

CHERRON RISER

His strength gave her passion. Her passion gave him strength

Veteran Dreams



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Cherron Riser

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Acknowledgements

This is for all the veterans out there who keep pushing each day to make their lives amazing. It is for the people in our lives who slip away and leave a mark.

This one is also for my grandfather, Joe Riser. I miss you every day and will love you always.

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Chapter 1

10 Years Ago

“Oh my God! I can’t believe she is actually going to do it!” The squealing of her excited friends from the other side of the bathroom door almost drowned out the sound of the sexy jazz music. It was the annual End of the Year Sleepover Bash, and the last one at that. In a few short days, they would be graduating, and life would change forever. High school was over, and Lita and her friends planned to take over the world.

However, that would come later. Tonight, she just had to open the door and do a sexy striptease for the boy she had been crushing on since the first day of ninth grade. Taking a deep breath, Lita flung open the door and strutted toward where Alex sat on the edge of the bed. He had the sort of cocksure grin which came with being a bit arrogant and a lady’s man, but his eyes widened seeing the way she moved toward him. Lita watched him watch her, seeing something flash behind those deep-green eyes. Something she wasn’t sure she had ever seen before.

His strong arms gripped the bed, and his long, slender legs were spread before him just enough for her to move between them. Lita wasn’t a small girl, having been given more curves than she knew what to do with. Her ample hips swayed to the music as her long, wet hair draped like a dark wavy curtain to one side of her face. She leaned down toward him, feeling a confidence she had never really felt before. After all, she had only ever done this for her girlfriends before, certainly not for the guy who haunted her dreams at night.

The sound of her friends disappeared as she moved in closer. Her hands cupped his face, and she felt his gaze burning a hole through her as he watched her body. Slowly, she ran her hand up, petting his short, dark hair, which was part of being both a member of the JROTC program and a future marine. She was going to miss him, but first, she was going to do everything she could to enjoy her time with him on this last night of insanity.

A wicked smile spread over her lips, and she pushed away, dancing and swaying to the music as clothing started to fall. Thank goodness for a mother who understood the importance of matching underclothing. She had put on one of her cutest sets for the occasion, red and lacy. Sure, Alex had seen her in a swimsuit plenty of times, and she wasn't going to strip naked, but a swimsuit and panties were two different things.

Just as the song hit its climax, Lita dropped the last article of clothing and moved in, straddling Alex's lap and moving her hips in a way she was sure no one in the room thought possible. For a moment, there was electricity, or maybe it was just the fantasy Lita had built in her head. Either way, the music calmed down, but her heart rate did not. It seemed like eternity passed as she sat there, nearly naked on Alex's lap, but then Kammy pulled her away and tossed a dress at her. "Come on, it's your turn."

Snapping back into reality, Lita laughed, acting like she hadn't just had a moment of complete desire and showing it all with no filter. "Okay, Regan, truth or dare."

"I dare Alex to stand up after that. Damn, girl! I knew you were sexy under all those frumpy clothes you wear but never like that." Regan laughed.

Lita got a glimpse of Alex's face, flush with, what, embarrassment? Yeah, probably that. "Give me a minute. They are right, Lita. You did that a lot better than I would have expected."

It was her turn to blush. At least her hair was covering most of her face. Her friends wooed at her, making the blush worse, and then the game returned to its usual madness. Her fifteen seconds in the spotlight were over, and it was something she was more than thankful for.

"Hey, Lita, can you give me a ride home? I have an early morning tomorrow, and while the party is fun, I can't really stay," Alex said when the party came to a lull. It usually happened sometimes after the circus peanut and Pixy Stix sugar crash, which usually left everyone a little out of energy. Most of their friends were scattered around the living room watching a movie and waiting for their next burst of energy.

"Yeah, sure. I can do that." Lita went to grab her purse and keys and then tapped on her mother's door to let her know where she was going. Alex said goodbye to everyone and gave hugs before the two of them went

out to her car. Even after the sun had set hours ago, the thick Alabama heat and humidity left the air sweltering.

It took a moment for the car's air conditioner to cool them off, but they were both used to it. Lita had the music turned up as she sang along to the song on the radio. She loved to sing and had been playing music and writing songs for years. Between that and her obsession with writing erotic short stories for her friends, Lita had made a name for herself as the one nerd who had some adventurous talent.

"So, I had a great time tonight. I never thought you guys would have such wild parties." Alex interrupted her singing with his words. He leaned back in his seat causing the moon to cast a shadow on his face, leaving Lita the faintest view of him. He seemed pensive.

"Nerds can be crazy too. We have always had fun. We just don't need all the extra drama that comes with beer and..." Lita began.

"Sex. Yeah, well, I think sometimes you think about that stuff. You were never as innocent as some of your friends. Just because you decided to keep yourself in a box doesn't mean you never peeked outside of it," Alex said, interrupting her.

"I never stayed in a box, besides, there is nothing wrong with wanting to make sure you make it out of high school." Alex had been right. Lita was on the edge. She never thought of herself as nerd but had also never fit in with the popular kids because of her aversion to trying anything considered "bad."

"You did stay in a box. Hell, you had one wild summer romance and then put yourself back in the box. There is a reason we call you Porn Queen. You write a lot about your pent-up frustration. I get your reasons for not wanting to party too hard, but you wanted more than just words on paper," Alex said. Yeah, she had lost her virginity to a guy she barely knew the previous summer, but that was the extent of her experience. Alex had always teased her, telling her she needed to get laid. Too bad he never offered to help her out. Just hearing him talk to her about it made her body tighten with the desire.

"Maybe I will get a little more wild in college. You know I leave for Berkeley at the end of the summer." Lita felt herself slowing down, not wanting the car ride to end. "Alex, I have to tell you something, and I...I want to do it before I lose my nerve."

He didn't answer. Instead, he just sat there watching her, which did nothing for her nerves. "I have had a crush on you for years. And I know you are leaving to join the military, and we are graduating, but I would have hated myself if I didn't say something."

There were several long seconds of silence between them as Lita pulled into the driveway of his house. Had she just messed everything up? Probably. That was how things usually went for her.

"You know, I have always known, but I didn't feel like it was right for us. You weren't ready to give up being so sweet, which is something I love about you, and I was always messing around and doing things you weren't ready for. Now, well, now, I am about to leave. Promise me you won't give up your writing or your music, Lita."

It wasn't what she wanted to hear. All this time, she had wanted to be with him, and he had known. What a great way to feel rejected. "Why would I give that up?"

"Because we aren't kids anymore, and that's what happens. Just, promise me, okay?" he answered, turning toward her.

Lita felt her heart pounding again. Why had he turned toward her when he was getting ready to get out of the car? "I promise."

"Okay, good. Now, before I go." Lita didn't have a chance to react. It had sounded like he was going to say something else. Instead, he moved in closer and pressed his lips to hers. She felt like she was in a dream as his hand moved up to cup her face. The kiss grew to something more passionate. It was like a scene from a romance movie. His fingers curled in her hair as their lips moved, and their tongues danced. If she had thought the end of her striptease had lasted forever, it had nothing on that kiss. He kissed her the way she had dreamed about so many times before. He kissed her the way she had written about. It wasn't the kiss of someone who didn't care about her. It was a kiss meant to leave a mark on her heart, and she was sure it would.

There was a stunning moment where the kiss ended, but the passion lingered before he pulled away. His finger caught in her hair, and she moved to help untangle them. "So, I guess this is goodbye, Lita. I hope to hear you on the radio one day."

He didn't give her a chance to respond—not that she could. Had he just kissed her? Like, really kissed her, and not just a friendly kiss goodbye? Lita sat there and watched until he was in the house, and then she raced

back to her home to tell her friends what had happened. But by the time she got there, she decided to keep it to herself. It had been a bittersweet moment, and somehow, she knew it was their final moment. There was no need to muddy it up with gossip. That kiss had been for her, and she would remember it always.

By the time she walked back inside, the sugar crash had revved back up into a sugar high, and Lita fell right back into the antics of her friends. She grabbed her guitar and started playing some songs while her friends skipped and danced around the front porch. The feel of Alex's lips lingered on hers, and she thought of it as she sang. Her songs were silly love songs, but they were hers, and in that moment, she felt them in a way she never had before.

Chapter 2

Everything was packed up and loaded into the car. Nervousness was sitting at the pit of her stomach, but she wasn't about to back down. Berkeley had been her dream her entire life. The California coast was calling her name, and Lita couldn't wait.

"Just two more days, and you'll be heading out. Now, you double-check that you have everything. It isn't like you can just come by to pick up whatever you leave behind. California is a pretty long way away," her mother said, walking toward the door. "I need to go check in with your grandparents. Granddaddy had his doctor appointment today."

"Okay, but I'm sure I have everything. The room is practically empty." Lita laughed.

Lita's grandfather had been fighting cancer for a couple of years, and things were getting worse every day. The week before, he had another stroke, which had taken more than half of his ability to move. Things were not looking good. Everyone put their worries and fears on hold to be there for her graduation. However, even Lita had spent a lot of the day focused on her worry over the older man rather than the festivities of the grand event.

The summer had been difficult waiting to see what would happen next. Unfortunately, they couldn't afford a full-time nurse, and her grandmother simply didn't have the strength to take care of him on her own. Lita's grandmother was only four foot eleven and barely weighed a hundred pounds. Her grandfather was six foot four and over two hundred pounds. With the dead weight of his paralysis, it made him seem heavier.

Going back to her room, she sat down on her old bed. So many memories had happened in that room. The walls had once been plastered in boy band posters and cute teen actors. Now they were bare, making the walls, the room, feel like a different world. In a few short days, she would be driving off into the sunset, so to speak. Everything would be over, and yet, it would be the start of a brand-new adventure in her life.

"You look distant. Anything you want to talk about?" Lita glanced up to see Kammy standing in her door. Kammy was short, almost as short as her

grandmother. Her pear shape held a few extra pounds, but it never seemed to hold her back. She had short hair which she had dyed on her own, leaving sections that had been missed in her hurry to not get caught by her mother. Kammy didn't care though. She was who she was.

"Just thinking how empty this place looks now that I have everything packed up. It is going to be strange being so far away," Lita answered. Her friends were going to be who she missed the most, but Kammy was also moving away. She had gotten accepted to a culinary school in Florida and was also on her way out of town.

"You have wanted out of this town since the moment I met you. When you moved here, you were such an outsider, because you weren't from anywhere close to here. Don't let this get to you. It isn't like all of this won't be here waiting for you if you need it," Kammy said, coming to sit next to her.

"Yeah, I know, but it still makes me wonder what is going to happen when I leave. I won't have anyone there. You are going two hours away. I am going more than two thousand miles away. It isn't like I can just turn around and be here if something happens." Lita sighed, laying her head on Kammy's shoulder. The two of them had been through a lot together. Kammy's mom was always putting Kammy on diets and beat her down emotionally. Because of that, Lita had become Kammy's lifeline.

In return, Kammy had always been the person Lita could talk to. She was the first one to know about Lita losing her virginity and when her heart was broken. She was also the only one who knew about Alex's goodbye kiss.

"Girl, you can't let it stop you. Your family wouldn't want that, especially your grandfather. Your family has worked hard to give you this opportunity, and you have a full scholarship." Kammy wasn't saying anything Lita hadn't already thought about, but she still was worried. As excited as she was for the move, her family was important too.

"Well, I have a couple of days before I go. I'm sure it is just cold feet." Lita smiled and started poking at Kammy. "Come on, let's put on some music and start up dinner. I'm sure my mom will be hungry when she gets back from my grandparents." The two of them headed for the kitchen and cranked up some pop music as loud as they could before dancing around while they began to cook.

They got lost in the music. It was a good feeling. Something she would miss when she moved cross country.

“Lita.” Her mom’s voice came from across the room by the front door.

Turning, Lita could see the terrified look on her mother’s face. It was obvious she had been crying again, and she was drenched with the strong scent which came from chain smoking. “Mom, what’s going on?”

“It’s your grandfather. He had another stroke while I was over there. Your grandmother is on the way to the hospital now, and I wanted to come and get you before we go as well,” she explained.

Lita looked over to Kammy and then back at her mom. “Okay, let me grab my purse, and we can head out.”

“I’ll finish this up and put it in the fridge. I’m not exactly in a hurry to get back to my house, so I will hold down the fort,” Kammy said without being prompted.

The hospital had that strange scent all hospitals had, which was like a mix between paint, bleach, and death. Nothing about a hospital ever felt good. They had been sitting in the waiting room for hours, waiting on news to what had happened. Everyone was tired and worried, and all Lita could think about was how much she was still needed here. How could she leave when her family was in such crisis?

“I think I am going to stay here for a while. I can go to Berkeley later. It isn’t going anywhere, but Grandma needs me,” Lita whispered, not looking up from the speckle of glitter that had been mixed into the design of the floor. It was pretty and something to distract her.

“I can’t let you do that. You have a scholarship, and it’s your dream.” Her mother reached over and placed her hand on hers, trying to draw Lita’s attention.

“I can get a scholarship at a local college for now. I can follow my dreams later, but you and Grandma can’t do this on your own. Family takes care of family, and right now, that is what I need to do.” Lita got up, not wanting to hear all the reasons she should go.

The sliding door squealed open, letting in a gust of warm summer air. Even with the sun down, it was rather hot. It didn’t matter though. It was better than being stuck in there with everyone else. The overwhelming sadness was taking its toll on her. As she walked around the hospital

grounds, the reality of her choice started to set in. Though it was the best choice for her family, it was killing her on the inside.

“Dreams can happen later. You don’t have to follow them as soon as your feet hit the ground,” she whispered, shuffling about and kicking loose rocks on the pavement.

Tears formed in her eyes, and part of her could feel her heart breaking. Sure, she could always go later, but part of her wondered if she would. Finding a tree, she crouched down to take a seat with her back against the trunk. Stars were twinkling bright in the sky, breaking through the streetlights. Small towns had a way of allowing them to shine brighter despite the few spots of unnatural light. Growing up, she had wished on those stars, praying for her dreams, but they had been the dreams of a child.

Her grandmother came out of the same door she had come out of earlier. The older woman pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. Lita’s mother soon followed. She wasn’t sure if they could see her hidden under the darkness of the tree, but she could certainly hear them.

“You know how Lita is. Once she makes up her mind, there is no stopping her. Lita isn’t going to leave, not now, and to be honest, we need her,” her mother said, lighting her own cigarette.

“I just feel so bad. This was her chance. The longer she stays here, the more likely it is she will never leave. You have seen it. We have all seen it,” her grandmother said.

Yeah, Lita had seen it too. So many people got stuck in this small-ass town. Even when they would leave, they would inevitably come back. Maybe she was just kidding herself to think she would get out.

“I know, and I want what is best for her. I didn’t ask her to stay. I wouldn’t ask her to stay. But I have a feeling it doesn’t matter. We will see how she feels in a few days after we get Daddy home.” The two women finished off their smokes, then hugged, and headed back into the hospital. No, Lita’s mind wouldn’t change. They needed her, but obligation didn’t make her feel any better.

Chapter 3

The last year had been hard. Alex had gone through the most rigorous training he could imagine and found a new home and brothers he had never thought to have. Things were going well, and he had been lucky enough to be stationed at the same base with Brandon, the first person he had met in training. But the biggest surprise had nothing to do with his marine training.

It was just after ITB, Infantry Training Battalion, when Alex met Clara Pierce. Brandon and he had gone out to a club to let off some steam after months of intense training. They were not the kids they had been when they started, but they were still young and wanted to have fun.

They had been there a couple of hours when she walked in. Brandon had seen her first and nudged him to make sure he would notice too. Alex noticed. He noticed her long golden hair and cherry lips, which were parted in an enchanting laugh. She had on a tight, short dress which hugged her curves perfectly.

“Damn, man! You going to go talk to her?” Brandon asked, jabbing him with his elbow.

“We are going to be shipping out soon. I really shouldn’t get involved with anyone.” Alex couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“Dude, we have just gone through hellacious training, and we haven’t touched a woman in months. I know I am going to be looking for some comfort, especially if we are going to be gone for a few years. It doesn’t hurt to go talk to her.” Brandon’s words hit something deep. Alex had left behind his girlfriend, his family, pretty much everyone. From early in his high school life, he had been very physical when it came to his relationships. It was hard to deny he had been missing female companionship.

“All right, I will go talk to her, maybe get a dance. But, I swear, I’m not in the market for anything long-term.” Alex took another drink from his soda then went to talk to the girl.

She didn’t seem to notice him at first, but as he got closer to the bar, she turned and gave him a devilish smile. “Can I buy you a drink?” Alex asked,

sliding onto the stool next to hers.

“I’m just getting a Shirley Temple. Not old enough for a real drink yet.” The girl nodded to where the bartender was making her drink.

“Neither am I, but I don’t mind paying for your soda. I just wanted to come and talk to you. Maybe convince you to have a dance with me.” Alex smiled and then held his hand out to her. “My name is Alex Houston.”

“Clara, Clara Pierce.” She reached out and shook his hand, giving him a thorough once over. “Strong shake, military?”

“Yeah, marines. My friend over there and I just finished our training a couple of months ago.” He glanced over to Brandon and saw his friend was already talking to someone. Brandon was smooth and seeing him outside of the base was interesting. Everyone was different when they could let their guard down. Even though Brandon was rebellious and headstrong, it was nothing compared to what Alex was witnessing in the club. Tall, dark, and devilish, Brandon had no problem with stealing some hearts.

“Well, I think I can oblige you with a dance or two.” Clara took his hand, and Alex felt instant electric energy shoot up his arm. He had felt it before, but this time, it made him want to chase it.

Clara dragged him out on the dance floor and turned into him, pressing her body against his. He breathed in the sweet scent of her hair; it was fruity like peaches. Alex shivered as they started to move together. His hands encircled her waist, and they swayed together, pressed tightly, and it reminded Alex of how much he missed human connection.

Things had moved quickly between Alex and Clara. Probably faster than they should have, but he simply could not get her out of his head. Or hands. They had gone from one dance to some dates to being engaged. Now he was standing in the courthouse in his dress blues waiting for her to come in. They had opted for a simple courthouse wedding with a small family reception after.

There was only a couple of weeks until Alex shipped out, but Clara didn’t seem to care. She said the wait was worth a lifetime. It was probably crazy, them getting married after such a short time and even more so because of him leaving to go to war. But they had fallen fast, and hard. There was no stopping it now.

Clara came in a few moments later. She was wearing a simple white dress with a blue sash around her waist. Her hair was up in an elegant

design, curled and decorated with gemstones and flowers. He wasn't sure he had ever seen her look more beautiful.

In her hand was a small bouquet of flowers. It was simple, but sometimes simple was more beautiful than anything extravagant. He held his hand out to her, and she took it with her free hand. The judge sat behind a desk, and when Alex and Clara stood in front of her, side by side, she started the proceedings. Clara's mother, and his father were also in the room as witnesses. His father thought he had lost his mind, but he wasn't going to miss the ceremony either.

Everything felt surreal. They went over the vows, and at the end, he got to kiss the woman he had fallen so deeply in love with. It was all short and sweet, but the finality was real. She was his wife, and he was married.

The reception was being held at the officer's club on base, and his father had paid to cater it with finger foods and a small dry bar. "Do you think we are crazy?" Clara asked as he held her close, dancing to a soft, slow song.

"Probably, but that is what makes it so wonderful. I love you, Clara. When I think about my life, all I see is you by my side." Alex answered, softly kissing the side of her lips. She still smelled like peaches and cream, sweet and enticing.

"I love you too. Please promise me you will come back to me. I don't want to have gone through all of this and then lose you." They hadn't talked a lot about the reality of what could happen with him leaving.

"I'm going to come home. We have the rest of our lives together, and I don't plan to miss out on any of it." Kissing her again, this time, he put more passion behind it. It was one of those perfect moments he was sure he would remember for the rest of his life.

They danced, and the dancing turned to boisterous partying. The parents and other family members disbursed, and the younger group, Alex and Clara's friends, took over the dance floor. Brandon had snuck in some whiskey everyone had been adding to their drinks, and the dancing was wild and electric.

"Man, I remember when you said you had no desire to get involved in anything long-term," Brandon said, patting him on the back and laughing.

"Yeah, I know, but I couldn't let this one go. Something about her just ... feels right." Alex answered.

"Well, I hope you know what you are getting yourself into. This isn't going to be easy after we leave in a couple of weeks. But I am happy for

you,” Brandon added.

“Thank you. I am glad you were here for me.” Alex gave Brandon a brotherly hug, and the two of them returned to the party and danced the night away.

Alex wiped the tears from Clara’s eyes as they stood just outside of the air terminal. It was early, and they were about to board their flight to head overseas. The two of them had known this moment was coming, but it didn’t change how difficult it was to leave her.

She wrapped her shaking arms around his waist, and he breathed her in once more. He wanted to have that scent as the last memory he could take with him. Yes, he had every intention of coming back to her, but it was going to be a while. He wanted to make sure when he closed his eyes, he would still be able to smell her.

“Look, I love you, and I will be back as soon as I can,” Alex whispered, kissing her one last time before he had to pull away.

“I know, and I am so proud of you.” She took a step back as well, and Alex headed for the jet bridge where Brandon was waiting for him. Brandon patted him on the back, an action he had been doing for a long time as a show of comradery.

“Come on.” It was the only words Brandon said. Alex wanted to glance back one more time and get a last look at Clara, but he was afraid if he did it would make it that much harder for him to leave. Yeah, he would come back to her, but first, he had a duty to his country to serve. She knew that when she married him. They both did. It had been his dream to serve his country, and he took pride in it.

Chapter 4

Five Years Later

The faint sound of beeping echoed, pulling him out of his medicated sleep. Time had lost all meaning. It was one day, and many days all rolled into one. The attack had come out of nowhere leaving him and several of his friends and fellow soldiers on the ground and left for dead. There was a moment when he thought he would die; others had. It still haunted him even with all the medication being pumped into him.

They had sent him back stateside and put him in a hospital close to home. Well, at least the last home he had before being deployed again. Everything was still a blur, but he had seen his wife a time or two, sitting next to his bed. Once she was even holding his hand, but she had spent most of her time pacing and talking to doctors. It comforted him to know she was there even if he hadn't been awake long enough to actually enjoy it. He wasn't even sure what had happened. He was alive, that part he knew, but everything else was still a blur.

"So, he is gone. My husband is never going to be the same?" Clara asked. She sounded far away, and it made him wonder if this was just his soul leaving. Maybe he had died.

"There is always a possibility, but no, the damage is extensive, and we have done all we can. I am so sorry, but at least he came home to you." Alex assumed that was the doctor, and he tried to shake off the haze and see what they were talking about. It was of no use. The weight of the medication was still so heavy, and he couldn't pull himself out enough to respond. "Many of his companions were not so lucky."

The frustrated sound in his wife's voice left him worried, but once again, he was whisked away by the, drug-induced haze and sent into another deep slumber.

"Come on, Alex, you know you can do this." As much as Alex wanted to enjoy the encouragement, after months of physical therapy, it just wasn't

doing it for him. Rehab was long and extensive work, and there were little results. Some days, painful tingling sensations would shoot through different parts of his body, making his muscles spasm. Other days, well, other days, he felt nothing at all. Once or twice, he was lucky enough to wiggle a toe or two, but movement was not coming at any pace which could be considered steady. It was exhausting.

Clara had been there by his side to support him, but part of him was starting to wonder if her patience was slipping. She loved him, but they were young, and Alex could see the strain his disability was putting on the relationship. He could no longer perform in a way that satisfied her, and all this was after he had been away off and on for years.

Alex wanted to do more. He longed to be the man she had married, but his physical damage was nothing compared to what his time in the Middle East had done to his mind. At night, he would wake up, sweating and flailing, screaming out for his friends who he was helpless to save. The memories of their empty eyes and dead bodies were ghosts, dancing around inside of him like living entities. It was the price of war; one he had known he would pay going into the marines. He just hadn't realized how harsh the realization of it would be.

Pushing with all his mental strength, Alex tried to make his foot move. It wasn't happening though. No matter how hard he tried, he could not get anything below his waist to function like it should. And the glimmers of hope had started to run thin. There were only so many times you could get excited over a toe wiggle before you started to question if it was just phantom movements.

