

## Secrets

"What are you guys doing here?" Lara asked as Charlotte, Liam, Lily, and Finn walked into the relatively empty diner—it was a Saturday but they got most of their customers after one. Charlotte had called only two hours earlier to invite her over for an impromptu Harry Potter movie marathon so Lara hadn't been expecting them.

"We decided to do the marathon tomorrow when you're not working," Lily explained.

"You didn't have to do that," Lara told them.

"We did. I feel like I haven't seen you in forever," Charlotte replied with a sad smile.

"Yeah, sorry," Lara murmured. "I got so busy with those summer classes."

It was a lie—Lara had written her exams over a week earlier—but she couldn't tell Charlotte the truth. She'd been avoiding her friend for three weeks, too scared of what Greg might have told her and too afraid of what Charlotte might feel or sense in her. The only time she'd been around her friend was during their training sessions with Marcus but Lara had always left as soon as they were done.

"So, are you guys here for breakfast or lunch?" she asked, wanting to change the subject before Charlotte could ask any questions.

"Breakfast," Charlotte and Lily replied at the same time the guys said, "Lunch."

"I see," Lara chuckled, grabbing two breakfast menus and two lunch menus. It was quarter to twelve so there were technically twenty more minutes before the kitchen stopped making breakfast. "Table or booth?" she asked, feeling a bit weird serving her friends.

"Booth," Liam said. "The others are coming as well, so we're gonna need some space."

"The others?" Lara asked with raised brows as she led them to one of the many empty booths.

"Greg, Dean, Connor, Thomas, Daniel, and Marcus," Charlotte explained.

"And here I was hoping it would be a slow day," Lara joked with a shake of her head, making them grin sheepishly.

"Oh, and I texted Jackson, He's coming as well," Liam added, making Lara's smile waver.

"I think you might need another table," she pointed out as the girls slid into the booth. Finn had to help Lily sit down and her large stomach was only a few inches away from the edge of the table.

Liam helped Lara move a table and chairs over to the booth and by the time they were done, the others, save Jackson, had arrived. Lara's gaze automatically found Greg's but she averted her eyes quickly, the secret between them making her feel jumpy and tense. She'd had more dreams about him since their kiss, most of them s\*\*\*I but some of them strange and hazy dreams where they spoke about things she couldn't quite recall or make sense of after waking up. They'd been so happy in those dreams and Lara's cheeks burned with mortification just thinking about it.

"Hi, Lara," Dean greeted her cheerfully while the others sent waves of greeting her way.

"Hey guys," Lara greeted them. "I'm just gonna grab some more menus," she said, walking back to the front of the diner. She'd just grabbed six more menus when the door opened again and Jackson walked in.

"Hey, babe," he said with a smile that held only affection.

"Hey," she replied, hoping her smile wasn't as strained as it felt as she grabbed one more menu.

Her mate had been kind and gentle toward her in the three weeks since that night, barely touching her unless it was to kiss her forehead or hold her hand. His new behavior had made Lara start to question whether she'd gotten it wrong, that maybe he hadn't wanted to hurt her. If it weren't for the way he'd been too rough with her in bed in the past and the way he'd sometimes dug his fingers too hard into her waist or hip, like on the night of Charlotte's bonding ceremony, Lara might have believed that small voice in her mind that kept telling her that Jackson hadn't meant to hurt her. If it hadn't been for all those signs, she might have let him convince her of it and she wouldn't have been considering speaking to Charlotte and Lily for the last three weeks.

And had Lara not felt so ashamed, maybe she would have gone to her friends. She just felt like the whole thing was her fault—she'd held the truth from him for too long, and though Jackson didn't know it, she'd kissed somebody else. Lara knew that she'd deserved his anger. She'd lied to him for more than a year and then she'd cheated on him. She was a horrible person and she knew she'd deserved his rage. Besides, he hadn't actually hurt her, so had he even done anything wrong? Would her friends understand her fear and stand by her, or judge her because she cheated on her mate? Lara wasn't sure she wanted to find out, so she'd remained silent.

"How was breakfast with your parents?" she asked Jackson as they walked to the booth filled with their friends.

"Good. Adam says hi."

