It's not you," he replied.

"I should go. I'll call you later. Promise me you won't fall asleep," she said.

"I promise."

"And if I remind you of that when you complain that I woke you up—"

"I'll be up."

"Heh," she chortled. "Dirty."

"You'd think so."

He could tell she was smiling. "I do. Don't fall asleep."

They were a six pack worse for wear between them when Jess alerted Luke to the fact that Kirk
had fallen asleep and was currently drooling on a table, TJ and his brother were trying to hoist
Bootsie into a keg stand, Andrew and Jackson were crooning an off-key rendition of "Eli’s
Coming," and the rabbi and reverend were arm-wrestling. Luke, pleasantly relaxed, merely rolled
his eyes and trudged upstairs. He’d sacrificed the bigger bed to TJ and his brother (Liz was staying
at Lorelai’s, the men and women divided up like kids at summer camp), and rather than sleep there
on the unmade remains of the night before, he opened a sheet over the sofa, stripped down to his
boxers, went about his nightly rituals, and lay down to wait.

He shifted uncomfortably on the sofa; the leather of the cushions creaked, and Luke pulled away
from the back of the couch, hearing more than feeling the loud sucking noise of the material
releasing his skin where it stuck to the parts of the sofa that the sheet he’d laid out didn't cover. He
stared through the darkness of his old apartment—he paused a moment, reflected on the fact that
this renovated office of his father's had become his "old" apartment in a matter of months after so
many years of being his home. As he beat a more comfortable hollow into his pillow and twitched
his legs against the sheet beneath him, this old apartment felt more like a poor temporary substitute
than home; it was the set of clothes worn on laundry day, when the everyday jeans and favored tee shirts were unavailable and all that was left were the oldest and the over-worn remnants of a wardrobe, clothes that perhaps used to be favorites but had outlived their usefulness and preference except as a last resort. Without the heat of Lorelai's body beside his, the comforting weight of her arm draped across his chest, this little apartment was just the place he didn't live anymore.

TJ and his brother—Luke could not, for the life of him, remember the guy's name—made their presence known just as the beer was making Luke drowsy and restful. They fumbled around the apartment, bitching at each other, rooting around in their bags for their things, laughing at their own jokes, and, when they finally stopped trying to goad Luke and make him acknowledge them, fell asleep, and began to snore at a decibel level Luke had previously thought only congested German shepherds were capable of.

Above the nasal din, he thought he heard soft scuffling noises in the diner downstairs. He waited, trying to decide if Bootsie and Andrew had come back to raid his stockroom as they'd threatened to. The sounds subsided after a short moment. The silence was sudden, a lull in the snorting, horking of the brothers, and brief, as the heavy tread of footsteps echoed in the stairwell. The door swung open, and Jess leaned in. "Luke, man, I've got two drunk girls downstairs. One drunk girl is way beyond my tolerance level, and seeing as how one of them—"

Luke sat up. "Ah, geez," he groaned, reaching for the first article of clothing he could find, an old denim work shirt, sliding his feet into a pair of sneakers as an afterthought.

He saw Ashley first, leaning her forehead against the glass partition between the diner and the soda shoppe next door. She wore a drunken squint, a confused expression, as she blinked at the transparent reflection before her. Jess rolled his eyes and crossed the diner. Ashley turned her face to him without lifting her forehead from the window. She smiled sleepily.

"Hey, I know you," she said. She stood upright unsteadily and flung her arms over Jess's shoulders. "Where ya been?"

"Not at the distillery you were," he said.

Luke averted his eyes, realizing he was staring. He turned to the counter. "Ah, geez," he breathed again, passed a hand over his eyes. Rory was sprawled across the countertop, half falling off a stool. Her arms were spread wide, her cheek pressed to the Formica surface. Luke approached her tentatively, completely unsure how to approach a Rory Gilmore passed out and possibly drooling in his diner, like Kirk.

He opted for a hand on the shoulder. "Rory?" He shook her slightly. "Come on, Kid."

She raised her head a fraction of an inch and opened one eye, smiled. "Pops."

"You ready to go home?"

Shaking her head, Rory folded her arms across the counter and rested her cheek on her wrist. "Tired."

Luke hooked one hand under Rory's elbow and reached a careful arm around her waist, slipping her off the stool. She got to her feet without complaint or opening her eyes. He negotiated her into the crook of his arm, her head lolling on his shoulder. She was disconcertingly loose-limbed in her current state, a rag doll in his arms. He looked over his shoulder at Jess, who was supporting Ashley as he walked her to the stairs. His nephew cocked an eyebrow at him, a silent "I'm fine," and Luke nodded. He leaned down and caught Rory behind the knees, hoisted her to cradle her in
his arms, and jostled her a little until she was easier to carry.

"I'm going to bring her home," he said.

Rory raised her head and looked at him with drowsy eyes. "You just keep thinking, Butch. That's what you're good at," she said.

"I got vision," Luke replied, and Rory giggled, slumped her head back against his shoulder.

He heard Jess clear his throat just as he reached the door. "You ever consider pants, man?"

Luke left without answering.

"Where're we going?" Rory asked.

"Bolivia," he answered, knowing what was expected. This had become their thing, their bit, though he couldn't quite remember how or when. One too many viewings of *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* in the living room, one too many times responding to "Butch" when she called him that, he supposed.

"Wherever the hell that is."

"Beats the hell out of me."

She began to giggle again. "Butch, the total tonnage of what you don't know—"

"Kid, the next time I say let's go to Bolivia—"

"—let's go to Bolivia," Rory finished for him. "You get all the good lines."

"Well, the Kid's not much of a talker," Luke said. He shifted her slightly. She was beginning to feel like dead weight.

"Naturally blabby," she said. "Luke?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're marrying Mom."

"Me, too."

She released a heavy breath. "When're you going to tell her about the chuppah?"


"It was nice that you made it. It's pretty," she said. "And it's fun to say chuppah." She pronounced with a choking noise, and Luke found himself involuntarily jerking his head away.

He spoke carefully. "Does she know?"

"About what?"

"The chuppah."

Rory paused, pursed her lips together. "Nope."

He thought about this a moment. "How'd you know?"
"Found it. Looking for duct tape when I was packing to go to Dad's." She sighed. "Never found the duct tape." She began to rock her head from side to side, tapping her temple lightly against Luke's shoulder when she tilted to the left. She hummed tunelessly as they came to the end of their street. "You can't come in the house," she said suddenly.

He angled to look at her. "Why?"

"Mom's dress is in the living room. She was trying it on before the party, and then Babette called that she was coming over, so she had to put it back on the mannequin and she just left it in the living room. 'S bad luck to see it before the wedding," Rory slurred.

Luke furrowed his brow. "She had to put it back on the mannequin," he repeated.

"Mm. She's all done with it, though."

His throat constricted a little. "She made it."

"Mm," Rory said again. "'S very pretty."

"I'll bring you through the kitchen," he told her. "And you're going to go to bed right after you drink some water."

She made a face, puckered her mouth. "Not thirsty."

"Don't care," Luke told her.

The house was dark, the windows open. Luke strained against the dark as he stepped onto the lawn. He deposited Rory on her feet when they reached the kitchen door and immediately felt his knees and back creak from the effort. She shuffled ahead of him, raking her hands through her hair and yawning. She stopped short in the door to her room, confused. "Lane?" Rubbing her eyes, Luke saw her expression change to one of chagrined amusement. "Oh, hey, Dave." She looked over her shoulder at Luke. "Is my room, like, the make out room, now?"

"Who're you talking to?" Luke heard Lane ask.

"Butch," she said with a nod and grin. Rory slumped against her doorway as Lane appeared beside her, slightly mussed. "Butch and me have been talking it over, Lane. Wherever the hell Bolivia is, that's where we're off to."

Lane rubbed the tips of her fingers at the space just between her eyes. "This again?" she asked. "Hey, Luke. You guys need a new bit."

Rory frowned. "I like this bit." She swiveled to look at Luke. "Don't you?"

"Sure I do, Kid," he said, smiling. He rocked back on his heels. "You should get to sleep, though."

"Mm," Rory murmured. She waved a hand at Luke over her shoulder as she entered her room. "Thanks, Pops. You're the best. Love ya. Dave, get off my bed and put your shirt on, okay?"

Lane crossed her arms over her chest and bit her lips together, looked guiltily at Luke. "It's been a long night," she said at length.

"You're telling me," he sighed. "Do me a favor, make sure she drinks some water before she passes out again?" She nodded. "Lorelai home?"
"She drove Sookie's car home. She's probably walking back now."

"Thanks, Lane."

"Sure, boss." Just as he turned to go, she called to him. "You do know you're not wearing any pants, right?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then."

They met up halfway between their place and Sookie's. Lorelai seemed surprised to see him, stopping dead; she immediately began to laugh. "Luke! Where are your pants?"

He looked down. "At the apartment. I left in a hurry."

"So it would appear," she said, meeting him in a crushing embrace. "God, am I glad to see you. Every other person I know is drunk, and when you yourself are not drunk, that's depressing."

"Not drinking tonight?" he asked, brushing a kiss across her forehead. "You okay?"

Lorelai wrinkled her nose. "Yes, I just don't—the idea of drinking anything boozy just makes me kind of queasy right now. I was hitting the diet Coke pretty hard, though." She stepped back and slipped her hand in his. "Come on, I'll walk you back to the diner. I don't trust you walking back all flapping in the breeze like that."

"I am not flapping in the breeze," he said darkly.

"I know, but it amuses me to say you are."

She kissed him at the door to the diner and rested her palms flat on his chest. "Okay, so. It's all set. We did the party thing, and tomorrow's the rehearsal dinner, and then the day after that we'll do the whole exchanging of vows thing..." She trailed off. "I'm so tired right now, I can't believe how not excited I sounded saying that. I'm sorry."

Luke slid one hand beneath the hem of her shirt and rubbed the small of her back in slow, reassuring circles. "I get it."

"This whole week has just been one thing after another, I know, and we haven't had time to breathe or actually think about what's actually happening. We're getting married," she breathed. "Which is just—well, it's something." She paused, waiting for him to reply. He only smiled in silent agreement. "Don't you think? I mean, aren't you excited?" she asked, her voice tentative.

He touched his forehead to hers. "To be getting married to you? You bet I am," he said.

"Good." Lorelai smiled, her eyes closed. "Heaven help you, Luke Danes. Do you have any idea why you're marrying me anymore?"

"I have some," he said, chuckling. "You?"

"You mean do I have any idea why I'm marrying you? Isn't it obvious? This way, I can tease and torment you for the rest of our lives," she said, her tone deliberately light.

He pulled away to look at her. "Well, yes, but you'd have done that anyway. Really, though, why?"

"I would have, yes," she agreed, her voice throaty with laughter. She circled his wrists with her
"I would have, yes," she agreed, her voice throaty with laughter. She circled his wrists with her hands, tapped his palms. "Why are you asking?"

Luke shrugged awkwardly and remained silent.

"Well, first of all," she said, "you asked me to."

"Yes, I did."

"There's also the fact that you're pretty good in bed."

"Pretty good?"

She continued, ignoring him. "The coffee is also a bonus, not having to pay for it. You also give quite good foot rubs," she said. "And if I didn't take pity on you pretty soon, you just know Patty would have set her tractor beams on you and made you husband number five."

"If I had known I had that option—"

"Very funny," Lorelai drawled. "Hey, do I have to call you Lucas when we say our vows?" she asked. "I don't know that I'd ever feel properly married to you if I had to call you Lucas. I've only ever called you that when I'm trying to piss you off."

"Luke is fine," he replied.

"In many, many ways," she smiled. She leaned up and kissed the edge of his jaw.

"So, other than the fact that I asked, my abilities in bed and status as your coffee supplier, and your graciously saving me from Patty, there are no other reasons?" he asked.

"There's also that whole 'I love you and want to be with you until I die' thing, too. Luke, my life, what is this about?"

Again, he shrugged. "We're saying vows in a few days. I just... I've been thinking about it. Wondering. How I got so—why you—you know."

"Why I what? Why I love you? Why I want to marry you?" He didn't reply, and she bit her lip, shook her head. "Oh, Luke. Sometimes I forget... for all our talky-talk-talkyness, there are still a lot of elephants in the room a lot of the time, aren't there? We'd give Maddie and David a run for their money, sometimes." Lorelai looped her arms around his neck. She looked at him a long moment, her expression serious and sad. "You shouldn't have had to wonder," she said softly. "You should have known that all along—we shouldn't—we shouldn't have to explain it." She raised a hand to his face and stroked his cheek, falling silent once more. "I love you," she said slowly, "because you're Luke."

Luke closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest. "Not helpful, Lorelai."

She swept her hand across his brow, through his hair, down his neck. "I couldn't help it if I wanted to, Luke. Okay? Do you get it?" She pressed her palms to his cheeks and pulled his mouth to hers. "You're ridiculous, you know that?"

He exhaled shakily. "Pot," he said.

"I know, Kettle," she laughed. "I have to go home." She pulled him in for one last, soft kiss. "Once more into the breach. See you tomorrow."

It had been tempting to have the rehearsal dinner at Luke's just to horrify Emily, but Lorelai told him she thought she'd finally outgrown doing things to horrify her mother and had moved on simply to saying things to do so. Sookie volunteered to host the dinner and the party following, and so Luke found himself cornered in Sookie's living room the night before his wedding, being
regaled with embarrassing anecdotes about his past romantic ineptitude and Lorelai's commitment phobic ways by a Miss Patty so pickled in her own punch she was reeling where she stood. Jess was pointedly—and delightedly, as much as he ever expressed such a feeling—ignoring his uncle's silent pleas for help. Rory's appearance at his elbow had Luke so relieved he was tempted to hug the girl right there, but she was expertly guiding him from the throng of well-wishers with a firm hand on his arm before he could.