"Look, I am getting a headache. I think we need to call it a day. Really, all I want to do is get some lunch and relax for a bit." Alex sighed, leaning back in his chair and looking up at the woman who had been working with him for the last several months. Dr. Michelle Applewood was probably one of the best therapists in the state, but even her positive attitude couldn't push him any farther.

She stood up from her crouched position and pulled her ponytail to tighten it before letting her long red hair swing behind her. She was tall, though it could have been relative since he was in a chair. Her features were small and slender, and her pale skin was dotted with freckles. Everything about her screamed ray of sunshine. But he was feeling stormy and was ready for a beer and some football.

“Okay, I can understand that. But I want to see you back on Thursday with a smile on your face and ready to work.” Dr. Applewood walked over to the desk and wrote up a reminder appointment card before handing it to Clara.

There was a stern look on Clara’s face, and he could tell she was disappointed in him ... again. “Thank you so much, Doctor. You have been doing a great job.”

Alex rolled along right next to Clara out to the car. He had gotten good at moving about in his chair and helping load everything up. Clara, of course, had to put the chair in the car, but they were looking into getting him a vehicle which was more friendly to his condition.

“I just don’t understand why you aren’t putting more work into this, Alex. I thought you would want to get better and help us move on with our lives.” Clara sighed as she started up the car.

“Do you honestly think that I’m not trying? I work very hard and do everything they tell me. You have no idea what I am going through. I get that you are frustrated, but so am I, more than you know.” It was the same thing. She thought he had given up, and part of him wondered as well, but he hadn’t. He wanted to be happy and moving. It just wasn’t that easy. There was no magic drug that would make him better again.

“I just don’t feel like you are trying as hard as you could be. I know I will never understand what you went through, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want things between the two of us to get better. I miss you. I miss us.” She had said it before, but the defeated sound in her voice solidified where they were headed. She was going through the motions but only because it was expected of her. She didn’t really want to keep going, and Alex was starting to wonder if there was any way to save what they had.

“Maybe we should try seeing someone together. I already go to the doctor to talk about what happened and work on myself. Maybe you should come with me. They might be able to help us work through this. I don’t want this to be difficult on you, but there is only so much I can do.” Alex hoped his suggestion would help appease some of her frustrations.

The two of them sat in silence for several moments before Clara finally answered, “I guess we can give it a try. I’m sorry if I come off sounding like a bitch. I guess I am just lonely. I want to be more than just the woman who chauffeurs you around to doctor appointments.”

He could see the tears forming in her eyes, and it broke his heart. Yeah, he could understand how she felt about all of this, because he felt the same way. Being broken and a burden was not how he pictured his welcome home going.

“Why don't we go out tonight? We can have dinner, get drinks. I don't know. Maybe we can just do something normal.” Even though all he wanted to do was go home and be away from all the stress of people seeing him, if it would make Clara happy, he would be more than willing to put himself out there.

“No, let's just go home.” She drove off without saying much more. Once again, Alex could feel their relationship falling apart.

“Don't you have a meeting later tonight?” Clara asked as they pulled into their neighborhood.

“Yeah. Brandon is coming to get me.”

Chapter 5

Lita pulled at the collar of her white button-up shirt and took another look in the mirror. Five years of school had led her to this moment. Her first interview with a real adult business. Sure, it was just for the reception job, but at least it wasn't serving pizza for tips.

She had softened her usual dark makeup and run a straightener through her hair to tame the waves. The woman in the mirror looked nothing like the girl she used to be. Well, she could still be that girl on the weekends.

Heading out, she grabbed her keys and purse.

Traffic was a little more out of hand than she had expected, but she was still getting used to life in Birmingham. Compared to the small town she came from, Birmingham was a different world and something she was still getting used to. Good thing she had left early. Being late would not make a very good first impression.

Despite how bad the traffic was, she was glad to see she had still arrived ten minutes early. It was something she had always been taught. If you wanted to make a good impression, then you needed to be early. Until then, she had never cared much about it, but now it mattered. Baby steps, but she would be successful one day.

In the back of her mind, she felt a little part of her die. Yeah, she was going to be successful, but it wouldn't be for what she wanted to do. After Berkley didn't work out, she had found herself back home and going to community college for business. However, she was bound and determined to be the best sellout possible. She took her community college degree all the way up to a bachelor's degree, complete with more debt than the damn piece of paper was worth.

In the back of her mind, she thought about Alex. She had promised him she would never give up on her dreams, and there she was, handing her résumé over to someone who planned to stick her behind a desk answering phones. If she was lucky, she would end up in cubicle hell. Oh yay!

"Lita, it is so good to meet you. You come with some great references both from your current employer and your teachers. I have to say I am

interested to see what you have to say.” Barbara McDowell came over to shake her hand and lead her to a conference room.

Mrs. McDowell was the head of McDowell Marketing Solutions, the company Lita hoped to get her start in. It wasn’t as large as some firms in places like Atlanta, Los Angeles, or New York, but it was one of the largest in the area, which was why Lita had chosen it. All through college, she had worked hard to make the best grades possible. Part of her believed if she could get herself into a good firm right out of college, maybe she could move up to one of the big ones in New York and then have time to work on her music career as well. It was a goal she wasn’t sure would ever happen.

“I was glad to hear you wanted to see me. I have been keeping up with your company for over a year now and honestly feel like this is the best place for me.” Lita took a seat at the large oak table.

Barbara McDowell had to be in her mid-forties to early fifties. She carried herself in a way that showed a tremendous amount of strength and elegance. Her silver hair was pulled up in a tasteful coif, and she wore a sensible yet fashionable dark-blue suit. As the head of the company, she exuded strength, but she didn’t let it hamper her femininity.

“Well, you come with a great résumé. I know you don’t have a lot of experience yet, but you are young, and you seem driven. I know you are here for the reception position, but I have a lot of faith you will move into something that better suits your skills,” Barbara said before going into a few questions. It didn’t feel like any interview Lita had ever had before. This felt more conversational and personable. It made her believe she walked in already having the job.

When she left, she knew she had the job and would be starting in two weeks, after she gave notice to Papa Gino’s. She had been working for him for over two years, ever since moving to Birmingham to finish her degree. He was already anticipating her leaving, but he wasn’t happy. Papa was the kind of man who truly loved and cared for his employees. It made her feel blessed to have found such a good man to work for.

Getting in the car, Lita called Regan and Kammy to let them know she had gotten the position. Kammy didn’t answer, but Regan picked up before the first ring had finished. “Tell me, how did it go?”

“It went really well. I think she planned to hire me before I even walked in the door. We mostly just talked about how school went and what I hoped

to get out of working there.” Lita turned onto the main street. Thank goodness for Bluetooth. She could talk and drive at the same time.

“I told you that you would get it. You worked your butt off in school. There was no way you wouldn’t get the job,” Regan answered, excitement heavy in her voice. “So, you are coming down for the BBQ this weekend, right?”

“Yeah, I told you I would be there. You know I can’t pass up the famous Regan ribs. Damn, your cooking is so good it makes my mouth water just thinking about it.” Lita laughed, especially hearing the frustration in her friend’s voice.

“You are such a wicked woman.” Regan growled. After some time of trying to find herself, Regan had finally come to terms with the fact she was a lesbian. It was something Lita was happy to know, because she wanted her friend happy and not struggling. However, Regan had a thing for her, and while Lita liked girls on occasion, she couldn’t see her best friend that way. They were just too close.

“I love you, girl. Can’t wait to see you. I hate you moved so far away. Things down here just aren’t the same. Going to the river has lost its appeal.” Regan made her voice sound sorrowful. If only she could hide the laughter behind it.

“No, it hasn’t. You send me pictures all the time of you fishing. You will never love the river less, but how about we take a visit while I am down there?” Lita offered as she pulled into the parking lot of her apartment building.

“Oh, am I finally going to get you to fish with me?” she asked, excitedly.

“You wish, but I will go swimming.” Lita laughed as the two of them finished their conversation. Then she went inside to strip off the tight business clothes and put on her jeans and rock-n-roll T-shirt. Today, she figured she would wear Iron Maiden. It was one of her all-time favorite bands, and she was in too good of a mood for anything less.

Papa Gino’s always smelled divine. It was a mix of fresh oven-baked pizza and homemade Italian sweets. Lita wasn’t sure how she had managed to only gain ten pounds instead of a hundred working there, but she wasn’t going to complain. The food was the best in town, and she was proud to work for him.

However, walking into her shift after her interview with McDowell Marketing Solutions, work was going to be a little bittersweet. Lita weaved through the tables and pushed through the swinging door which led to the back of the restaurant. Papa's wife, Catalina, was sitting behind a desk, looking over the books. She had a pensive expression on her face, as she often did when handling the accounting. Her dark hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and her short body was plumper than it had been when they first met. Old age was starting to settle on her, but she wore it well.

"So, how did it go? Papa has been asking me if I heard from you all day, and I had not." Catalina smiled up at Lita with a grin that said she had every confidence Lita had done a great job.

"It went so good. The CEO called me into the conference room, and she didn't so much interview me as much as we just had a conversation. She just talked to me about my goals and what I want out of my life. It was cool. I told her I needed to give notice, and she respects that. Do you think Papa will be upset?" Lita put her stuff in her locker and wrapped the apron around her waist.

"Don't be silly. Papa is so proud of you. He came to this country to be successful and would want nothing less for his family. You, Lita, are family. Papa wants you to succeed and be happy." Catalina got up and walked over to give Lita a hug. "Now, we are going to have a busy night. The high school is having a football game, and you know that always means a full house."

"Yeah, full house of crazy teenagers who have had way too much sugar and excitement. Hopefully, I don't have to break up any fights tonight. They always get surprised when I get in the middle." Lita collected her order book and walked to the door.

"Yes, Lita the barbarian. You have saved many a table and chairs for us." Catalina's joke had Lita laughing as she made her way to the kitchen to give Papa a hug before starting her shift. Papa was in his usual boisterous mood, singing as he cooked. There was even a bit of a dance to the way he moved around the kitchen. No matter how hard of a day she had, Papa had never failed to make her smile.

Lita went through the details of her interview once more, and Papa gave her the biggest and tightest hug she could imagine. "You will do wonderful things. But you come back to see us. I do not want to have to hunt you

down in your new job. And make sure you eat. You need meat on your bones.”

“Don’t worry about that. I don’t think there will ever be a time I won’t want to get a little pizza.”

Lita was just about to head out to the floor and start taking orders when Catalina popped her head out of the office door. “Lita, your mother is on the phone. You might want to take this.” Her mother never called her at work. The fact she had could only mean one thing. Lita’s heart stopped.

Chapter 6

She didn't know what to say. Though her grandfather had been sick for a long time, the truth was, Lita had never dealt with a lot of death. His passing was something new to her, something she wasn't ready to deal with. Her grandfather's death was the first one she had ever experienced. Until then, no one she knew or was close to had ever passed away.

In the last five years, Lita had also gotten extremely close with her grandfather. There were nights when she sat with him until late in the night. He would watch old Western movies, and she would study. It was quiet, but there had always been a sense of peace and closeness between the two of them.

Now, everyone wanted to keep asking her if she was okay and if they could help. No, she wasn't okay, and she wasn't sure she would be okay for a long time. Regan had driven up to Birmingham to be with her, and Papa Gino had brought over enough food for the family and possibly an army. She wasn't sure what they were going to do with it all. But she was grateful for it.

Outside, her mother sat by herself on one of those concrete stumps, a cigarette in one hand and coffee in the other. It had been her nonstop state since he had passed. Half of the cigarettes she lit went to waste as she got lost in her thoughts. Lita could understand it. Not that she smoked, but Lita couldn't seem to keep concentrating on any one thing either. It was frustrating.

Hearing the change in the music and the people hosting the funeral say it was almost time, Lita went out to let her mother know. "Hey, I know you don't want to, but we need to go in there. Grandma needs us."

"Yeah, I know." Patricia got up and stomped out her latest wasted cigarette, and the two of them walked into the funeral parlor together.

Her grandfather hadn't wanted a funeral. He had wanted to be cremated and sprinkled out to sea. He had been in the navy, and they had arranged for one of the battleships out of Jacksonville, Florida to take him and give him a military funeral. However, for the time being, they were just having a

small memorial. Lita had offered to sing—if she could get her wits about her.

Most of the memorial was a bit of a haze. Aunts and uncles got up and talked about her grandfather, reminiscing of times long past. However, when it was her turn, all she could do was walk in a clouded-over state. She didn't see the people sitting before her or the photos and flowers. Hell, she barely saw the podium. No, her mind was lost in some sort of trancelike state, wanting to be free of the whole situation.

The music to “Go Rest High on that Mountain” by Vince Gill started up, and Lita did her best to take a deep breath and not think. She had sung in front of lots of people for years. Nothing ever bothered her or made her afraid. Singing was her sanctuary. Softly, the words started to leave her lips. It was weak compared to how she usually sang, but she kept going, trying to find her confidence.

This would be the last time she could sing for her grandfather, and she wanted it to be special. She thought about all the good times they had over the last few years. Though they had been hard, they had been filled with good as well.

Near the end of the song, she could feel her voice starting to crack. It was difficult to sing with so many emotions, but she pushed through, knowing it wasn't her best but also that it was filled with love. When she finished, she saw tears on the faces of all her friends and family, and she knew the song had reached them.

The rest of the funeral was more of the same. People talked about her grandfather and how much he meant to them. By the time it was done, Lita wanted nothing more than to get out of there. It was the same with her mother who followed close behind. They used the excuse they wanted to get back to the house so they could be ready for when people got there, but really, it was just a way to escape for a while.

“I think your grandmother and I are going to move back down south now. As good as it was to be up here to have access to the better hospitals, we have never enjoyed living in the big city. Besides, you are all grown up now. I'm sure you are ready to get started with your own life,” her mother said as they weaved through the traffic.

Yeah, she wanted to get back to her own life, but it had already passed the point of her being able to enjoy going out to California. She would just have to work toward the next dream. “You guys never liked it up here. I was

surprised when you decided to come. I honestly thought it had more to do with being worried about me.” Lita was trying to make a joke, but it was difficult.

“Maybe that was part of it, but you are a strong girl. You don’t really need us. You gave up so much staying to take care of all of us. I think it is time for you to follow your own dreams.” Her mother reached over and patted her hand where it rested on the gear shifter.

Lita thought about what her dreams used to be. She was going to write books and sing rock songs. It was going to be a wild life full of adventure. Now, she didn’t feel like it was achievable. Hell, she rarely went out to karaoke and open mic nights, much less worked on her music career. Now and then, Papa Gino would ask her to sing something special for someone’s birthday or anniversary, but that was as far as her music had taken her in an extremely long time.

They got to the house her mom and grandparents had been staying at. Papa Gino had already set up a huge spread of pizza and traditional Italian dishes along with an array of sweets. It was more beautiful than she had expected. Papa Gino had been such an important part of her life, almost like a father figure. She was sure she would love him for the rest of her life.

When she walked in the door, Papa and Catalina took turns giving her and her mother tight hugs. He had told her to take time off, but in reality, it made her feel better to be busy, so she had worked through her pain. The only day she actually planned to take off would be after the memorial. Regan had convinced her to hit up an open mic night so she could work out some of her pain. It hadn’t been her favorite idea, but she knew Regan meant well, and maybe it genuinely would help.

People started to pour in, and Lita did her duty greeting them. Her grandmother had been on so much valium to keep her calm that she was simply led in and sat down in a chair. It was eerie to see her so distraught. Her grandmother was usually full of life with something to say about everything. Not today, though. Today, the tiny woman was quiet with a tear-stained red face.

“She will be all right. Just give her time,” Regan whispered, walking up next to her. Reaching out, Lita took Regan’s hand and leaned her head on her shoulder. There was a reason they were both such close friends. If only Kammy could have been there. The three of them together were unstoppable.

To get her mind off things, Regan had taken her to the club to blow off some steam and sing some songs. Before they even found a table, Regan had ordered them some drinks to be delivered. Lita wasn't sure what drinks she ordered, but with the look on Regan's face, she was sure they would be strong.

"You don't have to sing anything too complicated. Just get up there. It will be good for you. I don't remember the last time you actually sang something and just let your hair down," Regan said, putting her arm around Lita and leading her out to the main part of the club. Lita signed up for a slot, and then they found a table. It was only a few moments later when a tray of Alabama Slammers was set down on the table.

"There are enough of these to have me stripping by the end of the night." Lita laughed for the first time in days.

"Well, would that be so bad? You haven't been dating in a long time. Maybe you need a little wild fun as well. It wouldn't hurt, you know," Regan teased as she nearly shoved a drink in Lita's hand. "To a great man finding peace and a great woman starting life."

Tears started to form in Lita's eyes as she tapped her glass against Regan's in a toast. However, her eye makeup was on point, so she blinked hard and tried to keep the tears from running down her face.

By the time they called her name, she had downed three Alabama Slammers and started working on Smirnoff Ice. To tell the truth, she probably wasn't in the best place to head onto a stage and sing a song. Maybe if they were at a karaoke bar, but this was open mic. They expected more out of their performer.

"Hey, my name is Lita Reigns, and this is called 'The Greatest Man I Ever Knew.'" Lita lifted her guitar and started to strum at the strings, but her control was a little off. Then the words started to come; however, it was too much for her. The song had been written about her grandfather on a night when things had looked grim. She had been sitting alone with him, and his ability to breathe had made her wonder if it was going to be her last night with him.

She didn't get very far in the song before she dropped her guitar and just bolted out of the club. Regan wasn't even able to catch up with her. All she knew was she needed to get out of there. She wasn't a performer anymore. That ship had sailed long ago. She just needed to get to her new job and

start her adult life. There was no more time to be a kid. No more dreams to follow.

Chapter 7

Five Years Later

She looked down at the gold and maroon invitation on her desk, wondering if it was even worth opening. It had been ten years since she graduated high school, and now, they wanted everyone to get together so they could point and laugh at the people who were not as successful. Lita wasn't not successful. She just wasn't where she had hoped to be.

"You going to open it?" Oliver Koontz asked peeking over his cubicle to hers. Oliver was her office buddy. The short red-haired man loved to joke around with her and make her smile, especially on days when she was feeling less than happy.

"Are you spying on me?" Lita asked, looking up and arching a brow at him.

"Maybe, but you have been staring at the damn thing all morning. It isn't going to bite you. So just open it already." Oliver laughed, tossing a balled-up straw wrapper at her face.

"Fine." Picking up the envelope, she ripped it open and started to read. They were going to have the reunion at the country club back in Ozark. It had been a long time since Lita visited there. Instead she would just have her friends and family come to see her. There was more to do in Birmingham, and she would rather not be in that small, backwards town.

"You know, you should go. Here lately, you have been a little bit on the lost side. Sometimes you need to go home and refresh."

She didn't want Oliver's advice. There was nothing in her that wanted to go back to that school and reminisce about the old days. "This isn't going home. This is a circus of people judging just where they stand in the line of being successful. No thanks, I don't need a bunch of people looking at me and wondering what the fuck went wrong." Lita sighed, tossing the invitation over to the stack of files she still needed to work on.

"You are successful, just not in the way you had hoped. But don't ever say you aren't. You have been working your butt off, and I know it isn't

long before you are in there pitching ads and setting up big accounts. Lita, you are awesome.” Oliver tossed another paper straw cover at her then ducked back down.

She had thought she would be working at least one of the big accounts by then. It just hadn’t turned out that way. Instead, she got stuck in cubicle hell like many other people in the company. Sighing and opening one of the files, she started reading over the marketing plan for the startup she was working on when her phone rang. It was no surprise it was Kammy on the other end. She had been talking about the upcoming reunion for months.

“Hey, Kammy. I had a feeling I would be hearing from you.” Lita laughed as she answered the phone.

“So, you are coming to the reunion. Regan says you keep giving her the run around, and I know you need to put in notice with your work that you are taking time off.” Kammy was munching on something, and the crunching noise echoed in Lita’s ears.

“I don’t know. I mean, most of those people didn’t hang out with us when we were there, why should we waste a weekend rubbing elbows with them now? Seems like there are better things I can spend my time and money on.” Lita huffed while thumbing through the file in front of her.

“Come on, everyone is coming. Regan even has a BBQ planned for after so we can all hang out and have one of our old parties. Wouldn’t that be a blast? Please. It isn’t like you ever come to visit anymore.” She hated when Kammy begged. It made her feel guilty which in turn made her want to do whatever it was. Kammy had this way of getting what she wanted.

“Okay, fine. I will put in the time off, but I make no promises I am going to stay. I really don’t have much to say to anyone. The people I love and want to see I already see all the time.”

“Not as much as you should. Oh, I am so excited! I will let Regan know!” Kammy had barely finished her squeal of excitement before hanging up the phone.

From above her cubicle wall, she could see Oliver grinning down at her. “Oh hush.” Lita rolled her eyes, and Oliver laughed.

Kammy and Regan had met her at her mother’s house, waiting for her on the porch before she even pulled into the old dirt driveway. The two of them stood there, almost blocking off the carport as if to say she was in the

wrong place and needed to turn around. Weren't they the ones who had wanted her there?

Throwing the car in park, she flung open the door and stepped out. "What's going on? You do realize you are making it hard for me to park, right?"

"Screw that, get back in your car and head to my place. I already told your mom that tonight you are mine. She can get you back later." Regan shooed Lita with her hands. She walked over to Lita's car and got into the passenger seat. Kammy got in the other car.

"Is it really kidnaping if you make me do the driving?" Lita laughed, getting back into her car.

"I'm not getting caught dead driving your little frilly car. You know the way, so let's get going." Regan laughed and pulled on her seat belt.

"There is nothing wrong with my car. It gets good gas mileage and is comfortable." Lita defended, turning around in the yard to head back down the driveway. Lita's mother lived in the middle of nowhere on five acres of land. She had told Lita she could have the place if she ever wanted to move back home now that she was moved in with her new husband.

However, Regan had a house way out in the country, and it was set up with a fire pit, grill station, and a hot tub. While Lita's house had a pool, the added hot tub was a nice feature. Regan also lived alone, so there was no worry about someone breaking up the party. At Lita's mom's place, there was always the risk.

"So, Kammy said she moved back to the area. She was telling me her grandmother needed help, and she was trying to do some sort of job on the internet." Lita turned onto the long road which led out to Regan's house.

"Yeah, well, she hasn't been able to hold down a job for a while, so her grandmother said she could come help out. You know Kammy. She just can't get her shit together. So, I don't know, but she is our friend, and I love her, and I am going to do whatever I can to be there for her," Regan answered.

It wasn't long before Lita turned into the drive of the nice brick rancher Regan lived in. She had an awesome job working on the military base, making her able to get an incredible house. It helped it was her mother's old house, and she was able to get it at a steal.

Kammy was right behind them as Lita put the car in park and got out. It was hot, which was normal, but after the long drive in the air conditioning,

the thick, steaming humidity made it difficult to breathe. “I swear we live in hell.”

Regan chuckled, pulling Lita’s suitcase out of the back seat. “You will be fine. Once you get your swimsuit on and a drink in your hand, you will forget all about the heat.”

Lita wasn’t sure about that, but she joined in the jovial laughter and headed into the house with Kammy jogging up behind her. Regan’s house was just as nice on the inside as it was on the outside. She had a mix of country style and redneck with a smattering of modern technology. In the corner of the living room was a drum set from when she was in the band in high school. Once upon a time, Regan would play drums for Lita while she sang.

Regan kept going until she entered one of the bedrooms and plopped Lita’s suitcase down on the bed. “Kammy is across the hall for tonight. She is going to be staying so we can have fun. Go on and get changed, I am going to get food started outside.”

Once alone, Lita started to strip down. She pulled out her swimsuit, a two-piece with a tank top and bikini bottom and changed. Once she was dressed, she went into the bathroom and washed off all her makeup. There was no point in wearing it if she was about to get wet.

Kammy was coming out of her room when Lita opened the door. She was also in her swimsuit, a simple black one-piece. “So, did you hear I moved back to town? Things just weren’t working out for me in Florida, and my grandma needed me.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry to hear about that. But I bet Regan likes having you around,” Lita answered as the two of them headed for the backyard.

