

Lita's Love for the Alpha

What the hell, Cole?

Lita cracked her sore, and puffy eyes open. She felt as if she'd been steam rolled. Soundlessly staring at the familiar wood pattern of her ceiling beams, Lita regained consciousness sprawled onto her living room floor, surrounded by dried blood and broken furniture. And for the briefest moment, she didn't know how she got there.

The memories returned in a rush. For a blissful moment of awareness, she didn't move or breathe, worried that either of those things would kick-start the pain that was likely waiting in the wings.

Was Brian still in her apartment? As she moved her arms, Lita could hear the crinkle of caked blood on her dress. Her body immediately rebelled, shooting pain from her shoulders to her ribs. The silent apartment wasn't reassuring, because Brian could still be hidden somewhere out of sight. Or he could be in the hallway outside her door, or on his way back from somewhere to finish the job. So, she kept her pain quiet, carefully rolling herself up onto her butt. Based on the radiating agony she felt with every breath, Lita was sure at least one or two bones were bruised, but he could have easily done worse—had done worse before.

Looking down, she took the ruined dress as a good sign that at he hadn't taken anything she didn't want to give. And while she felt every ache elsewhere, that area between her legs felt untouched.

She was not always so lucky, vividly remembering a time when she woke up beside him in bed, sheets covered in things she would never unsee. He'd been so gentle with her that day, apologizing profusely as he washed and dressed her. How she ever thought that was love, Lita wasn't sure. For a while, though, her mother and Brian had convinced her that was how people showed their emotions. It's not like she'd learned a better example from her parents, two people who couldn't have cared less about each other if they tried.

She carefully pushed up from the ground, trying not to move too fast in case any of her bones were broken. It took an incredibly long time to get to her feet, moments that could have been hours between the deep breaths.

Lita was used to the calm that accompanied these moments. The utter silence of her mind. What was left to think about? What was there left to feel? She'd experienced it all before. Ten times over. These moments were always quiet and reactionary, her brain operating like a kind of triage. Check wounds. Get cleaned up. Drink whatever she had. Dress any wounds. Pass out for the rest of the day.

If she approached it like a triage checklist, Lita found it easier. Canting her head to the side, Lita listened for any errant sounds and heard nothing. Thankfully, Brian must have left sometime while she was unconscious. She moved her limbs and tested out her feet. When everything seemed to be in working order, Lita immediately stumbled to the apartment door so she could draw the chain. That way, she could at least get a fair warning before he burst back in.

When she turned back around, her feet stopped dead. She looked at the body shaped outline of blood and mess on the floor and felt her heart fall. When was enough going to be enough? When the blood became crime scene chalk? When she was finally six feet in the ground? Lita shook so violently, her teeth rattled. No, she was getting out, if it was the last thing she did. Her being in this situation was the reason James was dead and the least she could do to honor him was *try* to get out. She'd given up on honoring herself a long time ago.

Lita hobbled into the kitchen, grabbing a bottle of whatever her fingers touched first out of the fridge, and then she limping to her bedroom mirror. She unscrewed the top of the bottle, gulping a few mouthfuls down. Grunting, Lita embraced the vodka's burn. It covered her other pains for a moment, distracting her from the wreckage of her body. She ticked off every wound. A shiner under her eye, a bruised collarbone, a few scrapes over her face. She pulled the dress off, wincing at the ache of her muscles. Bruised ribs, maybe a few more serious issues in her elbow and femur, a welt on her hip the size of a shoe. She turned to her back, examining a few more curved welts from what appeared to be a belt. They crisscrossed over her already scarred skin, making it puffier than usual. As much as she knew it hurt, all she felt inside was numbness. That deadly silence that swallowed her mind. It was that quiet echo in her chest that told her she'd become entirely too used to this series of events.

She at least needed to clean the cuts and welts, taking another few swigs from the bottle to work up the courage to shower. Taking one last look at herself in the mirror, Lita paused, inspecting herself a little more. She looked awful, there was no arguing that. But the wounds and bruises weren't looking how they should have looked. Running her mind back over what happened, Lita knew for a fact Brian hadn't taken it easy on her. She should have been... worse.

Her body shuddered. Considering the blood across her living room floor and the severity of how many wounds she had, Lita was sure they shouldn't have looked like this.

For instance, her shiner was yellowish brown, a sign that it was in the later stages of healing. Her welts were all clotted and marbled in purples and blues. They weren't red and bleeding. They weren't open and meaty like hours-old wounds should have been. The scrapes on her face and arms weren't discolored at all, only thin brown scabs as proof they even existed. Even her aching body felt strange. Too easy to move. Too stable. She should have been stiff and, at the very least, crying involuntary tears from the pain. That's how it had always been before, so what had changed?

