



## The Truth

The kiss had been better than anything Lara had ever experienced— although the two dreams she'd had about Greg came close. As she rushed out of the training area it was as if she could still feel the soft hunger of Greg's lips against her own and the warmth of his body pressing against her. Her hands had wrapped around the back of his neck after he'd pulled her closer, and Lara could still feel the short but soft strands of his hair between her fingers. Her lips tingled with the memory of the kiss and her body was still humming with pleasure as she neared the apartment.

She'd never felt anything close to that with Jackson. On the day they'd met, Lara had felt that strong pull towards him that told her that they were mates, had smelled that strong and pleasant aroma of coffee on him, and though their first few kisses had made her body warm with desire, that warmth had soon turned to a numb detachment of sorts. Even those first kisses that had affected Lara hadn't stirred the kind of heated pleasure that Greg had just caused. Lara couldn't understand it, and while she wanted to march back into that room and begin again where they'd left off, she couldn't with Greg's words ringing in her ears, not to mention the mate that was waiting for her in their apartment.

I will only ever love my mate, so we both made a mistake just now. Lara shouldn't have been affected by the words but they had stabbed into her chest, leaving disappointment and a cold pain in their wake. Because even if Lara should have been able to understand his words and mirror them with her commitment to Jackson, she couldn't have said the same to him. She knew that what she felt for Jackson wasn't enough, and it was that thought more than anything that really proved to Lara that she was no better than her cheating mother. In fact, she was worse, because while her mom had the excuse of having had too much to drink, Lara had betrayed Jackson without so much as a drop of alcohol.

As Lara opened the door to their apartment and saw Jackson sitting on the couch talking to someone on the phone, she knew what she'd have to do. She needed to tell Jackson everything. She'd been stupid and selfish to keep her growing detachment a secret from him, and now she needed to own up to it and face the fury and hatred he was sure to throw at her. Lara knew she deserved whatever cruel words and curses he would hurl at her. She was a cheater and a liar and she deserved Jackson's anger.

"I can't tonight, Adam. Lara's making dinner and then we're gonna watch a movie," Jackson explained into the phone, sending Lara a nod of greeting as she closed the door behind her. "Yeah, sure. I have training in the morning but you can come over at ten," he said after a pause.

Lara hesitated at the door, waiting for him to end the call so she could talk to him, but Jackson laughed at whatever his younger brother had said and started talking about the game he'd been watching. She lingered uncertainly for a few more seconds but when it was clear the conversation wouldn't be over any time soon, Lara went through to the kitchen and, since she had nothing better to do than stew in her self-hate, she started cooking. The Fettucine was boiling away and Lara had managed to fail at making Charlotte's foolproof Alfredo sauce when Jackson came into the kitchen.

"Dinner nearly ready?" he asked, walking up behind Lara and wrapping his arms around her stomach.

"Nearly," Lara replied with a swallow. "The sauce is split though."

Jackson chuckled. "Why don't I just order some Chinese," he suggested.

"Yeah, okay," she muttered, turning the heat off and moving the boiling pot of pasta off of the hot plate.

"Mm, you smell good, baby," Jackson whispered into her ear, his hips grinding forward as his lips found her neck.

Lara braced herself by placing her hands on either side of the stove as the movement sent her forward. "Jackson, just hold on a second," she said as his hands moved over her shirt down her stomach.

"Shh, baby, it's okay," he replied in a murmur, his fingers moving to the waistband of her leggings.

"We need to talk," Lara told him as one of his hands wandered under the material and started lifting and stretching the band of her underwear. An intense wave of nausea hit her as his fingers roughly grazed over her. "Jackson, stop," she said, her voice barely louder than a whisper but her arms strong as she turned and pushed him away.

Jackson's jaw clenched. "Why am I not surprised," he muttered with a humorless laugh.

"I need to talk to you about something," Lara told him quietly but Jackson didn't seem to register the words.

"Two f\*\*\*\*g years!" he yelled, making Lara inch and step backward. "I can't keep doing this, Lara," he told her, his voice frustrated and raised. "You practically run away anytime I touch you, and with you waitressing and doing those f\*\*\*\*g summer classes, I barely see you anymore."

"I need to tell y."

"I understand you want to work so you can pay for your share of the groceries and whatever else but why did you have to take those classes, Lara?" he asked, his light green eyes spearing her with their icy rage.

"You know why," Lara whispered. "I wanted to finish my degree as quickly as possible." The sooner she finished it, the sooner she could start her career and start earning an actual salary. She had no car, no savings, nothing but the small amount she made from waitressing that only just covered her bus fare, some groceries, and the textbooks she needed for college.

"And did you stop to think that maybe I just wanted to have more time with you over the summer?" he asked her. "That maybe I wanted to see my mate for more than two or three hours at night?"

No, Lara thought. She hadn't thought about that because she was okay with not spending so much time with him. Because she was selfish and self-absorbed and the worst mate anyone could ask for. "No," she admitted truthfully, her eyes stinging with unshed tears.

