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Kayla K. Etheridge
Dominican University of California

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Excerpt from *Jaki's Tale*

By Kayla K. Etheridge

We cooked macaroni and cheese. It was the perfect time to have a girls' night. Candace loved to stir the block of butter, milk and packaged cheese in the pot once I finished draining it.

"Okay," she grunted. "It's done, Mommy."

She walked over to the sink and washed her hands. I plucked a noodle from the pot and licked the cheese from my fingertips.

"Get the lemonade," I told her.

I picked up the pot and separated it into three bowls while Candace filled two glasses with lemonade.

"Grab some napkins."

"I got them," she answered. "Come on. It's starting!"

"Okay, okay."

I scraped out the last of the macaroni and tossed the pot in the sink. I quickly picked up two bowls of macaroni.

"Do you have forks?" I called, skidding across the foyer in my socks.

"Yeah!" Candace answered from the living room.

Candace knelt on the floor in front of the coffee table. The TV displayed the first episode of the Gilmore Girls marathon.

"Hurry up, Mom," she said, tugging a bowl of macaroni and cheese from my hand.

"I'm here, I'm here."

I sat down next to Candace, leaning up against the couch. Candace tossed a blanket over my legs and leaned back just as the theme song began. We sat and ate our dinner, laughing and crying to the continuous episodes. I couldn't remember the last time we did something like this. She started to doze off during the fifth episode; I held her against my chest and stroked her hair until she was asleep.

Then, I heard a key in the front door; it creaked open. I cocked my head back and saw Mark step into the foyer. He shook his coat and slid his keys back into his jeans.

"Hey," I called.

Mark paced into the living room, sticking his hands in his coat pockets. He nodded his chin to the TV.

"What're you watching?"

"There's a Gilmore Girls marathon on tonight."

He nodded, still watching the TV.

"There's a bowl of mac'n'cheese on the counter," I said.

Mark nodded again and then turned to Candace.

“She asleep?”

I glanced down at her soft, sleeping profile. “Yeah, she didn’t make it to the end.”

Mark knelt down and picked her up from my arms.

“Thanks babe.”

He softly smiled at me and carried Candace upstairs. I picked up the bowls and glasses and shut off the TV. I walked into the kitchen and dropped the dishes in the sink. I’ll have time to do them in the morning, I thought, seeing as I don’t have a job anymore. I switched off the foyer light and headed upstairs. In the hallway, happy pictures of the three of us followed me to Candace’s door. I stopped and peeked into her room. She lay on her bed, under the covers, fast asleep. I smiled to myself and closed the door.

I stepped into our bedroom and left the door ajar behind me. Mark stood in the bathroom, barefoot but still wearing his coat; he looked into the mirror. I glided over to him and touched his back.

“Long night?”

It appeared as if he were glaring through the mirror. He stepped away from me and pulled off his coat; he laid it on top of the sink. He reached for his belt next and unbuckled it. He slipped his pants down his legs, still not facing me.

“Mark...” I began, approaching him.

He lifted his shirt over his head and a distinct odor tickled my nose.

“Were you drinking?”

He paused, then faced the mirror. I stared back at his reflection, lost in the sight of his gaze. His hand moved down his body, scratching at one of the three visible scars on his stomach. I frowned, reaching my hand to his chest; I placed myself between him and the mirror.

“Mark, I’m sorry.”

He gazed down upon me.

“I screwed up big time,” I started. “I’m just prone to bad things, y’know?” I stopped. “No I’m not but, I wasn’t thinking. I treated my job like garbage and that’s why it was taken from me. But,” I held up a waiting finger to him. “I know how to fix it.”

“How?” Mark asked.

“I know of some places that are hiring. I can start looking there.”

Mark sighed. He gently cradled his hands around the sides of my face. I leaned into them, missing his touch. Then, he pulled me closer to him.

“I don’t know what to do with you anymore.”

He let go and turned away. Dumbfounded, I stood. Now I was losing my husband. I turned on the faucet and washed my face of his warmth. I headed back into the bedroom and changed into my pajamas. Shortly after, Mark came out. He walked past me and climbed into

bed. Before I could say anything, he switched the light off, leaving me in darkness. I slowly climbed into bed next to him and stared at the ceiling.

"I'm gonna try to make it better," I said. I rolled over and gently touched his back. "I really am. So that the three of us can live like before. I'm gonna make it better, I promise."

I listened to the silence.

"Okay," he finally replied.

I sighed, relieved and faced the ceiling again.

"Who's Candace's father?" Mark asked.

The words disappeared into the silence as quickly as they were uttered, but the panging against my eardrums was still.

"Jaki..." he labored.

I shut my eyes to the darkness, to the silence, to the truth. "Rog."

I waited for a reply but never got one. I turned over and yearned to drift into my dreams, where everything was always perfect.