"Mom's waiting," she told him in a low voice. "Outside. She's a little worn out, I think she wants you to take her home."

Lorelai was sitting at the edge of Sookie's lawn, tapping her bare feet against the sidewalk below her. She looked up as Luke crouched beside her, smiled wearily. "Hey, stranger," she said. "What's happening, hot stuff?"

"Rory said you want to go home?"

She nodded. "I need my beauty sleep. Apparently I'm getting married tomorrow. You know anything about that?"

"I heard some things," he said, pulling her to her feet. "Some lucky bastard you found."

"I keep telling him that, and his response is just to try to feed me health food, which I think is really a slap in my pretty little face," she said. She leaned into him as they began to walk, slipped one arm around his waist as she swung her sandals in her free hand.

Luke slung his arm over her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "Maybe if you gave in, he'd stop nagging."

"Doubtful," she teased. "It was a nice party. You think anyone will notice we're gone?"

He checked his watch. "Equally doubtful," he answered. "It's late."

"Mm," she murmured. "It is that."

"Your parents, maybe," he conceded. "Your mother has been in high dudgeon—"

"Forever," she said, "that's how long. I talked to her before I left. She was fine. Well, as fine as she can be about a party in Sookie's house at which no one used or mentioned a doily. Hey," she said, tilting her face to him. "I wanted to tell you that I'm very proud of you. You've been very British this week, and I want you to know how much I appreciate it."

"I've been British?"

"Stiff upper lippy," she grinned. "Very impressive. I even have a present for you."

"Oh, yeah?" he asked, pleased. For the first time all day, he felt himself begin to relax. He'd felt stilted and awkward at dinner; too many people focusing too much attention on him, too many speeches with too much embarrassing detail, too much rich food and not enough alcohol to wash it down and dull himself to everything else. Lorelai had been, once again, strangely quiet, and it had worried him slightly to see her pick at her food, to hear the hollow falseness in her laughter when people cracked lame jokes. "I've got some stuff for you, too."

She gave him a slight squeeze. "I love stuff."

The house was dark as they approached; Luke sighed, thinking that once he walked Lorelai inside and the place lit up, he'd be on his way back to the old apartment again. It irritated him enough to
think Jess was right, he was whipped, and it was really rather pathetic. That they were getting married the next day took the heat from the revelation, but it still made him sigh. Lorelai stopped in the drive, looked at him with a furrowed brow.

"I know," she said. "It hasn't been the easiest week, and that's my fault. But it'll be worth it."

"That so?"

"It is," she told him. "At least, I hope so, because otherwise we just spent a really crappy week apart for no reason other than my—well, my last, desperate grasp at tradition, I guess. Come inside?"

"Just a sec," he said. He took one of her hands in both of his and led her towards the garage.

"You okay?" she asked. "Your hands are cold."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm okay." He could feel himself speeding up, his pulse quickening painfully and his breath coming too fast. "So, I gotta show you something. In the garage."

Lorelai wrinkled her nose. "It's not, like, hairy or anything, is it?"

"Not hairy," he replied. He released her hands and pulled the doors open. "So. Go on in."

He'd brought the chuppah front and center in the small space earlier that week, arranged the other furniture around it. The rocker was off to the left, hidden slightly in shadow now, the small bookcase and table opposite it. Luke hung back by the door as Lorelai stepped into the darkened garage, his eyes fixed to the ground, at his feet. He braced his hands on his hips as he waited, listening to her sharp intake of breath, the soft, wordless noises of appreciation and approval she made as she ran her hand over the posts of the chuppah, as she fingered the edges of the table, palmed the shelves of the bookcase. He looked up at the creak of the rocker against the cement floor; Lorelai sat gingerly in the chair, her hands folded at her knees. She held his gaze, her expression tearful and overwhelmed.

"All of this?" she asked.

He shrugged one shoulder.

"Luke?" Her voice shook. "When?"

He gave the chuppah a once-over. "Before your birthday, some of it. Some of it, later." He turned in the doorway, scratched the back of his neck. "You knew about the chuppah, didn't you?"

Lorelai sat back in the rocker, flattened her palms against the arms of the chair and stroked the wood reverently as she began to rock with a gentle push off the balls of her toes. "I found it," she said. "Awhile ago. I didn't want to say anything, I knew it was a surprise, but, Luke—I wasn't—I didn't expect this." She gestured broadly with one arm. "All of this," she said again. "I can't believe you did this."

"You like it?" he asked.

She was at his side, her arms around him so quickly she nearly knocked him off his feet. She held him, pushed herself forward into him, one hand in his hair and her nails digging into his scalp, his shoulder. She pressed her cheek to his, whispered hotly in his ear. "I love you."

He closed his eyes. "I just wanted some stuff that was ours."
She said nothing in reply, took a shaky breath, and rubbed her cheek across his, now damp with tears. "Oh, Luke," she said. "Come inside, okay?"

Holding tightly to his hand and pulling him behind her, Lorelai led him to the front door and through the living room to the stairs. She caught him looking over his shoulder as he followed her up the stairs, and she snorted. "It's in Rory's room," she said.

"What is?"

She stopped on the landing and put her hands heavily on his shoulders. "The dress. It's in Rory's room. She told me about her little drunken slip last night." She narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't think it's a big deal, or anything."

Luke smiled as he kissed her. "Wouldn't dream of it."

She rolled her eyes as she took him by the hand once more. "I'm thinking of wearing my Hello! Kitty slippers with it. I've found that of all my footwear, those go with it best."

"All your footwear?"

"Well, I had to try it with everything, my life, see what worked best." She paused at the top stair. "It's between the Hello! Kitties and my red Chucks. But you'll see which ones I choose tomorrow. First, you need to see your present."

The bedroom door was closed. She stood between Luke and the entrance, her hand on the doorknob. He looked at her, his brows raised in expectation. She took a breath, held it, and pressed her free hand to his heart. "If you don't like it, you need to tell me, okay? My feelings won't be hurt."

"Lorelai—"

"I'm serious, Luke—this is your room, too, now, and I don't want you going all Charlotte Perkins Gilman on me because you don't like it and haven't told me. If I catch you chewing on the furniture, I'm going to be seriously pissed." She swatted his hand when he reached around her to open the door. "Luke."

He sighed. "I promise."

He stepped in behind her as she turned on the light. The new curtains caught and held the light, softened it and glowed greenly against the night beyond the windows. Lorelai had decked the room out in dark, rich colors—deep greens and blues, burgundy and cream accents. The new bedding was plush and inviting, the reupholstered armchair in the corner draped with a new quilt and handmade pillows. He swept the room with his eyes, took in the floor-length window coverings, the throw rugs, the new, dark finish on her old furniture, the starkly bare walls, freshly painted and gleaming almost damply in the light. His first thought, beyond wanting to sink into the bed immediately with Lorelai to make love or sleep or stay awake all night with her tucked comfortably under his arm, was that he was glad to see the girly wallpaper gone for good. He planted his feet firmly and pulled her to him, brushed his lips across her forehead.

"I like it."

"Yeah?" she asked, pleased. "Really?"

"Definitely not going to be chewing on the furniture."

"I thought you'd like it," she said, laying her head on his shoulder. "Well, I hoped you'd like it, but
"I thought you might."

"Do you like it?"

He felt her smile. "Mm, I do. It's very warm, you know? It wants to hug you. It's simple."

"And this is why you asked me to leave for the week."

"It is, yes."

They were silent together a moment, Luke gathering her closer to him, Lorelai slipping her arms around him in return. "Thanks," he said. "You're going to make me go back to the diner tonight, aren't you?"

"Not yet." She wet her lips. "Hey, Luke?"

"Yeah?"

Slowly, Lorelai began to pull away. "I wasn't sure I was going to do this tonight…" She trailed off, turned from him, and stepped further into the room. "But I think I should."

"Do what?" he asked, watching as she opened the drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a plastic bag. "Lorelai?"

She bit her lips together and stared at the package in her hand a moment, looked up at him from beneath her eyelashes. She was pale, shaking, as she handed him the bag. "Open it."

Luke knew before he opened the bag and saw its contents what it was. He heard the faint rattle of plastic as she raised her arm and gave it to him, felt the hard corners of the box through the bag as he took it. His mouth went dry, his face and hands suddenly numb. "Is this…?"

"Yep," Lorelai answered. She crossed her arms over her chest. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing," he said. "I kinda—I'm a little—I can't—"

She raised her eyes heavenward. "Pretty much my reaction, too." Again, she took a deep breath, rubbed the back of her neck with one hand. Luke remained where he stood, stock-still, as Lorelai began to undress and tie her hair back, pull on a pair of old cotton pajamas and take off her jewelry. "You'll stay?" she asked.

His chest felt tight, and his skin was fevered and stinging as he came back to himself. "Do you have to ask?"

She held out her hand. "Let me," she said. "I'll just be a minute."

"You want me to—you know?" he asked as he returned the package to her.

She smiled faintly. "No, I think I can handle the weeing part on my own. But—just, don't go anywhere, okay?"

He watched her cross the hall, gripping the bag in both hands, close to her chest. "Lorelai," he called. She turned, uncertainty in her very posture, worry written on her brow. "I love you." His voice was thick, rough.

Her face blossomed in a smile. "I know. I'll just be a sec."

Luke sat heavily on the edge of the bed. The room should have felt alien, both too big and too
small in its newness; he thought about it as he kicked off his shoes, pulled his shirt over his head
and sat there, bare-chested in his good dress pants, settled himself back against the enormous pile
of pillows Lorelai had made, and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. There wasn't any
need to make himself feel at home, he realized, just comfortable. He folded his hands behind his
head, closed his eyes, and waited. The tightness in his chest was slowly worsening, descending to
his abdomen. He felt poised on the edge of something, his entire body waiting, humming,
overheated and worn and caught in skin suddenly too tight and thin.

The bathroom door creaked open a brief moment later. Lorelai padded across the hall and crawled
up onto the bed beside him. She curled into herself, her knees tucked to her chest, and laid her
cheek on his side. When she spoke, her words buzzed against the skin over his ribs, tickled the
hair on his chest.

"It doesn't take that long," she said. "I just didn't want to look at it."

"I need to oil the hinges on that door," he replied.

Lorelai chuckled, pressed her lips to his stomach. "Oh, Luke," she said. "King of the panicked
non-sequitur."

He twisted a lock of her hair around his index finger. "I'm not panicked," he said.

"No? So that look on your face is what, a reaction to your dinner?"

He tugged gently on her hair. "I'm not," he said softly. "I'm—I'm worried. About you. Feeling a
little overwhelmed, maybe, but not panicked. We can—we can do this. We can handle this."

Lorelai lifted her head and folded her hands on his chest. She regarded him a beat, her expression
inscrutable. "Do you think so?"

"I think so," he said, sliding the tip of his finger along the curve of her cheek.

"You just keep thinking, Butch—"

He groaned. "I'm going to burn that movie," he said.

She began to laugh. "Think you used enough dynamite there, Butch?" she teased. "Hey, did you
know that Edith Head did the costumes for that movie?"

"Who's Edith Head?" he asked.

"And Burt Bacharach did the music, which explains the weird 'Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My
Head' scene. Despite the Bacharach, it's a good movie."

"Who's Edith Head?" he asked again.

"Edith Head is Edith Head, Luke," she said, as though that explained everything. "Hey, have I
told you that you smell pretty tonight?"

"I do not smell pretty."

"Yes, you do." She sat up, leaning over him as she did, and kissed him lightly. She looked him in
the eye as she spoke. "I think it's been long enough. More than long enough."

Luke swallowed over the constriction in his throat. "Okay. You want me to—"

She pressed her hand to his chest, stared at her fingers as she tapped a beat against his skin. "You
She pressed her hand to his chest, stared at her fingers as she tapped a beat against his skin. "You stay here. I need to—I need to see it for myself." She climbed over him and rolled off the bed. She paused in the bedroom doorway. "Luke? Either way…"

"Either way, we're good."

"I know," she said. "Just… you know, just saying it. I'll be right back."

Closing his eyes, Luke gritted his teeth and drew a long breath through his nose. As he exhaled, he began to count. At three seconds, the beat of his heart began to seem painfully fast. At five seconds, he forced himself to fold his hands and still the shaking. At eight and a half seconds, he heard Lorelai from the bathroom.

"Oh," she said.

He swung his legs over the edge of the bed, got to his feet. The time she took to cross back to the bedroom seemed torturously long, but he remained where he stood, his hands in his back pockets, his whole body tensed as though ready to spring forward. Lorelai leaned in the doorway and crossed her arms over her chest.

"So," she said casually, "how do you feel about a shotgun wedding?"

His knees gave out. He let himself fall back to sit on the bed. He felt a tingling in the tips of his fingers, and the room seemed to collapse around him, close in and expand again. Lorelai wore a strange smile, but her posture was easy, sure. "No shit," he said.

She raised her right hand. "No shit."

"No shit," he echoed softly. He ran his hand across the back of his head. "So you're—"

"Knocked up," she said. "Baking a bun in my oven. With child. Pregnant." She paused. "You are going to weigh in on this without obscenities, right?"

Luke braced his hands on his knees and pushed himself to his feet once more. He spread his hands, shrugged, his expression sheepish, and she was on him in an instant, her arms around his neck, her chin on his shoulder, her mouth against his ear. Luke lifted her off her feet as he held her.

"Wow," he said at length.

Lorelai was clinging to him, tightening her arms around his neck and shoulders, lifting her legs and hooking them around his waist. He stumbled under her weight, tripped over his own feet, and toppled back onto the bed. She was shaking in his arms, trying to untangle the knot they'd made of their bodies, and as she pulled away, Luke could see her face was tear-stained, a flower wilted by rain. She sat up, tucked her legs beneath her, and turned her face away.

"Hey," he breathed. "What's this?"