Smoke was already visible just outside of the window where Regan had started up the grill. Outside was a huge cooler of fruity alcoholic drinks and bottles of liquor. Apparently, Regan planned for them to have a huge party or not be able to move the next day. Lita grabbed a hard lemonade, and Kammy took a hard iced tea before they sat at the patio table near the grill.

Regan was wearing her swim trunks and T-shirt, which was what she usually wore to go swimming. Music blared from the built-in porch speakers, and Regan was dancing and bobbing as she tossed steaks on the grill. “I hope you two brought your appetite. I am cooking enough food to last us well into the morning.”

“You don’t happen to have some circus peanuts hidden somewhere, do you?” Lita asked with a bit of laughter in her voice.

The look Reagan gave back made Lita pause. Reagan walked over to where she had the rest of their food waiting. It was all covered up to keep bugs from getting into it, but there was a ton of it. Lita wasn’t sure where they were going to put it all. Watching her friend, Lita busted out laughing when Reagan lifted the cloth from one of the bowls to unveil copious amounts of circus peanuts, pixie sticks, and chocolate. There was enough to put even the most adventurous sweet tooth into a sugar coma. “Don’t tell me I didn’t come prepared.”

The three of them laughed, and Lita snagged one of those puffy orange sugary death traps and popped it in her mouth. She wasn’t sure when the last time she had a circus peanut was, and she found the intense sweetness overwhelming. Taking a big gulp of her drink, she tried to wash down the sweetness. “Damn, that’s strong.”

“You getting soft on me?” Reagan teased, poking her with her elbow.

“No, but it has been a while, and well, that might just be too much.” Lita giggled, grabbing a chocolate instead. It was less likely to make her dizzy. Good thing Reagan put the chocolate in a bowl of ice too; with the heat, she would have had it all over her fingers otherwise.

“Well, this weekend is all about going back in time, so we are going to party like we are back in high school.” Reagan flipped the meat on the grill.

“Then why do we have alcohol?” Lita joked as she finished off her first hard lemonade.

The three of them broke into boisterous laughter, and the night went forward with food and drinking. Before long, they were in the pool, leaning against the side wall and talking about old times.

“Do you ever hear from anyone else? Like whatever happened to Alex Houston? I swear the last time we saw him was at the end of the year party senior year.” Kammy made her voice go sexy as if imitating Lita’s once high school crush.

“No, I don’t hear from a lot of people, but you know me. I kinda just went my own way. I know he went in the military, so I bet he is long gone living somewhere else.” Lita hoped her face wasn’t giving away the feelings which stirred up thinking about that last night.

“You had such a big thing for him I am surprised you haven’t found a way to social media stalk him by now,” Reagan chuckled, reaching for

another shot of vodka. Yeah, they had moved on to the stronger stuff.

“Yeah well, it doesn’t matter. That was ten years ago. I’m sure he has someone, and I certainly don’t have the time to start stalking someone. I do have my own life.” Lita defended herself, trying to fight off the blush she felt coming up.

“Either that or you are afraid to find out if he is still single and swoop in and snag him,” Kammy teased.

Lita splashed her then, and the three of them laughed. “She is right. You don’t want to know what is going on with him, because he was the one that got away. If you knew he was still out there and single, you would totally try to go after him.” Regan added wiping water off her face.

“What is this, gang up on Lita time?” As much as she wanted to protest, they were partly right. She had been thinking about Alex a lot more since deciding to come to the reunion. Part of her wondered if he would show up.

“Yeah, so get used to it.” And the ribbing continued with teasing Lita about all the naughty stories she had written with “Alex” as the star. Oh, this was going to end up being one hell of a weekend.

Chapter 8

It was time for the reunion. Lita wanted to look her best. If she was going to do this, she was going to go all out. Checking herself out in the full-length mirror behind her old bedroom door, she was pleased. She had on a pair of black pants that hugged her curves and a red shirt showing a little more cleavage than she should have worn. Her hair was lightly curled, and her makeup was a bit dark and sexy. It certainly would be something to make an impression.

Regan had on a nice suit with her hair spiked up. When Lita saw her, she grinned brightly. “Well, don’t you look handsome? You are going to knock the socks off people.”

“Not as much as you are. I swear you have only got sexier,” Regan teased, trying to hide her own blush.

“Well, let’s get ready to party! I can’t wait for this.” Kammy came out from the back. She had on a sleek dress with her hair in an updo full of curls and little clips.

“I am not sure I would say that, but I guess I am ready to go. Well, as ready as I will ever be.” Lita grabbed her purse and headed out of the door. Regan was doing the driving, so the three of them piled into her Toyota Tundra, which was the nicest of the three vehicles. Lita’s was nice but not quite as nice as Regan’s truck was. Besides, the truck had a lot more room.

Ozark was small enough that it took less than ten minutes to get to the country club where the reunion was taking place. The high school was under construction, so they had chosen to have the reunion at the country club instead. The parking lot was already full of cars, and cheesy pop music from the year they graduated blared from inside. Lita took a deep breath, and the three of them linked arms and walked into the building.

An open bar had been set up, and the girls were more than happy to get something to start the evening. Once they had their drinks, they went out to the main room to mingle. So many people were there. Some of them Lita didn’t even recognize, but they seemed to know her. Somehow, Kammy

knew everyone. She ran up to people and laughed, acting like no time had passed. For Lita, it seemed like a lifetime ago.

Regan was a little more reserved and stuck with Lita. “You don’t have to look like a scared puppy.”

“I’m not scared. I’m uncomfortable. Remember, you two dragged me here.” Lita laughed.

“You will get over that. Just give the drink a few minutes.” Lita couldn’t stop the laughter she felt rise in her with what Regan said. Something about having her friends with her made all the difference. To tell the truth, she wasn’t sure why she was so bothered to be there. It should have been nothing to her. However, memories of high school never brought her a lot of joy. Not that her time there was bad—it just wasn’t good either.

Regan and Lita did the round, stopping now and then to talk to people she did recognize and politely responding when others said hello. Then she saw him. Alex was sitting at a table near the back of the room with someone she didn’t recognize. Hopefully, the other person didn’t recognize her either because that would be awkward.

“Go talk to him.” Regan urged having seen her stop and stare. It was then when he looked over and made eye contact. No, that wasn’t awkward at all. However, when he saw her, he smiled, and it had Lita moving toward him.

“I’m just going to go and talk to him for a bit. See what he has been into,” Lita said quietly.

“Sure, you tell yourself that. I am going to go find where Kammy got off to.” Regan chuckled and walked off into the crowd.

Lita walked over to the table where he was sitting, holding on to the glass in her hand like it was a lifeline. Memories of the last time they saw each other flooded her mind. She had thought about it off and on for years, but she never thought to see him again, so it didn’t matter.

“Alex, wow, I didn’t think to see you here,” Lita said as she reached the table.

“I didn’t think I was going to come either. But my friend here convinced me.” He nudged the man sitting next to him. “This is Brandon, we were in the marines together. Brandon, this is Lita.”

“Were? You aren’t anymore?” she asked, feeling like she was being a bit rude. The look Brandon was giving her made her feel strange. It was almost like he knew who she was which seemed strange.

Alex motioned for her to sit with him, and she happily obliged. She couldn't believe it. After all this time, not only was he there, but he seemed to be just as happy to see her as she was to see him.

The look that crossed Alex's face, though, had her curious. He seemed to be a bit upset about whatever it was that had him sitting there and not off in the military. However, it wasn't her place to push the issue. Alex tried to hide his emotions and gave her the same sexy smile he had ten years ago. "It's a long story. How about we start somewhere else. How have things been for you? Do you still write? Sing?"

Lita was sure her face looked sheepish. The last thing she had promised Alex was she wouldn't stop her passion of creating. He was not going to be happy to hear she had. "No, not much these days. Now and then, when Regan comes to visit, she can convince me to go to a karaoke night, but other than that..." She shrugged and knew it sounded like a cop-out.

"What about the writing?" Alex asked, reaching out and taking her hand.

"I don't feel it. Nothing speaks to me these days. The only time I ever get to write anymore is when I write up marketing proposals." Feeling his hand on hers stirred up a lot of emotions, but she had no idea what his relationship status was. He could very well be married with kids by now.

"That's a shame. You always looked so happy and alive when you were sharing your stories and playing your guitar. I really thought you would have put out a few books by now."

When she looked up, she saw an odd look in his eyes. The look reminded her of who he had been years ago. He had that same smirk and that same charming gleam in his eyes. Damn, it just wasn't fair.

"It is what it is. Maybe if I can get my life settled, I will be able to write again. I remember I used to do most of it while in class. I actually find it easier to write when I have other things going on." She smiled back at him, and she swore she felt a spark, or maybe it was just her old crush tricking her mind.

"Well, this is getting awkward, so I think I am going to go and get us some more drinks. What are you drinking, Lita?" Brandon stood and took the two empty beer bottles from the table.

"Oh, umm, well, I was drinking a margarita, but you can just get me a Smirnoff Ice if you want." Lita shook herself out of the shock.

“So, you are in marketing? That’s cool. What about outside of work. You have someone in your life?” Alex asked, and Lita was sure she was blushing.

“I’ve had boyfriends here and there, but nothing that has stuck. I guess I am just too focused on my career,” she answered with a hint of laughter in her voice. “What about you? I mean, you were always good with the ladies.”

“Newly divorced.”

Lita felt bad for asking, but Alex had a rather content look on his face. So, maybe the divorce hadn’t been a bad one. “Yeah, well, it has been a long time coming. We both agreed it was best for us, and since we didn’t have any children, it actually was pretty simple.”

“Well, that is one way to look on the bright side. I’m glad it wasn’t a really rough divorce.” Now she didn’t feel so strange about him still holding her hand. But she wasn’t going to let herself get too invested. Alex had flirted with her before, and it never went anywhere. It was probably best she continued to keep it as one blissful memory.

“Hey, things could be worse.” Brandon came back with the drinks, and Lita was thankful for it. She took a deep pull from the bottle, using the moment to collect herself.

“I guess they could. I mean, everyone here is trying to make it sound like their lives are so great, but I bet it is all a farce. I know my life isn’t great. I still feel like I am fumbling around, trying to figure out how to be an adult. Don’t get me wrong, my life isn’t bad, but I am nowhere close to where I thought I would be by this point in my life.” Lita sat back so she couldn’t touch Alex. She didn’t want him clouding her mind.

“Yeah, I was sure you would be off in California by now. Weren’t you supposed to go to Berkeley?” Alex asked.

“I was, but then my grandfather’s condition got worse. I ended up just going to Enterprise, then we moved up to Birmingham for me to finish my degree. After my grandfather passed, my mom and grandma moved back down here, but I am still up there, working for a decent-size marketing firm. At least for Alabama,” Lita explained.

“Don’t feel bad for not being where you wanted to be. I’m certainly not.” Alex paused for a moment then looked over to Brandon. That was when Alex pushed back from the table. Lita expected him to stand up and walk around toward her. However, when he pushed back, she finally noticed

what he had been hiding below the table. Alex was in a wheelchair. “I was hurt pretty badly about five years ago. Everything I wanted was gone in an instant, and I was sent home to heal, not that I will ever really heal.”

Lita couldn’t believe what he was saying. Not just the words but the emotion behind them. He sounded like life had defeated him, and that was not what she expected to hear. “Oh my God, I am so sorry. What... I mean, you don’t have to explain.”

Brandon and Alex exchanged looks. Brandon had been hurt that night too, but his injuries, though they sent him home, had not left him so damaged. “It’s okay. I don’t mind talking about it now. We were out in the field, and we got ambushed. I was running out to pull some of my brothers from the field, and there was a big explosion. I don’t know a lot of what happened after that. Brandon pulled me back from what I hear, but I woke up in the hospital back in the States.”

Lita didn’t know what to say. How was she supposed to respond to that? It was like when someone died. Most of the time, there was nothing to say, and it was awkward to even try. “He is doing better though. Alex works hard, and he gets his therapy done,” Brandon said, trying to break the tension.

“Alex has always been strong. I am sure he’s doing awesome,” Lita added, feeling it was better than treating him like a victim. Lita was pretty sure most people in his life had done so, and she certainly didn’t want to be one of them.

“I don’t feel it right now, but I am trying. That is about all I can say,” Alex answered.

Alex started talking about how he and Brandon had become friends and the parts of his life that had been good. Lita figured he was trying to change the subject, so Lita went along with it. She talked about her time working with Papa Gino and her friend in the office who had helped push her to come to the reunion. Well, that and Regan and Kammy pestering her. He seemed surprised she was still so close to her friends from high school.

“Well, yeah, but I don’t remember most of the people we went to school with. I look around this room and wonder who the hell most of these people are. But the ones I do remember, they made a mark, good or bad, they stuck with me.” Lita looked around the room.

“And I am one of those people?” Alex asked, arching a brow.

“Yes, yes, you are.” Lita blushed, and she hated the feel of the heat growing on her cheeks.

“Hey, I will be in town for a few more days, why don’t we go get coffee or something. We can catch up more without so much of an audience.” Alex was asking her out, and for a moment, her heart skipped a beat. She was pretty sure it was just old memories playing tricks with her, but it was nice to feel that way.

“Sure, I would like that.” Lita wrote down her number so he would have it, and they set up a time and place to meet. She couldn’t believe after ten years she was finally going on a date with her high school crush. To think, she didn’t even want to go to the damn reunion.

Chapter 9

Things had been so rough in his relationship with Clara that getting ready for his date with Lita had Alex nearly shaking. Was it even a date? They were just getting coffee and talking about old times. She might not even consider it a date. Shaking off his nervousness, he finished his shave then spritzed on cologne. He and Brandon were staying in a decent-sized room, but it was still a little difficult to navigate in his chair.

Brandon was lying across one of the beds, flipping through TV channels and looking a little bored. “So how do I look?”

“You look like you are nervous, which is stupid because there is no reason for it. You are going to be fine, and she was obviously into you last night. Just chill and act like you normally would.” Brandon barely looked away from the TV. His friend was tired; that was obvious.

Shrugging, Alex went for the lobby to wait for Lita. She had offered to come and pick him up and drive. Sure, Alex had a car set up for him to be able to drive, but it was sometimes easier to just be a passenger. Not much had changed in their hometown since he had lived there before, but they did have a decent coffee shop from what he had heard.

When he saw Lita walking up to the lobby, his heart stopped. She was stunning. Even more so than the night before. At the reunion, it was like she was dressing for appearances, to please other people. This time, she looked like herself. Like a hot more grown-up version of her, but her all the same. She had on a pair of tight black jeans, biker boots, and a Judas Priest T-shirt. Her hair was down and styled in waves, and her makeup was a bit darker. She almost looked like a curvy rock star, and it made him feel a little overdressed.

“Hey, you look sharp. I wasn’t sure what we were doing, so I went a little casual. I hope that’s okay?” Lita walked up to him. She looked a little awkward and uncomfortable, but her smile was beautiful.

“You look perfect. I wasn’t really sure what to expect either, so I wanted to be able to go anywhere.”

“Well, let’s get out of here. I’m pretty hungry so I am ready to go.” Lita gave a shake of her hips and nudged for him to follow her. Lita was never a skinny girl. She had curves, and they were still perfect. So, when she shook her hips at him, all he could think about was the one time he had those hips on his lap and how he didn’t do anything about it. Maybe he should have.

Lita’s car was a moderate size. Honestly, it was a bit boring of a car. Silver outside and gray interior. It was a little hybrid which probably ran well and got good gas mileage but not what he pictured when he looked at the woman with him. Back in school, she had a dark red Pontiac. While not a sports car, it did have more personality than this.

“Umm, I am not sure how to do this. I’m sorry,” Lita said, almost looking away.

“It’s okay. I didn’t expect you to.” He reached out and took her hand, turning her to face him. “Hey, please don’t feel awkward asking me questions or bringing this up. I have been in this chair for five years. I am used to it. This is a part of me, but I don’t expect other people to understand what all of this is.”

Alex went over the instructions on how she could help. Though he still hated asking for help, he knew it was part of the situation he was in and had accepted it. She did a good job getting him settled and the chair in her trunk, then she slid into the driver’s seat. A flash of a memory went through his mind. The last time they had seen each other was in her car when she was driving him. Something about being next to her again just made him think about that night. She had never looked so sexy, well, except maybe now.

“So, you said you are up in South Carolina now. Do you like it up there?” Lita asked, trying to break the ice and make conversation.

“It is nice. We actually have seasons up there, and I have a decent house that is made for my situation. Clara let me keep it since she knew I needed it.” Alex answered.

“It sounds like you two had something really special,” Lita said, a sad tone in her voice.

“We did. It was beautiful and magical, but when I got hurt, she just couldn’t take it. Truth is, I couldn’t either. I tried, I really did, but she needed things I couldn’t give her. We agreed it was for the best. I love her, probably always will, but I want her to have the opportunity to have a family and be with someone who can give her the happiness and life I just

can't anymore," Alex explained. It still hurt to talk about it, but they had agreed, and he had time to prepare.

"That's pretty noble of you. I don't think I could have done it," Lita said.

It wasn't long before they pulled into the parking lot of the coffee shop, and Lita hopped out to get his chair for him. They went in and to the counter so they could order. Alex paid close attention to what she ordered, a sugar-free mocha cappuccino and a low-carb egg scramble wrap. He wasn't sure if she was trying to eat healthy because it was him or if she had really started eating that way. He ordered an egg, sausage, and cheese croissant and a large black coffee. It was simpler but what he liked.

Once they had their order, they found a table off where it was quiet. Alex watched her as she took her first sip of coffee and a smile spread over her face. "That good, huh?"

"Yes, sometimes, that first sip of a good coffee house cappuccino is better than sex," she teased, giving him a heated look. It made a shiver travel down his spine, and he was sure his face heated.

"Well, that makes me wonder about your sex life if you think a cup of coffee is better than sex." Alex laughed. He remembered some of the sex scenes she used to write, and they were all so naïve even when she thought she was being naughty. He couldn't help but wonder what they would look like now.

"Well, I said sometimes. Not all the time." She laughed, and her cheeks turned a beautiful color of pink.

"Well, good. I'm glad life hasn't been that bad for you." Alex took a sip of his coffee and also felt a moment of satisfaction. It was a nice feeling, but he missed sex a lot more. "So, you haven't really talked much about your dating life. What's going on with that?"

"There isn't much. I dated this guy kinda seriously for a couple of years, but that didn't work out. Most of it has been littered with short-term flings, but I don't have the patience for a lot. If a guy doesn't want to be a part of my life, I don't want him in it," Lita explained.

Alex sat back for a moment and looked at her while he drank more of his coffee. "Sounds to me like you are pushing people away."

"Maybe. I'm not in the market for getting hurt. So, I take care of me." Alex was kind of shocked at her words. Out of everyone he had known back then, he had always thought Lita would find a good partner and have a

family. She always had such a big heart. Hearing her talk about being so isolated sounded pretty sad.

“Well, maybe it is just that you haven’t found the right person. As cheesy as that sounds, you deserve better than being alone all the time and having short flings. You were always such a good woman,” Alex said, leaning forward and taking her hand. “You deserve to be happy.”

“Sounds like that’s your hope for everyone. Make them happy, but what about you? You don’t plan on spending the rest of your life alone, do you?” Lita asked. It was pretty obvious she didn’t want all of the attention on her, but neither did he. Part of him wished they could just pick up where they left off, but that was with him thinking she was too innocent to touch.

“I don’t know. I won’t make much of a husband. My body doesn’t work right, and I can require a lot of work to deal with. It isn’t like I can sweep anyone off their feet.” He motioned to his condition.

“There are lots of things you can do that doesn’t require that, and if someone truly loves you, they would be understanding.”

He was sure she didn’t mean it the way it sounded, but it made him wonder if Clara really had loved him or if she was able to give up so easy because she didn’t love him as much as he thought. It wasn’t something he had ever thought about before, and it made him a bit uncomfortable.

“Hey, I’m sorry if it came off harsh. I know you are just getting through a divorce, but I don’t know. I feel like if I was in love with someone enough to go through getting married and starting a life with them, then I think I would be okay with the hardships that may or may not come with the relationship. Nothing in life is perfect.” Her words were powerful and real, and it made him wonder if the reason she hadn’t found someone was because she wasn’t willing to settle for anything less than true love and happiness.

Alex had thought he had that with Clara, but everything happened so fast, and then he spent half of their marriage overseas. Even Brandon had questioned if part of the reason their relationship felt so magical was because they were constantly in the new love stage. They were never together long enough to move past it, because he was gone all the time. Hearing Lita made him wonder if his friend had always been right.

“It isn’t harsh. Honestly, it isn’t anything Brandon hasn’t said to me either. Clara and I didn’t spend a lot of time together before I got hurt because I was overseas, but after I got home and I was so hurt, I guess

things between the two of us got real. We were no longer filled with new relationship magic, and we had to deal with some difficult challenges.” Alex said, feeling like he was reflecting on his past with new eyes.

“Sometimes, the idea of love and having something is a lot stronger than the actual relationship. I know when I was in high school, writing all those stories and songs, I found myself creating a fantasy that was unachievable. It made me see people differently, because in my mind, I created a version of them that was more than who they really were,” Lita explained. “I wouldn’t doubt during that time you were gone Clara did the same thing. It is so much easier to create a fantasy than it is to face the truth.”

“Maybe ... maybe.” Alex sighed.

They finished their drinks and meal and went back out to her car. Something about the drive back to the hotel had Alex nervous. He wanted to kiss her again, just as he had all those years ago, but it wasn’t fair for him to do that to her twice. She deserved better. Once they were at the circle drive in front of the hotel, he turned to her. “It was great to see you again. I hope we will be able to see each other again soon.”

“Well, I am up in Birmingham now, so if you are ever around, make sure to give me a call. Maybe I can take you to Papa Gino’s.” There was something sad in the way she looked at him, and he reached over to cup her face.

“I will, for sure.” Alex rubbed her cheek with his thumb. “You are so beautiful.”

Lita didn’t answer, and the tension between them built even thicker as they sat there looking at each other. Time started to stand still, and Alex found himself licking his lips and leaning in despite his better judgment. He wanted to kiss her, taste her again, and see if she still kissed with innocence after all this time.

He was still a safe enough distance, to not look like a complete fool, when she jerked away and looked past him. “Your friend is there waiting for you.”

Alex blinked out of the trance he was in and turned to see Brandon standing at the door of the hotel lobby. His friend almost looked sheepish like he realized he had ruined the moment. “I should probably go. Lita, I hope to see you really soon. I don’t want to go another ten years.”

It had been the best weekend Alex had in a long time, and he hated it was ending. But it was time to get back into the real world and maybe process some of the feelings he had stirring inside of him.

“I will be looking forward to it.” Lita leaned over to kiss his cheek. It was the best he was going to get, and he would take it.

Chapter 10

The weekend had been amazing, much more so than Lita had thought it would be. It made going back to work very difficult. Ever since her date with Alex, and that almost kiss they had shared, she could not get him out of her head. He still looked as sexy as he had all those years ago. Even his injuries didn't take away from how strong he looked, and that smile. Yes, she could still melt into that smile.

"Wow, you are floating. I thought you were dreading the reunion. Looks to me like you had the time of your life." Oliver peeked over his cubicle wall.

"I'm not floating, but the weekend turned out much better than I thought it would. I met up with someone I hadn't expected to see there." Lita couldn't help her smile.

"Sure, I believe that. You keep telling yourself that. Tell me about this person you met." Oliver continued.

"I swear you are a bigger gossip than anyone else I have ever met. I mean, my family doesn't even gossip that much, and they gossip a lot." Lita laughed shaking her head and going back to her pile of work.

"So, you aren't going to tell me. Okay, I will get it out of you eventually." Oliver laughed then went to sit back down. She heard the obvious upset in his voice, but he would get over it.

Lita had just started to get into her proposal when her phone rang. Looking at the caller ID, she saw it was Kammy. Once upon a time, she would love hearing from her friend. But lately, it had gotten a little weird. As much as she loved Kammy, they certainly had started to stray. Picking up the phone, she sighed before answering. "Hey, Kam, what's up."

"Oh, hey! So, I have this idea, and I swear it is going to be big. I swear, I just need a little help to get this off the ground, and then I will be set," Kammy said before Lita had a chance to say anything.

