

## A Stolen Moment

Lara woke up from her dream and swallowed the gasp that was trying to escape her. She looked to the side to make sure Jackson was still sound asleep before carefully slipping out from the covers and tiptoeing into the bathroom. After turning on the light, she closed the door quietly behind her, leaning back against it and covering her face for a few seconds. Taking a shaky breath in, Lara walked over to the sink and turned on the tap.

The cold water she splashed on her face did nothing to cool the heat that burned through her body though. She'd had the same dream the previous night and she felt just as awestruck now as she did then. Lara had been so busy the day before with her shift at the diner and then with her two summer classes that it had almost been easy to push the dream back into the furthest recesses of her mind. But now it was back.

Fragments from it rose up in her mind. A strong male body hovering over her, covering her, making love to her. It had been so real, had felt so real. Lara had been too busy kissing him, his tongue brushing softly but desperately against hers, to see his face but she knew who it was just the same. Confusion and guilt tore through Lara's chest because it hadn't been Jackson. It had been Greg.

Lara knew she couldn't keep this up. For the week after Charlotte's bonding ceremony, she'd been trying to rekindle her old feelings for Jackson, had been committing herself to him by making him dinners, watching his favorite movies, doing small things like bringing him coffee or a beer when he looked a bit tired, and though he'd thankfully never progressed further than using her hand, she'd let him do what he wanted in their bedroom at night even if he was a bit rougher than she'd like. But she was still as detached from him as ever, and she couldn't hold it off anymore— she needed to tell him the truth.

~

That afternoon, Lara was working on an integration problem, one that she just couldn't seem to figure out, when a shout from Jackson broke her concentration.

"Lara!"

She blinked and looked up from where she was sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table to find her mate looking at her from where he was lying down on the couch. "Hmm?" she hummed, half of her mind still lost in the calculus question. Music was blasting through her earphones so she took them out to hear his response.

"You were singing," he told her before looking back at the tv. "I'm trying to watch the game here."

"Oh, sorry," Lara murmured, pausing the music on her phone and leaving the earphones on the coffee table instead of putting them back in.

She had a habit of humming or singing when she got in the zone and sometimes she didn't even realize she was doing it. Just like she would use her thumb to rub her bottom lip when she was concentrating or when she was anxious and she would only notice once her lip had started to hurt from the friction.

Lara tried to drown out the sounds of the cheering crowd and the announcers' voices as she got back to her work. She had an exam coming up and she'd been working through some of the harder problems their lecturer had given them, knowing that she could do the other problems in her sleep.

"That's the second home run of the night for—"

Lara ignored the rest of the announcer's words and focused back on the problem. She knew that the integral of sin was negative cos, so she just needed to figure out—

The crowd cheered on the tv and Jackson let out a triumphant, "Yes!".

She needed to figure out what the—

"Next on the plate is the rookie—"

Lara looked down at her pile of papers and knew it was useless. She considered going to a coffee shop and working there but decided to just give herself a studying break. She'd been studying since she got back from her lecture and her mind was starting to go numb anyway. Lara threw her pencil down on the table and stood up. Maybe she'd go down the hall and see if Charlotte and Lily wanted to grab a coffee or something. After nearly losing her baby after the stress of the battle, Lily had been ordered by one of the Council doctors not to travel, so she and Finn would be staying in Boston for the next three months or so. Lara hadn't spent much time with the pregnant Luna but she already liked the woman.

"I'm taking a break," Lara told Jackson as she stretched her arms over her head.

"Good idea," he replied, his gaze still fixed on the tv.

Lara wondered briefly if she should try to talk to him about... well, about everything, but knew it wasn't a good time— he was too distracted. She'd had to leave early for her shift that morning and when she'd gotten back from Boston University, he'd been out with some friends, so despite the promise she'd made to herself after that dream, she just hadn't found the time yet. It could wait until after dinner, she decided. Lara retreated to the bedroom where she changed out of the comfortable and baggy sweats she'd been wearing and into a pair of navy leggings and a white tank top.