She reached for his hand and pressed his palm to her abdomen, taking a long, shuddery breath as she tried to calm herself. "This is what this is," she said. She held his wrist fast with one hand, covered his fingers with the other. "This. I'm just—I mean—I can't—"

Luke sat up. With his free hand, he reached for her, and she dug her nails into the hand she still held tightly to her belly. "You're going to have to help me out, here, love."

Her laughter was loose, slightly hysterical. She forced him onto his back and kissed him, a long, messy, wet kiss. When she pulled back, her eyes were bright, but calmer. She pushed herself up and sat straddling him, took his hands and laced her fingers with his. As she spoke, she shook her
hair back, squeezed his hands, tried to regain possession of herself.

"I've been dreaming about this. Actually dreaming, not, like, symbolically speaking," she said. "Every night, almost, I've been having these bizarrely vivid baby dreams—so real, Luke, they're just so real that I wake up and I feel—it's like I'm suddenly without, and it's just, it's so—I don't know." She drew a slow, purposeful breath. "They're the laughing dreams."

Luke raised his head. "Say that again?"

She shook her head slightly. "I don't know how to explain it. In the dreams, I'm pregnant, or the baby's already here, and we're somewhere we'd never, ever be—a Laundromat, a car show, one of Taylor's Historical Stars Hollow seminars—and I just can't stop laughing. I don't even know why, but it's like whatever's going on, this is the most perfect moment it could be, and I have to laugh." She squeezed his waist with her knees. "I'm crazy, right?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," she said, rolling her eyes. "They started right when I stopped taking the pill. Talk about biological clocks, huh?"

The question stuck in his throat. "Are you okay with this?"

She nodded silently and pulled him to sit up. She studied him a long moment, sitting high in his lap, her expression a confusion of emotion—hesitant happiness, he thought. "We're having a baby," she told him.

It hit him in the chest, diffused through his whole body, this strange, strangling feeling he could only define as that of being overwhelmed. Just the words obliterated any other sense of what he thought, what he felt. "We're having a baby," he repeated.

"We're going to have to talk about this," she said seriously. "Talk a lot. Lots of talking about practical things."

"What, now?" He heard the note of disbelief in his voice, an admission that at this moment, he was far from capable of discussing practical things. That required time, time to think of questions and concerns and all the other things that would occur to him when Lorelai was no longer looking at him like that, her eyes soft and serious and bright. When he'd had time, there would be practical things to talk about in abundance, he knew.


He swallowed thickly, felt the color rising in his face, and he felt a burst of self-irritation, of stupidity, that she'd have to ask. He kissed her eyes. "I think this is very good."

"Do you?" she asked, the corners of her mouth turning down. "You're not just—"

"I am not just," he said firmly. He looked down at their still-joined hands. "I don't know how—" He sighed. "I'm not a words guy."

She hugged him, pulling his head to her shoulder, and stroked his hair. "I know this, Luke." She cupped his jaw, ran her thumb along his cheek. "I know this, Luke." She cupped his jaw, ran her thumb along his cheek. "Just tell me that you're good with this."

"I'm good with this," he said, looking up at her. "I'm very, very good with this." And with that, he did the only thing he could think to do: he kissed her, held her so tightly she groaned and slapped his shoulders in laughing protest. "Love you," he said.
Her eyes were full, and she spoke with her lips just touching his. "Love you back."

"We have to get you to a doctor," he said. "Soon. Soon-soon."

"So not just soon," she replied. "I know. Tomorrow, I'll run in super early, see a nurse or something at the hospital just for confirmation and vitamins and whatever. It's Saturday, so there's no way I'm going to see my doctor, but at least we'll know for sure. I mean, we do, but we will more." She closed her eyes. "That made no sense."

Luke reached up and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, and he felt something hot rise behind his eyes as he traced Lorelai's features with the tip of his finger in a gesture now as familiar as holding her hand. "I get it. Are you still going to make me leave tonight?"

She bit her lip. "Rory's bunking with me tonight. We planned this months ago, Luke—this is so huge, and I want you to stay, but she and I, we have to do our thing tonight. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "I do."

"Stay with me until she gets home?"

"I can do that," he said.

There was no sleep to be had that night. He stayed at the house with Lorelai for another hour or so before Rory came home, laying back against the mountain of pillows with Lorelai's head on his chest; they kept their conversation purposefully light, marveling over the fact of it, the timing of it, trying to figure out exactly when it had happened. It was hard for him to talk; it was hard for him to joke, to speculate about when and what would happen, but he made the effort for her, spoke without any idea of what he was saying. Lorelai feigned shock and disapproval when Luke casually cursed—claiming he had not a fucking clue about it.

"Luke!" she gasped. "Not in front of the baby!" She began to laugh. "And also, you made a pun!"

"Ah, geez."

"If those are this child's first words, I will hold you personally responsible," she said.

_This child's first words_, he thought. There was going to be a child—his child, his child with Lorelai. A year from now, he thought, and stopped himself. It was more than he could think of, more than he could picture or put to words. He'd wanted this, and he knew he'd wanted this, but it hadn't prepared him for what to think or feel or do when the time that it happened actually came. It was the same feeling he'd had when Lorelai had accepted his proposal: he knew, eventually, they were going to come to this moment, and together, but that knowledge did nothing to help him react. He could only listen to Lorelai, hold her and feel her solid and warm and comforting against him, and try to understand that it had happened, that he'd gotten what he'd hoped for so long.

She walked him to the door when Rory finally came home, led him out onto the porch, and kissed him goodnight. She fit her body as close to his as she could, drew him in with her hand against his face, kissed him with a fierceness that was both new and not new, that ended any possibility for coherent thoughts or words when they parted. He rested his forehead to hers, breathing heavily, and closed his eyes. The heat had lessened, slightly, but the air had a heavy feel to it, a metallic smell and tang. He was suddenly aware he was listening, that the silence was strange and dead—the stillness wasn't normal silence; it was waiting.

He squeezed Lorelai's waist in his hands. "It's gonna rain," he said. "You smell that?"
"No," she said, feathering kisses along the line of his jaw. "Just smell all that pretty Luke smell."

"I do not smell pretty," he said again. "And you really don't smell that? The rain? You can almost hear it, too. The thunder. It's gonna be big," he continued, almost to himself.

"Sure, Luke," she smiled. "Whatever you say." She let her hands come to rest on the lapels of his dinner jacket and tugged him towards her. "Much as I love Rory and I'm excited to have this thing with her tonight—"

"What thing?"

"Can't tell you," she said. "It's strictly for girls named Lorelai."

"Ah."

"I really wish you were staying," she said softly. "It doesn't seem quite real, yet. I need you here for that."

He tipped his head back. "Well, after tomorrow, I'll be here pretty much on a permanent basis. How's that?"

"I'll take it," she said. "C'mere. Kiss me, tell me you love me, and then get going before I lose all vestiges of self-control and decide to take you right here on the porch."

"Are you really going to go to the doctor tomorrow?" he asked.

Lorelai wrinkled her nose, considering this. "It's seriously the last thing I want to do on my wedding day, but we're leaving for... wherever it is we're leaving for... on Sunday, and we won't be back for a week, and I don't know how else—" She stopped. She said nothing for a beat, only rocked back on her heels and gathered the fabric of Luke's shirt in her fists. "Where are we going?"

"You know the deal," he told her.

"I know I know the deal," she replied. "But the thing is, if nothing you've set up is non-refundable, there's no reason to go some place funky or exotic or whatever, because you'll hate it and go all Clint Eastwood and that will be absolutely no fun for me, and I'm just as happy going to the cabin."

The wind shifted, however slightly, and the almost-sound of thunder was loud in his ears as he went over the idea himself. The slight caving in, the disappointment in his chest, was easily ignored when he thought about the baby, about long, long hours of seclusion with Lorelai, with Lorelai who he'd be married to in a matter of hours, about quiet fortresses and personal strongholds and familiar, familial places. "You're just as happy going to the cabin," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "My God, Luke, would you quit it with the Rainman repeat-o-meter thing you've been doing? Yes, I'm just as happy going to the cabin! More, in fact, because at least that way I know you'll be having a good time, too, and I won't have to be constantly asking you like Sorority Sissy Barbie."

"Sorority Sissy Barbie?" he replied, without thought.

"Oh, my hell, Luke. Seriously, I need you to stop doing that," she said, dropping her head to his shoulder. "It was the first thing I thought of to say. Now, tell me. The cabin—yes, no, what?"

He squeezed her again. "Sounds good to me. Nothing's been set up that can't be cancelled, I
"Good. That way, we can just hole up here for an extra day, I can go in for an appointment on Monday, and we can just leave from Hartford—I can just see us trying to go another week without seeing the doctor and you turning into stumbling, nervous Luke who's afraid to touch me until he gets the okay from someone with an MD."

"I would not."

She smiled. "Yes, you would. But that's okay, I think it's nice." She leaned up and kissed him again. "Okay, so you should go."

He resisted the urge to echo that he should go and kissed her instead, ignoring the sudden press of the air, the weight of coming thunder and rain, the electric charge of the space around them as he held her to him.

Lorelai called to him softly as he came to the edge of the lawn. "Tomorrow, I'll be the one in the big fancy dress," she said. "No matter what Miss Patty tries to convince you of, I'm the one you want."

"You are that."

"Hey, Luke? Just out of curiosity, where were we going to go?" she asked.

"Key West."

Her mouth fell open. "Kitsch capital of the world!" she cooed. "Next year, okay?"

"Next year," he replied.

She narrowed her eyes. "Tomorrow? The repeating of the vows? That's all you get."

The rain held off through the night, though Luke could still feel the weight of it in the air. The wedding day itself dawned cool, gray, and misty. Luke watched the slow change of light from his makeshift bed on the old apartment couch. He hadn't slept, but he was full of a strange energy that made his wakefulness less anxious and more bearable—this was Christmas-morning insomnia, he thought, rather than doctor's appointment insomnia. He was unable to give his thoughts words, to shape them into meaning. They remained a fog of too much, too big, too monumentally much.

Just before five, he gave in and rose, dressed, and stepped quietly out of his apartment. Jess, TJ, and the dipshit brother were still snoring and dead to the world, along with the rest of Stars Hollow. He walked Main Street, hardly seeing the businesses around him, shuttered and dark as they were. He walked without any idea of destination, just wanting the damp smell of the rain to come to clear his head, let him breathe without this strange weight on his chest.

He was halfway to the cemetery when the rain began, when he realized where he was headed. It was a half-hearted sort of rain at best, a gentle, smeary sort that drifted rather than fell. The clean, flowery scent soothed him, settled something in him. He didn't often go to the cemetery, but he was unsurprised to find himself picking his way through the maze of statues and monuments. The family plot was small, set back in a corner away from the others. Luke dropped to a crouch, folded his hands, and regarded the names before him, his elbows on his knees. On the occasions he came, he never spoke to the headstones as he knew some people did: they were granite grave markers, not his parents. It had never been helpful to imagine what he'd say to them when he had good news, were they still around to hear it. They weren't, and he couldn't tell them, and though somewhere in the back of his mind he thought they knew, he'd never been able to construct a conversation with them in his head about certain things—there wasn't a single choice he'd made
since his dad's death that he didn't know what his dad would have said, but it was different, trying to think of how he'd tell them both things as if they didn't already know. Dating Lorelai, getting engaged, learning he was going to be—they were—that she was pregnant, all of it, he shied away from thinking of how he would say it to his parents, as though it was all too fragile for words in the end. It was enough that he knew, that he thought they'd somehow know even if they weren't there to tell him they were happy. Still, it felt important to come, to commune with them somehow. In his own way, he paid what tribute to them he could.

It was raining harder when he left, light straining behind the heavy cloud-cover. Stars Hollow looked downright dreary as he walked the streets back to the diner. Luke turned his hat to cover his eyes and jogged the rest of the way, his hands jammed into his pockets. The diner was closed, empty, Jess and the others not yet awake, and so Luke set himself to making breakfast, ignoring his sopping clothes and sodden shoes and going about his everyday routine. Keeping his hands busy was the best remedy against thought. The ring of the bell over the front door startled him as he sat down to his eggs.

Rory shivered in, shut the door behind her. She smiled sheepishly at him, stood dripping in the doorway. "Morning," she said.

He was on his feet, guiding her to the counter. "Coffee?" he asked even as he reached for the filters.

"Yes, please," she said. "One for me, and some to go, if you don't mind. And if there's any sort of breakfast-shaped food around—"

"I'll whip up some pancakes," he said. "What are you doing up already? It's early."

She shrugged. "We didn't really sleep last night. Mom conked out a little while ago, but I'm too wired."

"And you want to add coffee to that," Luke replied.

"You are not surprised," she told him. "Besides, you're going to give us your new special Lorelai-decaf blend that Mom won't be able to tell is decaf."

He paused. "Do I have a new special Lorelai-decaf blend?"

"You do now," Rory said solemnly. "Whatever you have to do, Pops. She's got the nose, but I think she'll be a willing participant in her own deception this time." Her expression was somber, her eyes amused. "Know what I'm saying there, Butch?"

He held her gaze a moment. "Think I do, Kid."

"Well, thank goodness," she sighed. "All this subterfuge is making me need to pee. But, hey, finish your breakfast first, please."

"Coffee'll be ready in a minute," he replied.

She sat at the counter, reading a newspaper she'd scrounged from one of the tables while she waited. As he hovered over the grill in the kitchen, Luke smiled to himself. He added a handful of chocolate chips to the pancake batter; she'd understand he was grateful for making this easier on him. He insisted on driving her back to the house, rather than letting her carry the food back through the rain. She was quiet as he drove, but as they neared the house, she took a hesitant sip of one of the to-go cups in the carton she held.

"Huh," she said. "Tastes like actual coffee."
"It is actual coffee," he drawled. "Decaf isn't actually completely without caffeine, you know."

