

Lita's Love for the Alpha

Dreaming of a Date...

The sound of waves crashing into the shore filled the night.

Lita always loved the nighttime view from the beach house as a kid, but they hadn't been back in years. Her parents hardly had time to spare her a conversation that wasn't centered on Brian anymore, let alone take her on a weekend getaway. It all worked out in the end, because now this was the only place Lita and her brother could come when he was in town. God, she missed James like air in her lungs. That goofy face, those ridiculous two in the morning rambling conversations. Eating junk while bingeing every rocky movie.

Something warm bloomed in Lita's chest, fighting off the chilly night breeze. Their own parents wouldn't let James set foot in the house after they excommunicated him. A nasty symptom of abandoning the life they'd dreamed up for him. Lita had laughed the first time he'd called to say he bought a gym. Or rather, that he'd bought a derelict building he wanted to make *into* a gym. But he hadn't laughed back. He'd only given her his famous line, *you think you have forever, Lita, but you don't. Do what makes you happy and burn everything else*.

Their parents being who they were, it hadn't surprised Lita that his room was packed up almost overnight afterward. It hadn't surprised her that his photos were scrubbed from the walls and they had tossed his competition plaques. It hadn't surprised her they were all hell-bent on never saying his name. But it still hurt and made her feel more alone than she ever had before.

Lita wasn't close to her parents, outside of blood, they wouldn't have been a family at all. But she loved James, felt bonded to him in her core. And the distance weakened her. Made her weak enough for Brian to swoop in.

She clutched her side gently, knowing she would never tell James that or risk being another person trying to keep him from his dreams. Her brother would worry. He'd give up his Cali life for her in a heartbeat, Lita knew. So, she could never bring herself to ask. She couldn't explain that tether tying him to her or how badly it ached when he moved away, but she managed.

Lita leaned against the balcony railing in nothing but a bikini top, knit sweater and a pair of ratty shorts. God, what she wouldn't have given to rewind the last half hour.

She could hear the welcome-home party leaking out from the cracked balcony door, but she just needed a minute to herself before she could go back and face everyone. She only prayed no one had told James yet. One of her brother's high school buddies had been trying to throw her over his shoulder into the pool when her sweater had lifted away. It revealed an ugly bruise over her ribs, and everyone had seen it. To their credit, they all acted as if they hadn't. But the hot flush of embarrassment still stung.

She blew her tense air out into the breeze, lost in the quiet moment where she could almost forget what her life had become. Balmy night air swirled past her as she heard the balcony door slide open.

"No lies, what happened to your side, Lita?"

James. Of course, someone had already told her brother what they'd seen. It was a simple question, but it held all the undertones of a threat. He didn't want to know what happened. He wanted to know who did it.

"Would you believe me if I said it was an accident?"

"Would you believe me if I said I already know who it was, and I just need to hear you say it and put the nail in his coffin?" His throat sounded strained, as if he were losing control of his notoriously terrible temper. How terribly stereotypical. Her brother was a professional fighter with a bad temper. In the ring, that temper was a strength. In the real world, it was scary and unsettling. "Dammit, just say it, Lita!" James barked, startling her enough that she dropped her party cup. She watched it splash into the sand below, feeling her heart go with it.

"If you already know, why the hell do you need to hear me say it?" She still hadn't turned away from the sea. Too weak to face his opinion of her, her eyes already growing misty. This was a derailing train she couldn't stop.

"You're absolutely fucking right. I'm going to make him wish he was never fucking born."

Lita heard the door close before she could try to stop him. She raced through the party, stumbling through their drunk friends. A shoulder here, a knee there. Somebody's cup went tumbling to the ground. Lita didn't care. She couldn't hear anything over the desperate thump of her heart. She snatched her jean jacket from a chair and bolted out into the driveway. James was already shoving the key in the ignition before she slid into the passenger seat.

"You can't do this! Please don't do this..."

"Like hell I can't! He beats my fucking sister?! No way, I don't kick his ass. No way I don't break those hands." The engine startled Lita as he revved it and threw the car in reverse. She scrambled more fully into her seat and shut the door.

"It's not... I don't..."

