

Lita's Love for the Alpha

Get Your Mind Right

Lita leaned her head against the window, watching the world pass her in a blur. Her mind was cluttered and she couldn't seem to settle the feeling in her chest. Nothing would ever be the same as it was before she knew werewolves were real. As miserable as life tied to Brian and her mother, Diane, had been, it was at least routine. Yes, they controlled every second of her life, but she knew how to navigate them and their world.

She understood their buttons and how to avoid them. She understood her place in the hierarchy of her life. She wasn't at the top, and she accepted that. And on the off chance she would forget, apparently they'd been using their Alpha tones to correct her. That was scary but also comfortable because it was predictable. Part of her hated that pain was more comfortable than anything else. She'd spent more time with it than any other emotion, which only added to her depression.

She paused that line of difficult thoughts for a moment. Lita didn't know why she'd assumed that only men could be Alphas, but there she was, faced with the obvious fact that her mother could have led her own pack. How'd she end up playing second fiddle to Lita's father, Rafi, a Beta? Had she rejected her destined mate in favor of Lita's father? Had Rafi done the same?

Any time she'd ever seen them hosting a party or entertaining guests, they were in prototypical gender roles. Her mother didn't have a say in anything. The only place she had any power was within her own company and with Lita. At home, she was just Rafi's wife and the mother of his children. That brought up more questions than answers, and she made a mental note to ask someone more about how wolf genealogy worked.

At almost the worst time imaginable, in the silence of a compact car, Lita's stomach let out a monstrous growl. Brody didn't even pretend to hide his amusement like a gentleman would. And the sound surprised Lita. First breakfast this morning and now she was hungry again? After months with no appetite, she couldn't figure it out. She'd lost nearly half her body weight since James left for the west coast and yet now she found herself hungry all the time.

"Damn, that's a grown man's stomach right there. Strange for such a small girl," he laughed, "Don't worry, dinner will be on the table by the time we get back home."

Home. It was such a simple thing to say. Something he probably said all the time without ever really thinking twice. But for Lita, she hadn't been anywhere that truly felt like home since James left. And the day he died, her only home died with him. But it was nice to hear someone talk about home and include her in it. It felt like a spark of lightning in her darkness. Maybe Stace had been right, this sense of belonging, of being important, was what she'd secretly been craving all along.

"Oh but, um listen, I should warn you," Brody looked out of the windshield, completely avoiding Lita's stare, "Sometimes Erica comes by for dinner. I mean I don't know if she'll be there tonight but... you know... she doesn't warn anyone first, just shows up even when she and Alpha are on another of their infamous breaks..."

"Okay... should I know her? I don't think I've met an Erica... Is she another pack member?" Lita straightened up in her seat, flipping her new bank card absently in her hands. Why did she feel fidgety all over again? She was just looking for something to occupy her during the drive, she reasoned to herself.

"Shit, Alpha didn't mention her to you when he said he was rejecting you?" Lita gave him a wide-eyed stare and Brody scratched his neck. "Look, I really shouldn't have said anything. I thought he would have told you already so you wouldn't be upset. But, I guess either way, the wolf's out of the bag now. She's from his birth pack, moved out here a few years ago. Anyway, she and Alpha... uh... well before he knew about you..."

There it was. There was the unconscious reason for her nerves. She knew the second she heard the woman's name that it wasn't going to be good news. Lita felt her heart drop. Why the hell did she even care what he did? Her stomach twisted, robbing her of every hunger pain. She suddenly didn't want dinner at all.

They weren't married. Hell, they weren't even dating. He didn't want her as a mate, or whatever either. She shouldn't have cared at all, but she did. *It's just an irrational biological response,* she told herself. Brody was still snapping his eyes back and forth from the road to her. Old fears climbed up her spine and she reacted.

"Keep your eyes on the fucking road, Brody!" He jumped, hands white-knuckling the wheel. "Sorry. It's just—nevermind. Just say it, I'm not fragile," Lita huffed, pretending to be stronger than she was, knowing in reality she was actually as fragile as glass, barely holding together after being shattered. "They were fuck buddies or something? Friends with benefits?"

