

## Guilt

"Sorry," Lara said for what must have been the fiftieth time. "I suck at this."

"You don't suck," Greg argued, holding his hand out for her. Lara grabbed it and pulled herself to her feet, and Greg tried to ignore the sparks that her touch sent through his palm. "You're doing all the right steps but you just need to speed it up a bit. You're too stuck in your head."

"What do you mean?" she asked with a frown as she brushed a loose strand of her red-brown hair behind her ear.

"You're focusing too hard on what you're supposed to do next," Greg explained.

"I can see you know what you're meant to do, Lara, but you keep hesitating which is making you slow," Marcus agreed from where he'd been watching them from the center of the room.

"So how do I stop doing that?" Lara asked with a frustrated groan.

"Stop thinking so much," Greg told her with a shrug, making her raise her eyebrows in a look that told him how helpful she thought he was being. "Here, let's try it again," he suggested. "I'm going to do the same move but this time just let your body act on instinct. Don't try to plan out what you're going to do in your head."

"Okay, I'll try," Lara sighed, raising her stiff hands in front of her face and bending her knees slightly.

"Ready?" Greg asked her, mirroring her position.

"As I'll ever be," Lara replied, making Greg grin.

As he'd done before, he sent a punch toward her face. She dodged it with more speed than she had before, and she blocked his second punch with her forearm before it could even get close to her. Lara surprised him by sending her knee towards his groin this time, rather than the punch she'd delivered to his stomach the previous time but he managed to avoid it by jumping back.

"Good," he said.

"Just trying to keep you on your toes," Lara said with a grin as she sent two quick punches to his face, both of which he blocked.

"I can see that," Greg replied with a chuckle.

Lara tried to kick his stomach next but Greg caught her foot before it could reach him. She let out a startled yelp as he pulled her foot forward, but instead of losing her balance and falling straight to the ground like she had last time, Lara swung her arms toward him and grabbed onto his arm. Greg wasn't prepared for it though and the weight of her falling backward took them both to the ground.

Greg let go of Lara's leg and he tried to keep most of his weight off of her by planting his hands on either side of her head but Lara still groaned as his lower body landed on top of her and pressed her into the mat.

"s\*\*t, sorry," Greg spluttered. "You okay?"

"I'm good," Lara replied with a light laugh that sounded a bit pained. "I just don't think my leg's used to being, uh... in this position," she nished awkwardly, her entire face going red as her grey-blue eyes lifted to meet his.

Greg blinked in confusion before he realized that the leg he'd grabbed onto was stretched under his upper body so that Lara was in an almost-split with her foot hooked over his shoulder. He swallowed, an image of them in that exact same position but under entirely different circumstances rising up in his head. Trying to shake off the picture, Greg lifted his upper body more, releasing some of the weight from her leg but in the process putting more weight on her lower body. Lara's eyes widened and her lips parted, and much as Greg knew he should roll to the side and off of her, he couldn't quite seem to force his body to move. It was only the sound of Marcus's voice calling an end to the training session that had him snapping out of whatever daze he'd been in.

"Sorry," Greg muttered in embarrassment as he lifted himself off her and stood up.

"It's okay," Lara replied in a murmur, her blush coming back in full force. "I'll, uh, I'll see you tonight at the ceremony I guess," she said, her words almost too quick to hear or understand.

"Yeah, I'll see you there," Greg replied after clearing his throat.

Lara nodded and rushed off towards Charlotte and Liam. After giving Greg's sister a quick hug, she was ying out of the room like it was on re. God, he'd acted like an i\*\*t and completely crossed the line. First, he'd gotten jealous and angry when Dean was irting with Lara and then he'd gone and practically attacked her. Lara must think he was an animal after this— she sure was running away from him like he was one. What the f\*\*\*\*\*g hell was wrong with him?

He'd already ruined Lily and Finn's lives and had nearly gotten his own sister killed. The last thing he needed to do was destroy somebody else's happiness.

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Even hours later, Lara's hand felt warm where her palm had connected with Greg's and she couldn't quite forget the way that his body had pressed into hers after their fall. For once, it wasn't one of Jackson's comments or her guilt over delaying their ceremony that had caused the red marks on her wrist— it was her guilt and worry that she was becoming like her mother, like the woman she most hated. Her nails never did much damage to her skin and the marks would be healed by the next morning thanks to her werewolf genes, but Lara had still hidden the scratches under a silver cuff bracelet so that nobody would notice them at Charlotte's bonding ceremony.

The pain of the scratches had grounded her after the training session and had distracted her from feeling like the world's worst person for betraying her mate with her body's reaction to Greg's touch. The shiver of pleasure she'd felt just by touching his hand and the surge of heat that warmed her body at the position they'd found themselves in had been more intense than anything Lara had ever felt for her mate. It made her wonder if she was going crazy, if there was something wrong with her or something wrong with her side of the mate bond.

Jackson had called her beautiful before they'd left for the ceremony, his eyes appreciatively roaming over her above-the-knee white oral dress and down her pale legs to the beige and white wedges she wore. Lara had left her hair down and had applied some subtle make-up, and though she had thought she'd looked pretty after looking in the mirror, Jackson's compliment and the owner's he'd presented her with shortly after had felt like a knife to the heart because they were a reminder that she didn't deserve him.