"Okay, so why are you calling me, at work, to tell me this?" Lita leaned back in her chair to see what her friend had to say.

“Well, because I really am going to need your help. Just in the beginning. You were always the one that said you believed in me and that I can do anything,” Kammy went on to say. “Well, I need you to believe in me now.”

“You need money,” Lita said, waiting for her to stop beating around the bush.

“Yes, I do, but it is just until I can get things started. Then I will be able to pay you back,” Kammy answered, excitement heavy in her voice. “You know I went to school to be a chef, and there is a guy selling a food truck. I figured I could get it fixed up, maybe move up there to Birmingham with you, and start a business, maybe selling food near the hospital or business district. It wouldn't take long, and you know my food is amazing.”

“It can be, when you aren't using too much salt,” Lita countered. She wasn't sure how she felt giving her friend money for such a risky venture. As much as she wanted to support her, there was a lot of risk, and what if the “help” didn't stop being needed?

“Ha, ha, very funny. Look, I really think this will be great for me. I want to feel like I am doing something with my life. I know my grandmother needs me now, and I love being here for her, but I want to be more than just the girl sitting there helping her out.” Kammy sounded a little hurt but not hopeless.

“Give me some time to think about it. How much do you need?”

“I only need enough for the down payment. They said five thousand. And don't think I am asking you for all of it. I know that is a lot to ask. Just whatever you can spare. Once I have all the money together, I can do the down payment and start working on the truck. It won't take me long to get everything set up and making money. I swear, this is going to be amazing. And maybe you can help me with the marketing. You are the best.” She genuinely did sound excited about all of this.

“Wow, what does your family think about all of this?” Lita tried to sound supportive. She honestly wanted Kammy to do something that made her happy. For years, Kammy had been bouncing around trying to “find herself,” so it was time she came up with something she could focus on and succeed with.

“They just want me to be happy and do what I love. You know, like any supportive family. They are going to help too. I just need to try and make sure I can come up with the rest. With me not working, I don't have a way

to come up with the money on my own. But once I have it started; I swear... Please, Lita." Her words pulled at her heart strings. Lita believed in Kammy and wanted something wonderful to happen for her.

"Look, I have to get to work, but I will call you once I am off. I know you will do all you can to make something great out of this." Kammy squealed in excitement before hanging up the phone.

For a moment, before she got back to work, Lita thought about how nice it would be to have Kammy close to her. She had missed her friends and always wished they were closer. Regan came up when she could, but the city didn't really interest her. If Kammy moved up here to work her food truck, they could have some real fun. She would think about it, but she couldn't deny the idea was at least intriguing.

"I don't know. I just. I think if I can get out of this place and all the memories it would help." Alex rolled around the kitchen as a million thoughts raced through his mind.

"What about your rehab and doctors?" Brandon asked from the kitchen table.

"There are doctors in Alabama. The point is, everything about being here is a memory of the past. A memory I don't want to face every day. This house, this was me and Clara's. I shouldn't be here alone. This is the place I became a marine. I just think I need something new." Alex was pretty sure he sounded crazy, but it had been all he could think about since leaving the reunion.

"Sounds to me like you are running to your past. What did that girl do to you that would have you uproot your whole life and move? Hell, Clara is going to be pissed after letting you keep the house and now you want to get rid of it."

Alex turned and shrugged at his friend. "Maybe, but it has been years since I felt like I did this weekend."

"Yeah, it has been years since you were in the new love embrace. But that fades, and then where will you be? Look, Alex, you know I am all for being spontaneous, but this is about more than a wild night having too much to drink and going home with a stranger. This is about leaving everything you have on a whim. I think you owe it to yourself to at least give it time and think about it." Brandon arched a brow and splashed milk from the spoon in his hand.

Alex didn't want to hear reason, especially not from his anything but reasonable friend. When did their roles get reversed? "Yes, I understand this is a little more involved. But I need to do something to move forward, because what I have been doing here, what I have been doing for the last five years, isn't working."

"What happens if she doesn't want you, because that is what you are doing? You are chasing after her thinking maybe you can rekindle something that was never actually there. Yes, I get that being here probably still hurts, but aren't you just running toward more pain? A girl you haven't even talked to in ten years is not worth changing your whole life for. It's just too much, bro." Brandon got up and knelt in front of Alex, looking him in the eyes. "Brother, I will support you no matter what you choose. We are in this together forever, but I just want to warn you before you do something you can't fix. Once we are gone, we are gone. You can't take the house back. You can't just return to this if things don't go well."

"You saved my life, brother. I know I should listen to you, but right now, this just feels right," Alex whispered. Most people, if they were to kneel like Brandon had, would piss him off. However, this action was part of the brotherly bond they had built. No one understood him better than Brandon.

"All right, then we will do it. But how about we hold off selling the house or anything. Give it six months, and if you want to stay, then we sell the house. For now, let's just give it a trial period."

"Okay, that sounds fair. Six months, and then we will decide from there." Alex reached out and pulled Brandon in for a brotherly hug. He was lucky to have someone who cared enough to look out for his best interest. But he also needed to look out for his own interest, which meant making some changes. Six months was a good compromise, but he was hoping he never came back to it.

Chapter 11

She drove down to Ozark to talk to Kammy face to face. She had mulled over the helping her friend, and she wanted answers to a few questions before she handed over the check. Lita had some savings put back; it was not a lot, but it would help. Especially if her family was also going to help out. When she pulled into the driveway of Kammy's grandmother's house, Kammy was standing on the walk just next to the drive.

The excited look on Kammy's face was enough to make Lita feel more comfortable with the whole food truck thing. She still thought Kammy was biting off more than she could chew, but it was better than what she had been doing in her life. Maybe she could finally put to use the year of college she had gotten before she dropped out.

Her dropout status was part of the list of things that had Lita worried though. However, she was going to give her friend a chance to prove herself. It was the best she could offer. Getting in the car, Kammy buckled in and nearly started bouncing in her seat. "I can't wait for you to see it. I am so excited, and everyone is being so supportive of me."

"I'm glad. For a long time, your family didn't really support anything you did, and I know that made it hard for you." Lita backed out of the drive. "So, where are we headed?"

Kammy gave the directions, and Lita did the best she could to follow them, ending up at a used car lot on the other side of town. Unlike most, this one specialized in RVs and specialty vehicles. Nearly jumping out of the car, Kammy was already racing toward the truck she was looking into buying. "Isn't it beautiful?"

Lita couldn't see it. The truck was old with peeling paint and decals from whoever owned it before. There were rust stains in places, and the tires were shot. Sure, the initial investment was five thousand dollars, but how much would she have to put into it in order to make the truck viable? Lita couldn't help but think her friend was getting in way over her head. "Kammy, it looks like it is going to need a lot of work. Maybe I can look

for something up in the Birmingham area. That way you wouldn't have to move it. Then you can come stay with me for a while.

"I know it doesn't look like much, but it is mostly cosmetic stuff. They told me they would put new tires on, and I had my uncle take a look at it. He said it works just fine, just needs some TLC. I know that I can make it work with just a little bit of help." Kammy's uncle was a mechanic, which was a bonus. It also meant she had someone to work on it if something were to go wrong.

Still not sure, Lita continued to give Kammy the benefit of the doubt. The owner of the lot, a portly man with frizzy gray hair and a mustache, came out and opened the truck. The inside looked decent, and after taking some time to check everything, Lita was surprised to see it all worked.

"Now, just so y'all know. I do have someone else looking into this truck, so if you plannin' ta get it, you need to hurry," the older man said as he locked up the truck.

Lita waited until they were back in the car before she said anything. This was difficult, because her friends had always been there for her. But it also wasn't like she had a ton of money to spare. Heading toward the local Mexican restaurant, Lita figured they would discuss it over lunch.

The restaurant was small and filled with all of the wonderful flavors of Mexico. Lita hadn't realized how hungry she was until she stepped inside. They got a table and ordered drinks, and she started the conversation while they looked over the menu and ate chips. "You really seem passionate about this, which I haven't seen in a long time. I know you have always wanted to go into the food industry."

"I really do. I don't think I could ever own a restaurant, there is too much involved, but this would be great. It is something I can do mostly on my own or maybe with one or two other people. I can have a small limited menu, and I can work a schedule that is set more around spending time with you and my family. It would be perfect for me. And you're right. I want to do something with my life. I just haven't found the right spot for me," Kammy answered before ordering cheese dip for the chips.

"All right, well, I have two thousand I can give you, but I do expect you to pay me back. Maybe with the help of your family, you will be able to get this off the ground soon. I just hope you understand you can't go into this lightly. It is a huge project and a huge investment. So, make sure you know

one hundred percent that this is what you want to do,” Lita said, a knot forming in her stomach.

Kammy shrieked with excitement, drawing attention from other patrons. Her friend jumped up and ran around the table to give her a huge hug and sloppy kiss on her cheek. “I swear you won’t regret this! Oh, I am so excited. I can’t wait to tell my grandmother. She has already been helping me come up with menu ideas. I plan to do a German menu as homage to my roots.”

A few moments later, the waitress came and took their order. Lita wasn’t sure if she had ever seen Kammy so excited. The way she went on and on about the food and her plans was a breath of fresh air. Once upon a time, Lita was just as excited about her own hopes and dreams. Real life had killed them but seeing Kammy excited had her thinking it wasn’t impossible to look again. Maybe she had just given up too easily. It wasn’t like she was old, and even if she was, chasing your dreams shouldn’t have to be put on a shelf to collect dust.

After dropping Kammy off, Lita decided it was time for some peace and quiet. Her mind was racing with ideas of what she should do. It was difficult for her, because she ultimately wanted to go through some of the old boxes her mother had stashed there. They held her notebooks and things from when she was in high school. It had been easier for her to leave it there, especially since her mother didn’t even use the house anymore. That way she wouldn’t have to worry about losing any of it when she moved from place to place or need to get a storage unit if her apartment was too small.

Sitting on the couch, she carefully opened the dusty old box to reveal her old stories. There were stacks of them, all filled to the brim with things she had written. A lot of them were fanfictions about boy bands, which had been the highlight of her high school career. However, there were also quite a few originals. Hell, even the fanfictions had decent story lines.

Thumbing through the pages, she saw marks where different friends had put their initials so they would know where they left off in the story. Some of the words had faded over the years, smudged from heavy use and simple passing of time. Reading parts here and there, Lita felt her heart going light, and a smile spread over her face. She had loved writing these stories and seeing them again made her wonder why she ever stopped. There was no

reason she couldn't keep doing it. The only thing that stopped her was her own fear and self-defeating mind-set.

For hours, Lita got lost in the memories of the stories she had once created. The room turned dark, and she reached over to flip on the lamp. She jumped when her phone rang. Taking a moment to come out of her haze, she picked up her phone and looked at the caller ID. Alex? Why would he be calling? She hadn't heard from him since the reunion, which had disappointed her some. However, part of her had expected their shared time was over once more.

"Hey! What's up?" Lita asked, picking up the phone.

"Not a lot. Sorry I didn't call sooner, I kinda have been in the process of moving," Alex said from the other end of the line.

"Oh, because of the divorce? I'm sorry. I hope you are getting settled." Lita said, leaning back. She had been leaning forward so much that her back was starting to hurt.

"No, I got the house in the divorce, but honestly, being there was just a little depressing for me. So, I decided to move back to Alabama. I thought it would be nice to have some friends, to rely on for a while." Lita couldn't believe his answer. It sounded so rash. She wasn't sure she could ever decide like that.

Alabama, like near her? Not that Alabama was small, but the way he was saying it made her wonder if he was calling because he wanted her to know he would be closer. "That sounds like a huge change. Are you sure?"

"I didn't sell my house or anything. So, I can always go back if this doesn't work out. But I just needed a change. Brandon and I got us a place in Birmingham, and I remember you saying that if I was ever in the area to let you know. So, this is me letting you know I'm in town and getting settled. Maybe we can get together sometime." Alex sounded excited at the idea.

"Well, I'm down in Ozark right now, helping out a friend, but I will be back Monday. Maybe we can have dinner together Monday night?" Lita suggested. "I can take you to the best pizza place ever."

"Pizza in Birmingham, not what I expected, but I will trust you. Let's meet up about seven. I will have to make a bunch of calls during the day, so I am sure I will be ready to relax by then." Alex laughed. He sounded happy, even more so than he sounded at the reunion.

“Well then, I will see you Monday, so how about we meet there. I can send you the address. That way I can leave straight from work.”

“I’m cool with that. See you soon,” Alex said, and they hung up the phone.

Lita was sure she had the goofiest look on her face. At least she was alone. Her friends would have had plenty to say about it if they saw her. They had been giving her grief since the reunion. Well, now, she had even more reason to head back north as quickly as possible.

Chapter 12

Lita had brought her makeup bag with her so she could freshen up her look before leaving the office. She had sent Alex the address to Papa Gino's, and it was almost time for her to head that way. This time of day, there was always a little more traffic than she liked. Which was why she was glad he had suggested seven. She would rather be early than late.

Putting on her darker nightlife lipstick, she touched up her hair and walked out of the bathroom. Oliver was waiting for her with a sly look on his face. "I get the idea you have plans tonight."

"Do you have nothing better to do with your life than to follow me around and look for gossip?" Lita laughed, heading back to her desk for her purse and keys.

"Well, things have been boring lately, so listening to your drama gives me some sort of entertainment." Oliver followed her. She knew he meant nothing by it, but sometimes his constant snooping was rather annoying.

"I'm glad you can look at me as your personal reality show, but not today. If I don't get out of here soon, then I will be late for my date, and I don't want to be." Lita turned, gave Oliver the best smile she could muster, and left.

As expected, the traffic was thick, but at least it was moving. To keep her nerves calm, she had the radio blaring and she was singing along with it. It kept her from thinking about the date. Was it a date? She wasn't sure. It was better if she just sang her heart out instead of over thinking it.

It took her nearly an hour to get to the restaurant, which put her there fifteen minutes early. She had already called Papa and told him she was coming in and that she wanted a little something special. When she walked into the door, Papa was already rushing toward her, arms spread so he could pull her into a tight hug. "I have missed you so much. When you come back and work for me? You were happier when you worked here."

He wasn't wrong. She had been happier, but life had been simpler back then too. Now, she had to be an adult, which most of the time sucked. "I love you too, but I don't think I will be coming back any time soon."

“Well, the position is always open for you. Now, tell me, what is going on that you call and tell me you are coming in special?” Papa asked, walking with her over to the table she had requested. It was one that had a little more room and was away from the main part of the restaurant and all of the noise that came along with it.

“Truthfully, I asked a guy to meet me here. Now before you get too excited, I don’t even know if this is a date. He is an old friend from high school, and he wanted to meet up and have dinner.” Lita held her hand up to stop Papa before he could say anything else.

“Sounds like date to me. I will put in some fresh cannoli for you. You deserve the best.” Papa started to walk off, calling to the back. “Catalina! Grab that good wine Lita likes. She has a date tonight.”

She was shaking her head and about to take a seat when she felt someone poke her hand. Jumping from the surprise, she turned to see Alex next to her with the biggest grin on his face. “So, they are breaking out the good wine for your date?”

Embarrassed, Lita rolled her eyes to cover it up. “I told him it wasn’t a date, but he insisted on making a show of it.”

Something flashed through Alex’s eyes, a look she couldn’t quite read, but it was gone in a flash. “Well, it could be a date. I just don’t want to push. It has been a long time, and things are different now.”

Lita wasn’t sure how to respond to that. On one hand, she wanted it to be a date too, but she wasn’t sure if she was ready to take on the baggage that came with Alex. It made her feel a bit guilty for thinking about it, but it was the truth. He had already explained a lot of the reasons his wife had left, and they were hard to deny. “I’m not opposed, but we should probably take things one day at a time. I mean, it has been ten years.”

“I will grant you that. A casual date, then.” Alex wheeled up to the table, and the waitress came to take their drink order and drop off a basket of garlic knots.

The two of them sat close enough they could share the same menu. Lita had eaten everything the restaurant had to offer, many times over, so when Alex decided on something, she decided it was what she would order. “I used to work here, back when I was in college. They were like a second family to me. When my grandfather died, they were the first ones there. Even though I had just quit.”

“That sounds wonderful. I’m glad you had someone there for you. I remember when he got sick. You didn’t take it well,” Alex said. “You are doing well now though. I mean, this may not be California, but you are in the city, and sounds like you have a good job.”

“It isn’t singing or writing though, so it is far from what I had hoped to be doing.” Lita looked down, ripping apart the garlic knot in her hand.

“There is still time. You had to do what you needed to do to take care of yourself. You have always been independent like that. When you feel settled, I am sure you will get back to it.” Alex turned her to look at him. “You were always talented, and I’m sure you didn’t lose that.”

“I don’t know. I tried riding a bike again after over ten years and nearly busted my butt. It isn’t as easy as they say to get back to it.” There was an almost defeated sound in her voice; she just couldn’t keep it at bay.

“Hey, that is not the girl I knew. I know you can, you just have to try.” It was sad that Alex, after all this time, still believed in her more than she believed in herself.

The pizza was brought out, which was perfect for distracting them from the conversation. She smiled looking at the gooey pie, fresh from the oven and piled with toppings. It was perfect, and she realized she was hungrier than she originally thought. However, Alex wasn’t giving up so easily. “Lita, I know you can do it.”

“Well, when I was back home this weekend, I did find a bunch of my old notebooks. It was interesting to read over those old silly stories.” She found herself blushing as she thought about it. Alex had read a lot of the stories she wrote back then, not knowing some of them were about him.

“Oh yeah, silly stories with their innocent sex scenes. Even after you lost your virginity, your stories were kinda...” Alex started and Lita arched a brow at him.

“I know, I was very naive back then, but I have a little more experience now. I imagine I will be able to write something a little more realistic.” She grinned as she grabbed a second slice of the most perfect pie.

Alex had a conflicted look on his face, but it washed away a moment later, and he was back to his old sexy self. “Yeah, I figured you would have. And you can use that and all your other experience to write even more stories and songs.”

“Well, you were part of what got me thinking about it. When I saw you, I remembered the promise I made to you, and part of me felt a little guilty

because I had let my dreams go. A much as I wanted to follow them, life kept getting in the way, and it felt like a sign that I should just give up.” Lita had never talked about what caused her to give up. People often assumed she just moved on and became an adult, but honestly, she just felt defeated.

Alex had been watching her as she told her story. Though he didn't say much, his face and eyes told her a lot. He didn't see her as a failure. He was sad for her, but he wasn't upset. At least that was what his face said. “A lot of people give up on their dreams, and because of that, they assume everyone else does too. We let life get in the way. We let it defeat us, but we must be stronger than those battles. Maybe you can try starting up some songs at home so you can look at them whenever. Sometimes the first step to finding passion again is starting.”

Lita liked the way he smiled at her after saying those words. Being with him again after all that time felt natural. Instead of the awkward feeling she got when she was talking to people at the reunion, she felt like they were picking up where they left off. There was heat in his eyes, just as there had been the night of the party when he had kissed her. It was like the stars were pushing them back together.

Once again, she found herself moving toward him to kiss him, but just as they got close, Papa Gino came and set down a plate of cannoli and two glasses of wine. “Made fresh just for you.”

“Gino! Did you not see she was about to kiss him? Why would you interrupt them?” Catalina called from the front counter.

A rush of heat flooded Lita's cheeks as she moved away and tried to hide behind her hair. “They needed their dessert; besides, I don't know if he is good enough for our Lita.” Gino gave Alex a piercing look before leaving the table.

Being an adult did not keep Lita from feeling mortified by what happened, and she certainly did not want to see the look on Alex's face. It was just her luck Papa Gino would interrupt when she was going for it. In her peripheral vision, she saw the glass of wine being slid toward her. She looked to it and up at Alex, who also had a bit of pink in his cheeks. “Well, we can't let it go to waste. They look amazing.”

He said nothing about the almost kiss. Instead, he tried to move on and make her feel less embarrassed. It was a nice quality, and something she had remembered about Alex from all those years ago. “So, what do you say

about coming over and hanging out with me. We can always take these to go and have them a little later.”

“I think that sounds like a perfect idea.” Alex’s grin grew to a full-blown smile

Chapter 13

Alex followed Lita so he would have his own way to get home after the second half of their date. He hadn't planned to go back to her place, but after the second missed kiss, he was starting to think it would be the only way for them to have any kind of privacy. Lucky for him, Lita's apartment building had an elevator, so he had no problem getting up to her third-floor apartment.

However, the place was a little small with more stuff than she probably needed. It made navigating a little more complex, but he managed to make it to the couch and then transferred himself so he could actually sit with her. Lita was busy getting them drinks while still holding the little plastic takeout box with their dessert. Papa Gino didn't seem happy they were leaving without eating them, but Lita told him she would as soon as she had room. Lita had been right about the food. It was incredible.

After a couple of minutes, Lita finally made it back to the living room to sit with him. She had taken off her shoes and jacket but was still dressed nice. "I had no idea what you wanted to drink, but this wine goes well with the sweets. I don't keep beer or soda, so the only other stuff I have is juice, milk, and water."

"Wine is fine, I rather you relax some. Why are you so nervous?" Alex reached out and took one of the glasses from her hand.

"Maybe because in ten years, I am still the same girl at heart. You always made me nervous." Lita's cheeks turned that pretty rosy color they did when she was embarrassed but trying to hide it.

"I don't know why. I always liked hanging out with you. It was fun, and you made me feel like I could be myself. It was, I don't know..." Alex reached out and brushed a strand of hair from her face.

"Yeah, I know, sweet and innocent, that is how you always saw me. I didn't want to be that way with you though." Lita almost looked angry when she said that.

Alex had been fully aware for a long time that Lita had a crush on him. It was sweet, and maybe he had let it go on longer than he should because

he liked the energy it created between the two of them. But he had also been afraid to take that innocence from her. There was just something about it that bothered him. Even now, after all these years, she was still sweet, and he still felt that quality that always made him pull away. He had always messed around, and he didn't want to taint her with his past choices. Seeing her face, though, he realized it offended her how he kept referring to her in such an angelic manner.

Tonight, he didn't want to pull away. People were not often given second chances and certainly not third. Setting his glass down, he decided to be brave. Sure, she might not want to be with him in his current condition. He wouldn't blame her if she didn't, but he had to give it a try. As he leaned toward her, his hand moved up to slide through her hair and pull her closer. His eyes homed in on the way her lips were slightly parted and how she licked them softly. She wanted to kiss him as well; he had to believe that.

He went to close his eyes but found himself forcing them open for a little while longer. Her eyes were closed. She was ready for him. And that was when he closed the distance and pressed his lips to hers. A jolt of electric energy coursed through his body. She scooted in closer to him, and their kiss deepened. This time, there was no one to intrude and no time limits. He could kiss her for as long as he wanted, well, unless she didn't want to. However, she seemed perfectly happy to continue kissing him as well.

Their lips moved together, and his arms wrapped tightly around her, pulling her into him. His legs might not work, but his upper body was still strong, and he wanted to feel her warmth pressed to him. Clothes or not, the contact was long overdue. When he pulled her closer, her arms wrapped around him too, and a sexy moan vibrated up from her throat. Damn, did she feel and taste good. He never wanted it to end; however, the truth was, he wouldn't be able to do much for her, not past making out and foreplay, and the last thing he wanted to do was lead her on.

Pulling away, he rested his forehead against hers as he tried to catch his breath. She, too, panted and held to him, her body shaking in his arms. The energy between them was intense, and he wanted more of it. Oh, so much more.

"Alex," she whispered, her eyes closed and her lips still close to him. There was no tension in her, just a wanton hold on him that made him want

to start again. So, he did.

This time, the kiss had more hunger. He pulled her into his lap and held her tight, letting her feel his strength. Once upon a time, he would never have been able to kiss her like this, but now, now, it was all he could think about. Until seeing her, a part of him had died. She made him feel young again. She gave him hope in one of the darkest times in his life, and she had no idea she was even doing it.

The kiss changed. He ran his hands up her back and into her hair, fisting the silky strands around his hand as he pulled her head back and started to kiss down her neck, tasting the sweetness of her skin. Deep inside, he knew what he was doing was wrong. It could never be more, but he craved it with everything he had inside of him. He would savor it, as long as she would let him.