She cleared her throat, taking another big swallow to the head as she turned for the bathroom. Maybe the gym was making her body healthier? Stronger? Lita stood in the back of the hot shower, trying to work up the nerve to put water on her skin. Scabs or not, Lita knew the hot water would burn. Steam rolled around her, puckering her skin. Lita thought she heard a soft knock somewhere, but she dismissed it, focusing on making herself take that first step. She gulped at the alcohol once more and set the bottle on the shower shelf, taking a deep breath. She just needed to stop stalling. The water hit her legs first, scalding the scrapes on her knees. Was someone calling her name? Lita couldn't stop walking forward until the water was at her hips. Then her breasts. Her shoulders. Her face. Blowing several breaths in quick succession, Lita turned around to spray her wetted back. She whined and gasped as she with each new trickle. Her body seared from neck to waist. She couldn't keep the scream in as her whole back burst into flames.

That was when she heard the door burst open and heavy booted footsteps coming her way.

He'd come back to finish her. Lita trembled, her extremities turning cold under the hot water. For a moment, her heart stopped. She knew he was supposed to leave for a trip home this morning, because he couldn't stop talking about it at dinner. So, if the heavy steps weren't him, who was it? She panicked, knowing there was nothing in the shower or bathroom to use for self-defense. She cut off the water, snatching up her razor and back scrubber like they would help her. Lita took a quick step out onto the bathmat and wobbled out of the shower, ready to fight whoever it was in her birthday suit if necessary. Even as she knew she'd lose.

"Lita?!" a husky voice called from somewhere beyond her bathroom door. "Are you okay?" She couldn't readily place the person, her mind a jumble of things that made no sense. Before she could even think, someone was pushing open the bathroom door. She didn't wait to see the face, throwing the wooden scrubber straight into the first nose she could see. That sudden movement shot pain through every muscle in her arms, but she didn't mind. Unfortunately, the body didn't even flinch, weathering the sudden blow with ease. As she pulled back arm, hissing as she did, Lita was shocked to see Cole's dark eyes staring back at her.

"Shit, ow—sorry—wait, Cole?" Lita's brain froze. It would not process how ridiculous it was to see him standing in her bathroom doorway. His hair was wild and unkempt, looking as if he hadn't slept at all last night. Those intense eyes were wild and red-rimmed, as if he'd been rubbing them nonstop. She couldn't comprehend anything. How he knew where she lived or why he felt he needed to break into her apartment. Why was he here?

"Is my apartment door in one piece?" Lita asked, more confused and shocked than anything else.

"What the fuck happened to you?" he snapped, cutting her off with a look that seared the flesh from her body. His furious expression only darkened further, turning pale as if he'd just been punched in the gut. His gaze trailed from her face to her neck, her arms to her hips. It was like he didn't even notice she was naked, staring solely at where she was injured. He grabbed her arms, his eyes twitching with harsh emotion. She cried out at the contact. "That hurts!" Lita hissed, pulling away.

"Fuck, sorry—" Cole shook his head and released. "Who did this to you?"

He swallowed loudly, looking away. "I don't mean to scare you... I'll just..." The man was at war with something. Himself or her, Lita wasn't entirely sure as she curled her arms over herself, ignoring how the action tugged at her wounds. "I wait out there." He motioned to the bedroom. Cole looked her over one more time before leaving, and she didn't know what to do about it.

Alone in the bathroom once more, Lita started panicking. Cole had seen her body. Her normal pattern was to stay locked in her apartment for a few days until her body healed enough to hide.

That homecoming party with her brother had been an exception to the rule, and she paid dearly for it. How could she salvage this? It wasn't as if Lita wanted to protect Brian, but she didn't want anyone else's blood on her hands. She didn't want her plans disrupted before they could fully take root, either. She grabbed a towel to hide more of the injuries. There was no longer a hint in protecting her modesty. Lita rushed back into her bedroom. Already, she could feel the warmth of the liquor covering her pain and she clung to that false peace, hoping it would be enough to weather whatever was about to happen.

Cole sat on the edge of her bed; his expression so full of rage it scared her more than Brian, which was shocking. He looked prepared to kill someone, and she hoped it wasn't her.

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"Why the hell are you here?" Lita asked, her voice wobbling a little. managing Again, she wondered why she could challenge the men from the gym but could never challenge Brian? Sure, Cole didn't seem fond of her and yea, he was a fighter, and more than capable of hurting her if he wanted to. But Lita always felt safe with him, even when she didn't know why.

She glanced through her bedroom doorway to see her apartment door hanging off the hinges and swallowed. Maybe she was just a shitty judge of character when it came to men. "What the hell did you do to my door?!"

She didn't give a shit about her security deposit, but she cared about her privacy. And having her neighbors look in to see blood and mess everywhere? God almighty, what would they think of her? She'd never be able to show her face again.

"Who did that to you?!" Cole said in a voice so dark she felt it down her spine. His quiet words filled the entire space between them, electrified the air with the promise of wrath. She was definitely a poor judge of violent tendencies. Pulling at his hair, Cole jumped up and paced, looking like he was barely in control of himself. The veins bulging around his muscled arms should have concerned her at least, especially after the night she'd had with Brian, but they didn't.