"I'm going to see if Charlotte and Lily want to grab some coffee," Lara told Jackson as she walked back into the living room. "I'll be back in time to make dinner," she added, grabbing one of Charlotte's choc-chip cookies from the box she'd left next to her notes. Charlotte's new baking business was taking off, and Lara had become quite the loyal customer— she'd always had a sweet tooth but with the way Charlotte baked, Lara was in danger of becoming a full-blown addict.

"You're going out?" Jackson asked with a frown, his eyes leaving the tv to land on her. "I thought we could spend some time together."

"You're watching the game," Lara pointed out.

"Is there a reason you can't watch it with me?" he asked with raised brows.

Lara hesitated before answering. "You know I don't like sports," she said a bit guiltily. "But I can stay if you want," she told him, seeing the annoyance in his expression.

"It's fine," he muttered, turning back to the tv. "I'll see you later."

"Jackson..." We need to talk, Lara wanted to say but his focus was already back on baseball. "Enjoy the game," she said instead before grabbing her phone and keys and leaving the apartment.

Lara had been intending to go to Charlotte and Liam's apartment but as she got closer, she knew she couldn't go there. Charlotte would know something was wrong, and Lara couldn't exactly talk to her about the problem— what was she meant to say: I barely feel anything for my mate and now I've started having s\*x dreams about your brother? No, Lara couldn't go there.

So, Lara let her feet carry her up to the training rooms instead. It was pretty quiet with only a few individuals sparring in the glass-walled rooms and a few men using the weight machines and boxing bags in the main gym. Lara walked past them all until she reached the last room on the right. She hadn't given much thought to the small space before the night of the battle, but Marcus had mentioned the room to her after a training session a few days earlier.

Lara opened the glass door and walked into the air-conditioned room. Goosebumps formed on her skin as she took in the rack of throwing knives on the wall next to her and the velocity targets at the back of the room. The circular targets were spaced in a way that they were all different distances away from where Lara stood but the closest one was still a good 15 feet away. Lara put her phone and keys on the floor next to the door and slowly walked to the rack of knives. The small blades had a triangular shape and instead of the handle being a separate part of the knife, the metal of the blade and handle owed into one another. They looked deadly and dangerous but Lara reached out and picked one up, the metal cold as she wrapped her fingers around it.

It was much lighter than the one she'd thrown at Gold but her hand seemed to adjust to the weight as she turned to the targets. Lara took a deep breath in and let instinct take over as she took aim and released the knife. It hit the target closest to her and landed perfectly in the innermost circle. She swallowed and walked up to the target, staring in a daze at how the blade of the knife had pierced the wood of the target before she yanked it out and returned to her spot next to the rack.

Lara threw the same knife again before reaching out and grabbing two more knives which she threw in quick succession. Two more knives followed after that, and within seconds each of the velocity targets had a knife sticking out of them. Two of the knives were an inch or two out but the rest had all landed in the center circle. It was a uke. It must have been. So, Lara collected the velocity knives and repeated the procedure. Only it hadn't been a uke because she'd managed to hit the bull's eyes of every target.

"I thought you said it was beginner's luck," a voice said from behind her, making Lara jump in fright.

She turned around to see Greg leaning against the frame of the door, his eyes fixed on the targets.

"What are you doing here?" Lara asked, feeling like she'd been caught doing something wrong.

"I came to work out in the gym and saw you through the glass," he explained, gesturing behind him to a training room filled with punching bags. "Where did you learn how to do that?" he asked, his gaze shifting to rest on her.

"That's the thing— I didn't," Lara said truthfully. "Learn it I mean. The first time I threw a knife was that night with Master Gold."

Greg's brows lifted. "So you can just throw knives perfectly without any training?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes...no. I don't know," Lara muttered, covering her face with her hands and breathing in deeply. "I don't really know what to tell you," she said, dropping her hands back to her sides.

Greg frowned but he must have thought better than to press that issue because he moved on to something else. "Can I ask you something? At Charlotte's bonding ceremony I noticed something."

"What?" Lara asked nervously, not knowing where he was going with this.

Greg's brown eyes were sad as he walked toward her and gently took her hand in his. Lara gasped, and sparks danced across her skin as he lifted it and turned it over to reveal the inside of her arm.

"I saw a mark on your wrist," he said quietly, his fingers tracing over the now smooth and unmarked skin.