"WHY didn't you tell me? Why? All the times we talked on the phone, and you never said a thing." James snapped, nearly screaming. "Of course, I knew the type of family he comes from," James sneered, his distaste clear, "But you don't care about shit like that Lita. You care about car rides and baby animals at the state fair, and helping kids learn to swim whenever we stayed at the beach house. My baby sister doesn't get roped into *political* matches. Why Brian?!"

Lita had never heard him so angry at her. Guilt and shame slithered through her, numbing anything she might have said. She hadn't known at first, had no idea that her parents were in talks with his. That they were planning to use money and influence in their favor. She still didn't know to what end, but it had become increasingly clear that Brian saw her as an object.

James ignored her silence, digging deeper, "You made it seem like you two were fucking happy... And goddamn if I wasn't happy as hell, you had somebody, you know? Even if it was that fucking wannabe. That fucking Alpha. As if he could lead his own pack. No one would fucking follow him. And he'd die in a challenge with Asher every day of the week..." James trailed off, not making a lick of sense to Lita. She couldn't stand to see him to so upset, so disappointed in her decisions. It had been her decision, right? She'd chosen this for herself, and there wasn't anyone else to blame.

"I was on the other side of the country, worried about my baby sis and you told me, *told me* you were happier than you ever been. You sold me a line about how you thought you might marry that guy. An eighteen-year-old thinking about getting married should have been a big ass red flag for me. I gotta own that one. It's on me not to have asked more questions, but why lie to me, Lita?"

"Just stop the fucking car, James! Please. Don't drive like this." She couldn't answer him. She couldn't think of what to say that wouldn't send his opinion of her even further into the gutter.

"You don't trust me or some shit? You don't think I have your back?" James slammed his hands down on the smooth wheel, squealing to a stop at the red light. "You're my family. My only blood family, sis. Fuck those other two. To hell with that den of vipers they call friends and colleagues. To hell with Asher and his minions." James shook his head, clogging up Lita's throat with raw emotion. She had no idea who Asher was or why her brother kept bringing him up, but she couldn't ignore his disappointment in her. "You're* my only blood. And you... he *hurt* you. And you let him?"

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"It's not like that!" Lita snapped, fury climbing up her throat. "I don't *let* him do shit. He does it and I'm not strong enough to do anything about it, James! You think that makes me feel good? That my brother is looking at me like I'm scum?! He's not always—" Lita exhaled, tears springing into her eyes—"He used to be sweet, James. He took me on those long Sunday car rides. He helped me feed the baby fair animals. He was nice and a great listener. He was... And *how* could I tell you?! How could I, knowing you'd react like this? Knowing you'd look at me like that! I'm good. I'm okay."

"Lita," James hissed, his voice taking on a roughness she'd never heard before. "Look at me." She did, letting the tears fall because she was beyond pretending not to hurt.

He swallowed, cutting his eyes back and forth from the road. "I'm not disappointed in you. At all, jellybean. You hear me?" Lita felt the force of his childhood nickname for her like a physical blow. More tears streamed down her face.

"I'm disappointed in those manipulative fucks we share blood with. And the piece of shit who has been putting his hands on you! I would never—" James shook his head as if realizing he'd already blamed her once. "I'm sorry for saying you let him. That was the anger talking, the confusion. But I know it's not your fault. You're just a kid and the adults in your life are using you to get what they want."

"I didn't know about the deals they were making at first," Lita admitted, hanging her head. "I thought he liked me for me. I didn't think he liked me for my family name or our money."

"Lita, goddammit," James snapped his head. "You have no idea. That's just the tip of the iceberg. The moves they're trying to make with Brian and his idiot of a father, go so much deeper than money and influence." James' eyes bunched, his face darkening, "I don't know what the fuck kind of shit mom is up to, but I'm getting you out of it. Tonight, this shit with Brian ends."

Lita woke with James' name on her tongue, sweat plastering the thin tank to her skin. She swiped the hot tears, ignoring the damp spots on her pillows as she got up. On autopilot, she forced her body into the bathroom, grabbing her phone to check the time. She choked at the numbers staring back at her. How had she slept until five in the evening?

Sure, she'd spent so much of the night worrying and working that she didn't even set her alarm. But sleeping for nearly fifteen hours wasn't normal. Sighing, she accepted she would miss her classes and rubbed her eyes. She flipped on the shower and scrolled through her socials.