As Jackson grabbed and squeezed her hand, drawing her attention to the fact that the ceremony was starting, Lara swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to return her focus to the present. She turned with the rest of the gathered crowd to watch Charlotte walk down the aisle in a stunning sage green dress, a crown of owers resting in her hair. She looked beautiful, but it was the man who was next to her and walking her down the aisle that Lara's focus nally rested on. Charlotte's brother looked handsome in a well-tied black suit, the fading orange rays of sunlight glinting off his dark brown hair and swimming in his brown eyes. Those eyes found hers as he and his sister neared the aisle but Lara shifted her gaze away before she could get lost in them. Whatever was going on between them had to stop. It wasn't right.

Lara watched as Charlotte's hand was placed in Liam's, and the two of them faced each other with smiles so happy that nobody could doubt how much the mates loved each other. Knowing her friend would want the moment captured, Lara took her phone from her purse as surreptitiously as possible and snapped a photo of the two of them. Her spot in the front row ensured she got a good picture, and Lara grinned as she put her phone back in her bag and Marcus stepped forward to start the ceremony. Despite the events of the day, Lara couldn't contain her excitement for her friend— Charlotte looked more beautiful than any bride ever could, and by the way Liam was looking at his mate, Lara would say that he loved Charlotte more than any human groom could ever love his wife-to-be.

Bonding ceremonies were short and sweet, so after Marcus had given his blessing for the union on behalf of the Council, Dorothy was asked to tie the rst ribbon. Liam's mother said the required words as she wound the pale blue ribbon around Liam and Charlotte's joined hands, and then it was Lara's turn.

"Lara, will you tie the second ribbon?" Marcus asked while Dorothy retreated to her spot next to her mate, Master Gold.

"I will," Lara replied with a wide smile, stepping forward with a deep red ribbon. She wound the ribbon that symbolized Liam's and Charlotte's strengthening bond and ever-growing love for one another around Charlotte's wrist, over their joined hands, and then around Liam's wrist, all the while she said, "These mates promise to always love and cherish each other. As their bond strengthens, so their love will grow." Lara nished wrapping the ribbon around Liam's wrist before asking, "Do you both promise to do so?"

"We do," Liam and Charlotte said in unison, their happiness almost tangible in their voices, and as Lara returned to her spot next to Jackson, the two of them kissed. It wasn't a chaste or short kiss but rather a passionate and fervent one that had a mate in the crowd chuckling under their breath.

Lara had to bite her lip to contain her chuckle at the way Greg shifted uncomfortably where he stood close to the couple, clearly not happy with the way Liam was embracing and kissing Charlotte.

"I present these two bonded mates to their friends and family," Marcus said, nishing the ceremony and bringing an end to the couple's kiss.

The gathered crowd broke into applause, Dean's exuberant claps the loudest of all, and to Greg's credit, a small smile tipped up his lips as he joined in the clapping. Liam and Charlotte glanced over at their friends, sending looks of gratitude and happiness their way before he led her away from the guests and deeper into the woods. The sun had almost nished setting, so once they'd reached a more secluded part of the woods, they'd be able to shift and run in their wolf forms as per tradition.

"That could be us soon," Jackson whispered to Lara as Charlotte and Liam disappeared into the trees and chatter spread through the guests.

Lara swallowed and nodded, sending her mate a strained smile.

"Wow, don't look so happy at the thought," Jackson muttered sarcastically.

"Jackson, please," Lara begged quietly. "I'm sorry."

With a clenched jaw, Jackson dragged her off to the side and away from their friends.

"You're always sorry, Lara," he bit out once they had a bit more privacy. "I'm getting so f\*\*\*\*\*g tired of this."

"I'm trying," Lara replied softly.

"Are you?" Jackson asked bitterly. "Because it seems to me like it's always one step forward and two steps back with you."

"Maybe if you weren't pressuring me so much I'd be more willing," Lara snapped back without thinking.

Jackson just blinked at her as if he was thrown off by her statement— a statement that she realized was true. The more Jackson pushed her, the more reluctant she'd become. It had started with him wanting to have s\*x soon after they'd met and it had progressed to him wanting to go through the ceremony a week after she'd moved in with him. He had been wanting to move faster than she'd been ready for and the more he pushed, the more she'd pulled away.

"All I hear from you anymore is that you're tired of waiting, that you're tired of me delaying our ceremony or delaying us having s\*x," she hissed. "Well, now I'm tired Jackson. I'm tired of you pushing me to do something I'm not ready for."

"We'll talk about this later," Jackson eventually said, his eyes icking over Lara's shoulder to the ceremony guests.

"Fine," Lara replied, though she knew their 'talk' would inevitably turn into another argument.

The sun had completely vanished, and the strings of fairy lights that Dorothy had wrapped around the trees and the canopy tents in the small clearing were now the only source of light in the area. The guests had started streaming into one of the canopy tents, but Kennedy, Greg, Marcus, Dean, and the others remained in the clearing as if they'd all come to a silent agreement not to join the other guests yet.

Lara and Jackson joined the group, and though they'd just been ghting, Jackson placed his arm around Lara's waist as if nothing was amiss. Lara's hands were still trembling though, her emotions not under control yet as anger and hurt simmered in her veins. But underneath it all was that constant guilt that had been permeating every cell of Lara's body for over a year; in the end, it was always that guilt that won out.