The feel of his lips on her skin was intoxicating. For a long time after graduation, she had imagined a moment like this. However, those were the fantasies of youth and had faded. In that moment, though, she felt like a teenager again. His strength made her feel both vulnerable and protected. She had always known he was strong, but this was something else. With how sweet and playful he was when they were hanging out, when he was overrun with passion, he was fierce.

However, with how much fun she was having making out with him, she didn't want to get her hopes up about being with him. Alex had made no promises of being able to be more than what they were. His body didn't function, and she wasn't sure it was a long-term situation she would be comfortable with. Time would tell, she guessed. There obviously was still desire there, on both sides of the equation.

They kissed and touched. Her hands pulled at his shirt so she could feel him skin to skin. Time had not taken away from the muscles he had built. He was still strong, very strong. "Lita, we..." Alex tried to talk, maybe to stop her, but she wasn't ready to stop.

Heat rose, and she found herself gasping for air between kisses. His hand moved up her spine, and he moaned with desire. It made her shiver and had her pressing tighter as if it was even possible. "Lita, we need to stop. I need air, and I just..." He kissed her again despite his words. Damn, this went beyond her dreams. "I just need a moment to think. I don't want to hurt you."

Hearing his words, Lita finally pulled away. She didn't want to, but she understood. Her body was already responding to the affection, and, even if he wasn't injured, she wouldn't want to go too fast. "Yeah, we probably should. Umm, do you want more wine?"

Alex looked up at her with a heated smile on his face. Damn, that did not help calm her throbbing need. "Yeah, I can have another glass. Besides, I wouldn't mind trying one of these cannolis."

Lita got up to grab the wine bottle and fill up their glasses. "They are the best. I swear I don't know how I managed to keep from blowing up like a balloon working there."

"You are beautiful, curves in all the right places." Alex waited for her to set down the bottle before pulling her back into his lap. She wasn't sure if he was planning to start making out again, but she had no complaints either way. "Lita, I don't want to rush whatever this is. I want you to be sure before we go too far. I care about you, and the last thing I want is for either of us to get to a point we hurt one another if things don't go well. It's been ten years; we can afford to take our time."

"So, you want to see if we can make more of this?" She ran a finger across the line of his jaw.

"Yeah, if you want to. Lita, I haven't felt this good in a long time. I think we could be good for each other." He stroked her hair from her face, then leaned in, and started kissing her again. Damn, it was going to be a long night.

"Alex, I can't make any promises, but I agree. I haven't felt like this in a long time either. Hell, tonight, I feel like a teenager again." Lita smiled before turning and reaching for the dessert and feeding him a bite.

"I shouldn't have done that to you. You deserved better than a quick kiss in the car the night before I was leaving." Alex licked crumbs from his lips.

Lita found herself blushing once again, and a smile spread across her lips. "That was one of the of the best moments of my life. When things got hard after that, I would think of that night. Dancing for you, that kiss before you left. It was magical, like a dream."

The look he gave her was a little confused, and she wasn't sure why. "I always thought I had hurt you. It actually bothered me for a long time. But I used to think about that dance too. It was far sexier than I thought I would get out of you. It shocked me but in a good way."

“I haven’t danced like that in ages. Truthfully, I don’t think I have danced like that since that night,” Lita whispered, letting the images of dancing for him play through her mind.

“Well, maybe you can dance for me again one night.” There was heat in his suggestion, and she laughed a little thinking about.

“Let’s see how things go. But, maybe.” She kissed him again, but this time, she didn’t let him stop them. She knew it was just kissing and holding each other, but it was more than enough for her. It seemed to be good enough for him too, because he held her to him with all his passion and strength, and all her stress melted away into the fantasies of her teenage self.

Chapter 14

Alex felt alive, and it made him want to focus even harder on his therapy and maybe on trying to heal a little more. Sure, he might never be able to be fully healed, but maybe he could fix some of it. The doctors had always said some function could return; he just wasn't sure how much. Now and then, he had been able to get a toe to wiggle or tingling sensations would return to his legs. The doctors called it hope, but in the past, he had seen it as pain. He didn't want to think something could happen and then it never did.

With how Clara handled his injury, he had lost hope. She didn't want a broken husband, and, even if he could get healed, he would still be partly broken. It had caused him to lose hope his life could ever be happy. However, Lita knew going into things he was broken, and she didn't seem to care. Sure, this was all new, and they hadn't even gotten to the point of calling each other anything to resemble a relationship. Right now, they were just friends who spent all night making out.

He grinned thinking about it again. Brandon had been shocked when he rolled himself in at seven in the morning. Probably the only reason he had left was because Lita had to get to work. They hadn't gotten much sleep between talking and kissing, but it had been a great night. After a shower and nap, though, Alex was ready to start setting up his new life in Birmingham.

Brandon had found them a support group to try out. They found comfort talking to other veterans about their time in the service. Those groups had gotten Alex through some of the darkest moments just after returning home. Now, Alex was sitting at the table, calling in to the VA, trying to find a doctor in the area. Birmingham was full of good doctors.

He had been on hold for over thirty minutes, and he wasn't sure if anyone was ever going to answer. That was one of the struggles, but he used the free time to think about what he would do next with Lita. She was a risk, but that made it more exciting.

"Still on hold?" Brandon asked, walking into the room holding his shoulder. Alex watched him as he walked to the cabinet to pull out his pills.

Brandon had been shot through the shoulder and nearly lost his entire arm to the injury. Most days, he was able to ignore it and move on, but other days, it bothered him greatly. From the look on his friend's face, this was one of those days.

"Yeah, but you know how it is. Sometimes, you just have to wait it out. I'll be fine in a bit." Brandon grinned and leaned against the counter. "So, are you tired?"

"You know, I should be, but I'm not." Alex put the phone on speaker and set it on the table. He was tired of holding it.

"You look happy. I swear I haven't seen you this happy in a really long time, but I am worried about you rushing this. I just watched you go through depression and divorce. The last thing I want to see is you hurt again." Brandon moved over to the table to take a seat with him.

"I know, and I am happy. It just feels so natural with her like I gave up a good thing back then. I realize I might be getting my hopes up, but I rather be like this than the dead shell I have been for years."

Brandon reached over with his good arm and patted Alex on the back. "You're right, and I will be here to pick up the pieces if something happens. I love you, man, and I want you to be happy."

Finally, someone answered, and Alex scrambled to pick the phone up again. The woman on the other end took down some information, and they discussed his next steps. The call lasted even longer than his hold time, but by the end of it, he had an appointment with a doctor and physical therapy set up. For the first time, he was looking forward to going into therapy and maybe making some progress. He had to.

"All right, well, now that you have that taken care of, I think you should get another nap. A real nap. Especially if you were planning to go out again tonight." Brandon yawned. His medication was starting to get to him, but he also wanted to make sure Alex was okay. Brandon was good like that.

"You're probably right. I don't know if I was going out tonight, but I definitely want some sleep before Lita gets off work." Alex pushed back from the table and started down the hall to his room. After another good nap, then maybe he would be able to plan for the night. One thing he knew for sure, though, was that he would be taking Lita out again soon.

Lita was still floating on cloud nine thinking about her night with Alex. She felt seventeen again, and it was amazing. At work, she had been able to

work out a plan for her marketing report that had been holding her back for weeks. When she presented it to the committee, they had been blown away by how fresh it was. Nothing felt better than getting high praise from clients.

Now she was sitting back in her little cubicle, doodling on a random piece of paper and drifting off into fantasies. Probably not the smartest thing to do, but she couldn't help it. "You have been acting weird all day. What happened to you last night?" Oliver asked, leaning against her cubicle wall. Apparently, he didn't have anything to do either.

However, Lita couldn't even get annoyed. "So, when I was at my reunion, I reconnected with a guy I had a huge crush on in high school. Well, he is living here in Birmingham and he asked me out on a date last night. Then he came over, and we spent the night just reconnecting. It was amazing."

Oliver arched a brow and gave her an almost wicked look. "Reconnecting?"

Instantly her cheeks flushed, and she threw her pencil at Oliver in retaliation. "No, not like that. I mean, we did kiss, but I am not the kind of girl to just jump on a guy the first time he takes me to dinner."

"If you wanted to, I wouldn't judge you. That is so outdated. Guys want to most of the time, why can't girls. Besides, you don't date a lot. If you found someone who could make you feel like this, then there is no reason to not take advantage of it."

That was one thing she truly liked about her freckle-faced buddy. Oliver did not believe in double standards. He had even gone and complained when he found out she was making less money than he was and had been with the company longer. She had gotten a raise after that, and he had earned a lot of respect with their female CEO.

"I appreciate that, but it is a little more complicated than that. I don't know. We have waited ten years to try this out, I don't see why we need to rush. If it is meant to be with the two of us, then it will happen." Lita didn't want to explain how Alex was paralyzed and probably couldn't have sex with her. Nor did he need to know all the details on why they didn't get together in high school. It was enough for him to have the details he already had, which obviously made him happy. After all, Lita had been cranky with him lately.

He gave her a sweet smile before pushing off her cubicle wall so he could go back to his own. "Well, just so long as it isn't because you are worried what other people think. Lord knows, I would never judge you, and we all know my opinion is the only one that matters." He gave her a playful wink and walked off before the boss saw him.

Lita sat back in her chair and took a big relaxing sigh. She was happy, and it was nice that others noticed. She decided she should call and check on Kammy. It had been a few days, and last she heard, Kammy had gotten her family to cover the rest of the cost for the truck. Lita was excited to see how things were coming along.

The groan in Kammy's voice however did not match the excitement she had expected to hear. "Hey, girl, how are things going with the truck?"

Kammy gave another moan before answering. "I have another one of those bad migraines, so I am at the ER right now. They have been coming back pretty badly lately, and I just can't seem to shake them."

A few years ago, Kammy had gotten into a cycle of migraines that landed her in the ER over and over for weeks. Lita had been too far away to help, but she was worried they were coming back. "Are they doing a CAT scan?"

"Yeah, I am just waiting for them to come back with the results. I have been here for hours, but at least they already gave me something for the pain."

"Well, that is good," Lita said, relieved Kammy wasn't hurting anymore. "So, I assume you haven't been able to get the truck yet."

"No, not yet. I was going to go up there today and finish up the paperwork, but I ended up here. Hopefully, I can make it up there before Friday. He said he can only hold it till then. Apparently, there is another buyer interested."

"Well, hopefully, you will feel better soon. I worry about you when you get like this." Lita felt a little sad for her friend. "Well, do you want to hear something interesting to take your mind off of things?"

Kammy tried to laugh, but it came out a bit more like a cry. "Yeah, 'cause it has been a long time since you had anything exciting to say."

"Well, you remember how I hung out with Alex when I was down there for the reunion?" Lita asked, feeling excited to share the news with someone. "Well, he is living in Birmingham, and we went out on a date.

Then he came back to my place, and we spent all night talking and making out. It was so fun.”

Oliver popped his head over the cubicle and arched a brow at her. Lita just shook her head and shooed him away.

“Girl, that’s exciting. But, can he even do anything with you. I thought he was fully paralyzed down there.” Kammy wasn’t shy about saying the truth. “I mean, as hot as he is, I don’t think I could be in a relationship where I couldn’t get sex a few times a week.”

“Well, I am going to see how it goes. I feel really good when I am with him, and I think it would be nice to see what happens from here. Yes, it comes with complications, but doesn’t every relationship?” Lita said, defending how she felt about things.

“You’re better than me. I really think it would be a deal breaker for me. Love you, honey, but I can’t do it.” Kammy chuckled a little. It was a bit disheartening that Kammy didn’t support her, especially with how long she had crushed over him. Maybe it was just because she wasn’t feeling well.

“Well, I hope you feel better soon. Let me know when you’re able to get the truck. I am looking forward to seeing you get your business started.” Lita sighed. They finished their conversation, and Lita hung up. She wasn’t going to let Kammy feeling bad ruin her good mood.

Chapter 15

It had been a few days, and Lita and Alex had spent most of that time talking and getting to know each other again. It was interesting, but there was still a superficial feel to it. They hadn't gotten into too many details about the hard things. She hadn't talked about her grandfather or everything that led to her giving in to a business degree and a cubicle job. He hadn't gone into what had happened to him when he was overseas. They were sensitive subjects neither of them was ready to discuss.

Now it was Friday, and Alex had invited her over for dinner. Brandon would be there too, but it would be nice and a little more informal. Not that either of them had felt the need to be too formal. Alex had instructed her to dress comfortably and be ready to hang out and watch movies. Sounded like a nice night to her, and she was looking forward to it.

Instead of starting the night late, she had asked to get off work a few hours early so she could go home, shower, and change into something comfortable. Her plan was to wear something more comfortable than jeans but not quite sweatpants. So, she put on leggings and one of her long ACDC T-shirts. This one she had made herself using a longer shirt so she could wear it with the leggings and not look strange.

Once she was dressed, she pulled her hair up into a high ponytail and just brushed on some lip gloss. They had no plans to go anywhere, so no point in putting makeup on that was just going to get smeared and rubbed off.

Lita sent a quick text as she got into her car and started it up: *Hey, I am on my way. See you soon.* Punching his address into her GPS, she waited for it to fully load before pulling out onto the road.

Alex lived about twenty minutes from her, but it wasn't a busy drive. When she pulled into the driveway, she smiled. The house had been modified to allow for his chair. It wasn't a fancy house, but it was quaint. She kind of liked it. Getting out of the car, Lita walked up to the door, but just before she tried to knock, Brandon flung the door open. "Hey! I was wondering if you were ever going to get here," Brandon said as she stepped

in. “Alex has been talking about this all day. Now maybe he will find something else to talk about.”

Brandon led her through the house. The living room had a good-sized leather sofa and chair set. There wasn’t a coffee table, but side tables were next to each side of the couch and between the two chairs. A TV was mounted on the wall with a small shelf under it that had a game system and some movies. However, the room held very little other furniture. They had kept the house open so Alex could easily get around.

“Alex is in the kitchen. He insisted on cooking dinner. He made steak and potatoes. I put a salad together, and we bought a pie for dessert.” Brandon turned the corner into the kitchen where Alex was putting plates on the table.

“That sounds perfect,” Lita said and smiled when she saw Alex. He had gone all out, and everything smelled amazing.

“Hey! I’m glad you are here. I didn’t want the steaks to get cold. I put everything on the table already, and I will get the potatoes out of the oven. I wanted to make sure everything is good.” Alex set down the last plate and wheeled over to her. She leaned down and kissed his cheek before she made her way to the table.

“Well, this all looks amazing. Thank you. You didn’t have to do all of this for me. I would have been fine with…” Lita began as she made her way to the table and took a seat. She didn’t want to be in the way. Brandon went to get the potatoes while Alex moved into his spot.

“I know you would have been fine with anything, but I wanted to do something special. It was important to me.”

Lita looked over all the food, breathing it in and letting herself taste it just from the scent. A smile spread over her face, and she reached out and squeezed his hand. “It is perfect, thank you. Now, I’m going to dig in because I am starving.”

The guys laughed, and the three of them went about making up their plates. Lita moaned at the first bite of steak. Alex had cooked it to the perfect medium rare with just the right amount of seasoning. “Wow, this is incredible. I have been to restaurants that didn’t make a steak this good. Maybe you should think about a new career path.”

Alex grinned, taking a bit of his own steak. “It isn’t that good, but I am glad you like it.”

“So, what are we doing tonight? I mean, you mentioned movies but not what ones.”

“Well, I wasn’t sure what you would like, so I picked up a couple of comedies, and I also have a couple of streaming services. Figured we could look over the list and you could pick something. I am pretty open-minded.” Alex answered, putting more sour cream on his potato.

“I want you to enjoy it too.” Lita screwed up her face. She liked how he was going out of his way to make her happy, but it wasn’t enjoyable if he wasn’t also having fun. The last thing she wanted was for their relationship to start out with all take and no give.

“Well, I promise you I will let you know if I don’t want to watch it, but I want you to decide overall. Then maybe next time I will choose.” Alex answered.

“Aww, you two are you just so cute.” Brandon teased. “Lita, I have to say, Alex hasn’t been like this in a long time. Even before we were discharged from the military, he was starting to lose his spark. You seem to be finding it again.”

“Well, it could be just new toy syndrome.” Lita laughed, and both men gave her a curious look.

“New toy syndrome?” Brandon was the first to ask though Alex seemed just as interested in finding out the answer.

“Oh, it is something my friends and I came up with a long time ago to describe that silly, lovey-dovey feeling you get when you are in a new relationship. That overwhelming happy.”

The two men looked at each other and exchanged arched brows. “I don’t think I have ever heard that before.” Alex chuckled. “I guess that’s one way to look at it.”

“Well, you know, it is like when a kid gets a new toy on Christmas and is so excited, but then after a while, that fades and you get to see if they really love it or if it was just the excitement of it all.”

For a second, Alex looked sad, but it was fleeting. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Hey, don’t look at it that way. Everything feels out of this world when it’s new. The difference is when you can get that out of this world feeling to last. That is when you know you have something special,” Lita went on to explain further.

“I guess that’s true. I mean, I have talked to a lot of girls and had that feeling, but it didn’t last. Maybe it is a good way of putting it. I know I was like that as a kid, so you may have something there.” Brandon was obviously trying to make Alex feel better about it, but Alex did not seem convinced.

“Hey, why don’t we go look and see what we can find to watch,” Lita suggested, getting up and kissing his cheek before heading back to the living room.

“I can clean up. You two go enjoy the movie. I am probably going to go out after I get everything put away.” Brandon said motioning for Alex to follow.

Like at her house, Alex transferred to the couch so they could sit close together. He picked up the remote so they could start browsing movie ideas. “Hey, I’m sorry if I upset you. It wasn’t meant that way.” Lita said.

“No, you didn’t upset me. I just was a little thrown off by it. I guess part of me is just hoping whatever this is, it lasts,” Alex explained.

“I do too. I mean, I have been crushing on you for close to fifteen years. Believe me when I say I want to see this last.” Lita turned Alex’s head to look at her. “I was talking to Kammy today. I told her you and I had been talking, and we went out on a date. She told me she didn’t think she could do it, and all I could think about was how it sucked that it was all she could see. I’m not trying to delude myself that whatever this is we will have it easy. But I want to try, because I do care about you, and I have wanted to be with you for so long. So, I don’t care if it is going to be hard, because it is worth it.”

The look in his eyes showed the turbulent emotions rolling through his mind. Lita wondered if he had thought after a while she was just going to leave. “I’m glad you want to be here with me, but I want you to be here because you want to be and not ...”

“Stop it. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t want to. So, can we just move on, relax, and watch the movie?” Lita leaned in and gave him a kiss, then rested against him. She was sure his insecurity was justified. He had just gone through a divorce because his wife hadn’t been able to handle his condition.

Chapter 16

Alex sat in the waiting room, tapping his fingers on his knee in anticipation. It was always that way when he saw a new doctor. It was awkward to explain everything that had happened. Not to mention, going over the details was not the most comfortable conversation to have. He hadn't even had that conversation with Lita yet even though he wanted to.

The idea of being that vulnerable, or having flashbacks, was not something he was ready to face. Not with her. Honestly, not with anyone. One day, if things went well between him and Lita, he would have the strength to open up to her. However, before he did that, he had to make sure she was serious about the two of them. Clara had already broken his heart; he didn't need it to happen again.

His thoughts had taken over his mind so much, so he hadn't realized the nurse was calling him. Snapping back to the present, he blinked and smiled at the woman standing before him. "Umm, I'm sorry. I think I just got lost in thought."

"It's all right. This happens from time to time. So, are you Alex Houston?" the nurse asked again. The woman before him was lovely with a welcoming smile. She had long braids in her hair which were pulled back and decorated with little silver clips. Her eyes were a soft amber color which shone with joy and matched the smile spread across her lips.

"Yes, I'm Alex." Alex still felt a bit hazy.

"Well, I am Rita, and I am going to take you back so we can get your vitals and talk with the doctor. Would you mind following me?" He liked she didn't ask to push him. It would happen a lot at doctor offices, which made him angry at times.

"Well, it is nice to meet you. Sorry if I seem out of it. I just have some things going on that has me a bit distracted." Alex followed along.

The doctor's office was nothing special. Like many others, it had ugly blue carpet and drab light-blue and dark-blue walls with pictures of flowers and lakes hung every couple of feet. It was generic yet meant to be comforting. Nothing about it eased Alex's nerves.

Rita went about doing the usual triage, checking his temperature, blood pressure, and other vital signs, all while asking him a string of questions which he had answered on the form and turned into the front desk. Part of him had always wondered why they had to fill out so much paperwork when everyone he spoke to planned to ask the same questions over and over.

Sighing deeply, Alex went through the whole process and then was taken to a room to wait for the doctor. Rita said it wouldn't be long, but Alex knew it was a standard statement. For all he knew, Alex would be stuck in the office for hours waiting for someone to remember he was there. It had happened before.

To his surprise, the wait was shorter than he expected. A loud knock sounded, which made him jump and turn toward the door. Panic raced through him, and it took him a moment to recover. Loud noises did not go over well for him. "Mr. Houston. I'm Doctor Cressler. It is nice to meet you today. How can I help you?"

"Well, I just moved here and am looking for a full-time doctor. I am hoping to find someone who can help me progress some. For five years, I have been told I can heal and maybe gain some function, but I haven't seen any of that," Alex explained.

"I see. I spent some time looking over your records. You went through some extensive treatment, but it does note little progress toward regaining movement and function of your lower body. There are notes in it stating you may have been having the trouble due to your own mental blocks. Would you like to talk about it?" the doctor asked.

Would he like to talk about it? No, he really didn't. The doctor was busy looking down at the file and not actually paying attention to him. There wasn't much for him to say about the past. He had been injured, badly, and come home to a less than supportive family. Clara was supposed to have loved him till death do they part and all that crap, but she gave up on him before he was released from the hospital.

Did he want to talk about it? No, but if it would help, he would do the best he could. Alex went into as much detail about what had happened as he was comfortable going into, and all the while the doctor jotted down notes and made noises to say he was listening. It was awkward, but hopefully, it would help.

“Well, I would certainly recommend you staying in physical therapy but also seeking some mental therapy as well. I would also like to discuss some other treatment options. Medicine has come a long way, and if you are serious about wanting to see yourself healed, there are procedures we could look into. That is all up to you, but first, I would like to see how things go for the next month. I am ordering PT three times a week and referring you to a counselor to speak with at least once a week. I would like to see you back in a month.” The doctor finally took the time to look him in the eyes. His words were a little vague. What was this treatment he was referring to?

“Counseling didn’t really help much in the past,” Alex said, not wanting to go through all this again with yet another stranger.

“Maybe you didn’t want it to work. If your wife wasn’t supportive, then you probably didn’t put your best foot forward when it came to therapy. I’m asking you to try again, this time, with your newfound motivation.” Dr. Cressler was not backing down. Sighing, Alex gave into it and went to the front desk to set up his appointments. It was a start. Maybe, whatever this treatment plan was, it would actually help.

All the talk about getting back to singing and writing had Lita’s brain working on overdrive. She had been reading some of her new stories, but they all seemed silly and juvenile to her now. What she really needed was to write something from the heart. So, Lita decided to do just that.

She brewed up a whole pot of coffee, popped some popcorn, and sat in her recliner with her laptop on her lap. Instead of plotting something out, which seemed horrifyingly intimidating, she just started writing about the past. She wrote about that night with Alex, and the fantasy she concocted late at night when she was lonely. Blushing a bit, her fingers began to fly over the keys, knocking out word after word, page after page. It was a complete fantasy but fun to write.

In her story, Alex came back for her before leaving for boot camp. He told her he loved her and couldn’t leave without knowing she would be there waiting for him when he got back. It was sappy and silly, but she was enjoying getting some creativity flowing. The longer she wrote, the more ideas seemed to pop into her mind.

She decided to open another Word file and jot down some of the story ideas she had so she wouldn’t forget, but she wanted to finish what she had

started. The story she wrote wasn't long, but it was fun and made her smile thinking of all the possibilities.