"I know," she said. "But still. It's good. Up to the Lorelai standard, I think."

"Will she be able to tell?"

Rory took another sip and swished it in her mouth as though it were a fine wine. "Mm, it's hard to say. It's got that sharp undertone she likes, and it's generally a full-bodied sort of flavor, so the odds are good she won't be able to tell the difference. However, it's impossible to underestimate that woman's palate. It's freakish. She's like one of those drug-sniffing dogs." Luke pulled into the drive as she spoke, and she began to gather her things to cart them into the house as best she could. "Ten to one she's already up and waiting for delivery. Thanks for doing this." He shrugged. Rory leaned across the cab of his truck and daintily kissed his cheek. "Welcome to the family, Pops," she said. "Mazel tov."

"Do you want me to help you bring that in?" he asked, feeling the blush rise up his neck.

"Nope," she replied. "Bad luck to see the bride before the wedding, first of all, and second of all, really bad luck to see the bride in her dress, and if last night is any indication, she's probably trying it on again."

"Say what?"

Rory rolled her eyes affectionately. "Every hour on the hour," she said. "But I have to go. See you later, Butch."

He cleared his throat as she put her hand on the door handle. "Rory, I—"

"They say that your life goes in seven year cycles, did you know that?" she asked. She looked him in the eye in that startling, unsettlingly direct way she'd had since childhood.

"I did not."

"And if that's true, that means that, with me turning twenty-one this year, I'm about to go into a new seven year cycle. And if you figure that my life and my mom's life operate on the same wheel, to use a bad metaphor, then that means she's about to go into a new seven year cycle, too," she continued. "And since you're marrying Mom, we're all on the same wheel, which means you're about to start a new revolution, too."

"Okay," he said slowly.

"So, the way I'm looking at it, we're all starting our way around again—not over, just, you know, one more time," she said. "And we're all doing it together, starting again one more time, which is the way it should be. Plus," she said, swinging the door open, "there's plenty of room for whatever little person or little people to join us this go-round."

"Thank you, Rory," he said, embarrassed to hear his voice uneven and choked. "You're a good kid."

She smiled. "I know. See you in the funny papers, Butch."

The rain continued through the morning. Luke deliberately kept away from the front windows of the diner, of the apartment above; he had no desire to see the progress Michel and his minions were making in the square, setting up for the ceremony and the reception to follow. He was mildly curious to see how it would all go should the rain not end, but he was too full of nervous energy
and a strange, strangling flutter in his chest to stay in one place long enough to watch. Instead, he cleaned his apartment. He cleaned the diner. He did push ups. He avoided conversation with the brothers TJ as much as possible, as well as ignored all of Jess's bemused glances.

By the time three o'clock rolled around and he began what could only be called primping, it was already the longest day he could remember. Luke considered himself a patient person, generally speaking, but this sort of waiting was excruciating. He knew it to be a horrible, disloyal thought, but he needed this day to be over. He needed to be out from under the weight of expectation, from the tiring and constant gaze of others. He needed not to be sleeping alone at his old apartment, as well. And he really, really needed not to be wearing a tie when all was said and done—the knowledge that half the population of Stars Hollow would be staring at him, and that Liz would be pontificating on life and love in that hippie way she had, and that there would be no way of avoiding a dance with Miss Patty, Babette, or Emily (and possibly all three) were choking enough, and the tie seemed a cosmic middle finger waving in his direction.

It wasn't a fashionable time for the ceremony, but five o'clock found him standing at the bottom step of the gazebo, Jess and Jackson just behind him, Liz smiling beatifically from the stair above him, her hands folded in front of her. They'd placed the chuppah just at the bottom step, and he stood under the arches he'd made and that Lorelai had since hung with garlands of flowers and greenery. It was warmer than he'd expected—the rain had forced them under a tent in the square, and the collected body heat gave the outdoors a balmy closeness that made it difficult to suppress the urge to tug at and loosen his tie. The lightweight suit Lorelai had chosen for him, for all its selling points of breathability and casual softness, was still a suit and therefore uncomfortable. He was thinking about the itch under his left arm when Dave Rygalski began to play his guitar just to the side of the chuppah—Sookie's arrival at his end of the aisle very nearly startled Luke, still unprepared for the ceremony's actual start when she took her place opposite Jackson. Luke cleared his throat, smoothed his tie, and waited.

He was more attentive to Rory's approach; she walked slowly, her smile serene, her head held high. She seemed to have grown three inches since the morning. She wore her hair swept back in loose curls, the barest touch of make up and no jewelry, all youthfulness and easy beauty in her blue gown. As she came to stand by Sookie, she gave Luke an encouraging nod, and he could see her eyes already brimming.

The air shifted almost palpably as the small congregation rose and turned towards the end of the makeshift aisle to see Lorelai's emergence into the tent from the rain. She ducked beneath the canopy, laughing and breathless, the train of her dress draped over one arm. She shone in the grey light of the afternoon, her curls damp and her bare shoulders just glistening with rain. Taking a breath, Lorelai shook her dress out behind her and began her slow saunter down the aisle. Every other person was watching her with him, but she held Luke's eyes with hers as she walked, oblivious to the rows of people she passed. When she reached her parents, who had risen from their seats and stood just behind Rory, she extended one hand to her mother, squeezed Emily's fingers lightly, and touched her father's elbow before she passed.

"Hey," she whispered, taking her place beside Luke beneath the chuppah. "Fancy meeting you here." She handed her small bouquet off to Rory, slipped her arm through his, and rubbed his bicep with her free hand. "You look nice."

"You're beautiful," he returned, and she tightened her arm in his just slightly. The small gesture anchored him to her, steadied him and cleared his head. The group of people behind him dissipated as Lorelai leaned into him, and his world shrank to the small circle of her family and his at the bottom of the gazebo, beneath the chuppah.

He tried to pay attention to his sister as Liz prattled on about soul mates and best friends and
journeys, but instead he found himself listening to Lorelai's breathing, to the steady rhythm of her presence beside him. He hardly heard the questions Liz posed, the promises to love and honor and respect, to nourish spiritually, mentally, and physically, all till the end of their days; he heard only Lorelai's low tones, her promise of "I will," her pledge to him as she slid the heavy ring on his finger. He heard himself do all the same, saw himself put the ring on Lorelai's finger, but all that he could think of was the warmth of her hands in his, her eyes on him. And suddenly, Liz was declaring them husband and wife, and Lorelai was leaning in, tilting her face to his in silent invitation, and as he met her in a soft, simple kiss, the realization that the ceremony was over and he was married and Lorelai was married to him and they were married was interrupted by the startling, disorienting explosion of applause, and Lorelai was laughing as she slowly pulled back, as she took his hand and led him down the aisle, as she pressed her lips to the edge of his jaw. He put his arm around her as they continued out of the tent, across the street to the diner through the misting rain, and she fell against him, warm and solid and reassuring.

Once inside, Lorelai placed her hands on his shoulders and looked at him levelly. "So, husband of mine," she began, "love of my life, take a breath. You're a whiter shade of pale."

Luke smiled sheepishly, reached up and took her hands in his. He held them fast against his chest, and as he spoke, leaned forward to rest his forehead to hers. "We just got married," he said.

"Is that what happened?" she asked. "I thought we were witnessing the opening of a new mini-mart." She kissed him several times quickly in succession. "You look shell-shocked."

He rubbed her hands. "It was really fast. Was it really fast? I feel like I missed it."

"You did," she said seriously. "I had to marry Kirk. In fact, he's waiting for me at the reception."
At his look, she softened, kissed him again, twining her arms around his neck to pull him closer, deeper. "You were there," she said, at length. "I told you, my life, that you were going to be just so overcome with emotion—"

"I did not weep," he said. "That much, I know."

She smiled and ran her hand through his hair. "No, but you were certainly overcome. It'll all catch up, I think—I get it, it's overwhelming. But it's like garlic, so no worries."

"Excuse me?"

"Two people eating garlic cancel each other's bad breath out when they're kissing," she said.
"And I'm right there with you, a little shell-shocked and reeling and overwhelmed and whatall, so I figure together it all works out to having one very good memory between us. I mean, I know I'm going to remember you today better than I'll remember almost anything else ever for, you know, ever—"

He cut her off with another brief kiss. "Likewise."

Her smile was brilliant. "Well, then, there you go. Like garlic." She tugged on his lapels with both hands. "We gotta go, lover. They're having a party out there in our honor."

"What will it take to get you to stop calling me that?" he asked.

She cocked one eyebrow. "Ask me when we're alone."

"We're alone right now."

"Ask me when we're alone and naked, is what I meant," she said.
Luke settled his hands at her waist, looked down at her. "I like your dress."

"It did come out nicely," she said. She ducked her head, lowered her eyes. Luke felt her breathing, suddenly aware that she was shaking. She pressed her palms to his chest, and when she looked up, working her lower lip between her teeth, her eyes were full. "Hey, Luke," she began, a fine tremor in her voice.

"Yeah?"

"We got married today."

By the end of the day, his face would be sore from all the smiling, he thought. "We did."

"So..."

He circled her wrists with his hands, raised them to his face, and kissed the heels of her hands. "So this is where we start."

She shook her head, cupped his face. "Nope. This is the place we keep going."

"Because we're already started."

"You catch on quick, Butch."

He indicated the door with his head. "Should we go?"

"We should," she sighed. "Listen, I haven't told anyone about our little surprise. Rory," she conceded, "but no one else. I think we should wait."

"Whatever you want," he told her.

She brushed her lips against his cheek and spoke in his ear. "A very fine way to start this marriage."

Luke lifted her off her feet in a hug. "Love you."

"I know. Love you back."

"I know."

The reception was as much a strange, blurred watercolor event as the ceremony had been—Luke felt himself propelled forward, all his movement directed by some force outside himself—Lorelai, mostly, Rory, occasionally, Jess and Emily and Liz. As he stumbled through pictures beneath the chuppah and toasts and readings and the cutting of the cake, Lorelai kept her hand firmly in his. Her hand in his was sanity; it continued to keep him grounded even when all he could hear was the rush of blood in his ears. They shared their first dance on a parquet floor beneath the tent, and Lorelai kept up a continuous stream of chatter as they stepped lazily to the beat.

"You're handling me," he said.

She tucked her forehead into the crook of his neck. "Yep. You're in need of handling," she said. "You still have that googly-eyed confusion thing going on. But I think you're doing very well."

"Am I?"

"You are. No one else is going to notice the googly-eyed confusion."
"It's just a lot of stuff."

"It is," she agreed. Her tone had taken that infuriating quality, that amused, attempting-to-soothe quality, a tone that complemented that smile that was somehow as satisfying as it was irritating. "And a lot of people are staring," he continued.

"Well, you're very pretty."

"I don't think I'm the one they're staring at."

"They're staring at both of us," she told him. "This was a very good choice of song."

"Lane helped me," he replied.

"How long did it take her to convince you to go with the original Dylan over whatever covers there are?"

He chuckled. "I told her I liked the original, but she still went on for five minutes about why all the covers were inferior."

"This is a good wedding we're having, Luke."

"Yeah?"

"I'm enjoying it."

It was full dark by the time Lorelai tossed her bouquet. Rory drove them home in an antique car her grandfather had borrowed from a friend. When she'd pulled into the drive and put the car in park, she peeked over her seat at them, grinning. "It was a good day," she said.

"I believe this is a unanimously held opinion," Lorelai laughed.

"Luke?"

He tipped his head to one side. "Ask me tomorrow."

"Will do, Pops," she said. "So Jess and Ashley and Marty and I are all crashing at Lane's—"

"Oh, man to be a fly on that wall," Lorelai groaned.

"And Liz and the brothers TJ are staying at the diner, and Grandma and Grandpa and everyone else are all going home," she finished. "So go be married."

Lorelai sat forward and dropped a kiss on her daughter's cheek. "Thanks, sweets. We'll see you Monday before we go."

"I love you guys," Rory said. "Now get lost."

Lorelai gathered her skirt up with one hand as she walked, picking her way up the path to the porch and holding tightly to Luke's hand with her free one. She led him to the door, and she paused there. Luke took the opportunity to kiss her thoroughly; she pulled away, breathless, and Luke stooped, hoisted her over his shoulder, and opened the door. She laughed, slapping his rear with both hands.

"Luke, I don't think this is the way it's traditionally done," she choked out.
"You know what I'm going to say to that?" he asked. He shut the door and crossed to the stairs, took them two at a time.

"That tradition is overrated," she answered, and he deposited her to her feet at the bedroom door. She stood a moment, just looking at him, and then began to undo his tie. "The fresh hell is over, my life," she said. "Sigh in relief if you want."

He kissed her as he backed her into the bedroom, let her take off his tie and push his jacket from his shoulders. When he cupped her face in his hands, swept his thumbs along the smooth skin of her cheeks, she paused, her hands on his belt. She withdrew reluctantly from his kiss and studied him curiously. Luke pushed a lock of hair off her face, and he began to catalogue her features, to memorize the way she was at this particular moment—the curve of her cheek and neck, the hollow of her throat, the way she caught the light straining through the curtains, the tilt of her head and smile, the particular fall of her curls in the delicate upsweep style she wore, the way her dress hugged her, the shape of her in his arms. He wanted to imprint her in his mind, to save her this way, all lit up and lovely and soft, no matter how frail a memory it would be—it brought to mind a line from one of their recent readings, something that had hit him hard in the chest when she'd read it aloud.

"Every time," he said, his voice low and rough, "you happen to me all over again."

She closed her eyes and leaned into his palm. "For me, too," she returned.

Even the simple act of undressing felt somehow reverential, and as the dress she'd made fell from her hips and she stepped out of it towards him, he dropped to his knees, traced kisses along her abdomen, slid his hands along her hips and thighs. She laughed softly, threading her fingers through his hair. He saw the garter that she'd made in addition to the dress and began to laugh as well: blue plaid flannel, edged in lace and ribbon.