Lara smiled genuinely at that. Jackson's younger brother was a sweet guy. He would be a senior in high school in September and had been planning on becoming a Council or pack doctor for as long as Lara had known him. "Here're the menus," she said as they reached the booth, placing them in the middle of the table. "What do you guys want to drink?" she asked, taking out the pen and small pad from the front of her apron.

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"Do you guys need anything else?" Lara asked as she returned to the now-cleared table.

"Can I have some coffee, babe?" Jackson asked, taking her hand and kissing the top of it gently.

"Sure."

"I could go for some dessert," Thomas said. "Do you have any cake?"

"Yeah, we have carrot, chocolate, and red velvet," she replied. "I'd suggest the chocolate though. It's delicious."

"As are you," Dean said with his trademark wink, making Jackson's hand tighten uncomfortably around Lara's.

"Really?" Connor scoffed. "You just can't give it a rest, can you?" he asked Dean.

"Lara doesn't mind," Dean replied. "Do you?" he asked her with a cheeky smile, making Lara's lips tip up into an unwilling grin. The guy was just such a goofball.

"I mind," Jackson bit out, sounding far angrier than the situation called for and making Lara inch.

"He was just messing around," Daniel said carefully.

"Yeah, it was just a joke, man," Dean explained with a frown, his hands raised up to show he meant no harm.

"I'm getting kind of sick of your jokes," Jackson replied with a glare.

"You need to calm down, Jackson," Greg said, a hint of threat in his tone.

"Why don't you guys decide what you want for dessert," Lara said quickly. "Jackson, can I talk to you for a sec?" she asked quietly, hoping her mate wouldn't make any more of a scene.

With a clenched jaw, Jackson stood up and let Lara lead her to an empty corner of the diner. "I'm sorry," he sighed. "I just don't like that he's always irting with you."

"He's our friend," Lara reminded him in a whisper. "He's harmless."

"I know," Jackson murmured, gently pulling Lara in for a hug. "I'm sorry, babe," he whispered into her ear. "I feel so stupid. They probably think I'm a nutjob," he admitted as he pulled away.

"It's okay," Lara assured him, though pink still stained her cheeks with embarrassment and her hand still ached from his grip.

"I'm just going to head home," Jackson told her, grimacing as he glanced back at the booth. He took out his wallet and handed her a few notes. "This should cover my share."

He gave her a short peck on the lips and then he was leaving the diner, avoiding having to pass the booth by leaving through the back. Lara put the money in her apron and took a deep breath before returning to her friends.

She noticed their concerned looks but tried her best to ignore them as she took out her notepad and asked, "What'll it be?"

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"Thanks, Lara," Marcus said as their group stood up to leave. The others all mirrored his statement and Lara grinned at them as she cleared the last of the plates.

"No problem," Lara said as if it had been a pleasure to wait on a table of eleven rather than the hard work Greg knew it had been.

Marcus, Thomas, Daniel, and Connor started walking to the exit but everyone else seemed to be lingering.

"I'm sorry for upsetting Jackson," Dean told Lara before she could leave with the tray of dishes. "I really didn't mean anything by it."

"I know, I'm sorry about that," Lara replied with a sigh. "He's just been a bit stressed lately. It's not your fault."

"Okay," Dean said, sounding uncertain. "Well, I'm sorry anyway. Thanks for the lunch, Lara."

"No worries," Lara said, before picking up the tray and walking off with it.

"Do you mind waiting by the car?" Greg heard Charlotte ask Liam quietly. "I just want to talk to Lara for a minute."

He'd been planning to do the same so he hovered while the rest of the group cleared out. His sister widened her eyes at him and gestured with her head for him to leave as Lara came back to wipe down the tables, but Greg just shook his head in refusal.

"What's up?" Lara asked them hesitantly when she got back to the booth, her grey eyes flitting between Charlotte and Greg.

Greg hadn't seen Lara since that night at the gym and he was shocked by how different she looked. The dark circles under her eyes told him that she hadn't been sleeping well, and he was pretty sure that she'd lost some weight. Her cheekbones looked sharper and her cheeks a bit hollow, and seeing her that way reminded him of the state he'd been in only a month or two earlier when guilt and shame had been eating at him. He would have thought it was because of the kiss they'd shared but after the way Jackson had acted, he couldn't help wondering if it was something else.

