



## Confrontation

"Dorothy did such a good job," Kennedy noted once all the other guests had led into the tent. He was glancing around at the strings of fairy lights, and Lara followed his gaze.

"She did," Lara agreed. "And Charlotte and Liam looked so happy," she added with a grin that probably didn't quite meet her eyes.

"A little too happy," Greg muttered under his breath, making Dean and Thomas chuckle.

"The mate bond will do that to you," Kennedy said, sounding amused but Jackson seemed to stiffen beside Lara. "I'm going to head inside. See you all in a bit," he said before walking into the tent to join everyone else.

"Speaking of the mate bond, are the two of you going to be tying the knot anytime soon?" Daniel asked Lara and Jackson.

Jackson's arm tightened around Lara's waist, his fingers digging into her hip a bit too hard. "I don't know," he said through a clenched jaw. "You should ask Lara."

They'd become good at pretending that everything was okay around other people but Jackson had just made it very clear that he'd had enough of pretending in front of their new friends. Lara noted the way everyone looked awkwardly between the two of them, obviously having heard the frustration in Jackson's tone. Greg's eyes were the only ones not icking between them, fixed instead on the hand Jackson was using to grip her hip.

Lara cleared her throat and quietly said, "We'll do it when we're ready," earning a scoff from Jackson.

"What she means is we'll do it when she's good and ready, and not one f\*\*\*\*\*g second sooner," he explained to their wide-eyed friends. "Isn't that right, Lara?" he asked while pressing harder into her hip and pulling her further into his side.

Marcus and Greg each took a small step forward. "You're being an asshole," Greg told Jackson, his eyes narrowed on Lara's mate hatefully.

"I think I'm just going to go home," Lara whispered, tears of humiliation stinging her eyes as she shoved her way out of Jackson's grip. She heard him mutter a swear as she started walking away. Jackson had driven them both there but maybe she could get an Uber once she'd reached the main road.

"Lara!" Jackson called out. "Lara, wait!"

Lara ignored him and kept walking through the clearing and had just reached the line of trees when Jackson caught up to her and stopped her by grabbing her upper arm.

"Baby, I'm so sorry," he said, looking truly distraught as he looked down at her, still so much taller than she was even in her heels.

"Do you know how embarrassing that was?" Lara asked him, wiping a tear from her cheek angrily.

"Babe, please forgive me," Jackson begged. "I just lost my temper and lashed out. I'm sorry."

"We can't keep doing this," Lara told him, a kind of cool calm settling over her. "We keep having the same argument over and over and I'm tired of it."

"I know," Jackson admitted, closing his eyes in a wince. "I'm tired of it too."

"Jackson..." she started to say, intending to tell him the truth about how she'd been feeling lately.

"Can you please just try to see where I'm coming from though?" he asked before she could finish. "My friends and family have been asking me when we'll do the ceremony for the last two years, and do you know how humiliating it is for me to explain that you don't feel ready. They all keep giving me these confused or pitying looks when the subject comes up like they feel sorry for me. They think you don't love me, Lara," he admitted with a sigh. "They all think I'm wasting my time, and sometimes- sometimes I wonder the same thing because if you feel even half of what I feel for you, I just don't see why you'd want to wait any longer."

Lara swallowed and looked down at her hands, the guilt already settling into her bones again. She was so f\*\*\*\*\*g selfish— she was just like her mom. Jackson had bought her flowers, and not for the first time. He made her coffee every morning and always drove her to college or work if he wasn't busy with training so she wouldn't have to take the bus. He was the kind of boyfriend most girls would kill to have.

"You're right. I'm sorry," she whispered, ignoring her sense of déjà vu that the tables had been turned and she was apologizing to him again. "I'll do better," she promised him, and with her words, Lara made a silent promise to herself: she would stay away from Greg and forget whatever connection she had been feeling to him. She had to do it for Jackson because he deserved so much better from her. He'd spent two years of his life on her, and now it was her turn to be there for him.

A clearing throat had Lara jumping slightly and the two of them turning back towards the clearing. "Lara, is everything okay here?" Greg asked her, his brown eyes looking worried as he searched her face.

"Everything's fine," Jackson bit out.

Greg didn't look at Jackson or acknowledge him in any way as he said, "I wasn't asking you."

"I'm okay," Lara told him. "Jackson and I have worked it out," she added.

Still, Greg hesitated, looking like he didn't want to leave them alone.