"Hey," she said, "come here."

He rose, and she took his left hand, held it against the flat plane of her stomach as she had the night before. "I'm sorry if I was a shit head today," he said.

"Luke," she said. "Wedding night. I don't care. I just—" She bit her lips together, and her voice shook when she allowed herself to speak again. "We're married."

He smiled. "Yeah, we are."

"Married, married." She laughed tearfully. "Sheesh," she added, sniffing. "We're married, and we're here, and there's this—this baby that we're going to have, you and me, and we've got this house." The tears began to get the better of her, and Luke furrowed his brow, stepped closer. She shook her head. "No, I'm okay," she said. "I'm just—I can't tell you, I just can't tell you how many times I never thought this was going to happen—I'm talking about before," she told him. "Before, when I was alone and trying to keep Rory in clothes and food, and I was alone…" She wiped her eyes with one hand, still holding his left hand to her middle tightly with her other. "I never really thought I'd get to have this."

"This what?" he asked. The raw emotion in her face made him ache.

She waved expansively. "This—you, this life, this whole—just everything," she said.

And he realized what she meant, spoke without thinking. "The whole package."

"The very one," she said. She drew a long, quivering breath. "It's just that—this—is possibly the scariest thing that's ever happened to me."
Luke swallowed over the tightness in his throat. "I'm not going anywhere."

"That's not what scares me," she said. She said nothing a moment, and the familiar numbness began to creep into his hands—it was, he knew, not just weakness, not just fear, but the knowledge that there were things he couldn't fix, and it pained him. "I don't know how to put it, just that it's not normal to be this happy." She rolled her eyes. "I am so ridiculous."

"I don't know what to say," he said. "I want to say something that's gonna—that'll make this not scary, but I—"

She cut him off, kissing him hard. "It's supposed to be scary, I think. I didn't mean to get so weepy, I don't want you to think I'm not happy, because that's so far from the reality of the situation it's the planet behind Pluto. It just sort of hit me, just now, what today is, and where we're going and what we're doing and everything." She swallowed thickly. "Everything's happening, you know? And I am so, so, so very glad that it's with you. I love you," she said. "I just do."

He kissed her, then, and he laid her down, and with every touch he tried to show her how he loved her, with every move tried to make her know what he felt, tried to share the crushing, painfully expansive feeling he'd had all month, that there was just too much, that he ached with the feeling, and when she came crying his name and laughing against the dark, a new calm settled in the space where all the panic and nerves and confusion had been roiling within him. When they'd both stilled and the air around them began to cool, he shifted, gathered her close.

"Everything's changing," he said.

She traced nonsense patterns on his chest with the tip of her finger. "It is."

"That ain't so bad."

"Mm," she sighed, closing her eyes. "It's very, very good, actually."

"Scary, though," he said.

"Good scary," she murmured.

"I think so." He stroked her hair. "It's all for the better, love. I didn't get it before."

"Get what?"

"The good scary. I thought—"

Lorelai sat up and looked at him, her expression serious and sad. "I know what you thought. You thought being afraid meant you were a bad person and you didn't love me the way you think you should. But I knew you'd figure it out."

"You did," he said.

"I'm very smart, Luke."

"I know this."

She gave him the whisper of a smile. "You still don't think you deserve this, do you?"

He averted his eyes, and though the answer was there, on the tip of his tongue, he struggled, found the words heavy and slow to come. "I think—I think if you spend enough time alone in your life you get used to the idea. And even when you're with someone, and you know you're not,
and you know—you know it's for good, that that's it, that that's everything—it's hard to believe it.” He spoke haltingly and without looking at her. "And when you figure it out, that it's all happened, it kinda knocks you out. And freaks you out."

Lorelai climbed onto his lap and narrowed her eyes at him playfully. "Believe it, buddy. You got it. You got me. I'm here."

He held her loosely in his arms. "Back at you." He sighed, closed his eyes as she curled up against his chest. "We got married today," he said.

"How many more times do you think we'll have this conversation?" she laughed.

"Couldn't say."

"You all talked out there, my life?" Lorelai asked. "That was some confessional for you. Plus, there were the vows and everything. I figure your word quota is about used up."

"You trying to tell me to shut up?" he asked.

"Never," she replied. "But if you would like to worship my body in that delicious and non-verbal way you have, I'd be okay with that."

"Whatever you say, love."

"It is so hot when you say that."

July faded into August that weekend, all yellow humidity and heat. Luke watched the sun rise over the lake from the family cabin each day that week, savoring the start of the new month, remembering Rory's comment about the wheel and starting again. Not over, she'd said, but again —this is where we keep going, Lorelai had put it. He no longer felt that he was the only one standing still.
August: Epilogue

"Rory? Do me a favor?"

Rory leaned out of her bedroom door, rolling her eyes. "I'm not going to kill you, Mom."

"I appreciate that," Lorelai called. "But that wasn't what I was going to ask you." She propped herself up and peered over the arm of the couch. "I just need a glass of water, if you wouldn't mind."

"I wouldn't mind," Rory told her. "Are you sure you haven't seen my collected works of Chekhov?"

Lorelai dropped back to her pillows. She pressed her hands to her abdomen, closing her eyes as she spoke. "Maybe it's up in the bathroom underneath Luke's copy of People from last week. He's so sweet, worrying about Nick and Jessica the way he does."

Rory stood over her, holding a glass of water and frowning. "Not funny," she said. "You know how I feel about Nick and Jessica jokes."

"I know, I know," she replied, reaching for the water. "Their love is so pure."

"Besides, how do I know what you and Luke bogsarted from my room that whole time you were living in there?" Rory asked. "Maybe the Chekhov got mixed in with some of your stuff."

"Hon, if Chekhov got mixed in with our stuff, Chekhov probably got chucked."

"So not funny!" Rory cried. She stalked back to her bedroom, muttering. "Chuckng Chekhov."

Lorelai sipped the water and sighed, listening to the sounds of the house. It was a breezy, lazy kind of day, the heat and humidity only just noticeable, a bare annoyance compared to the rest of the summer weather already gone by. She heard Rory, crashing around the bedroom and listening to some twangy, annoying chick singer that would make Lane cringe. She heard her mother, upstairs, talking on her cell phone and banging a yard stick against the floor. She took another long sip of water, tried to ignore the twinge in her temple. Ignoring the potential headache only reminded her how very, very nauseous she was, however, and she decided the twinge was the lesser of the two evils.

"Hey, Rory?"

"Still not gonna—"

"No, I know," Lorelai called. "You won't kill me. That's fine, but could you bring one of Luke's frying pans out here?"

Rory wandered down the hallway, her flip flops flipping and flopping noisily against the hardwood. She stood with her hands on her hips and looked warily at her mother. "Frying pan?"

Lorelai struggled to sit up a little. "Yeah, go back and get one."

"For?" she asked, her brows raised.

"To hit me really hard in the head so that I'll be in so much pain, I won't be able to think about how I feel like I'm going to throw up all the time," Lorelai replied, nodding with fake enthusiasm.
She waved her hands at Rory. "Now, shoo, get Mommy a frying pan and don't hold back. Put all those years of good-girl oppression to good use."

Rory dropped to sit at her mother's feet. She squeezed Lorelai's ankle, clucking sympathetically. "Not feeling so great, huh?" she asked. "What can I do to help?"

Lorelai nudged her daughter's hip with the tip of her toe. "You could switch places with me and be the one with all-day morning sickness, but that would also mean that you'd be pregnant with Luke's baby, and since we don't live in Llanview or the bayou, we know that's not happening. I appreciate the offer, but it'll pass on its own."

"When?"

She grinned. "Sometime in the next trimester, I hear. But I have a lifetime to get back at little baby Danes, here," she said, "so in the end it'll be a wash."

"Something to look forward to," Rory said. "Lucky LBD."

She reached for Rory's hand. "Tell me about your week."

"Well," Rory said, drawing a huge breath. "Tonight I have plans to watch that movie with Marty —"

"My daughter, dating Jesus. I'm not sure whether to be proud or concerned," Lorelai smiled.

The younger Lorelai wrinkled her nose. "Mom, you really need to stop calling him that. He hasn't gotten the part yet. And it's creepy."

"Hey, you're the one dating him."

Rory opened her mouth to respond but kept silent, her attention caught by a clanking above. She raised her eyebrows at Lorelai, amused. "Grandma?" she called.

"Mom, put the measuring tape away!" Lorelai whined. "I'm begging you! You have, like, six months to decorate that room!"

They waited a moment. "Lorelai, I am on the phone."

"Really, I can be so tiresome," Lorelai said, her voice affectedly high. Off Rory's look, she shrugged. "I'm just finishing the thought for her. Anyway. You and Marty, watching the Godspell tonight."

"Yes. He's got the audition on Wednesday, so he's going to be all insane, tense, hermit guy for a few days while he practices," Rory said. Her fond smile was reassuring, sweet, and made Lorelai vaguely nostalgic. "I've tried to be encouraging on this one, but I don't even know if he can sing."

"I'm sure he'll do great," Lorelai said. "But that's Marty's week, I want to know what's on tap for you."

Rory chewed her bottom lip a moment. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Classes, reading, all that. I don't have anything major due right away, since the semester's only just started. There's some stuff at the paper—I'm thinking about putting myself up as a section editor, maybe, for features."

Lorelai couldn't help the grin. "Babe, that's amazing. I think you should go for it. Be bossy. Use all that experience you got at the Globe this summer. And be bossy."
"I'll think about it—I have a week before I have to decide," she said. She leaned forward and dropped a kiss on her mother's cheek. "I have to stop by Lane's before I head back, so I'm going to skedaddle."

"Can you explain to me how Lane ended up with a copy of Godspell? Not that Lane isn't the world's leading expert on contraband cultural items, but I'm curious if this was a Mama-Kim-approved thing or not?" Lorelai asked.

Rory rose and shouldered her bag. "Contraband," she said. "Lane got it in a Yankee swap one year at school and kept it because her mom thought it was too flippant about God—she thought if her mom disapproved it must be interesting."

"Just prepare yourself. You'll never be able to look at Victor Garber the same way again. Nor," she added, sitting up, "will you wonder how he can sing so high with pants that tight. I'm going upstairs, see if I can subdue your grandmother enough to take the tape measure from her and hide it somewhere that is else and far, far away."

Rory made for the door. "I'll call you. Tomorrow?"

"I'll be here," Lorelai told her. "Or at the inn. Wish Marty luck for me, okay?"

"Bye, Mom. Love you!"

"Love you, babe."

She mounted the stairs slowly. She couldn't remember feeling quite so physically overwhelmed when she carried Rory, but she supposed it was just that this time, she was no longer sixteen, a fact that Luke had pointed out several times in the past few weeks. She was not quite three months along, and while she knew that the fatigue and the nausea would ebb eventually to make way for other delightful conditions, she was ready to see them go. As it was now, her limbs felt heavy, hard to maneuver, and she was sore in places there was no reason to be sore. She supposed that part of this was her fault: she'd been working more at the inn this past month, trying to make up for the time in June and July that she'd left the running of the place to other people, and the long hours were starting to wear. The year was about to turn the corner into fall, and foliage season had always been big business for her at the Independence and would be now at the Dragonfly. She knew she could slow down and that Luke was on the point of telling her to. Working hard, however, and at her own inn at that, was satisfying in ways that nothing else had ever been no matter how it wore her out. She rounded the corner of the stairs and wandered down the hall to the new room, rubbing the small of her back with one hand.

Emily stood in the center of the room, her arms crossed over her chest and her lips pursed in a critical expression. She stared out the window, and as Lorelai entered, tipped her head to one side. Lorelai came to stand beside her and followed suit, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes in an effort to see what her mother was mentally berating.

"Huh," Lorelai said. "I never noticed that Babette's got that wood lattice work under the eaves. Pretty."

"Pretty?" Emily echoed, her voice rising on the latter half of the word. "No, Lorelai, not pretty. Tacky, yes, peeling, most definitely, and a horrid match to the rest of the house, absolutely."

Lorelai draped her arm across her mother's shoulders and turned her towards the door. "Mom, I'm pretty sure little baby Danes here isn't going to mind the view until he or she is at least four—that's when the faculty to criticize landscape and architecture really develops in children." She gave up trying to force her mother to walk and dropped her arm. "Mom, I love that you're so excited about
this, and I appreciate your taking over the nursery decoration, but it's just a tad early to start looking at fabric samples and paint chips. We haven't even told anyone outside the family except Sookie and Michel, yet."

Emily looked around the room, wearing a slight, nervous pout and wringing her hands fretfully. "It's just that—well, with Rory, we never really got to enjoy the pregnancy or celebrate it, you know. Francine was crying and Straub was yelling and your father was making business plans..." She sighed gustily. "As much as we loved Rory from the minute she was born, the entire time you were pregnant was just dreadful. Now, we finally get another grandchild—" She ignored Lorelai's chortle of laughter. "—it's just that I'm so excited to be excited, Lorelai, no matter how irritating that might be to you. We didn't get to have that before."

Lorelai softened. "Thank you, Mom. You have no idea—that means a lot, to hear you say that. And I understand that, I do, but I'm also going to tell you that right now? You need to slow down a little. Let me get through the first trimester. Please?"

Emily relented and let Lorelai walk her to the bedroom door. "I just want to contribute, and—"

"And I'm grateful for that," Lorelai told her. "But right now I think you should go home, take a walk with Dad, have a nice dinner, and stop thinking of ways you can blackmail Babette into getting rid of her lattice work."

Emily gave her a petulant sidelong glance. "You look terribly pale, Lorelai."

"I'm a little tired," she admitted. "I think I'm going to take a nap."

"I suppose this is my cue to leave," Emily said.

"You're only staying if you hand over the measuring tape and yard stick and promise not to tack any more swatches to the wall," Lorelai replied.