"F\*\*k, Lara! I'm so goddamned tired of this," he told her, his hands running through and pulling at his hair. "Do you know how long it's been since I've had s\*x?" he asked in frustration, and Lara couldn't stop the tears from falling anymore.

"Around two years," she replied numbly, knowing he'd been sleeping around until he'd met her. At least he'd been honest about it but it hadn't made it hurt any less to know that she'd been patiently waiting for her mate while he'd been having s\*x with random women. She'd been willing to wait and he hadn't been— hell, he still wasn't.

"Two f\*\*\*\*g years," he spat in agreement.

"I'm sorry I brought an end to you f\*\*\*\*g whoever you wanted whenever you wanted to. I'm sorry I'm not willing to spread my legs for you as easily as all those other women were." Lara murmured, her voice cold and devoid of emotion. She hated how bitter she sounded, how her words degraded the women who Jackson had slept with when her anger was directed at him and not them. The urge to scratch at her skin rose up but, remembering her promise to Greg, Lara pushed it down and ignored it.

"s\*\*t, that's not what I meant," Jackson muttered with a grimace before running a hand over his face.

"Are you upset that I won't do the bonding ceremony because you know we'll have s\*x after it? Is that why you keep pushing me? Is that all it's about to you?" Lara asked, her anger rising with each question.

"No, baby. You know it's not like that," he insisted, but the way he'd hesitated before answering told Lara that he wasn't being completely honest.

"F\*\*k you, Jackson," she spat, turning to leave the kitchen.

He'd closed the kitchen door behind him and when Lara reached for the handle, a hand wrapped around her arm and stopped her. Jackson pulled her arm so that she was forced to turn around and face him.

"Don't walk away from me," he seethed.

His words sparked a fire in Lara's chest, and the words she'd been struggling to say for over a year, suddenly tumbled from her mouth. "You were right, Jackson," she told him sadly. "I should have told you a long time ago but when you touch me, I don't feel anything anymore. I don't want to sleep with you and I might never want to sleep with you." Pure rage ickedered in Jackson's eyes and though she backed up against the door in fear, Lara knew she had to tell him that she'd kissed somebody else. She had to own up to it. "I-

The word got caught in Lara's throat as Jackson lifted his fist. She was frozen. She couldn't move or scream or do anything but watch as his knuckles flew toward her face. At the last second, Lara closed her eyes and inched in preparation for the pain she knew was about to come... only it never did. A loud c\*\*\*k sounded next to her, accompanied by the pounding of her heartbeat in her ears. Lara barely registered turned her head to the side and opened her eyes to see a fist-sized hole in the drywall. It was only inches away from her face.

She could see Jackson's hand reaching out to her out of the corner of her eye and Lara instinctively inched away from it.

"Baby, please. I'm so sorry," Jackson whispered, sounding desperate, and when Lara slowly turned her head to look at him, she could see the guilt shining in his eyes. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just got so angry," he explained, slowly lifting his hands and resting them gently on her cheeks. "Please forgive me, Lara," he begged, wiping away her tears that just wouldn't stop gliding down her cheeks.

Her hands were shaking and her legs felt seconds away from giving out. She wanted to run or fight or scream but she couldn't do any of it.

"I love you so much, baby," Jackson whispered. "Let's just forget about tonight and about what we both said. I know you didn't mean it and you know I'd never hurt you. Please, Lara, let's just forget about all of it."

As if it would be easy for him to forget what she'd said about not feeling anything when he touched her. As if it would be easy for her to forget the way he'd nearly hit her. Lara had been so sure that he had been aiming for her face. She'd seen the animalistic rage in his eyes, had seen the hateful twist of his lips. Even if he'd backed out at the last second, he'd wanted to hurt her. She knew he had.

"Okay, baby?" he asked, his green eyes searching hers for confirmation.

Tears still falling from her eyes, Lara nodded her head because she was too terrified to do anything but agree with him.

Jackson let her leave the room after that, and while he ordered the Chinese food and cleaned up the mess she'd made in the kitchen, Lara sat on the couch and simply stared down at her pile of papers on the coffee table. After the food arrived, Jackson sat down next to her but didn't try to touch her or talk to her as he turned on the tv. Instead of putting on something he liked, Jackson put on the next episode of Carnival Row, the fantasy tv show that Lara had started watching a few nights back. Lara barely registered what was happening on the screen as she picked at her food, taking only a few bites before giving up on it completely and letting it grow cold in her lap.

"I'm gonna stay up for a bit and get some studying in," Lara murmured after two episodes had come and gone and Jackson had taken their leftovers through to the kitchen.

"Okay," Jackson agreed, hesitating for a few moments before going through to the bedroom.

Lara didn't even try to solve the problem she'd been working on earlier that afternoon. She just sat there and waited for over an hour before she was sure that Jackson had fallen asleep and couldn't hurt her. Only then did she go through to the bedroom, feeling only marginally safer knowing that her mate was sleeping as she changed into pajamas and got under the covers, the smell of coffee surrounding and choking her as she closed her eyes.