"Greg, it's okay. I'm fine," Lara assured him, and after a few more tense seconds he nodded and walked back into the clearing.

"I don't like that guy," Jackson muttered.

Lara wanted to say that it seemed like the feeling was mutual but she settled for, "He was just trying to help."

Jackson drove them back to the Council building after that, and Lara was glad to leave so she wouldn't have to face her new friends again quite so soon. When she and Jackson were in their bedroom and he undressed and guided her hand down between his legs, she didn't argue or complain, silently letting him use her hand to reach his pleasure like he had a week earlier. All she could think about while it was happening was the pain her father had gone through when his mate had cheated on him, had betrayed him.

No, Lara thought as Jackson gripped her waist a bit too tightly and bit down on the skin of her neck. She wouldn't hurt her mate like her mom had hurt hers. The next time Jackson brought up their bonding ceremony, she'd tell him she was ready, not only because she didn't want to become her mother but because she was scared of what Jackson would do if she didn't. So, she'd be happy with him. She had to be.

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"Is Lara okay?" Thomas asked when Greg returned to the group.

"Seems like it," Greg replied, though he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. The way that Jackson had been holding onto Lara's waist hadn't been right. "Is he always like that?" he asked.

"Not at all," Connor said. "I don't know him that well but he's always seemed like an okay guy."

"He seems like a d\*\*k to me," Marcus argued with a disgusted shake of his head.

"Maybe, but I think I'd also get a bit moody if my mate made me wait two years to do the ceremony," Daniel pointed out with a shrug.

"It doesn't give him the right to act like an asshole," Greg said, his hands curling into fists. "If Lara wants to wait, he shouldn't push her."

"You're telling me that if you found your mate today, you'd be okay waiting another two years to have the bonding ceremony?" Dean asked him with raised brows.

"I've already waited three years to find her. What's another two?" Greg had felt his mate go through her first shift over three years ago, and when he found her, he wouldn't push her into anything. "At least they found each other and they're together."

"Then you're a better man than me," Daniel said with a bemused shake of his head. "Lara seems great but I get why Jackson's losing his patience."

"Maybe she has a reason for wanting to wait," Greg murmured, his thoughts going back to that red mark he'd seen peeking out under Lara's bracelet.

He'd noticed it when his gaze was locked on Jackson's grip on her hip but he couldn't be sure it was what he suspected it was. He knew someone needed to talk to her about it but he wasn't sure if he was the best person for that job— despite how drawn he was to her, how beautiful he'd thought she'd looked that night with her long auburn hair framing her face, and despite how f\*\*\*\*\*g sexy he'd thought she'd looked in her dress and those heels, he barely knew her. He'd talk to Charlotte about it after she got back from her 'honeymoon' in New Orleans, he decided.

"Who knows, man. It's their business anyway," Dean said. "Let's just go inside and try to enjoy ourselves," he suggested, pushing Greg towards the canopy tent.

Greg didn't think he'd be able to enjoy himself but he let Dean push him into the large tent where the ceremony guests were eating finger foods and chatting away happily. The others led in behind them but while they stuck together near the entrance, Greg walked over to his dad.

"Greg," Kennedy said with a smile. "Dorothy and I were just talking about you."

"Uh, you were?" Greg asked awkwardly, turning his gaze to Liam's mom who was smiling encouragingly at Kennedy.

"I was telling her there's a baseball game next Saturday I wanted to watch," Kennedy explained.

"The Sox and the Nats," Greg said with a nod.

"Right," Kennedy replied, his smile growing wider. "I thought maybe you'd like to watch it with me," he explained.

"Yeah," Greg murmured after a moment. It should have been such a simple thing— a father asking his son to watch a game together— but it felt so big, so...important. "That would be great," he said, his worries about Lara momentarily disappearing as he smiled at his dad.

Kennedy swallowed and blinked, looking as if Greg had just offered him something he'd been waiting a long time for.

"Master Kennedy and I are going out to dinner tomorrow night to catch up," Dorothy said. "Why don't you join us, Greg? It will give you two more time to get to know each other," she said gently.

"I don't want to intrude," Greg was quick to say.

"Nonsense," Dorothy replied with a wave of her hand. "My son just cemented his bond with your sister. In my eyes, that makes us family."

Greg looked to his dad who was hiding an amused smile behind his hand.

"We're going to this little Italian place that has the most divine food. You'll love it," Dorothy insisted, her kind hazel eyes pleading with him to say yes.

"Sure," Greg replied with a small chuckle. "I'll be there."