Emily headed for the stairs. "I should be going. Your father's probably gotten into some kind of trouble by now—he's begun a new hobby that I do not understand, but he seems to enjoy it, heaven knows why."

"What is it?"

The older woman wrinkled her nose. "He's trying to teach himself to cobbled shoes."

Lorelai stifled the ready expletive of disbelief. "Did the world learn nothing from Daniel Day Lewis?" she asked. "Make Dad take you out. He clearly needs it as much as you do."

Emily's heels clicked loudly in the silent house as she descended the stairs and let herself out. Lorelai waited until she heard the click of the door shut downstairs. She turned, surveyed the empty room. It wasn't large by any means, but it would be a big enough nursery. There were good windows, and the one that faced out into the backyard had a seat built in beneath the sill that doubled as a toy chest. The floor was new, pristine, devoid of the scratches that marked the floors elsewhere in the house. The walls were bare (save her mother's swatches, she thought, rolling her eyes), but with the closet being so small, Luke had told her he would build and install some shelves; Lorelai had wondered aloud what sort of things Luke thought the baby would need shelving for. He'd gestured broadly with his hands as they stood together in the doorway.

"Things," he'd said.

"What things?"
He had looked at her darkly. "You're a knick knack person, Lorelai. You're going to need shelves for this room even if the baby doesn't."

She wandered into the room, now, running her fingertips along the wall. Luke's rocking chair was already in the corner by the window that overlooked Babette's house. Lorelai sat, slid her palms along the arms of the chair and rocked gently. It was astounding, she thought, that a chair without any upholstery or cushions could be so comfortable, so confoundedly soft. It defied any logic her brain could trick out that she could sink into this chair and immediately feel restive, feel embraced by its gentle curves and the smooth wood and the back and seat fitted so perfectly to her body. As she pushed off gently on the balls of her toes and began to rock, Lorelai closed her eyes.

When Emily arrived back home, Richard was in his office. The new television was on, tuned (as it usually was that time of day) to The Young and the Restless. The man himself sat comfortably in his armchair amid piles of books.

Emily stood in the doorway waiting to be noticed. At length, she cleared her throat. Richard dropped the book he held, starting in surprise.

"Emily!"

"How nice," she smiled, "you remembered."

He waved her into the room. "How is Lorelai?"

"Impossible," Emily sighed. She perched on the arm of his chair as she spoke and cast a wary eye over his books. "She won't let me do anything to the baby's room yet. Richard, what is all this? What to Expect When You're Expecting? Feed Your Baby's Brain? Pregnancy after 35?"

He blinked owlishly over his glasses. "I'm afraid it's true, Emily. I'm pregnant."

"You're not half as amusing as you seem to think you are," she told him. "Did you buy every book on pregnancy that the story had?"

"Very nearly," he said. "I'm going to give them to Lorelai at this Friday's dinner, after I've had time to go through them myself and flag the most crucial information for her."

Emily reached for one of the books on the table beside Richard, flipping idly through the pages. "She will never read any of it, Richard."

"Perhaps not, but I bought two of each and I mean to read them all. I'm sure Luke will read them, as well, and between he and I, we'll educate her even against her will," he said. He seemed, Emily thought, inordinately pleased with himself. She refrained from rolling her eyes.

She set the book back on the table atop the others and remembered, not for the first time, the evening Richard locked himself in the room where she now stood, over twenty years ago, the same night Lorelai had locked herself in her bedroom. The two people Emily loved most in the world, shuttered away from each other and stubbornly silent; she had roamed the house alone that night, unable to sit or stand still. The cover of Richard's new book felt dusty beneath her finger tips, and Emily absently raised her hand to her throat, thinking of the month she'd spent in bed, disconsolate, after Lorelai took her baby and left. She thought of all the waiting, the months before her daughter first gave birth, the years lapsed and lost after.

"A baby is going to be good for this family, I think," she said suddenly. "It seems a good idea, a baby."

Richard took one of Emily's hands in both of his and kissed her knuckles. "I quite agree."
"I," she began, rising, "am going upstairs to change, and then you are going to take me to the club for a nice long walk." She tipped her head to the side. "Shall we?"

He laid the book he held aside. "We shall." He paused. "You know, Emily. I also purchased a few how-to manuals dealing with how one might get one's book published, should one—"

She felt vaguely lightheaded suddenly. "Oh?"

"I did. They are quite informative." He got to his feet. "Let's go change."

"What else did you buy?" she wanted to know.

"Oh," he said, his tone studiously nonchalant, "you know. Some books on various and sundry little hobbies."

Her eyebrows rose to her hairline. "Hobbies?"

"Car restoration," he said. "Model building—planes, ships, you know."

"Car restoration? Oh, Richard. I thought you'd gone through that phase. What happened to cobbling shoes?" Even cobbling shoes, as bizarre and obnoxious as it had seemed, would be preferable to the grease.

"There just weren't any good books on cobbling shoes," he opined.

"Heaven help me," Emily sighed.

Richard draped his arm over her shoulder and steered her to the stairs. "I'm sure they do, Emily."

Rory dropped her overnight bag in her room and gathered the necessities in her book bag—textbooks, notebooks, pens, Post-It flags and notes, a bag of mini-Butterfingers and a one liter bottle of Diet Coke—and wandered down the hall to Marty's room. He answered her knock wearing jeans and a threadbare tee shirt. She kissed his cheek, sidled past him, and threw herself on his bed with a gusty sigh.

"Promise me something?" she asked. He cocked an eyebrow in response. "Promise me that you'll remember always to put a shirt on when answering the door. Now that you're an RA, you need at least to pretend to be respectable. Plus, you can't have your advisees all flirty and bribing you with sexual favors, because that's a Lifetime movie waiting to happen."

Marty grinned as he sat at his desk chair, the back turned out. He folded his arms across the top and rested his chin on his wrists, studying Rory a moment. He affected thoughtfulness as he spoke. "My girlfriend doesn't want other women checking out my goods," he told the air. "I've got a mad, obsessive girlfriend who wants me all to herself. I'm so cool."

She sat up slightly, propped up on her elbows. "I could start walking around in the buff, you know," she said.

"I have no problem with that," he deadpanned.

She closed her eyes and fell back to the pillows. "You're so sweet."

"I try. How's the fam?"

"Mom's good. Tired—she's been working insanely a lot, so probably more from that than the whole being pregnant thing."
"The whole being pregnant thing," he echoed, shaking his head.

"Well," she said, as though this in itself were obvious. "I don't think she'll be playing the invalid card any time soon. She's got enough people ready to strap her down to a bed for nine months and not let her move until she's fully dilated and ready to push."


"Some might say they aren't that different," Rory said lightly. "People are excited. My grandparents are excited. Luke is excited and eight kinds of uptight. My mom is—" She paused. "—she's very serene."

"And you?" he asked carefully.

She sat up. "Of course I'm excited," she said. "Don't I seem excited?"

"You do. You just left yourself out."

She wriggled to the edge of the bed and swung her legs over, drew a line on the floor with the toe of her shoe. "I guess I did," she said. She raised her eyes to meet his, shrugging a little in response to his questioning gaze. "It's a huge thing that's going on for her, that's all."

"For you, too," he told her.

"I know," she conceded. "I'm happy for her, for them." She smiled and rolled her eyes for his benefit, knowing she sounded all of four, baby-voiced and uncertain. "So. What are you working on that has you stripping down to the skivvies?"

"Learning the lyrics to 'God Save the People,'" he said. He rubbed his eyes. "My life is all rock and gospel right now."

"Very Creed."

"Bite your tongue, woman," he groaned. "Or else I'll do it for you."

"I'm confused, though—isn't Godspell usually done in the spring? Right around, what is it, Lent?" she asked.

"It is. Sasha always does a musical in the spring, but Godspell's not big enough for what she normally does. So, there's that, plus she wants to do a musical in the fall along with all the one-acts and stuff she normally does. She says she's always wanted to do it and this is the best time since it's small and easy to produce and... everything." Marty rose and leaned towards the mini fridge housed beneath his bed, the expression on his face sheepish as he trailed off.

"Sasha so loves you," Rory cooed. He snorted at this. "When do I get to hear you sing?"

"Never," he intoned.

"Killjoy."

"That's my Indian name." He cocked an eyebrow at her and chugged from a bottle of water.

Rory smothered a smile and tugged the videotape she'd brought from her book bag. "Lane lent me the movie so you can get all fired up with holy spirit," she said. "Mom says we'll never see Victor Garber the same—"
"How were we seeing Victor Garber before?" Marty wondered.

"—and she wants to know if you'll participate in all the skipping," she continued, ignoring him. "If you want to go ahead and watch it without me, that's fine. I've got loads to do, reading and whatall, so I'm going to hole up in the library for a bit, and then I have some paper stuff. I'll swing by after, if you'll be around?"

Marty rested his hands heavily on her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "I'll be here. I have a book to read, too." He paused. "We're back at school again, aren't we?"

"We are," she said wistfully. "Nose to the grindstone and everything. It was a good summer, though, and it's going to be a good semester."

"If you tell me to buck up, little camper—"

She cut him off with a brief kiss. "Gotta go. See ya later, Jesus."

It had been a good summer, a strangely fluid, endless parade of different things to do and places to go—except, she reminded herself as she settled into her old library study nook, it hadn't been endless, and she was back at Yale. And that, she decided, was a decidedly good thing.

She'd been back almost two weeks, and already she knew she'd have to get used to weekends at school; Friday through Sunday of the last few months had been spent at home with Lorelai, hanging out with Lane at Luke's, watching movies at the bookstore and afternoons reading at Weston's, entire days spent at the inn helping with odd jobs and wedding details. Her evenings during the week she'd spent having dinner with her dad and Sherri and the baby, and when she wasn't reading or writing, with Marty. Days, she'd gophered at the Globe Sunday magazine. She'd sat in on meetings, fetched coffee and lunches, did minor research, and soaked in everything she possibly could. She began to understand what it meant to freelance, to write to a deadline, to conceive a theme and execute it. The entire process thrilled something in her that she hadn't expected—as a student, hell, as just being i Rory, /i she thrived on tight schedules and lists and grades, on clearly defined expectations and clear-cut results, and she was decidedly adverse to the unknown. Having grown up with Lorelai, she was used to the spontaneous, and she was used to slightly ordered chaos, but she liked her lists, she liked her schedules, and she liked to know what was coming next. But this summer had taught her that she could ride by the seat of her pants, and that it didn't have to be terrifying—the fact that it was just the tiniest bit scary actually was the best part. It made her work harder.

Certain things had marked the summer. The wedding had been first and foremost, and the week preceding with all its parties and prep and equal parts giggling and neurotic hand-wringing. There had been her weekend at the Cape and the fourth of July in Stars Hollow with Marty as well. Her father had taken her to a baseball game at Fenway, though she wasn't entirely sure he understood much more of it than she. She'd enjoyed watching him try to explain; more than that, she'd appreciated the effort.

When she had packed up her things for good at the end of the summer, her dad had told her not to be a stranger, hugging her a little harder than she'd been used to. She'd promised and meant to keep her word with phone calls and day trips to Cambridge when she could. She wondered, privately, how long it would feel like effort to include him when she'd spent so many years not thinking she'd needed to, or even that she could.

It still wasn't habit, and as she settled into her chair at the library and ran down her list of assignments in her organizer, it made her sigh just slightly to see "call Dad" among the chapters she needed to read and the school supplies she needed to buy. She circled it in purple, reached into
her book bag, and pulled out her copy of *To the Lighthouse* to begin her work.

By the time Rory got back to her room, she was mentally exhausted—dinner had been a pointless, circular argument with Paris in front of several other students from the paper about Rory's decision to put her semester abroad off until the summer. The two girls had been talking about spring semester of junior year and their stint at Oxford since the year before, and Paris was (understandably, Rory thought but did not say) livid that Rory was backing out to spend the spring at Yale. Paris had gone on—and on, and on, and on—about the relative stupidity of sticking around stateside for four and a half months for the sake of a single day, one that wouldn't mean very much in the long run because the mewling infant wouldn't remember it anyway and they could all just lie to it until it knew better and Rory could just—

"Paris!" Rory had exploded. "Would you stop? I can't miss this! I'm sorry it messes up your plans, but I need to be around for my mom and for Luke and I want to be there to meet little baby Danes—" Paris pulled a face. "—when he or she arrives in the world, and I'm not discussing it with you. It's not up for debate, okay?"

She changed quickly in her room and brushed her teeth before shuffling to Marty's room. He lay stretched on the bed, clad in blue cotton pajama bottoms and a white tank undershirt, watching an episode of *Arrested Development*. One arm thrown over his forehead, he twisted his hair about his finger and hummed. Rory crawled up on the bed beside him and situated herself against his side, her legs tangled with his and her arm thrown across his chest. He stroked her hair absently as the show went on.

"Paris ran me through the ringer about the study abroad thing," she told him, when it finally came to commercial.

"Shocking," he said. "She'll get over it."

"Or she'll hold it over me until I die. I'm actually looking forward to being able to tell people that in my wayward and callow youth, I spent three summers in Europe. It'll make me sound distinguished." He grunted. "How goes the practicing, Emmanuel?"

Marty wrinkled his nose. "Okay. I think I know the song—for some reason, I just had to choose the one with the most complicated lyrics of all of the Jesus songs. I think I know it. But I am concerned."

"Why?" she asked.

"Well, I think—do you think I have messianic charisma? I feel like I need to have messianic charisma." He angled to look at her, waggling his eyebrows as if to demonstrate his charisma, or lack thereof.

Rory squeezed him. "You've made me praise the lord more than once," she told him.

"That might be the most lascivious thing you've ever said," he said, choking on laughter.

"I know, dirty," she said. "But you asked."