"Is everything okay?" Charlotte asked Lara softly before Greg could.

"I'm ne," Lara replied with a shrug.

"You're lying. I can tell you're lying just like I can tell that you're feeling scared and ashamed," Charlotte said sadly, letting Lara and Greg know that she was using her abilities to read Lara's energy. "You can talk to me, Lara. I just want to help."

Lara swallowed and looked down at her hands, and Greg knew without a shadow of a doubt that whatever was going on had to do with more than just that kiss. "I've been lying to Jackson about something for a long time," she whispered. "I nally told him the truth a few weeks ago and he was pretty angry about it."

"Did he hurt you?" Greg asked, the word 'scared' echoing through his mind. Anger like he'd never known rose up in him at the thought.

"No, he was really upset but he didn't hurt me," Lara replied. She bit her lip and looked up, her eyes meeting Greg's. "He—"

"Lara, I seated that family in your section," a waitress who must have been in her forties called out as she passed by before Lara could nish whatever she was going to say.

"I have to get back to work," Lara told Greg and Charlotte as she hastily nished wiping the tables.

"I'll see you tomorrow, right? For the movie marathon?" Charlotte asked.

"Yeah I'll be there," Lara agreed with an unconvincing smile. "See you tomorrow," she said, her eyes holding Greg's for a few more seconds before she turned to wait on her new table.

"Was she telling the truth about Jackson but they?" Greg asked his sister as they walked out of the diner.

"Yes," Charlotte replied but she still sounded worried.

"What are you thinking?" he asked her.

"I thought Jackson seemed like a good guy but now I'm not so sure," she admitted. "The necklace mom gave me still had most of my powers when I met him but he seemed, I don't know, charming. I shook his hand and nothing really jumped out at me or anything like it did with Marcus or with Liam's dad."

"And now?" Greg asked.

"I didn't have a reason to before but when I focused in on him today, I could feel that he loves Lara." Greg opened his mouth to ask why that was a problem but she continued before he could. "It felt wrong though. It's not the same kind of love I feel from Liam or I can sense in Lily and Finn. It felt... corrupted, I guess."

"What the hell does that mean?" he asked with a frown.

"I don't know," Charlotte sighed. "But I do know that I'm worried about Lara."

"Me too," Greg murmured. The only reason he wasn't marching over to the Council building and nding Jackson was that Charlotte had warned that Jackson hadn't hurt her. Still, he was sorely tempted to go back into the diner and offer up his apartment if Lara ever needed a place to stay. He'd moved into the Council building two weeks earlier and the space had an extra room she could stay in.

"Is she okay?" Lily asked them when they got to the parking lot where Liam, Finn, and her were waiting.

"I'm not sure," Charlotte replied honestly. "Something doesn't feel right."

"We can try and talk to her again tomorrow," Lily suggested, and Charlotte nodded in agreement.

Liam wrapped his arm around Charlotte's waist and kissed the top of her head. "She'll be okay," he promised his mate.

Greg hoped he was right because, despite what he'd said to Lara that night, he already cared about her and he needed her to be okay.

"We'll make sure she is," Charlotte said, and he knew enough about his sister to know that, like him, she wouldn't give up until Lara was happy and safe.

"I better get going," Greg said to her with a sigh, wishing he had time to go back inside and talk to Lara some more. "Dad and I made plans to watch the game."

"Why don't you guys come over to my place," Finn offered. "I wanted to catch the game as well."

Greg blinked in surprise. He and Finn used to hang out all the time but it had been a long time since the Alpha had extended an invitation—not that Greg blamed him after everything that had gone down in Seattle. "Really?" he asked.

"Yeah," Finn replied with an easy shrug.

Greg nodded. "Sounds good," he said a bit uncertainly.

"You saved Finn's life that night with the Council. Because of you and Charlotte, Rose will have a dad," Lily said quietly, obviously reading the surprise on Greg's face. Her hand moved to rest on her stomach. "We understand why you lied to us in Seattle and we forgive you."

Greg had to swallow the lump in his throat before he could speak. "Thank you," he replied, his voice a bit hoarse.

"We'll see you and Kennedy soon," Finn said with a smile, and any lingering guilt that Greg had been holding on to disappeared.