Then her story went into a sexier direction. Lita could feel the blush rise in her as she let the words flow. She had gotten so distracted that she jumped when her phone rang. Alex. He had gone to the doctor earlier and had promised to call her and let her know how the appointment went. She hoped it had gone as well as he had wished.

"Hey! Sorry it took me a second. I was writing, and when you called, it freaked me out." Lita said answering the phone.

"Writing? Really? Well, that is music to my ears. Next, I am going to get you on a stage again, and then I will really be excited." Alex's voice was smooth and sexy. Damn, if only he knew how excited she had made him in her story. Just hearing him talk had her wanting more.

"Yeah, well, I am just messing around right now. You know, seeing what I can get done. I didn't want to try anything serious until I was sure I could get into it, but I am having fun." Lita closed the lid to her computer so she wouldn't get distracted by the sexy scene staring back at her. She slid the computer to the side and got up to get a drink. Her bones creaked, and her muscles ached for a stretch. How long had she been sitting there? Making her way to the kitchen, she decided to change the subject before Alex got too nosy about what she was writing. "So, how did the appointment go? Did you like your doctor?"

Alex sighed deeply, making her wonder if the appointment had been a bust, but she would wait until he answered. "Well, it was like a lot of doctor visits. I answered the same questions a million times, went through my life story, and heard about how I am holding myself back." Alex's confident sensual voice sounded a little more discouraged.

"Well, are you?" Lita asked and then gasped. Had she just questioned that? Surely, Alex was doing all he could to get better, right?

"Maybe I am. He prescribed physical therapy three times a week, starting tomorrow, and wants me to talk to a shrink. Then after a month, if he feels like I am ready, he wants to talk to me about some treatment options. I don't know. He didn't go into a lot of detail about it, but he said it may help me a lot."

"Look, I know you have had a difficult time with all of this. You didn't have a lot of support, and things felt hopeless, but just like you believe in me, I believe in you. So, how about you give it your all. Maybe you will see

a difference?" Lita wanted to support him. She wanted to see him better and not just because part of her hoped one day they could do more than make out. She wanted him happy and feeling like he was the man he always believed himself to be. No, Alex didn't go into detail about how he felt or what had happened, but Lita could assume being injured like he was had caused him to feel less than human and less of a man. Lita didn't see him that way, but she certainly could understand it. Hopefully, with time, he would see it too.

"Things are different now, so I am going to do my best to go into all of this like the fresh start it is supposed to be. Thanks for being so supportive of me, Lita. You have no idea how much it means to me to have you in my life." Alex answered. "Now, tell me, what were you writing about?"

"You." She was so thrown off by his question, she didn't even have time to stop herself, and when she told him, the blush on her cheeks turned ten shades redder. "Oh crap. I didn't mean to say that."

"Oh really. Now you have to tell me more. Were you writing something like you used to?" Alex teased. She loved the more playful sound in his voice. It was much better than the way he talked when he was explaining his medical issues.

"That is none of your business, and no, you can't read it. I told you earlier I am just messing around, and when I write something serious, you will be the first to know." Lita laughed, glad he couldn't see just how embarrassed she was by having told him. At least she hadn't gone into detail.

"I'm going to hold you to that, Lita Reigns. Now, I am going to let you get back to work, and I am going to hunt down some food and get some rest. See you this weekend, okay?" Alex was laughing between his words, and if she could, she would have thrown a pillow at him. He was lucky he was on the other end of the phone and not on the other end of the room.

"Sounds great. I will see you later. Have a good night and call if you need anything." They hung up the phone, and Lita went to find her own source of nourishment before going back into her little fantasy.

Chapter 17

Over the last couple of weeks, things had started to really shape up for Lita. She had gone on a couple of dates with Alex, as well as gotten some real work done with her writing. For the time being, she was working on short stories which she might later put together to make a collection. Getting back to writing seemed to be helping her with her day job too. It took a lot of creativity to work on a marketing campaign, and with her mind in overdrive, she had been able to come up with some great ideas to help her team.

It was an exhilarating feeling and one she hadn't felt for many years. Which also put her in the limelight with her boss and gave her more work to do. Not that she minded, it made her feel proud she was finally moving forward in her career. For years, she had felt stagnant and stale. Now, she was working on some one of the larger accounts. If all went well, she would more than likely get a promotion, which would put her one step closer to reaching her goals.

Lita had everything laid out on her desk, trying to write out her proposal and set up her PowerPoint presentation for the client. The presentation was set two weeks away, and she needed to have everything perfect before then. Mrs. McDowell walked over to her desk, something she seldom did, and startled Lita out of her focus. "How are things going?"

Jumping, Lita looked up and smiled. "Oh, umm, well, it is coming along. I am still trying to make sure I have the basic outline done before I leave today, then come Monday, I am going to start putting together each section of the proposal and start on the PowerPoint. I should have everything for you to approve by Friday next week."

"I hope you are able to get it all done. This is a huge account and can really boost the firm's reputation and bring about more big-name clients. Before long, maybe we can bring our business to national clients and make a name for business here in Birmingham. It would be wonderful. We could rival other larger southern cities like Atlanta." Barbara seemed more than

excited about getting the new client, and that put more pressure on Lita to make everything perfect.

“It would be wonderful. I would much rather build and grow with you, and I am starting to feel a little more at home here.” Lita gave her best smile.

“Yeah, you are from a much smaller town. Well, I am glad you are happy here. You really are one of my best workers, and I don’t know what I would do without you. I thought for sure I would have lost you to some big firm in New York or something.” Barbara patted her on the shoulder then walked away. “Keep up the good work. You are doing perfect!”

Yeah, all the pressure. Not to mention, others had heard her words of high praise, which put a target on Lita’s back. Even Oliver, at the end of the day, was here to make money and progress up the ladder. To prove her fears true, Oliver poked his head around the corner. “You certainly are getting a lot of attention here lately. You went from skirting by to being put on the largest account we have.”

“Yeah, it is a nice feeling. I have also been writing again. In the last couple of weeks, I have managed to write five short stories. Something I haven’t done in a long time. I think it has helped get those old creative juices going,” Lita explained, not wanting to start a pissing contest with someone she considered her friend.

“Well, that’s good. I guess it helps you have the new boyfriend too. Seems getting lucky now and then has helped get your juices going too.”

Lita was surprised by the snarky remark, and she was sure it showed on her face. “Look, first of all, what I do and don’t do in my private life is no business of yours or anyone else’s here. Second, I work hard for this company and have for years. I don’t discount that everyone here works hard too, and I know I am lucky to be given this opportunity. As my friend, you should be happy for me.” Lita let her anger come through in her voice. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it in.”

She didn’t wait to see Oliver’s reaction to her words. He would get over it in a day or two. He always did. Instead, she went back to her outline and making sure she had it all in order. The details of the product were laid out at the beginning, followed by the listing of the ad campaign she would run for the product. Second, she had a campaign planned for the company itself. They wanted to completely overhaul their marketing strategy and rebrand to

reach a wider audience. It was a lot of work and something which would take months to achieve. However, if done right, it could bring a lot of business to the company. Lita wanted to do well, not just for what it would do for her but also what it would mean for both the company she was working for and her current employer.

Once again, she got lost in her work, and as the time went on, she didn't realize how late it got. At least, not until she felt a hand brush against hers. Startled once more, she turned to see Alex there beside her, dressed nicely as if ready to go out. Then she remembered they had plans to meet up with Regan and her new girlfriend, Sierra. This would be the first time she would meet Sierra, and Regan had told her how important it was for her to approve. Likewise, Lita wanted Regan's opinion on Alex. Kammy hadn't been very supportive.

"Hey, we need to get going. Are you about ready?" Alex asked, giving her one of his devilish smiles.

Oliver came out from his cubicle with his things, and his eyes grew wide. Lita hadn't talked a lot about Alex's condition, mainly because it wasn't anyone else's business. The look on Oliver's face said it all. He could not believe the man in the chair was the amazing boyfriend who had her excited and feeling lively. Putting on a smile, Lita stood and started to get her things together. "Yeah, sorry, I was focused on getting this put together. Let me get my stuff together, and I will be ready."

"Were you planning to change, or were you going in your work clothes?" Alex asked seeing Lita was still a bit of a mess after a long day's work.

"Umm, yeah, I have a change of clothes in my car. It shouldn't take me long to get ready. Sorry again. Just give me a few minutes." Lita gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before heading out to the car to grab her dress.

It only took her ten minutes to get changed and freshen up her makeup and hair. When she walked out of the bathroom, she looked like a different person, but Alex looked a little annoyed. Screwing up her face in confusion, she walked over to Alex to find out why. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah, sorry. That guy didn't seem to like me much. He seemed a bit snarky when he left. Messed with my head." Alex reached out and took her hand. "You, however, look incredible and make me feel amazing."

Lita could feel the blush rising in her cheeks. The way he looked at her made her hot with excitement. "Thank you, now let's head out before we're

late.”

“We are already late.” Alex laughed as they headed to the car. Lita was going to drive just because it was easier for her to drive her car than for Alex to drive his van.

“Yeah, well then, we shouldn’t dilly-dally even longer.” Lita laughed. She helped with Alex’s chair then headed off to meet up with her friend.

Regan stood outside of the theater, tapping her foot, with a playful expression on her face. The sheepish look on Lita’s gave said it all. She knew she was running late, but they were on time for the show, barely.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry. I was so focused on work and lost track of time.”

“Yeah, well, if you were five minutes later, they wouldn’t let us get seated, so let’s hurry up,” Regan said. Standing next to her was a woman with long red hair in a beautiful blue dress and black heeled boots. She was considerably older by appearance; which Regan had told her. Sierra was just over ten years older than Regan. Not that it mattered. So long as Regan was happy.

They had gotten special seating because of Alex. There were only so many spots in the theater which would accommodate a wheelchair. Lita wasn’t complaining; it put them closer to the stage. “So, I know we had to rush, but, Lita, I want you to meet Sierra.” Regan introduced them just as they were taking their seats.

Lita reached out and shook Sierra’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Regan has said nothing but wonderful things about you for weeks. Umm, this is Alex, my boyfriend. We actually knew each other in high school, but we just recently got together.”

“Yeah, Lita had the biggest thing for Alex back in the day, so this is like something out of a Hallmark special,” Regan added, making Lita even more embarrassed.

Alex reached out to shake Sierra’s hand too. “It is great to meet you too. Yeah, few people know that I had a thing for her too. I just thought she was too good for me.”

His words startled her. He had mentioned his feelings of her being too innocent back then, but never that he was into her. “Umm, yeah, so let’s get settled. The show is about to start.”

The look on Alex’s face said he realized just how much those words had affected her. When she sat down, he reached over and took her hand. They

were seeing a Broadway show and then going to dinner. It had been a long time since Lita had been to a theater show, and Alex said he had never gone, but he wanted to go so he could be with her. Regan and Lita had always been heavily into music and musicals, so seeing shows was something they loved to do together.

Moments later, the lights dimmed, and the show started up. For how tough Lita tried to be, when she watched live shows, the tears always followed. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Alex was watching her not the show. When she started to cry, he took hold of her hand and handed her a tissue. Smiling, she was glad he was there with her even if he was more concerned with watching her cry like a blubbering idiot than the show.

Chapter 18

The show had been incredible, and now, the four of them were gathered around a table at the Cheesecake Factory drinking cocktails and munching on appetizers. It was shaping up into great night out. Sierra had a cunning wit about her which fit Regan perfectly. Never had she seen her friend so happy. It was like Regan had found her soul mate.

“So, we went out hunting, and I swear, Sierra reminded me of when I took you fishing. She was there, and we had fun, but she didn’t want to do anything that meant touching something gross. We had a good time though. It was nice.” Regan laughed, grinning at Lita.

“Yeah, well, I can sit in the boat all day long, but I am not touching a slimy worm or fish.” Lita sat back in her chair.

Sometimes, when the two of them got together, they got caught up reminiscing about the past instead of talking about the here and now. “You just loved the sun and water. Alex, are you going to take Lita to the beach? It is one of her favorite places.”

“I don’t know. The beach can be a little difficult for me, but I’m not opposed to trying. I haven’t been in years. It could be fun,” Alex answered. Lita hadn’t even thought about her and Alex going to the beach. Honestly, her mind stayed focused on what they could do together. Maybe she was being a little too cautious. It was certainly something to talk to him about.

“Regan and I are planning a cruise next summer. I am looking forward to it. I have never been on a cruise before, and I think it will be good for us.” Lita was surprised by Sierra's words. She and Regan hadn’t been together long, but their relationship had blossomed quickly.

“Oh, wow, that is amazing. I would love to go on a cruise one day,” Lita said, genuinely excited. The elated look on her friend’s face made it all worth it. She had fallen, hard, for this woman, and it was a breath of fresh air.

“Well, you two should come. It would be great, and you deserve a break. You have taken, what, one vacation in the last five or six years. I don’t even count reunion because you only went for four days two of which

were the weekend. You really could use the time off, and it would be great to have you with us.” Regan slapped her hand on the table as if it was settled.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” Lita wasn’t sure she was ready to invest that much into her relationship with Alex. Right now, it was all shiny and new, but the complications that came with it might still prove to be too much for her.

“Well, think on it, but if you do want to do it, you need to plan sooner rather than later,” Sierra said.

The waitress came by and got them all more drinks as well as took their dinner order. They took some time to sober up before leaving to go back to Lita’s place. She dropped Alex off at his van on the way so he could get back home. Lita wanted time to hang out with just Regan, and he more than understood that.

After more drinks and laughter, Sierra went to bed, leaving Regan and Lita to fall back into memories of the past. “You know, life seemed so much more simple sitting on the bank of the river and talking about the future. Everything was perfect back then. Now, I don’t know. It seems like the world got complicated on us,” Regan said, sliding onto the floor from the couch and stretching out her legs.

“Yeah, back then, all that really mattered were dreams and our friendships. All of us were so close, and now, it seems like walls had come between us,” Lita agreed, wishing they could go back to simpler times.

“Too bad we had to grow up. I wish I could go back, but there is no going back. We are where we are. I mean, especially with Kammy. Things have gotten so bad for her.” Regan’s voice went from vibrant to serious almost instantly.

“Yeah, but things are turning around. She got the food truck and is going to start her own business. She is pulling herself out of the hole, slowly but surely.” Lita was proud of Kammy picking up the pieces after so much failure in the past.

However, the look Regan gave her made her wonder if there was something she was missing. “What food truck?”

“The one she just bought a couple of weeks ago. I loaned her some money from my savings, and she was going to move up here and stay with me so she could work in the city.” Lita’s heart started racing. What had she gotten herself into?

“Lita, I hate to break it to you, but Kammy didn’t buy a food truck. She has gotten involved with this asshole of a guy, and they are blowing through money and drugs. I don’t know who is urging who, but she is really messed up right now.” Lita was shocked. What the hell had happened? When she had talked to Kammy, she had been so excited about turning over a new leaf and getting her life back on track.

“Please say you are kidding. There is no way she did that.” Lita’s body shook with a mix of anger and heartbreak.

“I wish I were. I went to see her a couple of days ago. She was over at his house, and the place was trashed, like really disgusting. There were bills piled up, neither of them is working, and evidence of drug use was everywhere. She wasn’t even trying to hide it. I started to wonder what was going on when she started getting her headaches again. She went to the ER three times a couple of weeks ago just to get the drug to make it better. Then she straight up started asking everyone for money and telling people no one was helping her. It was bad. She isn’t even staying with her grandmother anymore.”

Lita felt like she had missed so much, and she certainly had been conned into giving Kammy money. Had anything her friend said been real or was it all a ruse to get as much money out of her as possible? “I gave her two thousand dollars. It was almost everything I had in savings. I really wanted to believe in her and support her. She said no one believed she was going to do well. I didn’t want to be another person that made her feel like all she could do was fuck up.”

“She tried to pull that same routine with me. I don’t remember what it was she said she needed the money for before, but she called three weeks in a row asking for money. The first couple of times I gave in and brought her some, but then I started to question it. That was when I found out about her new boyfriend and all the other stuff. I had no idea she was getting you involved. I thought with you way up here she would leave you alone.” Regan sighed. She reached out and took Lita’s hand. That money had been meant for Lita’s future. She had intended to use it to move up to bigger and better things. Now it was gone and not even for a worthy cause.

“I just, I can’t believe it. I mean, I knew she got in a pretty bad place when she lived in Florida, but that was years ago. I thought she put that all behind her.” Lita could not hide her shock, and the more she thought about it, the more she wondered if the signs were there and she had missed them.

“No, not really. I mean she kind of roller coasters. Sometimes, she would be in a good place, and other times, she would fall back on her ass. It has been this way for years. I tried once to get her to go to rehab and try to find a better outlet for her emotions. Honestly, I think there is something more behind it, and she is using the drugs as a sort of way to self-balance herself,” Regan added. It was more than apparent Regan had struggled as well.

For years, it had been the three of them. They fought through all the teasing and bullying. They stood together when the odds were against them. It was the three of them against the world. They had other friends, and all of them were as close as friends could be. But Regan, Kammy, and she had been the ones to stay together after graduation. The pain of what her friend was going through was more than she could bear. All Lita wanted was to find a way to help, but she was also angry. Kammy had lied to her, used her, and put her in a position of having to start over.

“Look, Lita, I’m sorry Kammy did that to you. I don’t know what to say. I mean, that was a lot of money.” Regan patted Lita’s knee, trying to comfort her as best she could.

“It isn’t your fault. I mean, I questioned it because it was so much money. I swear I did. I thought maybe I was getting myself into trouble. But then she took me to see the truck, and she was so happy. Everything was positive, and she had it all planned out. That was a lot of work to put into just conning someone out of money.” Lita sighed, leaning down to kiss the top of Regan’s head.

She would get through it and rebuild, but it was a hard blow. “Well, if you need it, I will do what I can, but I can’t help that much.”

“I could never ask you to do that. It was my fault for being so trusting. As much as I want to be there for her and believe in her, I guess I need to learn from this and move forward. Thank you for letting me know at least.” Lita’s mind raced with the decision and how torn she was on giving Kammy the money in the first place. Part of her thought she should have gone with her gut.

The two of them transitioned into talking about something happier. Regan went on and on about how much she was falling for Sierra, and Lita talked about how things were going with Alex.

“I think you are doing great, and you seem happy. I’m sure the situation is difficult, but you have a big heart.” Regan reached for her drink.

“I don’t know if my heart is big enough. I mean, I love spending time with him, and we are having a great time, but I’m not sure if I am going to be able to handle things long-term,” Lita admitted. She wanted to be a good girlfriend and stick it out.

“Well, you said he was working on physical therapy and trying to heal.” Regan turned to look at Lita. She shifted and then got back onto the couch.

“He is trying, but there is no guarantee. They have told him the chances are low.” Lita sighed. She leaned into Regan, and her friend gave her a hug. “Well, I guess all I can do is hope and believe in him. He is fighting for it.”

“You got this, girl.” Regan patted her shoulder and squeezed her tight. “All right, well, it is late, and I have a long drive tomorrow. I think it is time to sleep off the alcohol. I love you girl, and I know you will do what is best for you.”

Chapter 19

He was shaking as he held onto the bars on either side of his chair. Rita kneeled in front of him, pressing on his feet. She had been trying for the last fifteen minutes to try to get movement out of him. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get the feeling moving through him. He had tried to stand, hoping that putting feet to mat would inspire his feet to move. It hadn't, and the dead weight was heavy.

"You are trying to rush things. We need to take this one day at a time. I know you have been fighting this fight for a long time, but you are new here. We have to come up with a plan and start from the beginning." Rita poked his big toe. He felt nothing.

"I don't want to start over. I want to be healed." Alex sighed, flopping back in his chair.

"Yes, I can understand that, but it takes time. I have faith we will be able to do something. No, I can't promise you that you will walk again, but I have faith we can do something." Rita was trying to be supportive. It was a wonderful feeling to have so much support. Not that he didn't have support in North Carolina. It was different though. He was too lonely and had given up too much to see it.

"For years, I felt like I was swimming upstream, and no one was there for me. Now I have this amazing supportive woman in my life, but I'm still swimming upstream. I just don't want to let her down," Alex confessed.

"Having support is one of the strongest forms of healing. If this girl cares for and supports you, then it is going to work out," Rita answered. "Use that to power you."

"You are very sweet, Rita. Thank you." Alex was going to do exactly what she said. He thought about the support Lita was giving him, and he put that into his therapy. That day didn't end with any results, but he pushed as much as he could. He did everything they asked of him, and he knew he would do that from then on.

No, it wasn't going to be easy, and things might never change, but he refused to give up. Not so long as Lita was supporting him

Her heart raced, and she had sweat on her palms. She hadn't gone to an open mic night since her grandfather died and she utterly failed. However, Alex was pushing her to start singing again, and he had asked her out to a local karaoke night. They dressed up, and this time, instead of her doing a quick change after work, Lita got ready at home. She was able to put on thicker makeup and sexier clothing than she felt comfortable changing into at work. Alex said it would help relieve her stress about the upcoming proposal if she were to have a night out having fun and doing something she loved. At least that was his excuse.

No, Lita had anxiety about going back on the stage after so many years. Not to mention, Birmingham was much bigger than the places she used to frequent when she was younger. Over the last couple of weeks, along with her stories, Lita had dusted off her old guitar and started putting together songs. None of them were ready for the stage, but it had also helped with her feeling more alive and creative. She just wasn't sure she wanted to sing them live. After her last experience with the open mic, singing live was one of the last things she wanted to do.

When they arrived at the bar, Lita was overwhelmed by the smell of liquor and cigarettes. It wasn't a bad sensation, just a shocking one, as she hadn't been to a club in years. Her nights out had been more about dinner, movies, and spending intimate time with the person she was with. Clubs always gave a feeling of distance between her and who she was with because of the loud noise and screaming involved.

With it being a weeknight, the club wasn't overly full, but there was a healthy crowd seated around the dance floor. One vibrant, and probably inebriated, couple happily danced out on the floor with each other, oblivious to the fact they were not alone. Alex and she got drinks then made their way toward a table, but before they could make it, Alex pulled her down into his lap. She gasped and laughed looking at him with surprise.

"You are so beautiful tonight, and I wanted a dance," he said over the loud thump of the base. She didn't feel terribly beautiful. She had put on a pair of her tighter leather pants and a sexy, dark-red top with a velvet rose pattern. It looked nice, but she wouldn't say she was beautiful. Her hair was in waves, and her makeup was darker and thicker than she usually wore. It was more like how she would wear it back when she was in college.

Alex thought she was beautiful, though, and that made her heart race with desire. He handed her his drink and started wheeling around and spinning in circles, dancing with her as best he could. She laughed, elated by his thoughtfulness and desire to treat her as normal as possible. When they were together, it was like his disability wasn't there. They were happy and always found a way.

The way he moved had her leaning into him, and she breathed in the musky scent of his cologne. It made her shiver. They spent several moments out on the floor as the only other couple out there dancing. She couldn't even say they were drunk, because they hadn't started their first drink. Then, after the song ended, he wheeled them over to a table and kissed her softly before letting her slide away.

Up by the stage, a table had been set up where people could sign up to sing songs. Lita took a big gulp of her drink before walking up to see what they had. Alex had made it clear she wasn't going to get out of it, so there was no point in trying. Flipping through page after page, she found a powerful song by one of her favorite female rock groups and signed up before going to sit down.

"What did you pick?" Alex asked, leaning in close in hopes they wouldn't have to yell quiet as much.

"You will have to see. I swear, I have never been this nervous to go on stage in my life." Lita answered, reaching over and taking his hand. Alex was strong, and supportive. Much stronger than most people gave him credit for. Nothing had changed with him in the last ten years, and she loved that about him.

"Don't be. You have an amazing voice. Just pretend like you are dancing around in the kitchen in your underwear. Actually, that is what I am going to pretend you are doing," he teased, his voice dropping into a sexier tone. He had gotten braver with his teasing, which was a little frustrating, but she couldn't deny how much she enjoyed it.

"I'm not sure I want to dance naked in front of all these people. But I can give it a try." She laughed again and went back to her drink.

A flashy, flamboyant, and extremely tall drag queen came out onto the stage. Her larger-than-life hair was styled perfectly, and her makeup was full of color and glitter. She wore a gorgeous red sequin gown and what had to have been ten-inch heels. More power to her, she was stunning.