"That's all I'm going to think about now, when—"

She shushed him, pressing a kiss to the corner of his jaw. "Who loves you, Jesus?" she asked.

"You do?"

"You bet I do," she said.
Marty gathered her closer to his chest. "And would you love me even if I had a huge Victor Garber 'fro? A garbfro, if you will."

"I would not encourage it," she said slowly, "but I probably wouldn't like you any less."

"A ringing endorsement if I ever heard one," he said. "Noted, my woman prefers my hair trimmed and tamed."

Rory buried her face in his neck. "There's a dirty joke in there somewhere."

"You have been hanging out with your mom way too much, Rory," he groaned. He sighed. "Why is it that trying anything new in college bears the distinct possibility of total humiliation?"

Rory smiled and sat up, pulled Marty with her and settled herself in his lap, her arms slung over his shoulders. "I've thought about this extensively, pal."

"And?" He raised his eyebrows, his expression expectant.

She pressed her palms to his cheeks and kissed him soundly. "How else are we supposed to learn?"

When she and Marty had nearly read themselves to sleep, Rory turned off his bedside light and curled up between Marty and his dorm room wall, wriggling to find a comfortable position in the narrow space. Marty shifted, and when she protested that she was fine, he told her jovially to shut up and took her by the waist, hauling her close to him. They lay in silence, spooned against each other. Rory felt Marty sigh from deep in his belly, a sign he was close to sleep.

"I wonder if it's going to be a boy or a girl," she said, abruptly.

Marty rubbed her hip with his thumb; she could tell by the sound of his voice that he spoke with his eyes closed. "Bet if you wait long enough, you'll find out."

"You know, I was an only child for seventeen years? And now, I'm almost twenty-one and I'm going to have two younger siblings? How amazing is that?" She shook her head. "Things like that only ever happen on television."

He smiled against the curve of her shoulder. "I guess not," he said. "Since it's happening to you."

"I guess," she said vaguely.

"You okay?" he asked. She knew now his eyes were open, though she couldn't see him. He slid his hand over her hip and rested his palm heavily on her abdomen. She caught it there and held his hand fast to her skin.

"Yeah," she sighed.

"Because you seem—you seem kinda sad. Or, I don't know, not so sure about things." Marty pressed a kiss to her temple. "You keep talking about how happy everyone else is and you don't seem as jazzed as you want to sound."

Rory turned her head, her chin on her shoulder, to offer her cheek up to him. "I'm happy. I just feel like—this year has gone by and so many things have happened and so much has changed."

"Right," Marty replied, his tone cautious.

She took a breath and continued. "My mom got married to this guy she loves so much, and she's
having a baby, and she opened this amazing inn and really, finally made up with her parents, and her whole life has changed in this huge, epic way. It's the sort of thing they make movies about, you know, like a kind of up-by-your-bootstraps Victorian, Dickensian novel. And my grandma—she's become this whole new, softer person, and she's still my grandma. It's like she's the same person, she's just got all these new interests and she knows herself so well now. She went through this huge emotional Oprah journey over the last year, she and my grandpa. And Paris is seriously close to unseating the valedictorian, Lane's band is playing gigs all over Connecticut and starting to break into New York, and you, you've got this whole budding thespian thing going on that's so huge. You're going on stage and you're becoming new people, and you're singing, and it's so amazing and so different for you." Her voice was high and thin to her own ears, shaky with anxiety. "I just feel like everyone's doing things and getting better and being more, and I'm still me."

Marty sat up and rubbed his eyes. Rory watched him as he ran his fingers through his hair, rumpling his curls and standing them on end. After a moment of staring thoughtfully at the wall behind Rory, at the broad circle of orange light from the outside streetlamp, he spoke. "You know what I thought when I first met you? I thought, 'you're so beautiful. Sometimes, you're so beautiful, it just gags me. Maybe you're not real, maybe you're a phantom or something. I keep expecting you to vanish.'" He paused. "Well, I'd have thought it if I'd read You Can't Take It With You then, which I hadn't, but that's how I felt, that you were so beautiful, you couldn't have been real. And it wasn't just how you looked, even though, you know, you're this impossibly beautiful person. You gave me your robe. You were just so good at everything. You tried so hard at everything, and you were so intense about school and your mom and reading and the paper." He shrugged. "I just thought, someone this perfect can't be in the world; she's just too good. And you know, sometimes you're still so beautiful, it just gags me, but lately, it's like I know you're never going to vanish—you let yourself make mistakes now. You try new things. You stopped thinking that you had to do everything a certain way, follow a certain order—you got a whole new major. You're a writer, you've been writing these incredible essays. You stopped hiding behind the plan, Rory."

"Well, it sounds better when you say it that way," she said, her voice choked with tear-y laughter. She lay on her back and looked up at him. His face, she thought, was sincere. "I don't know—"

"I do. You're not a phantom anymore, you know, you're a real—you're becoming this even more amazing person because it doesn't matter so much anymore if you're perfect for everyone else as long as you make yourself happy." He spread his hands. "I think that's pretty huge, myself."

Rory was still a moment, silent as she considered what he said. "Thanks," she said at length. "That's some good perspective."

"You think?" he asked, and he smiled.

"I do. And I love you, you know." She reached up and traced the line of his jaw with her fingertips. "You big dork."

He laughed. "I know that. I think you're all right, too."

Rory pulled him towards her, her hand firm on the back of his neck. "Come here, Jesus. I got something to show ya."

It was the staring that woke Lorelai, not the slight twinge in her back. She shifted in the rocking chair, aware that her ass was asleep but unwilling to open her eyes. For all the softness and comfort Luke had designed into the thing, it was still a wooden chair and perhaps not made for hours of sleeping, she had to concede. She wrinkled her nose, and even with her eyes closed, she knew Luke mirrored her slight look of confusion.
"Stop staring at me," she said.

"I like staring at you," he replied.

She opened one eye, felt herself flush with an irrational delight to see him right where she thought he'd be, standing just as she thought he would: one shoulder against the doorframe, his feet crossed over each other and his arms folded over his chest, his head cocked to one side as he regarded her.

"Well, that's just creepy, then. How long have you been standing there?" she asked.

He tilted his chin up, pretending to consider. "Not long."

Not long for Luke meant anything from a few minutes to an hour, she knew, but she smothered the smile and held out her hands. "C'mere and help me out of this chair, Ricky Fitts, before my ass is permanently welded to the seat."

He grasped her hands and pulled her up, angling to look over her shoulder even as he let her slump against his chest. "Something wrong with the chair?" he asked.

Lorelai shook her head, making a soft noise of appreciation as Luke slid his hands beneath the hem of her shirt and pressed his palms to the heated skin of her back. "Chair good," she said, "sitting too long bad." He rubbed at the small of her back. "Do me a favor, keep doing that?"

"Would that I could, love," he said. "I'm just here on break—I have to get back pretty soon."

"Back?" She tipped her head slightly to look at him. "Why back?"

"Miss Patty's having her end of summer recital, and there are about fifteen classes on the program—"

Lorelai nodded. "You're swamped, then."

"Like a frog," he sighed, rolling his eyes. "I had to get out of there for a few minutes, come home, clear my head—I'll be able to leave for the night in a couple of hours, once the recital crowd has cleared out."

Lorelai reached behind her and took Luke's hands, turning in his arms to lead him out of the room. She affected lightness as she spoke, but it still made the tiny winged creatures stir in her ribs to hear Luke call the house home—for years, she'd heard him call the rooms or buildings people lived places—impermanent, impersonal. She ignored the tingle in her fingers and pulled him towards their own bedroom. "They're a tough one, that recital crowd. Come lie down with me for a second?"

"I lie down for a second and I won't be able to get up again," he told her.

Lorelai dropped his hands and sat on the edge of the bed. "I promise not to try anything dirty."

Luke pinched the bridge of his nose. "I'm serious."

She smoothed the comforter with the palm of her hand. "Just sit for a second, then," she said.

"I can sit," he conceded.

She waited as Luke arranged himself with his back to the wall; he was rigid and determinedly tense as he shoved pillows out of the way and stretched his legs out before him. When he was
settled, she curled up among the pillows he'd discarded, rested her head against his hip, and draped her hand over his thigh. She tapped her fingertips along the inseam of his jeans.

"So, you came home to be alone?" she asked, breaking a long moment of quiet.

Luke had been playing with a lock of her hair, and he tugged it gently. "In a way."

"This is like your Fortress of Solitude, then," she said.

He grunted. "It's my Fortress of Solitude."

"Can I be in the Fortress of Solitude?"

"You already are," he pointed out. "And if I said you couldn't be, you'd probably find your way in anyway."

She smacked him with the flat of her hand. "And be heartily welcome, right?"

"Of course," he drawled.

"What about Rory? Can she be in the Fortress of Solitude?"

"Rory can be in the Fortress of Solitude." Lorelai could almost hear him rolling his eyes again.

"Can Lane be in the Fortress—"

"No!"

She looked up at him, mouth agape. "But we love Lane!"

Luke heaved a deep breath. "First of all, it's the Fortress of Solitude, so it's supposed to be, you know, solitary, and second of all, if I'm there, I need Lane at the diner." He paused. "Sookie can't come, either."

"What about—"

He held up a hand. "You, me, and Rory, that's it. The Fortress of Solitude is closed to Stars Hollow visitors."

"It is so proclaimed," she said, laughing.

Luke folded her hand into his. "LBD can come, too."

Lorelai opened her mouth to reply in sarcastic gratitude and found herself stopped short at a slight movement she saw Luke make with his left hand. She dropped her eyes and watched for the briefest moment, and he did it again: with his ball of his thumb resting on his wedding band and a sharp downwards thrust of his ring finger, he twisted his ring.

She'd been noticing it a lot recently, this tiny gesture that had rapidly developed into habit. When his hands were idle, when he was listening to someone he was in conversation with, even when he was cooking, he flipped the wedding band on his finger with the same gesture. The ball of his thumb slid to the left, twisting the ring as his ring finger bent inward to the center of his palm; after a brief pause, the whole process would repeat itself several times. It was a swift, fluid movement less obvious than just fiddling with the ring with his other hand would be, but she found it strange and distracting nonetheless.

The sudden silence made her feel pinned down and restless, and she began to speak without any
clear idea of what she was saying. "We should think of LB names," she said. "How cute would that be?"


She squinted, mock-thoughtful. "Like… Lyndon Baines. Or Lady Bird."

The rumble in his chest shook her. "No way," he said firmly.

"Lloyd Bridges," she said. "Laura Branigan—no!" she exclaimed, amused with the new game. "Lauren Bacall. Lucille Ball—"

"Larry Bird?" Luke offered.

"Who?"

He stared at her. "Seriously?"

"Never mind. Lionel Barrymore," she said.

"Who?"

"Mr. Potter," she said. "Seriously." She paused. "Lord Byron?"

"Definitely not."

"Little Buddha?"

Luke furrowed his brow. "What?"

"It's a movie— " He groaned. "—where Keanu Reeves plays a—"

"The phone booth guy?" he asked. "Oh, absolutely not."

Lorelai leaned up and kissed his cheek. "Don't worry, I'm in no way seriously suggesting we name our kid after a movie starring the phone booth guy. But it is a cute idea, the LB names. Maybe too cute," she conceded, seeing he was ready to protest. "But when has that ever stopped me?"

He kissed her quickly and checked his watch. "Too soon to be picking names, anyway, if you ask me. I should be going. Dinner, when I get back? You want me to bring something?"

She shook her head. "I'm feeling like a pizza."

Luke pushed himself to his feet. "Funny," he said, bending to kiss her goodbye, "you look like my wife."

"Bada dum bum," she said, rolling her eyes. "Get out of here, Punny McPunster."

She listened to him leave, lazing for a moment after the front door had shut behind him. She wanted nothing more than to stay where she was, curled among the pillows, a cold cloth for her forehead and her belly, perhaps, to fend off the returning headache and the constant sensation of being about to vomit. Nothing would fall apart if she stayed where she was, she reasoned, but she knew wouldn't sleep that night for the hours of napping in the afternoon. She swallowed over the heaviness at the back of her tongue and struggled to her feet. A few moments later, she adjusted the pillows behind her back on the sofa and took a long sip of iced tea. Luke had just barely managed to figure out how to use the TiVo, and there were hours of programs to scroll through—
Iron Chef Americas, reruns of *Veronica Mars* and *Project Runway* and about thirteen hundred hours of baseball and sports news shows. She bypassed the food shows—the possibility of seeing anything fishy flipped her stomach just so—and the last few episodes of too-tense mystery in favor of catty, verbally inventive judges and oddly-coiffed designers. And, with a slightly wistful sigh, she reached for the instructional book, the ball of yarn she’d chosen, and the crochet needle she’d hidden in a bag beneath the sofa.

"I hope you appreciate the years and years of prejudice I'm attempting to overcome in order to make you your first binkie, little baby mine," she said, lowering her chin to her chest and speaking in the direction of her navel. "I have an actual yarn ball here."

As she looped the yarn over the crochet needle and squinted one eye at the square of practice stitches, she decided it had been a strange, lovely kind of month, and, like Rory, she was slightly regretful to see the summer end. The wedding had been—she paused, smiling as she thought of it—the wedding had been everything she could have wanted it to be, as well as the lazy day after, alone with Luke and holed up in the house. They'd gone to the doctor the next day, which she'd counted as a waste of time and a lost opportunity to sleep in and have newlywed morning sex, as all she'd done was wee on another stick, see another positive result, and been told to start taking her prenatal vitamins and come back in a few weeks. It had been made slightly more worth it to see how utterly embarrassed Luke could get in the presence of an OB/GYN who had no qualms asking Lorelai about her menstrual cycle and who was possibly the only woman he'd ever met who could say intercourse without giggling, as she was neither named Lorelai nor from Stars Hollow.