"Nah, they're the whole shebang, you know? Well, let me not say that, they've been on and off for a long time. She's a pain in the ass and between you and me, I don't like her. But they had been *on* for like a month straight this last time. I think they split like a week ago so the odds are good that she'll invite herself over."

Lita tensed, swallowing the bile. He had this whole situation when he kissed her? When he groped her and acted like he couldn't stop himself? She wanted to scream. Brian was her ex. And a terrible person. She didn't feel any guilt about being with someone else. Cole couldn't say the same thing, could he?

Lita snorted to herself. *This* was why he was going to reject her. Hadn't he said as much? That mates could come in a ruin whatever relationship was already there? God, she felt stupid.

"Look, I really shouldn't have said anything," Brody whispered, thankfully keeping his eyes on the road so he couldn't see hers misting with unshed tears. It was stupid to feel so rejected. So hurt. Shouldn't she have been numb to emotional pain by now?

"They have history or whatever. And Erica never lets him go very long without reminding him that she's his future. I don't know what they are now that you're here, since he still hasn't technically let you go. But last I heard, making her his Luna was always the plan."

Lita's stomach calmed, her eyes drying. She didn't need to ask what a Luna was, putting enough context clues together to know it was probably the wolf equivalent of a wife. Again, why did she care? Why did she feel so disappointed? Was it because she didn't want to have to leave the pack? God, would he make her leave after he rejected her? Would she want to leave?

He was a grown man and free to live his life as he wanted. He didn't owe her anything. But somehow, since the moment she'd understood what mates were, Lita couldn't get the thought of him being her perfect piece out of her head. What did that mean? Was it purely physical? That they could have a type of pleasure she wouldn't get from anyone else? Was it emotional? Like somehow he would just understand her in a way she didn't know she needed? She just couldn't stop trying to understand.

"Shit, listen, YOU DID NOT HEAR THIS FROM ME, OKAY?!" Brody shouted, "And anyway, you two are mates, so telling you is just the right thing to do. We have already blindsided you enough today, I didn't want that to make you feel worse, you know? I know what that's like."

"How do you know I'm feeling bad?"

"C'mon, Lita. It's written all over your face. Today was hard for us all, but I'm sure it hit you even worse. I don't know what women do to get their mind together, but you should probably do that. Just in case?"

"Not that I'm very optimistic that it will help," Lita mumbled under her breath, well aware that Brody's wolf ears would still pick up on it. He shook his head, biting his lower lip to hold in whatever he was about to say.

Twenty minutes later they were entering the industrial building behind the gym. Lita hadn't paid much attention to it on the way out, but now she could see it was taller than the gym, likely made up of three floors and a basement. It was all cement blocks and very little curb appeal, but for this group, external appearances didn't seem to be the most important thing. Inside, the furniture was nice and even though it was a hodge-podge of aesthetics, somehow it all worked.

She could see the way they felt about their less-than-perfect gym in the way they cared for the equipment. In the way they each took turns cleaning and mopping between workouts. This was their home and they loved it.

Brody called the structure a packhouse and Lita followed him in, trying not to let her emotions get the best of her.

One look at Stace and Jaz's apologetic faces as Brody led her to the dining area, told Lita exactly what she was in for. Setting her spine, Lita lowered herself into one of the empty seats next to them. Brody slid into the last seat on her right and Andres sat on her left, in between her and Jaz. It was a large farmhouse table with matching benches and a weathered black exterior and worn in slopes at each seat. The head of the table was the only spot for a chair. She glanced at the spread of spaghetti, salad and garlic bread, thinking it was possibly the most welcoming dinner she'd ever seen.

At her parents house, personal chefs made everything and they were served in courses. She'd never experienced family-style dinner Lita had hardly taken a breath before Cole was sitting at the head of the table, clearing his throat as if he was about to say something to her.

"Chicken spaghetti again, Mark, how many times can one man make the same d—oh, a new human?"