Lita couldn't help but smile at the stupid videos Stace sent her of fitness models. She ignored them and checked the rest of her messages. Mark had sent her a video of some sets he filmed himself doing. Lita rolled her eyes, pretending like she didn't watch it twice more just to see if she'd missed any muscles. Then she logged off the app.

Some part of her couldn't interact with the gym today. Not after the insanity she still couldn't make sense of. It was best to take a break from the gym and get through this mess with Brian unscathed. That would be hard enough by itself without thinking about whether she hallucinated wolves.

A couple of hours later, Lita smoothed down the satin dress over her new stomach. It fell at mid-thigh with the short sleeves and high neckline offsetting her new breasts and hiding her scars. Would Brian want her sexy? Would he want her dressed down? It was always a gamble, and it rarely paid off anymore. Whatever she chose would likely be the wrong answer.

At least her stomach had begun to fill out instead of curving in toward her ribs. Thinness was perfect until it started looking sickly. Apparently, that was the silent line she'd crossed that drove her mother to push for a gym.

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She nervously scratched at the backs of her earlobes. She didn't even want to go, but that didn't mean she wanted to make Brian angry. He was insufferable now, but angry? He was an unbearable brute.

She regretted missing her Thursday classes, economics and investments. They were notoriously boring, but useful if she wanted to figure out the rights she had over her portion of the inheritance. It was yet another layer of her plan to get away from Brian and her parents. But again, it all hinged on her actual ability to leave. She needed to know how much she could move from that account at once.

She eyed her pill bottle from the mirror, knowing she hadn't had a single one all day. It was making her more emotional than usual, and she'd nearly bit the head off her barista for getting her coffee order wrong an hour ago. And the girl who nearly hit her SUV by running the red light around the corner from the apartment? She'd screamed so loud she thought the car windows would shatter. That kind of outburst couldn't happen anywhere near Brian. She'd shivered at the thought. Maybe she should just take one pill... *no*, she thought, she needed to detox it out of her system but she wouldn't have any more hallucinations tomorrow. She huffed and returned to the issue at hand: not pissing Brian off. She grabbed her phone and shot him a text.

Should I go dressy or casual?

He replied almost immediately, *you know what I like... heading over now.*

Lita felt like throwing up. Brian always did this. It was like a game to him. He would be pissed if she didn't get it right, but he wouldn't tell her what he wanted. She ran her fingers through her dark waves and checked her makeup.

At the sound of her door opening, she grabbed some heels and a jacket, rounding the corner with her stomach anxiously sitting on her knees. Brian crossed her living room like it was his, eating up the distance between them in a few long strides.

"You look perfect baby," he whispered in her ear, pecking the side of her mouth tenderly, "I was thinking of dinner first, then the movie, and look at you, practically reading my mind like the dove that you are." He stroked her neck, inhaling her. He stiffened and gripped the back of her dress. Then, as if it hadn't happened, he pulled away and flicked her nose with adoration. Lita couldn't help but smile a little at having gotten something right. It had been so long since he was sweet to her, she couldn't help but miss it. The weight she'd been holding felt lighter as she returned her breathing to normal. He even had the signature twinkle in his eyes when he looked at her. Damn, it was so hard not to fall back into the familiar rhythm.

Brian wore a fitted blue button up and dark pants. The top two buttons of his shirt were open, showing the pale, muscled skin beneath. It always amazed her how fit he looked, even when he never worked out. Brian had a naturally good body, strong and broad in all the right places. Though he wasn't as huge as the men in the gym. Lita's mind snapped to Cole for an instant before the fear of retaliation made her bury his face so deep it wouldn't reappear that night. Regardless of his lack of time in the gym, Brian was certainly strong, a strength she could painfully attest to. She stiffened at his touch on her lower back, but he pressed on, motioning her to the door.

"Thank you," she smiled, pulling away from his hand, "Ready to go?"

At the door, he ran a finger over her lips, pulled her back into his hold, and then leaned down to kiss her gently, "Now I'm ready." It was too gentle, Lita thought, her mind wondering what was wrong. But what could she say? That she knew he never kissed her like he cared, so something must be wrong.

She shook away the worry and followed him down to the garage, sliding dutifully into his car without a word about the cold leather seat.