And then, Lorelai and Luke had had their hazy, yellow week at the lake. They were both of them so in awe of the fact of their marriage and baby and the rings on their fingers that she knew it would always seem a surreal sort of memory, with colors and scents and the recollection of touches too vivid to have been real. She had thought at the time that it was like living in a series of paintings: "Man and Woman on Beach," "Man and Woman in Canoe," "Husband and Wife Sleep In."

At home, they'd gone back to work and things felt very much as they had been, but different. She wasn't sure how to articulate it when, one evening, she casually remarked to Luke as they lazed on the porch swing listening to a baseball game on the radio, that being married was nice.

"I like it," he'd said absently, sleepy and warm at the very end of dusk. He tucked her head under his chin and rocked them in the swing, an implicit shush as Ortiz came to bat.

She settled her head into the hollow of his shoulder more comfortably. "It has a kind of more-ness to it," she said.

"A more-ness?"

"Yes," she said. "That's what it feels like."

He'd said what Luke said when something hadn't occurred to him but seemed right when he heard it: "Huh."

She didn't know how else to put it—there was a slight quality of difference that had more to it than living together in the renovated house and more to it than the smaller, mundane changes, like joint checking accounts and a new driver's license with a new last name—it was an ineffable, unutterable change, everything old about her life, just a month ago or even two or three or six, just a little different. A little more.

It was comforting, even being home alone. Lorelai shifted on the couch, punching at the pillows.
she'd wedged behind her back, and set aside the crocheting—she'd done a few respectable, though mangled, rows, but once she'd hit week twelve, she could tell Babette (and therefore the rest of Stars Hollow) and finally get some lessons that would result in something more than lumpy stitches and knotty-looking patterns. Her throat felt tight from the nausea, the almost-but-not-quite-ready-to-hurl feeling; she moved the pillows to the end of the couch and curled on her side, nestled among them. She reached for the phone.

"I love Tim Gunn. What do you think it would take to get him to come live with me?"

Sookie clucked her tongue. "Honey, how many times are you going to watch those *Project Runway* reruns?" she asked.

Lorelai narrowed her eyes at the screen as she watched Kara Saun drape a dress form with fabric. "As many times as it takes to hallucinate—successfully—that Tim Gunn and possibly Heidi Klum live with me."

"You want Heidi to live with you?"

She stretched her leg and wiggled her toes, grinning. "Well, I think Mrs. Seal really needs to learn a little something about the proper way to pout."

"And who better to school her than you?" Sookie asked cautiously.

"I did grow up with Emily Gilmore as my mother," Lorelai said. "I have practice." She sighed. "Is it weird that I have this overwhelming need to go upstairs and try on all my lingerie?"

"When I was pregnant with Davy, I took a picture of my feet every single day as long as I could do it without bending over at the waist," Sookie replied.

Lorelai hit the power button on the remote and sat up. "So you're saying it's normal."

"I'm saying try it on while you still can."

She smiled. "You know, being pregnant is weird."

"Really weird." Sookie paused. "You ever think about what would happen if we were pregnant at the same time?"

"Sook. Are you…?"

She answered quickly, and Lorelai could practically see her shaking her head. "No, I was just, you know, wondering."

Lorelai rubbed her eyes. "Well, it would be hard, with the business to run, but if we had to, we could figure out a way to make it work. Why, are you and Jackson trying?" she asked.

Sookie made a humming noise for a moment. "We're not *not* trying," she said. "But if you think it would be better—"

She rose and trudged towards the stairs, her crocheting bundled in one hand. "Sookie. Please. I would never—could never, should never, and absolutely *would* never ask you to do something like that. If you and Jackson want another baby, and it happens, I would be nothing less than ecstatic for you, and if it happens in the next nine months, you and Michel and I will have a plan and we will keep the Dragonfly open and functioning and as well as it is right now. Okay?" She paused on the landing. "And think of how much fun it'll be if we are ever pregnant at the same time."
"Our babies will be friends just like us!" Sookie cried.

"It will transcend generations, Sook. And—oh," she exclaimed, "oh, if I have a girl and you have a boy, or you know, the other way around—"

"They can get married!" Sookie howled.

"And go to prom together!"

"It'll be like a movie!"

"And Tim Gunn will be the costume director," Lorelai said.

"Honey, you have to let Tim Gunn go."

"Tim Gunn would not want me to let it go, Sookie," she insisted. "Tim Gunn would want me to make it work." Sookie said nothing, and Lorelai grinned into the phone as she padded into the bedroom. "Stop mocking me," she told Sookie. "Your silence, it speaks volumes."

"Oh, go on and try on your lingerie, you pregnant freak," Sookie laughed.

"Be nice to the pregnant lady!"

"Talk to you later, sweetie."

Lorelai stood in the hall between the nursery and the bedroom, the phone still in her hand. She studied both rooms from where she stood, the warm, inviting new bedroom and the bare nursery flooded with late afternoon sunlight. She set the portable on the floor and wandered back into the baby's room, the bare wood floor warm beneath her feet. She settled once again into the rocking chair. She curved her back to the shape of the chair, rested her cheek against the smooth headrest, and stared out the window, letting her thoughts wander as she gently rocked herself with a tap of her toes on the floor. The yarn and hook lay forgotten in her lap.

She'd been thinking only a moment when she heard the front door bang open. She immediately busied herself with untangling the knot she'd made in the skein of yarn, not wanting to be caught woolgathering twice in one afternoon. Luke would tell her she should be exercising, or laying down, or taking her blood pressure.

"Lorelai?"

"Up here," she called. "Baby's room." She smiled as she said it.

Luke loped up the stairs and paused again to lean against the nursery door. "You really like that chair."

"I really love this chair," she told him. "I thought you had to work? Lots of little ballerinas to be fed before they start developing body dysmorphic syndromes and eating disorders?"

He rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "I decided I could skip out for an afternoon."

"Everything okay?" she asked, working at a particularly convoluted knot of yarn.

"Just felt like a return to the Fortress of Solitude," he said. "Too many people at the diner. What're you doing?"

Lorelai looked askance at her crochet hook. "Theoretically? I'm making a baby blanket."
"Theoretically?" he echoed. "What about practically?"

"Practically, I'm making a lot of knots in the yarn while I try to figure out how to make the blanket," she said. She wrinkled her nose and conceded defeat, rose and put the yarn on the window seat nearby. One hand at the small of her back, rubbing at the knot of tension she'd been nursing for weeks, she turned to face him. "So, a whole afternoon ahead of us. How should we waste it?"

Luke extended his hand, beckoning her. When she was within arm's reach, he grabbed her roughly about her waist and hoisted her into his arms. "Had a thought," he said, cradling her against his chest. "Not so much of a waste, though."

She laughed as he closed the bedroom door behind them and set her gently on the bed. She tossed her hair out of her eyes, watching him as he kneeled at the end of the bed and kissed the inside of her ankle, as he ran his palm slowly, almost reverently, up her calf, pausing to tickle the soft, thin skin behind her knee. They undressed between long, heated kisses, sliding hands under hems and exploring familiar, hidden, favorite expanses of skin, of warm muscle, prolonging the moment when they lay skin-to-skin, his face in her neck, her hand in his hair. Lorelai arched against him, hooking her legs about his, pulling Luke to her again and again for kisses that bruised and burned, begging him to continue, never to stop, to fill her over and over and again. He savored every inch of her beneath his hands, the curve of her hips, the soft edges of her shoulder blades, the smooth slope of her back and the firm warmth of her thighs. When he found release, she shuddered and shook around him, her nails leaving white ridges in his upper arms.

Luke held Lorelai loosely with one arm and gathered a sheet over them with the other. Lorelai nestled against his shoulder, tucked against his side though they were both slick with perspiration and heat. She nipped gently at his neck and exhaled through her nose.

"I don't think Superman ever did that in the Fortress of Solitude," she told him. She closed her eyes, rubbed her nose into his shoulder. "Come home more often in the afternoon, will you?"

When he began to chuckle, she slapped him lightly on the stomach. "That's not dirty! Even though it is!"

He rested his chin on the crown of Lorelai's head. "I've been thinking about names," he said. He began to comb his fingers through her curls.

"I thought you said it was too soon for names," she mumbled. She hitched herself higher in the bed and hugged him more tightly.

"It is. But you got me going with all the talk," he told her.

"Mm. As I so often do."

He tugged gently on her hair. "Don't fall asleep."

"Not," she said, pressing a kiss to his jaw.

"I like the name Leah," he said. "Leah Katherine Emily."

Lorelai smiled, her eyes closed. "After her grandmothers, that's nice. I like the name Leah, too. You think it's a girl?"

Luke snorted, as he often did when he was thinking, scoffing. Lorelai felt him flip his ring several times in succession. "You'd know better than I would," he said.

"Do you want it to be a girl?" she asked, raising her head.
"I just want it to be…" He paused.

"Happy, healthy, preferably with your sense of direction and my sense of fashion?" she suggested.

"Yeah," he said. "Have all its parts in the right places and stuff."

Lorelai covered her mouth with one hand, studying her husband a moment. "Have all its parts in the right places and stuff," she repeated. "Luke, are you afraid our child is going to have an arm coming out of its head like a bad SNL sketch?"

"You do drink a lot of coffee," he reasoned, catching her hand in his. He kissed her knuckles. "You never know."

"I know," she said darkly. "So, would you like a girl?"

Luke sighed. "I'd just like it to arrive in one piece and figure everything out from there."

She kissed him soundly. "I promise to do my utmost to incubate this kid to proper part-having wholeness," she said. "You're going to be a ticking time bomb of worry for the entire pregnancy, aren't you?" Luke shrugged, his eyes cast down. "You realize it doesn't end at birth, right? That then we take the baby home and raise it to be a flannel-wearing, coffee-drinking hybrid in high heels and baseball hats?" She saw him actually pale, the color drain from his face. "Luke, I'm kidding!" she cried. "Everyone knows you can't wear heels with flannel! I'm sure our kid will, too."

"Ah, geez," he groaned. He looked down at his hands, and Lorelai thought how silly and vulnerable and sickeningly sweet he looked sitting there in their bed, naked and covered with a sheet, his hair mussed and his eyes wide. "I'm going to be a ticking time bomb of worry for the rest of my life," he said.

Lorelai cupped his face in her hands, and she kissed his eyes and nose and cheeks and chin, speaking with her lips to his. "Relax, my life. It's got its perks. What's good about the whole married thing is the part of the deal where you don't have to worry all by yourself. The Fortress of Solitude admits more than one superhero."

"We need to stop talking about the Fortress of Solitude before you go out and buy me a costume or Superman underwear or something like that," he said, smiling a little.

"Oh, I like that idea," she whispered. She stroked his cheek with her thumb and tipped his head to look at her. She held his eyes a long moment. "I did it alone once, you know. And while I think I did pretty good on my own, it's—having you here? And us together? We have to enjoy this, Luke, this is like—this is like the best possible thing, better than—" She paused, searching for the right words. At length, she shrugged. "I can't tell you what it means to be able to do it again, with you, and like this. I can't even begin to tell you."

Luke ducked his head, abashed, and enfolded her in a loose hug. "Yeah," he said softly. "Yeah. Okay." He pulled back a little, and as he fluffed the pillows around her, Lorelai felt him flip his ring again on his finger.

Lorelai furrowed her brow, poked her lower lip out, and after a moment of silence, heard herself exclaim, "Okay, so why the heck do you do that all the time?"

"Do what?" Luke asked, his face set in a question mark. "What did I do?"

She bit her lips together, thinking about her reply before she spoke. "You fiddle with your ring.
Your wedding ring. You're always playing with it, all the time. Even in your sleep sometimes, you know—well, I don't know if you know, maybe it's some sort of subconscious thing..." She trailed off. "I just see you doing it all the time, and I was wondering why. If it's because it's jewelry and you feel like an extra from i The Sopranos /i with even the tiniest bit of—pardon the expression—bling, that's okay, you don't have to wear it. I know plenty of men who don't wear wedding rings because they don't like the way it feels, and it's not like they're doing it to be shady or because they don't want people to know they're married or they're serial killers trying to lure young innocents to the pit in their basements, or anything—" She stopped. "You fiddle with your ring, and you were doing it just now. I've just been wondering why."

Luke spread his left hand and looked at the ring on his finger, and Lorelai could see him considering it anew. "I know I do it," he said. "Didn't realize you noticed."

"I'm serious, Luke," she said gently. "You don't have to wear it for my sake—"

"I like wearing it!" he protested. "I actually kinda—I really like wearing it. I like knowing it's there. I like that you have one, too. I just—I play with it sometimes."

"Yes," she said slowly, and her face flooded with heat. "Because...?"

He lifted one shoulder and flipped the ring again. "I just like to remember it's there."

"You like to remember it's there?" she echoed.

"Yeah," he said. He swallowed thickly and squeezed her hand. "I just like to check, sometimes. You know. That it's really there. That it happened. That this is happening," he said, laying his ring hand against her abdomen. "I just like knowing it's there."


He rested his forehead to hers. "Love you back. Now, c'mere." He arranged them both against the pillows, the sheet draped over them. When Lorelai was resting comfortably, her head on his chest, he reached past her for the book on the bedside table. Rory's copy of Persuasion was well-worn, the pages edged in yellow, thin, the text blurry in some place. "You want to read?"

"Mm, where were we?" she asked, thumbing the edges. "Louisa just fell off the wall, right?"


Lorelai peered down at her navel. "Leah, don't listen to him. Girls should never suffer broken heads, no matter how silly they are."

"We're calling her Leah, now?"

She nodded emphatically. "I think we are."


They stayed there together in bed long past dusk, reading, and eventually, they fell silent. The evening cooled and the two curled into each other, limbs entwined, breathing, each listening to the sounds of the other, heartbeat, pulse, the sigh of exhalation. They were loathe to move, to speak, to end the quiet, perfect afternoon.

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