

## Meeting Him

Sometimes Lara wondered if there was something wrong with her. Jackson's lips moved against hers hungrily and forcefully as if he couldn't get enough of her, but Lara's breathing remained even and there was no surge of electricity pulsing through her veins or wave of tingling pleasure as his tongue brushed desperately against her. Sure, it felt...nice but that was it.

It hadn't always been like that— there was a time when Jackson would kiss her and Lara's body had warmed with pleasure, but it had been a while since she'd felt anything close to that. Now, it was always like this. Jackson would kiss her, and though it didn't feel awful, she never felt the need for things to go further. Even when his hands delved under her shirt and pressed against the bare skin of her stomach and waist, she could have happily ended it there.

Jackson, whose body was pressing hers into the bed, obviously didn't feel the same way though as he groaned against her lips and let his hands wander further up her body. Lara briefly wondered if she should let him continue— she'd let him do more in the past after all — but a small voice in her head said no.

Lara pulled her head to the side, ending the kiss. "Jackson, wait," she said once their lips were separated.

"What's wrong?" he asked in between kisses to her neck.

"I'm just not in the mood," she replied with a nervous swallow. Jackson was becoming more and more impatient, and she couldn't exactly blame the guy: they'd met two years ago. Most mates would have done the bonding ceremony by now and they denitely would have slept together already.

Jackson lifted his lips from her neck to look down at her. "You're never in the mood," he said, his words coming out with a hint of venom.

"I'm sorry," Lara replied, her voice losing its concidence.

"I've waited two f\*\*\*\*g years, Lara. How much longer am I supposed to wait?" he asked angrily.

"I'm just not ready for that yet," Lara said in a small voice, the urge to scratch the skin of her wrist rising up.

"I'm starting to wonder if you'll ever be," Jackson spat as he moved off of her and got off the bed. "I've tried to be patient Lara, but I've been ready to have our bonding ceremony for over a year now," he huffed as he moved to the cupboard and pulled out a pair of gym shorts and a white shirt.

"Jackson, please," she pleaded as he angrily shoved the shorts over his briefs. "I'm sorry."

"I don't need apologies. I need you to tell me why you keep pushing off our bonding ceremony," he said, running his hands through his dirty blonde hair in frustration.

"I..." Lara started helplessly. She had no good answer for his question. Deep down Lara had a good idea of why she'd started to feel this detachment towards her mate but she always pushed the thought from her mind whenever it reared its ugly head. She didn't like to think about it too much because the more she thought about it, the more Lara wondered if Jackson was the right person for her, and the more like her mother she might become. And that was one thing Lara refused to be— anything like her mom.

"You what?" Jackson asked impatiently as he pulled his shirt on.

"I'm just not ready," she nished lamely, knowing the answer wasn't good enough.

Jackson sighed heavily. "I'm getting tired of this, Lara. I've given you plenty of time but it feels like things are only getting worse. Maybe we should just... I don't know, take a break or something."

As tears stung her eyes, Lara couldn't ignore the urge anymore. Her nail dug into her wrist and dragged across her skin, the physical pain giving her something to feel other than guilt and hurt. "Don't say that," Lara said in a choked voice. Even if it had been a while since she'd felt the type of toe-curling, ery passion that she used to feel when she kissed her mate, Lara still cared about him.

"Well what am I supposed to do?" he asked as he slammed the cupboard door closed, making Lara inch. "My own mate acts like she doesn't even want me anymore."

"You're right. I'm sorry I'm making you wait so long," Lara told him sadly. "It's not fair for you." Guilt slammed into her as she was reminded of how selsh she had been, how selsh she was being. "Why don't you come back to bed?" she asked with a small smile.

"No thanks. I'm not in the mood anymore either," he muttered. "I'm going to the gym."

"We're meant to go to the surprise party Liam's throwing for Charlotte soon," Lara reminded him.

"I'm not really in the mood for that either," he told her coldly. "If they ask, just say something came up and I couldn't make it."

"Jackson, please don't be like this," she whispered.

"Like what?" he roared angrily as he shoved his feet into a pair of sneakers.

"Angry," Lara said quietly as her nail dug sharply into the skin of her wrist again.

"I have every right to be angry," Jackson reminded her with a glare. "All I want is for us to go through the bonding ceremony. Is that too much to ask? Does that make me unreasonable?"

"No," Lara admitted, lowering her eyes to the white sheet on the bed. He was right. She was the one who was being unreasonable.

"I'll see you later," Jackson said. "Enjoy the party."

Lara watched as he walked out of their bedroom, his back stiff with frustration. After a few moments, she heard the front door slam closed. It wasn't the rst time Jackson had left in anger, and Lara doubted it would be the last— it seemed like lately she'd made a habit of pushing his buttons and getting on his nerves. Somewhere along the way, he'd started to become quick to anger and Lara knew it was her fault. Jackson had never been that way before. It was only after she'd started to delay their bonding ceremony that things had gotten bad.

As she showered and got ready, Lara decided that she needed to do better, be better. Jackson deserved that from her. He deserved for her to at least try. She would make something nice for dinner and maybe they could watch a movie like they used to before she got too busy with college assignments and with working longer shifts at the diner. She'd make up for her mistakes. She'd try to make this work. She had to.