Shame burned Lara's face at his words. "It was nothing," she replied, her words ringing with a lie they could both hear.

"It wasn't nothing," Greg disagreed gently, his eyes moving up to hers. "You can talk to me, Lara. You can trust me."

Lara swallowed and looked down at her wrist. Greg's thumb was tracing over the skin, and it felt...familiar and almost familiar.

"I saw the way you scratched yourself that day after Jackson told you you would just get in the way," he told her when she remained silent. "Did he say something to you the morning of the ceremony?"

Lara couldn't look at him as she whispered the truth. "I did it because of you." She felt Greg's body stiffen at the words. "I felt guilty because when we were training together, I—"

Lara's eyes lifted to meet his confused ones.

"You what?" Greg asked.

"Nevermind," Lara murmured, horrified by what she'd been about to say. "It doesn't matter."

"Lara, please tell me," he asked, his breath grazing over her lips because his face was so close to hers.

"I should go," she told him, her voice coming out panicked and awestruck.

Greg's fingers didn't dig into her skin like Jackson's would have. They remained gentle as he asked her, "You what? Tell me, Lara," Those brown eyes pleaded with her to tell him the truth.

"I can't." She couldn't let him see what a horrible person was. She couldn't stand the thought of him thinking less of her because she had feelings for him when she already had a mate.

~

Greg was almost certain of what Lara had been going to say but he wanted to hear her say the words so he could be sure. He was close enough to her to notice the dark grey ring around her blue-ecled iris and the collection of almost unnoticeable freckles on her nose. Even with her hair up in that ridiculously messy bun and with the shine of sweat on her forehead, she was stunning.

Almost of its own will, his fingers moved to brush a strand of her hair behind her ear, and when Lara didn't inch or pull away, he rested his hand on her cheek. She sucked in a surprised breath and Greg's gaze moved down to her parted lips. With that look, it was as if something snapped within both of them. Greg lowered his head and she lifted on her toes to meet him halfway. Their lips met and Greg knew nothing would ever compare.

Lara's lips were soft as they moved against his, and the brush of her tongue against his had a low growl building in Greg's throat. She tasted like sugar and chocolate, and he'd never wanted— no, needed— anybody as much as he needed Lara right then.

Greg wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer to him until every inch of her was pressed against him. Lara gasped against his lips and he used the opportunity to gently suck on her lower lip. It was perfect and amazing and... it was a mistake, Greg realized.

He pulled away from her even though his body screamed for him not to and despite the desperation that was burning beneath his skin. "We can't do this. You have a mate," he said breathlessly, the words tasting bitter and vile on his tongue.

"Oh my god," Lara whispered, her grey eyes filling with horror and guilt. "I'm so sorry," she said as if he hadn't been equally responsible for what had just happened.

"Lara, it's okay," Greg told her. He reached out to touch her arm but she backed away from him, her eyes filling with tears. "This is on both of us."

"You're not the one who just cheated," Lara murmured before she rushed to pick her things up from the floor. "I'm so sorry," she said again, hesitating at the door uncertainly.

"Lara," Greg sighed. "I shouldn't have done that either," he admitted. "I promised myself that I wouldn't ever get feelings for anyone while I waited to find my mate."

Disappointment ached in Lara's eyes but Greg knew he needed to tell her the truth.

"I will only ever love my mate," he explained. "So we both made a mistake just now."

"I understand," Lara replied quietly before turning to leave.

"Wait," Greg called out, remembering why he'd wanted to speak to her in the first place. He'd been planning on talking to his sister about what he'd seen, but when he'd tried to bring it up with Charlotte, it had felt like he was betraying Lara. "Will you just promise me one thing?" he asked her, and at her nod, he said, "Promise me you won't hurt yourself again."

Lara inched but she nodded in agreement.

"If you need to talk, I'm here," Greg told her.

"Thanks," she murmured, sending him an uncertain smile before she exited the room.

Greg closed his eyes and swore once Lara was gone. He, or rather they, had just f\*\*\*\*d up royally. Still, Greg couldn't shake the feeling that their kiss had been anything but a mistake. He'd loved every second of it, and with Lara in his arms, he'd finally felt like he was home.