Again, Lita's stupid heart insisted she was completely safe with him, as if the last thing Cole would ever do was hurt her.

"It's not important—" she tried to say before he dismissed that response.

"Is this why you didn't come to the gym yesterday?" His face pinched as if he was in physical pain every time he looked at her. Lita hadn't realized anyone would want her to come back after she'd acted so crazy over imaginary wolves.

"No... not really... I was embarrassed," Lita grudgingly admitted, clearing her throat until it drew a groan. She cupped a hand around her neck at the same moment that Cole stepped forward. "I was embarrassed about how I acted. I mean, I've never had something like that happen before," Lita sighed, gingerly walking into her closet. "The, you know, hallucinations. I've got to figure out my medicine situation, I guess."

"How *you* acted?" he asked incredulously. It sounded like he'd taken a few steps closer to her closet. "I don't understand how you could blame yourself for *any* of that."

"It's nice of you to try to make me feel better, but I know it was weird to run away screaming about wolves that aren't real. Apparently, I'm overmedicated. It's never happened before, but it's not unheard of. And I didn't feel like having that conversation with strangers, but here we are..." She dropped the towel, opting for a loose tee and sweats with nothing underneath. The last thing she needed was a bra that aggravated her welts or underwear that dug into her bruises.

She rubbed her temples. How did they end up having a conversation about the wolf hallucination when he'd just burst into her apartment? This wasn't a normal reaction, was it? Surely, she should have been screaming or forcing him outside. Surely, she shouldn't have been calmly getting dressed in the closet as if it were a normal Friday. It must have been the shock, Lita told herself. Her body and mind couldn't handle what was happening, so she numbed it.

After having just endured with Brian, Lita wasn't entirely sure she was in the right frame of mind to be around others anyway.

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"You... hallucinated?" Cole asked himself quietly, "That's what you think? That you imagined the wolves?"

"Hmmm?" Lita called out, "I can't hear you too well from in here. Say it louder."

"What meds?" he asked instead, rubbing his jaw and then his neck.

"It's just something for my nerves. I have bad emotional triggers. Sometimes I can't... control myself." Grimacing at her description, Lita was sure she sounded demented. No one in their right mind would call her normal with an admission like that and zero context.

Lita pulled her hair up into a wet bun and looked into her closet mirror. She needed to cover up that black eye. "It's not really my nerves. More like my anger. The meds push all that shit down so I can breathe a little easier. But other emotions can trigger meltdowns too." She groaned again. Why couldn't she stop opening her mouth? "That was too much info, sorry."

Cole didn't need to know any of this. He just needed to fix her door and get out. As if to further that point, Lita yelled back, "You still haven't explained yourself, though. Why the hell are you standing in my apartment, unannounced, after breaking down my door to get in? You can't think that's normal."

"I came to check on you when you didn't come to the gym yesterday," he said, as if it was obvious. "After my wolf tried to mark you", Cole thought to himself. "And I was knocking, but you didn't answer and then I heard you screaming, so I broke down the door..." Cole clenched his eyes closed, shaking out his fists. It sounded insane, didn't it? Lita was going to think about it for all of two seconds and accuse him of stalking her. *Fuck*, he could hardly hold his wolf in, his natural protective instincts flaring. The scent of her blood. The sight of her beaten body. Cole inhaled slowly and exhaled the breath. How long could he go before he needed to run this off?

"So, you looked up my address and just... showed up?" Lita asked, sounding like she didn't believe him.

Cole couldn't deny that it was embarrassing when he'd said it out loud like that. The truth was that his good sense caught the scent of her blood from outside the door and there was nothing he could do. His instincts overrode every single bit of his good sense. And damn if his heart hadn't stopped when he burst through the door to see that dried pool in the middle of the room. His wolf had almost shoved free of this body, and it took years of careful control to stay human. But whatever the reason for the intrusion, he was ultimately happy he did it. Otherwise, he wouldn't have seen what happened to her. And if there was one thing he knew without a doubt, he was going to kill whoever did that to his mate. Whether they were going to complete the bond or reject it, had no bearing on this.

"I was worried, Lita. And apparently I was right to be worried."

He was a lot of things, Cole knew. For instance, he was an asshole most of the time with a difficult exterior and trust issues. He had baggage and a five-foot-nine girlfriend that wouldn't like this recent development one bit. And yea, he wasn't planning on getting involved in anything with Lita. He'd seen the bruises that first day. But Alex had been right about steering clear if he would do nothing about it. He wasn't perfect by a long shot. He still wouldn't be able to turn a blind eye to what he'd just seen. So, he was going to get Lita to open up to him. And then Cole was going to dismember whoever hurt her like that. His wolf, Midnight growled, the two of them finally on the same page about Lita.

Cole stepped around the threshold of her closet, watching as Lita started patting her shiner with powder. She gasped at his reflection in the mirror.

"Don't cover it up," he said calmly, his eyes blazing! turned back to a softer shape, "You need to tell me who did that, Lita. And I promise you, I'll give it back times ten."