A perky, out of place woman Lita had never seen before pulled herself into a seat beside Cole at the dining room table. The dull buzz of chatter among the others kept Lita from feeling completely ill, but it still stung to see someone so perfect and put together. She made Lita look like a bruised fruit.

"You're welcome to cook next time, *Erica,*" Mark snapped back, acting completely out of character. He'd only ever been charming, happy, and flirty. Lita had never seen him make that face before, but she couldn't ignore what Brody said earlier. Did the pack not like Erica?

"But we both know you can't cook for shit. Alphas got a lifetime of ready made takeout menus in his future. *Yay,* for him."

"Mark," Cole said quietly, a word of caution but not a reprimand.

Erica ignored the snub, turning her eyes on Lita instead. Lita had been around enough fake women in her life to recognize one at first sight. And if she hadn't been sure, Erica's next words confirmed it.

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"You've always been so charitable, Cole baby! I love that about you. Now Jaz has a friend." She leaned in to kiss him, but at the last second Cole turned so she grazed his cheek. The conversations around the table completely stopped. Stace's mouth hung open and even Brody seemed to be about to say something before Lita kicked him under the table.

Cole hadn't had a chance to explain anything to Lita so she was going to let this play out. She wanted to see how far Erica would passively aggressively push. Cole gave Erica a tight smile that didn't reach his eyes. He cast an apologetic glance at Lita but she didn't return it, consumed with Brody who was bringing dishes of food to her.

Lita tried to ignore the way Erica's words made her feel. Like she was less than someone else. A charity case. A lowly person who was relying on others for her basic needs. And she'd basically insinuated the same for Jaz. Was it because they were human or because Erica saw them as competition?

What bothered Lita the most was that she felt like it was true. Whether or not she was technically rich, she relied on the people at the table for her sanity at the moment. And that was very vulnerable thing to feel, especially when someone else shined a light on it. The buzz of conversation at the table eventually picked back up, covering up a little of the open wound over Lita's heart.

Pushing the food on her plate around, Lita tried to eat but she had a hard time. Her stomach rebelled with each of Erica's light touches on Cole's arm. So she simply moved the spaghetti and salad around on her plate and drank water. Sandwiched between Andres on the left and Brody on the right, Lita couldn't really get comfortable. Their shoulders both grazed her as they ate. Brody looked over at her, "I know you're hungry, Lita. Don't let it ruin your appetite."

She silently thanked him for not mentioning exactly what upset her because, even though he whispered it, they were at a table full of wolves. Lita gave him a slight nod, forcing a tiny bite of broccoli into her mouth. She looked up at Brody, as if to say *see? I'm eating...* but ended up catching Cole's eyes instead. They studied her closely until she looked away.

Why was it making her feel so awful? Why did she want to throw up and run away all at the same time? Lita's heart took up residence in her throat. Should she even care? She'd been trying to keep herself from such a complication all this time and now, she was jealous? How did that make sense?

Really, it was his fault, she decided. He'd kissed her in the apartment. That had started this whole fucking problem in her heart in the first place. Then she'd kissed him in the hallway. And though she may have been at least partially responsible for things, the initiation had been his. What kind of person kisses a woman when he knows he has a girlfriend or whatever the hell Cole and Erica were to each other? Lita felt even sicker to her stomach.

She couldn't help but wonder how disappointed he must have felt to realize she was his mate. Not only was she human while Erica was a wolf, but her appearance and style were so—Lita didn't finish her thought, feeling her emotions tunnel down into depression again.

Stace cleared her throat and Jaz tried to catch Lita's eye by leaning her head in front of Andres. Lita didn't have the nerve to look, feeling like she was under a microscope. She knew the women were trying to talk to her but what was she supposed to say?

Despite Brody's best advice, she had not gotten her head together at all, and she was paying for it now. She wanted to glance over, but she didn't think she could hold it together if she looked up from her plate. Instead, she forced another bite of lettuce into her mouth.

"So Lita," Erica chimed from across the table, "What brings you to Cole's pack? Are you another bunny?"