“Hello! I am Roxy Fierce! Welcome, welcome! We have a fun night ahead of amateur singing and laughing. I will do some songs as well! There will be dancing and drinking, so hold on to your wigs, and remember this is all about having a great time!” Her personality was as fierce as her name as she welcomed everyone to the club before breaking into a lively Elton John song. The juxtaposition of her higher “female” voice was shocking as she belted out in a deeper “male” singing voice, and the crowd's reaction seemed to be exactly what she had hoped for as she sang and danced around on the stage.

Everyone stood and cheered as Roxy finished her first song. “All right now, let’s get this party started for real. First victim, I mean, singer, is Andrew Carmichael! Come on up!” She introduced the first singer, inciting another round of laughter from the crowd.

Lita was farther down on the list, which was nice. It gave her time to relax more and listen to others. Some were good, really good, others were okay, and then there were some who were horrible. However, no matter how bad the singer was, everyone cheered, laughed, and had a great time. It made Lita feel a little less nervous about going up on the stage, and with the longer it took for her to get to her turn, the more drunk everyone around her got.

By the time Roxy called her name, Lita was starting to feel pretty good. Alex had driven, so she didn’t need to be as cautious with her drinks. It wasn’t often Lita just let go and allowed someone else to take care of her. More often than not, she would do open mic nights which meant she would have her guitar. Being without it left her feeling a little vulnerable.

Turning to face the crowd, she hadn’t realized just how full the club had gotten since they first arrived. “Girl, now no reason to be nervous up here. We are all family! Now let’s hear ya!” Roxy said, having seen the way her face fell at the sight of the crowd.

Sure, they were all family, but that didn’t mean people would like her. Funny how fear could sneak up on you like that. The loud music started to blare out of the speakers, heavy guitar and bass bringing about the start of one of her favorite rock songs. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and let her nerves soak in the vibrations, becoming one with the music like she had all those many years ago. Then she opened her mouth and belted out the first few notes.

All her nervousness washed away as she continued, singing and dancing, letting the music take her on a journey and inviting the crowd to come along with her. People were dancing, cheering, and just jumping up and down in time to the beat of the drum. Before the end of the first chorus, Lita had a tight grip on the microphone and was moving all over the stage, putting on a show. Alex had said it before; it was like riding a bike. She hadn't forgotten how to perform; she had just put up a mental block. Once she started to break down the wall, it all came back to her and then some.

With age, she had gained a different sort of confidence. It allowed her to move in ways she never would have when she was younger. Her eyes held a knowledge that only someone with more experience could express. The audience fuelled her fire, and on that stage, she burned, and it was probably the best she had felt in well over five years. Nothing, in that moment, could bring her down. Absolutely nothing.

When the song ended and she started to walk off the stage, Roxy took hold of her shoulder and held her there for a few moments. "Well, now, that was something else. You going to stick around and do another song for us, honey?"

"Umm, yeah, I can do that." She smiled. Her breath was coming heavy. Performing was a workout, after all.

"Well, that is what I wanted to hear. How about all of you? You are looking forward to a round two with our sexy rock diva!"

The crowd cheered louder, and Lita thrust two arms in the air in response, urging them on.

The smile on Alex's face when she got back to the table was priceless. He had a mix of heat and pride in his eyes which said more than any words could have. He was proud of her and was glad she finally did what she had been longing to do. "You were so sexy up there." He pulled her into his lap. He seemed to be enjoying having her there and would get no complaints from her.

"I was so scared when I went up there, but once I got started, I felt so alive. It was incredible! Did you realize how many people had shown up?" Lita gave him a big kiss. Some people near them made teasing playful noises which made Lita blush, but Alex didn't care. He held her to him with all his strength and passion and kissed her the way she deserved to be kissed.

“You have no reason to be scared. You are amazing, and I believe in you,” he whispered and kissed her again.

Chapter 20

Alex drove the two of them to Lita's apartment. She had ended up singing three songs and drinking a few too many drinks. Not that he cared. She deserved the freedom and being on the stage had turned her into a goddess. He wasn't sure he had ever seen her so beautiful.

Once they got to her apartment, he pulled her into his lap and took her inside. Something about the night had him wanting to hold her as close to him as possible. The feel of her pressed tightly to him where he could wrap his arms around her and let her feel the strength of him made him feel more like a man than he had in years. It stirred up something deep which he had locked away long ago.

Lita was being distracting too. She wasn't just cuddling into him. No, she kissed along his neck and ran her hand up and down his chest, making it difficult for him to navigate to her apartment. However, he managed, and once there, she unlocked the door and let them both inside. Over the last couple of weeks, Lita had done some redecorating to make her apartment easier for him to get around. She put furniture against walls and left the floor more open to allow better access for his chair. It was something that to most seemed small, but to him showed a level of devotion she hadn't expressed with any words. Lita might not say how she felt, but she never failed to show it.

Once inside, he wheeled over to the couch, transitioned from his chair, and pulled her to him again. Many of their late nights had been spent kissing and making out. She tasted sweet, and his tongue always craved more from her, but he wanted to do more. She never pushed, never complained, even when he knew she wanted to take things further. There had been no secret about how she felt about him in the past, and he was sure she was disappointed in the fact she had him but might never fully have him. He loved how she never made him feel that way, though.

Lita wrapped her legs around him and started kissing him deeply. There was no sweet build-up; she was a hungry vixen begging to feed from his lips, and he was more than happy to let her. They kissed with a passion they

never had before. It was the sort of kissing which would usually lead to something more intense. There was no innocence to it. No, it was a full-out explosion of weeks of built-up desire.

Alex gripped her tight, wanting her to feel his strength and know how much he wanted to please her. Getting caught up in the moment, he lifted her shirt and threw it down on the floor. He let his hands roam the heat of her skin, memorizing every curve, loving the silkiness of her skin against his rough fingers.

She was a pure beauty, all curves and softness, which screamed woman to him. It made him want nothing more than to fulfil her every need and desire. When he ran his hand down her back, he slid his hands into her leather pants and gripped her bare ass, holding onto her and rocking her against him. His body wouldn't react, but hers would. He could feel the temperature of her skin growing hotter, and it excited him on a deeper level than purely physical.

"Lita, I want to make love to you," he whispered against her ear as he continued to nibble and suck along the sweet curve of her neck.

His words shook her. She looked up into Alex's eyes. They were heated and full of passion with so much power behind them. He held her with strength like he would protect her no matter what. It made her feel small, in a good way. However, she had not expected those words.

"Umm, how?" she asked, not wanting to ruin the mood but honestly confused.

Alex didn't stop kissing her and touching her. His hands were demanding of her body, begging for more of her. "Stand up."

His words reached deep down into her, and she found herself compelled to do as he asked. She watched as he reached out and pulled the button free. Slowly, he pulled the zipper down, and since leather required a little extra force to be pulled off, he yanked the pants down her legs. His forceful hands worked her pants and panties as far down her legs as he could reach, and she finished the rest. Then he turned her around before pulling her back down to his lap.

Swiftly, he pulled free her bra and slid the straps down her arms, kissing where they had pressed into the skin of her shoulder. Part of her felt strange being completely naked while he was fully dressed, but he at least took a moment to take off his shirt before pulling her back against him. His hands

kneaded her breasts, teasing her nipples and sending shockwaves of pleasure through her body.

He was strong, very strong. His military training had not diminished after his time in the chair. She couldn't imagine him being stronger. Moaning, she arched against his firm chest. The motion seemed to urge him on, and it wasn't lost on her that he hadn't answered her. She didn't know what he had in mind, but her body was on fire with anticipation. One of his hands slid farther down her body, making her gasp and roll against it. The teasing of his fingers had her begging, moaning, for him to do more.

The lower his fingers travelled, the tighter the coil inside of her wound up. Then he pressed them against her, not inside but against the outer mound. He pressed at her, teasing her more. "Please," she said breathily, rolling as if to encourage him to do more.

His deep chuckle vibrated over her body. His other hand moved from her breast and up into her hair, gripping into the strands and making her arch more. "I want to feel you shake in my arms while I make love to you."

His finger slid into her and pressed against that little ball of nerves that electrified her entire body. She cried out from the first touch, having wanted it more than anything else. He stroked her slowly at first as his lips moved over her neck. He didn't just kiss her and suck on her. He nibbled and bit into her skin. She had dreamed about a moment like this before. But she had never imagined it would feel so invigorating. She moved with his touch, showing him exactly how she enjoyed being touched, and then he took full control.

"You are so beautiful, so sexy. This has taken far too long," he growled against her ear, making her gasp.

He teased and toyed with her, building her up and stopping. It drove her crazy, and each time, he brought her closer and closer to the edge. She wanted to fall over the edge, but he kept her dancing on it, and she was sure he was trying to drive her insane. She wasn't sure how many times he brought her to that edge, but finally it happened. White flashed behind her eyes as she cried out as waves of writhing pleasure pulsed over every nerve of her body, but it wasn't the end.

He flipped her around and had her straddle him again. This time, he impaled her on those strong fingers and began to fuck her with all of his power and strength. She clung to him, feeling orgasm after orgasm through

crash through her. It had been so long since she had felt so much pleasure, and he was selflessly giving it to her.

Finally, she was spent, and he pulled his hand away from her. As she settled back down in his lap, she kissed him. They kissed with passion, care, possibly even love, but they weren't ready for that. "I can't believe you just did that," she whispered against his lips.

"It was incredible. You have never looked so beautiful and sexy. Damn, it felt good to make you feel like that." His voice was still husky and deep, making her shake with aftershock.

"But..." She wanted to do something for him, but she had no idea what she could do.

"But what. You made me feel so good. The way you shook in my arms and begged for me to touch you. I haven't felt this strong and this alive in a such long time. All I have wanted for the last five years was to feel what I did tonight. I got to watch you sing and dance, then I got to make you feel this. I couldn't be happier" he pulled her in closer to him and stroked her head, cradling her into his body.

There was something about how he held her and spoke to her. It was beyond the walls the two of them had built. He was not a broken soldier afraid he couldn't make a woman happy. She was not a lost artist falling victim to the normalities of life. How could anyone let him get away? He was everything she had longed for. Everything she had believed he would be. Strong, powerful, passionate, fierce, yet supportive, playful, and oh so sexy. If she could bottle this feeling and save it for times she felt depressed and sad, she would.

As her body came down from the high, she breathed him in and let him hold her and protect her. She wasn't sure how much time passed before he reached and pulled a blanket over to two of them, all the while petting her, sinking his love into her. No, they didn't say it with words, but she could feel it with everything he did. Before long, they were both lying on the couch, and he held her. He held her and let her sleep feeling whole for the first time in longer than she could remember.

Chapter 21

“Your proposal is the best I have heard in years. There is no way they are going to pass this up. With some fine tuning, you will be ready for the meeting Friday. I have to say, Lita, you have been on fire these last few weeks. This is the woman I hired all those years ago. The one I was sure would lead this company into a greater age,” Mrs. McDowell said after looking over everything Lita had put together.

She would do a practice run of the presentation Thursday then move on to the official meeting first thing Friday morning. Everything in life was going in a direction she was proud of. “Thank you.” Something about Alex being in her life had her ready to take on the world. “Thank you for everything. This opportunity has really pushed me, and I want to find that spark again.”

“Well, you seemed to have found it. I can’t wait for Friday. You are going to do amazing!” Lita wasn’t sure the last time she saw Mrs. McDowell that excited, but it was certainly a joy to see. Gathering her things, she started to leave the conference room when the phone rang. Not wanting to be rude, she picked it up. “Hello, McDowell Marketing Solutions. This is Lita. How may I help you?”

“Hey, Lita, it’s Regan. Sorry to bother you at work. You know I wouldn’t call if it wasn’t important.” Lita felt her heart start to race. While Kammy had no issue with interrupting Lita’s work day with useless jabber, Regan never called until she was off work.

“What’s going on?” Lita asked, taking a seat in the chair by the phone.

“It’s Kammy. I just got a call, and she is in the hospital. She overdosed on something, I’m not even sure what. Her mother asked me to meet her up there. That guy Kammy was seeing was arrested, and the house is being raided.”

Lita felt her breath catch in her chest. She had just seen Kammy a few weeks ago, and Regan had only told her about Kammy’s problems during her visit. It was like everything she knew about one of her closest friends was being turned inside out. “I should come down there.”

“No, not right now, Lita. Right now, they are saying she is in stable condition, and I will keep you informed on everything I find out. It doesn’t make sense for you to leave work, and things are going to be super crazy around here. I just wanted to make sure you knew what was going on.”

A part of her felt like she should still go to see her friend, but she also had a huge presentation at the end of the week. How was she supposed to stand by while her friend needed her? “I just feel like I am letting her down.”

“Lita, seriously. She is the one that let you down and owes you. She did this to herself, and it isn’t right for you to screw up everything you have been working for just to come down here. She is in the hospital and will be here through weekend at least. If you really want, come down Friday after you finish your presentation, but I will keep you updated.” Regan was being firm, and she knew her friend was right. There was nothing more she could do by sitting around in the hospital. This presentation, however, had been weeks of work and would come with a huge promotion. It had to be done.

“All right, but call me if anything changes. You guys are family, and I should be there if you need me.” Lita tried to shake the anxiety she felt.

“I love you, girl. I will call you with an update after you get off work. Try not to let this ruin your day. You need to keep working hard. Goodbye.”

Lita finished getting her stuff together to take back to her desk. Yeah, how was she supposed to think straight now knowing one of her best friends was sitting in a hospital somewhere? It might have been her own damn fault, but it didn’t change the fact she should be doing something.

Heading back to her desk, she took a seat and tried to process what she had just heard. Wanting to keep her stuff organized, she kept the pile stacked and pulled out her cell phone. As much as she needed to focus on work, her brain was a mess. “Hey, Oliver, I am going to head out for lunch. I need a moment.”

“Hey, is everything okay? Your friend sounded pretty upset. It was why I went on and transferred her.” Oliver had been acting like an asshole for over a week, but deep down, he cared about her.

“There is just something going on back home. Not that I can help right now. I just figured I would go get some lunch and clear the air.” She smiled and grabbed her purse before heading out of the office. For the most part, her work was finished until the meeting, other than practicing and making sure she had her wits about her. Taking a break would be good for her.

“All right, if anyone asks, I will let them know. It isn’t like you ever take lunch anyway,” Oliver said in a supportive tone. She gave him a weak smile and headed out of the building.

It wasn’t that she was hungry. Quite the opposite really. But the air was nice. It wasn’t as hot as it usually was, and the day had a bit of a breeze. She walked down to the coffee shop around the corner from her office. Now and then she would go there for lunch, but today, she was just going to get a drink and call Alex.

Once she had her coffee, she sat at one of the outside tables and pulled out her phone. She wanted to talk to someone who could help her get her mind off things. She dialed Alex who answered after a couple of rings. Just the sound of Alex saying hello helped to make her feel better. “Hey, I hope I am not interrupting anything.”

“No, not today. I have therapy tomorrow, but today, I am free. What’s up? You don’t usually call while you are at work.” He sounded concerned, which she could understand. Work was work, and she did usually leave personal calls to outside of work hours.

“I’m at lunch, and I just needed to talk to someone.” That lingering stress and despair began to show in her voice, and she found it more and more difficult to keep it in. So, she let it all out. She told him about what had been going on with Kammy and how she had borrowed the money under the pretence of starting a business. Then she shared the information about the new boyfriend and how she had gotten heavily into drugs again. While she let it all out, he listened, which made her feel better. It was nice to know he could sit there and listen to her without making her feel like she was a bother.

“I just feel so stupid and angry, but at the same time, I am worried about her and wish I were there. If I were, maybe she wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with.” She took another sip of her coffee.

“No, you being there wouldn’t have stopped any of this. If that were the case, Regan would have been able to stop it too. Sometimes, things are outside of our control. I hate she is in the hospital, and I hate what she did to you, but hopefully, you realize she did this to herself, and there is nothing you can do to fix it.” Alex tried to sound supportive but there was a bite to his tone that made her wonder if he was angry. Maybe he was angry? She was, after all. So, she could understand someone else being feeling that way.

“I wish it were that easy to separate the two, but it isn’t. It is like no matter what I can’t shake the feeling that I should be there.” Lita sighed. She looked out into the beautiful sun and smiled, trying to draw in its warmth to bring her peace.

“That is called being a good friend. You are an amazing person, Lita, and you deserve to have people treat you as such. It is why I push you to sing and write. Because you are amazing. Kammy shouldn’t have done this to you, and you shouldn’t feel guilty. She was selfish.” Again, that tone was there, but she knew it wasn’t because of her. It was because of Kammy.

The way he talked spoke volumes and reminded her of how he held her the other night. Despite everything, he was protective of her, and she had no doubt he would do everything in his power to ensure she was safe even if it hurt him. Never had she had someone in her life who gave her that sense of safety, and she certainly hadn’t expected it to come from him. “Well, Regan told me I should stay and do my presentation, so that was what I plan to do. It just feels wrong.”

“That proposal is huge for you, and you have been working so hard on it. You can’t let this stop you from doing what is best for you. Regan is right. If you want, we can go down there this weekend after your meeting, but I don’t think you should cancel and potentially mess everything up just because of Kammy. She isn’t going anywhere, and she has tons of people there. A couple of days so you can make sure your stuff is in order won’t hurt anything.”

She hadn’t missed the part where he said he would go with her. It actually made her smile. The idea of him going with her, being by her side, meant a lot more to her than he probably knew. “All right, well, I should probably head back to work. There were a few minor adjustments I wanted to make to the proposal, and tomorrow, I will be doing the run through. Hopefully, it goes as smoothly in practice as it has been on paper.” Lita got up and tossed her cup in the trash.

“I’m sure it is going to be perfect. You have done everything you can, and I believe you will make it great.” They finished up their conversation as she headed back into the office, and when she got back to her desk, Oliver was there with his usually curious face. It was annoying, but today, she knew it was because he cared about her and not because he wanted dirt. Well, not completely because he wanted dirt. Part of it was he wanted to make sure she was okay.

She didn't go into detail but told him one of her friends was sick, and she was worried about her. He listened and gave her a supportive pat on the back before heading back to his desk to finish out the day's work.

Chapter 22

Her heart was racing, and she found herself rubbing her palms over her pants trying to dry the sweat from them. It was frustrating, because she had everything perfect. Then she got a call Kammy was not doing so good, and it messed with her head. Because of the call, Lita had decided to leave for Ozark and check in on her friend. Alex had therapy and would meet her at the office after to pick her up.

However, her emotions were making it more difficult for her to get into the groove of her presentation. Mrs. McDowell sat near the back of the room, beaming up at her with an excited smile, which did nothing to make her feel better. No, Lita felt the weight of the whole company on her shoulders and hoped she didn't let everyone down.

Sitting around the conference table was a small group of executives waiting to hear what she had come up with in order to improve their company and advance them into a new era. Not only had she worked up a full ad campaign, but she had a complete set of logos, rebranding material, and commercial ideas. Everything had been carefully laid out in a perfect presentation, and now, her tongue was glued to the roof of her dried-out mouth.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to push out all of her personal emotions and do what needed to be done. "Umm, hello. I am so glad all of you are here. I have been looking forward to this meeting."

Lita put on the best smile she could and started to go into the presentation. At first, she did well even though she was a little bit nervous. But every time she stumbled over a word or clicked the screen through too quickly, she fell further until she felt like an out of control mess.

"Umm, Lita?" Mrs. McDowell asked, looking up at her. She was trying to pull her back into focus, but the world around her got dizzy and cloudy.

"Yes, I, well, let me show you the logos I have worked on. Our goal was to take your familiar style and give it a modern twist. Part of the marketing plan is to make your current loyal clients feel like they still matter while bringing in a new generation of customers who feel you understand their

needs as well.” Her words were meant to come out smooth, and they did, until she spilled the handouts all over the floor.

Lita was mortified as she watched papers flutter and fall all around her. All her careful work lay scattered on the floor like leaves in a park. Only, she liked fall leaves not fallen papers.

“I think we have seen enough. Barbara, we will be in touch. Thank you for all of your hard work,” Chasity Levi said as her team got up to leave the meeting. Lita stood there while Barbara walked them out, doing her best to smooth things over.

While she waited for her boss to return, she picked up her mess, her hands shaking. What had she done? Weeks of work, and she had flushed it all down the toilet. She had managed to get everything picked up and ready to move back to her desk when Mrs. McDowell returned. “What the hell was that? You had everything perfect on Wednesday, and today, you stumbled over the whole thing. You had such great material to work with.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened. This week just... I’m sorry.” Lita still couldn’t get her tongue in order.

“Look, I don’t know what is going on with you. Oliver told me something about some personal problems going on, and I am sorry for that. But you have to leave your personal life at the door. This is not the place for you to unload it.” There was no mistaking the anger in Barbara’s voice.

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” There wasn’t much for her to say. All Lita could hope for was the client still decided to go with their firm. If not, she wasn’t sure there would be a place for her there any long. Barbara had taken a chance on her, and she very well might have messed it all up.

“Stop telling me this is going to get better!” Alex was beyond frustrated. Even with the progress they had made, it just didn’t feel like enough.

“Dude, stop being so hard on yourself.” Brandon moved over to the table where he was lying to try to talk sense into him.

“No, you don’t understand. This is not me!” Alex slammed his arm down.

“No, I don’t understand. I will never understand, but look, really take a look. There is progress.” Brandon held his arm, trying to get him to calm down enough to see reason.

For the first time in months, there was progress. Scorching fiery progress which hurt in ways his friend would never understand. It felt like

millions of fire ants were raging over his legs, hip, and lower torso, but his foot moved. Not just the toe but the whole foot. It was more progress than he had ever made. If only it didn't also come with the pain.

"I'm sorry it hurts so bad but try to look at the progress. I never thought this day would come." Neither did Alex. He tried to breathe through the pins and needles to try to move his foot again. The movement didn't happen again, which only frustrated him more. What was the point of going through all of this if it wasn't going to continue to work?

"Alex, you are putting a wall up. It is like every time you make any kind of progress you start to think about how it isn't enough, and your whole body shuts down. You have to keep your mind and body in line." Rita tried to encourage him, but it was too late. The frustration grew higher and higher, and just as she had said, it shut down everything.

"I think I am done for the day." Alex groaned, trying to sit up on the table.

"No, you need to take a few deep breaths, and we are going to keep going. You don't need to say you are done for the day just because something goes wrong. I am not going to let you give up on yourself." Rita tapped his shoulder to keep him on the table.

"Yeah, man, what would Lita want to see from you?" Brandon added.

Alex glared at his friend for bringing Lita into the conversation. She didn't care if he was ever whole. She cared about him despite his broken body. Lita was slowly proving she cared about him more than she cared about his flaws, and he was falling for her more and more because of it. So why did Brandon have to bring her into it, remind him that part of why he worked so hard was so one day he could be whole for her? "You're an asshole."

"Yeah, well, you love me anyway." Brandon had the audacity to chuckle at his own joke, but the break was over. It was time for him to get back to work. There was still half a session left and a lot of pain coursing through his body. What could be better?

By the time they were done, Alex wasn't sure he could take much more, but he pushed on. He forced himself to transition into his chair and wheel to the front to make sure everything was set up for his next visit. Not that he wanted to come back. With the way he felt, it was the last thing he could fathom doing. Good thing Brandon was driving him.

When they got to the car, Alex took some of his meds, hoping for a reprieve so he could breathe. “There is about an hour before you are supposed to get Lita from work. Do you think taking those is a good idea?”

“If I don’t, I won’t be able to drive anyway.” Alex panted as he popped the pill into his mouth and washed it down with water.

“You sure you should be taking this trip after everything that happened today?” Brandon asked, pulling out of the parking lot and onto the street.

“I want to be there for her. She is going through a lot. I just hope her presentation went well. When I talked to her last night, she was so stressed out that nothing I said calmed her down.” Alex breathed in and out slowly, letting the conversation take him away from his own sorry state.

The sensation in his legs and hips was starting to subside when his phone rang. Looking at the caller ID, he was surprised to see Lita’s name. He had expected the meeting to go longer. “Hey, baby, how did everything go?” Alex did the best he could to put excitement in his voice.