After drying her long auburn hair and changing into a pair of light denim high-waisted shorts and a navy shirt that hugged her curves, Lara grabbed the gift that she'd gotten for Charlotte and left the apartment. She tried to shake off her ght with Jackson as she walked down the hall towards Liam and Charlotte's apartment, and by the time she was knocking on their door she had a reasonably believable smile plastered on her face.

"Hey, Lara," Liam greeted her cheerfully after opening the door. Lara had seen Charlotte's mate around the Council building before but the rst time they'd actually spoken was a few days earlier when Liam had invited her to the party. "You're just in time. We're about to do the cake."

"Sorry I'm a bit late," she apologized with a wince. It had taken her longer than normal to get ready with the thoughts that had been weighing on her mind.

"No worries," he replied with a wave of his hand as she walked past him into the apartment. "Is Jackson coming?" he asked, closing the door behind her.

"Uh, no. He... something came up," she explained, her eyes not quite able to meet his.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lara could see Liam's brow furrow but he didn't ask more questions about it. "You can put the gift with the others," he said, pointing to where several wrapped gifts had been stacked on the coffee table.

Lara did exactly that and then joined everybody else in standing around the dining room table where a precariously leaning chocolate cake was on display. "Happy Birthday birthday, Charlotte," she said as she approached the group, most of whom she didn't actually know. Technically Charlotte's birthday had been a few months earlier but she'd been in a cell in the Portland pack house basement at the time, so Liam had planned a birthday party to make up for the lost day.

"Thanks, Lara," Charlotte replied with a bright smile before giving Lara a brief but tight hug. "I still can't believe you all kept this a secret from me."

"I didn't even know about it until this morning," a man who Lara recognized as one of Liam's good friends, grumbled.

"That's because you can't keep your mouth shut," Liam explained with a pointed look.

"It's true," another man added with a chuckle.

"Whatever," the rst man mumbled, but the smile on his face said he wasn't upset about their words. "I'm Dean by the way," he said to Lara, holding his hand out for her to shake.

"Lara. Nice to meet you," she replied.

"Connor," the second man said with a smile and a nod of his head.

"Sorry, Lara. I forgot you don't know everyone," Charlotte apologized. "That's Thomas and Daniel," she explained, pointing to the raven-haired twins across the table. "And that's Marcus."

Marcus was a Medial that Lara had seen guarding the front door but he'd seemed too scary and intense to strike up a conversation with. Now though, he gave her a small nod of her head and his usual scowl was absent.

"And my dad, Master Kennedy, and Liam's mom, Dorothy," Charlotte nished.

Charlotte had told Lara that Master Kennedy was her dad but it was something that hadn't been advertised around the Council. Lara's friend hadn't even known who her father was until she'd moved to Boston with her mate and Kennedy had seen her and immediately recognized her as his daughter. Lara thought it sounded like something out of a soap opera but she'd promised to keep her lips shut about it.

"Alright everyone," Dorothy said, getting their attention as she lit the last candle on the cake. "We're ready."

Without missing a beat, Dean broke into a rather loud and off-key 'Happy Birthday', and Lara's smile was no longer forced as she joined in the song with the others.

"You should leave the baking to Charlotte next time," Dean said after Charlotte had blown out her candles.

"It's not exactly structurally sound, is it?" Thomas asked with a laugh.

"No, not exactly," Marcus agreed.

"It's perfect," Charlotte told them with a glare. "Besides, can any of you bake a perfectly proportioned cake?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

Lara smothered a laugh behind her hand as Dean, Thomas and Marcus shook their heads like scolded children. After the way Jackson had stormed out of their apartment that morning, Lara hadn't thought she'd be able to manage even a forced smile but she found herself smiling and laughing as they moved to the living room and Charlotte started opening her gifts. It was impossible not to have a good time, not when Charlotte looked so happy and not with Dean's good sense of humor.

"Oh, that one's mine," Lara said excitedly as Charlotte picked up the gift she'd brought along.

Charlotte started tearing it open enthusiastically, but a knock on the door made her pause.

"I'll get it," Liam murmured, standing up from the couch and walking off to open the door.

"Is it okay?" Lara asked, pulling Charlotte's attention back to the gift in her lap. With Charlotte's love of cooking and baking, Lara had thought an ice cream maker would make a good addition to Charlotte and Liam's kitchen.

"It's awesome," Charlotte replied, standing up and giving Lara another erce hug. "Thanks, Lara."

"How come I didn't get a hug?" Dean asked with a pout, making Lara chuckle.

Charlotte didn't reply though and Lara followed her friend's wide eyes to the tall man who was walking into the apartment next to Liam. Lara swallowed and she swore she could feel her pulse speed up as her eyes took him in. The man looked like... well he looked like s\*\*t, to put it bluntly. But underneath his paleness, the bags under his brown eyes, and his slightly hollow cheeks, Lara could see the attractive man he'd used to be— or still was, she admitted to herself.

When Lara had met Jackson, she'd smelled coffee and had instantly known that he was her mate, but what Lara felt now was nothing like that. It was as if her eyes were drawn to the man who'd just walked in and she just couldn't look away— or rather, she didn't want to. Lara forced herself to avert her eyes when Charles ran up to him and threw herself into his arms though. She had no idea who he was or why wanted to steal another glance at him, but she knew one thing for sure: Jackson was her mate. Whatever she was feeling now, she had to ignore it. It was probably just all in her mind anyway.