“Umm, not great. Can you just go on and pick me up? I’m done for the day, and everyone knows I’m leaving early. I just don’t want to be here anymore.” It was not the answer he had expected, and it washed away any of his own pity party. Lita needed him.

“I’m on it,” Brandon said beside him, making moves to change the direction they were headed in.

“What happened? You said you had everything set.” Alex wondered if she was possibly overreacting or simply overwhelmed from the stress.

“I made a mess of everything. I really did. I just need to get out of here,” Lita said, obviously not wanting to talk about it.

Whatever had happened, he could find out later. Brandon did the best he could to get to Lita’s office quickly. Alex would pick her up and calm her down, and they would head south to check on her friend. Hopefully, it wasn’t as bad as she thought.

Chapter 23

They had gotten a late start on their trip, and Alex hadn't been in the best mood. The fact he wouldn't talk about it was a bit annoying too, but Lita was trying to let it go so they could try to have a decent visit. Not that visiting your friend who nearly died from being stupid was considered a fun time.

They rode in silence with only the sound of their breathing and soft music playing breaking the deafening silence between them. Lita's mind was a flurry of emotions and thoughts. It was like she couldn't keep one thing there. Everything passed through in rapid cycle making her feel anxious. It was a mix of going to see Kammy and disappointment in how her presentation had gone. She could only hope the written information and files she emailed were enough to win them over.

They had just left Troy and were in the rolling hills of nothingness that would take them into Ozark. Regan had told Lita that Kammy had been transferred to Dothan Thursday night because she wasn't doing as well as they expected. It was an extra hour on the trip, but she would be all right. After all, they had better doctors, so it was probably better for her friend.

"You okay over there?" The sudden talking startled her, and she turned to look at him. There was still tension in his jaw, and she felt like he was bothered by something, but he still hadn't offered to talk about it.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Sorry. My head is just racing. I'm trying to shut it off though." She reached over and patted his hand. Oh, how she wished he would talk about it.

"You are just really quiet, and I thought I would check in. The trip has been rather peaceful, but I know you had a tough day." Though there was still strain in his voice, he did sound like he was trying to calm down as well.

"All this stuff with Kammy had my head in a bad space, and I just wasn't able to do as well as I had hoped. It was such a big account too, and I am worried Mrs. McDowell is going to fire me over it." Lita leaned against the window.

“She isn’t going to fire you. You have been there a long time. It isn’t your fault life hit you with something difficult and threw you off.” Alex tried to defend her, which she appreciated. But the truth was, she shouldn’t have let her personal life interfere with her work life.

“That’s just it. I have been there a long time and have never done anything particularly amazing. I had all the potential but just did what I needed to get by. I was stagnant and boring. This was my chance to prove I was valuable and worth keeping around, and I blew it.” She sighed, watching the window fog up where her mouth was.

Alex waited a few minutes before saying anything else. It was like he vibrated with a rebuttal but was afraid to say it. Apparently, he lost the battle. “You shouldn’t even be working there. Lita, you are so much better and can do so much more with your life. I don’t even understand how you got involved with working in the corporate world. You are an artist and a musician. Your work should be out there for the masses, and you shouldn’t be wasting your talent in a dead-end career making money for other people.” There was a firmness to his voice, something she hadn’t ever heard from him. He had always skated the edge between positive and sexy. Dominating had never been his style.

“Why do you keep pushing that? I gave up on that dream a long time ago. It isn’t like I can just pick up where I left off.” Lita turned away, feeling a little angry. Why did he keep bringing up the past like she could wave a wand and make herself go to the Berkeley instead of community college? He had no idea.

“Maybe because it isn’t too late for you. It is too late for me. I can’t go back to the way things were. I am a broken man who can’t do anything for the woman I love except try to remind her she is more than some pencil-pushing slave to the corporate ladder.” His voice was elevated and fierce.

Lita was in shock, but it wasn’t just the frustrated tone. It was the words. Surely, he had just lost his temper and didn’t realize what he had actually said to her. There was no way he actually was falling in love with her. It hadn’t been long enough.

Alex continued. “You are trying to let the world destroy you. But it has already destroyed me, and I am not going to sit back and watch you go down.”

She had no idea what to say to that. He sat there, teeth clenched and fingers gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were turning white.

Lita just sat there watching him slowly breathe in and out as if trying to gain control of his emotions. There was more to it than what she was doing with her life. Something was bothering him that had to do with his own life.

“You know, you always have so much to say about how I am living my life, but you haven’t told me anything about what happened to you. It is more than obvious that you are upset, but you are just sitting there stewing instead of talking to me, which isn’t helping anything.” Lita was pretty sure changing the subject wasn’t going to help anything, but if he was going to judge her on how she was living her life, then she could do the same.

“It isn’t important. Talking about it won’t change anything,” Alex answered with a deep sigh. His fingers gripped the wheel even tighter, as if it were even possible.

From that point until they reached the Dothan Circle, they sat in awkward silence. She wished she could make him see how she felt every time he brought up her writing and singing. As fun as it was to go to karaoke night, and as much as she was enjoying dabbling with her writing, she had little faith it would turn into a successful career which would pay the bills. No, she had to think about her future, which meant she had given up on childhood fantasies.

When they pulled into the hospital parking lot and started to get out of the car, Lita groaned at the sensation. She ached from hours of sitting and not walking around. They had taken one rest break just outside of Montgomery. Other than that, they had driven the whole time. Until she stood up, though, she hadn’t noticed how sore the trip had made her. With a deep arch and heavy yawn, Lita stretched back then leaned down to touch her toes before shaking it all off.

By the time she was done stretching, Alex had rolled around to her side of the van. He reached out and took her hands, his face growing a little soft. “Look, I’m sorry for blowing my fuse there. I want to support you, and right now, I think that means being there for you while we handle this situation. We will cross other bridges later.”

It was a truce; his way of waving the white flag until they could talk about the issues further. Truth was, she wasn’t sure things would go any better the next time they brought it all up. Lita wanted to know what was wrong with him, and she needed him to lay off her when it came to her writing and singing. “Thank you, but we will talk about this again.” She gave a gesture of pointing over his whole body. She had no other way of

describing it, but she wanted to make sure he understood her feelings. Regardless if talking about it changed anything, she deserved to know his struggles just as he insisted on knowing hers.

Kammy was on the fifth floor in a private room. One of the good things about the Dothan hospital was the ability to have a private room. When Lita walked in, she saw Kammy's mother half-asleep in a chair by the window. Over the years, Kammy had started to look more and more like the portly older woman in the chair. The only difference was Kammy didn't have the coarse curly hair her mother sported.

No one else was in the room other than Kammy who lay asleep in the bed. Medical equipment whirled and beeped, but it didn't dampen the tension of silence in the small dark space. The older woman looked up and tried to blink herself awake. "Oh, hey, Regan said you should be coming in tonight. I didn't think you would be here until tomorrow."

"Oh, no, I wanted to come as soon as I could. I felt bad not being able to get here before now." Lita moved into the room and closer to the bed. Kammy looked pale lying in the bed. Her face was covered in what looked almost like pox marks from her acne getting so out of control. It broke Lita's heart to see her like that. How had she not realized what was going on?

"Well, if you are going to be here a while, I really could use a break. Regan had to go to work, and I have been here almost all night." Kammy's mom stood up and stretched much like Lita had after getting out of the van. That seemed to be when she noticed Alex. Her face screwed up in confusion then she smiled. "Oh, I remember you. Wow, I haven't seen you in a long time, Alex Houston."

Alex smiled back and wheeled farther into the room. "It is good to see you too. I'm sorry you are going through this."

"Eh, it has been a long time coming. We should have known this was going to happen sooner or later. She has been on this roller coaster for ages. Thank you for being here." She didn't say anything about Alex being in a chair, which made Lita think Kammy had already told her. It also helped she was a nurse and had seen worse in her time.

"You go on and take some time to yourself. Go get a shower or something. I will be here for a while." Lita gave the woman a hug then sent her on our way. Once she was gone, Lita pulled up a chair next to the bed and reached out and took Kammy's hand.

Silence once again filled the room while Lita sat there, watching her friend as if something was going to happen. Though if Kammy woke up, Lita wasn't sure what she would say to her. Her heart felt heavy, and tears formed in her eyes. Alex moved in next to her and put his hand on her thigh in a comforting way. Hopefully, her friend would wake soon.

Chapter 24

They stayed at the hospital until Regan showed up. Then, after about an hour of talking with her other friend, Lita and Alex headed out so they could get some rest. After getting up early for work and therapy, the long drive, and some stressful conversations, they were ready for some rest. At first, he had started to go look for a hotel, but Lita told him to head to her old house, the one where she grew up and the place where she held the party and danced for him. With how frustrated he had been earlier, memories started to flood him and replace all the built up anger.

It was a little far from the hospital, but it was a free place to stay. On the way there, they swung by and picked up some pizza and snacks. When he pulled into the driveway, he was surprised to see the house hadn't changed. The trees were still overgrown, creating an almost jungle look. The grass in the field was nearly six feet tall, but the house had been maintained. While it was still colored the same, he was pretty sure someone had painted it since the last time he had been there.

"Now, this brings back memories." Alex parked the van, then turned to her, and smiled. Lita didn't look quite as excited as he was, but then again, she probably just saw the place as home.

However, after his comment, he did see a soft smile rise up on her lips. "Yeah, good times. The pool should be cleaned up. I wasn't sure if you could swim."

"No, not really. I always sank in the water, so now I would and probably not be able to get back up. But I can sit on the side or ride a float or something if you feel like getting in the pool," Alex offered. They sat there in the darkness for a moment.

"Maybe, but first, food. I'm really tired and feeling like I just need a break." Lita sighed.

He reached out and cupped her cheek. It was apparent she was drained, mentally and physically. "Once upon a time, you told me water made you feel refreshed. It was why you always had pool parties."

Even in the darkness, he could see the blush rising on her cheeks. The heat of it tickled his fingers and had him leaning toward her to kiss. It wasn't a hungry passionate kiss. Instead, it was a sweet kiss, soft against her lips. He pulled away, still tasting her on his tongue. It made his grin widen and his heart race. "Come on, the pizza is getting cold. Let's get inside. We can decide about the pool once we have eaten."

"Alright, I can live with that." They got out of the van and made their way inside. Her bumpy and debris-covered yard was a little difficult to navigate, but he managed to get through. There was a step that went into the house, but she was able to find a board to help him get in. "I see your mom put in hardwood. I like that. Makes things a little easier for me."

"Yeah, I treated her to them a couple of years ago. No one was here enough, and the carpets were starting to get musty. I thought putting the hardwoods in would make it easier for us to keep the place clean," Lita answered going around and turning on lights. "Do you want me to get some wine, or are we going to stick to water and soda?"

"You look like you could use a rest, but if you drink wine, you are going to fall asleep with pizza in your hand." Alex laughed and found a spot at the table. He watched her move around the house. The open kitchen looked exactly as he remembered, and she was nervously moving around the room as if she were trying to avoid something. "Baby, come over here and eat. You were just telling me we needed to eat this before it got cold."

A sheepish look crossed her face, and she finally came over, a soda in her hand for him and a water for her. "I figured for the two of us, we could save having to wash dishes and just eat out of the box."

"Caveman style. I love it." He chuckled.

When Lita got to the table, she sat down beside him, and he reached out and pulled her in closer to him. Again, she blushed, but she still looked nervous. He figured it had something to do with their argument earlier. She wanted to talk about it but at the same time didn't. Well, he didn't want to talk about it either.

"This place brings back so many memories. I know I only came out here a couple of times, but I was amazing here. Especially that last party." He pulled out his phone and messed around for a bit until he had a song loaded. He had taken the time to find the song she danced to and had saved it for a special occasion. What better moment to bring it up than at the place

it all happened before? Well, close to. The dance had happened in her bedroom.

Pressing the button, he let the song start, and she looked up at him, her face changing to something a little sexier, heated. Her eyes filled with fire. “You remember the song?”

“I remember the song. I was hoping I could see you dance for me again.” He pushed back from the table, no longer caring about the pizza getting cold. They could always reheat it or just eat the damn thing cold.

Lita stood and started to dance to the song. The way she moved had a more mature flow to it, graceful, sensual, the movements of a woman who had more experience. Her curves had his mouth watering, but she hadn’t lost her flare. She teased him as she slowly started to take her clothes off piece by piece. Under her clothes, she had on a black and red lace bra and panty set. It looked new and fit her perfectly. His hands itched to reach out and pull her into him, but that was against the rules.

The first time she danced for him like that, they went full-on strip club rules. She could touch him, but he had to keep his hands to himself. Boy, how he had wanted to touch her, just as badly as he currently did. Hell, she hadn’t even moved in to touch him yet.

His mouth watering, he watched her sway and move. This time, the underwear didn’t stay on. She reached back and unsnapped her bra before tossing it at him. Then she moved in. She ran her hands over him, rubbing his chest before kissing along his neck. He could smell the sweetness of her perfume mixed with the heat of her desire. They weren’t kids anymore, and she wasn’t the sweet, innocent girl she used to be.

Unable to hold back, he reached out and gripped her hips before lifting her and tossing her onto the table. She had enough time to push the pizza out of the way before he had her pressed down. The music continued, but the dance was over. He ripped her panties off and shoved her legs apart. He was hungry, but pizza was no longer on the menu.

He started out with teasing kisses along her thighs and around her hips. Kissing without actually devouring her. Instead, he took his time. Holding her legs tightly and throwing them over his shoulders. When kisses were no longer enough, he gave in to nibbles and bites. She cried out, arching back on the table as if offering herself up to him. And he took full advantage.

As her hips rolled, he pulled her in closer to him then gave her one long lick between her sweet folds before drawing her sensitive nub into his

mouth and sucking on her. He hadn't braved going this far before, afraid of what it would do to them. But he couldn't hold back. He licked and sucked with ferocity, needing to feed from her body until she was screaming for more.

Looking up, he watched the way her body moved as he continued his feast. She clutched her breast, rolling against his mouth, and then she reached down and ran her fingers through his hair, pulling him in tighter to her.

The way she whispered his name and begged for more had him wanting to torment her all night. It was the sexiest, most beautiful sound he had ever heard. Like a song just for him. He brought her to that edge, eased off, and then brought her to the edge again. This time, however, he decided not to tease her over and over. No, he decided he was just going to give her one release after another until she couldn't take it anymore.

He worked his tongue and lips until he had her where he wanted her, and then he flicked and sucked her sweet spot just right until she was screaming out his name. Just as her orgasm spiked, he thrust his fingers into her. He didn't tease or play. No, he pounded those fingers into her tight heat, making her scream over and over. He couldn't believe how hard her release was. Those tight walls gripped his fingers so tight he could barely move. It was an incredible sensation.

He brought her again and again, taking turns with his mouth and hand until she couldn't take it any longer. She pushed him away, not because she was upset, but because she needed him to let her come down. He wished he could have stood over her and watched the play of emotions on her face. Her body was quivering and shaking, making him ache for more. Pulling her to him, he nestled her in his lap and kissed her softly. "You have no idea just how sexy you are and how lucky I feel to be able to give you this."

Part of him did wish he could enjoy it with her, but the pleasure he got from turning her into the shaking sated beauty in his lap was more than he could have ever dreamed of. Nothing would keep him from ensuring moments like this never ended.

"You broke the rules." Lita panted against his cheek.

Screwing up his face in confusion, he looked at her and watched a goofy smile spread over her lips. "What do you mean I broke the rules?"

"Well, the rules are I can touch you but you aren't allowed to touch me. So, you broke the rules," she answered, and he couldn't help busting out

laughing. How she could make a joke and still be quivering in his arms was beyond him.

“Rules were made to be broken. Besides, if I had broken the rules last time—”

She placed a finger over his lips. “If you had broken the rules last time, nothing would have been different. Other than my silly fantasies. You would have still left. So, let's leave the past where it belongs. I like how you break the rules now.” She kissed him, hard, and he tightened his grip on her body, pressing her into him as much as he could.

Chapter 25

Kammy woke up the next day, groggy and achy but awake and alive. It was a blessing, and one everyone was thankful for. The morning was filled with lots of tears and hugs. Lita was there, but the family hovered so much she had no time to talk to Kammy. Her friend looked different to her now. Now, she could see her for what she was. It was like seeing a ghost of the girl she had known all those years ago.

Once the family had settled down some and given Kammy some space to breathe, Lita finally got a chance to talk to her. Everyone left, and even Alex went to grab some food from the cafeteria. Lita pulled up a chair close to the bed where Kammy lay, looking out of the window to avoid having to look at anyone. It had been how she looked all day. If she didn't have to own up to anything, then it didn't make it real. Well, Lita was never very good at letting things slide, and Kammy was well aware that this was going to happen. "I can't do this right now," Kammy whispered, her throat hoarse.

"You will probably never have the time. That's the thing with you. When things get difficult for you, you avoid and deflect until you think people forget. Sometimes they do," Lita answered, not letting it go and letting the firmness fill her voice. "But I am not going to forget this. How could you do this to me? How could you do this to all of us. We trusted you."

Kammy didn't seem to know what to say, so she said nothing at first. Instead, she stared out the window as if she were trying to escape. Maybe she was. Maybe part of her had hoped she would never wake up. Lita wasn't sure. All she knew was her friend was awake and the pain was real.

For several long moments, the silence stretched between them, pulling like a rubber band ready to snap at any moment. It was painful and had Lita breathing heavy, her body shaking with pent-up energy.

"I hate myself more than you or anyone else could ever hate me. I'm never going to get better, so why are you even here?"

It wasn't what Lita had thought to hear. Kammy's voice didn't carry its usually perkiness. Before, she had always sounded optimistic and happy. Now, she sounded defeated. It worried Lita that this trip to the hospital was only a steppingstone to something much worse. "You can get better. You just have to want to get better."

"I have no reason to get better. We are almost thirty. You and Regan have great careers. Y'all's lives are awesome, and here I am still mooching off my parents. I can't hold down a job. All I get are loser boyfriends or half-ass one-night stands. My life sucks, and it is so bad now that I can't fix it." Kammy protested, finally turning to look at Lita. "I have tried. I wanted to try. But I can't. I suck as a person. I suck as a human being. So, I might as well just be done with it. At least I will feel good as I go."

"You don't mean that," Lita whispered, moving in closer.

"So, what if I do. You ran away. Hell, you wanted to run away further. You don't care what happens down here. The only time you visit is when something is going on. There is no reason for you to even be here. Go back to your life up there and pretend I don't exist like you always do," Kammy sneered, flinging her hand out to push at Lita, who was just far enough away to not be hit.

"You know what, maybe you are right. Maybe I did leave, and that is part of why I do have a good life. You are the one who chose to fuck everything up when you had the opportunity to do something great with your life, and then you blame everyone else for doing good. You fucked up, Kammy, not me. It isn't my fault you are stuck here in this dead-end town that has nothing to offer. Regan got lucky, but ninety percent of the people in this place don't make much money and don't do much. It is a sleepy slow town for a reason. If you wanted to do something with your life, you needed to do something. But no. You wanted someone else to make your life for you. You wanted someone to pay your way and make the magic happen. Well, that isn't how life works. If you want a good life, then you have to work for it. I gave you two thousand dollars, and your solution was to squander it on drugs instead of using it to make your life better. So, fuck you and your judgment. You had your chance more than once. You mom got you a job at the hospital, you decided to fuck guys in the bathroom. Regan got you a job working in the office, you decided to be late every day and come in looking like trash. How the hell did you think you were going to get anything done with your life if you never tried. I'm over it. You don't

want me here, fine. I won't be here." It hurt. Lita could admit it, but in that moment, she was too angry to let it bother her.

Instead, she walked out of the room, storming down the hall like a bull toward a red cape, in search of Alex so they could get out of there. If she never saw that stupid sleepy town again, it would be too soon. Of course, she would see it again. Her family lived there, so did Regan, but she needed out of it for a while.

Alex was in the cafeteria drinking a coffee and eating a muffin. If she hadn't been fuming mad, it would have looked tasty. Instead, all she saw was more time it would take for them to leave. "We need to go."

"Umm, okay. What happened?" Alex asked, trying to wrap up what was left of his muffin.

"I just can't. I am not going to sit around and listen to someone act like I am this horrible person because I did something with my life. It isn't right, and I am not going to do it," Lita answered. Alex gave her a confused look, but she would have to explain later. There was not enough rational thought in her head to explain presently.

Alex did the best he could to pack up so the two of them could get out of the hospital. Lita didn't stop to say goodbye to any of Kammy's family. No, she just left. There was nothing left to say or do. Kammy didn't want her around, and she had never really seen eye to eye with Kammy's family, so it was time for her to be done with it. There might come a time in the future when that would change, but it would be down the road, much further down the road.

It wasn't until they had been on the road for a while before Alex tried to find out what had happened. "Look, I know it isn't really any of my business, but what happened back there. You were in such a hurry to leave and so angry." He tried to keep his tone calm and cool.

Even with the steady rhythm of the road, Lita hadn't been able to calm down. She was angry in a way she hadn't been in years, maybe even more than a decade. For a moment there, she swore she saw red. "She...she acted like I don't care and I had no right to be upset with her. It is like she just wanted to roll over and give up."

"Maybe she does," Alex whispered.

Alex probably didn't mean to come off sounding heartless, but Lita was too upset and angry to ignore his words. "What's that supposed to mean? She can't just give up on life. I care about her, and I refuse to believe that

she wanted to just give up.” Lita wanted to fight about it. For some reason, it was easier than the pain of believing her friend wanted to give up on life.

“I wasn’t trying to imply that. I mean, I just know what it’s like to feel that way. Lita, I was in that position before. Feeling helpless. You start to push everyone away because then it is easier.” He didn’t raise his voice. It wasn’t even like the tension they had on the way down from Birmingham. There was true concern and emotion in his voice. Something which bled real and whole from his voice. Lita hadn’t known about that aspect of his past though it made sense. It was a bit shocking and made her feel like a bit of an ass for being so angry.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you.” It probably wasn’t enough, but she honestly had no idea what to say to him at that point.

“You didn’t know, and I understand. You care about your friend, and the idea of her being in such a horrific place is difficult. No one wants to hear someone they love and care about is feeling something so dark and empty, but it happens, and getting angry doesn’t help. I don’t mind you getting angry with me, but maybe calm down and then stay in touch with her. Don’t let her have a reason to believe she has been abandoned and can give up.” Alex reached over and squeezed her hand with his. It was a wonderful sensation and had her smiling a little.

An intense sensation of calm washed over her for the first time since getting to the hospital earlier that day. Now that she was feeling better, she was starting to feel hungry. They waited until they had been on the road for a while before grabbing some food. She needed to get back to Birmingham in order to face work, something she was not looking forward to, but being late would not help matters.

Chapter 26

“I should fire you for what happened Friday. I have no idea what got into you, but you nearly blew the whole account.” Mrs. McDowell paced around her office. She hadn’t been able to sit down since Lita got in there. “You are just lucky that your paperwork was on point, or we would have surely lost the whole deal. I can’t believe it! What the hell happened?”

“I’m so sorry. My best friend was in the hospital, and I had found out she had taken a turn for the worse right before the meeting. I know I shouldn’t have let it get to me, but... I’m sorry. I swear. I will do everything I can to make it better.” Lita had never been one to beg, but this account was supposed to catapult her to the next level. Now it sounded like she was barely holding on to her job.

“Our personal lives are always going to have ups and downs. I am sorry about your friend, but you have to learn to put your game face on when it is required. You have to learn to separate the two, or you are never going to make it” the older woman glared, finally standing behind her desk. “I want you to take the rest of the day off. Figure yourself out, and come back ready to work hard and like the woman I know you can be.”

Lita couldn’t believe she was being told to leave. It seemed crazy, especially since she had the entire weekend to work everything out. Now, she was being told to leave again. Not wanting to make things worse, she left with polite acknowledgment, then grabbed her purse, and left. Oliver was waiting to ask questions, but she didn’t so much as even glance back at him. She was pretty sure she was already the office joke after she had screwed up the presentation Friday.

For several moments, she sat in her car, staring out of the windshield, wondering where everything had gone wrong in her life. Everything had been going great. She had a wonderful job; things were on the up and up... weren’t they? So why did it feel like everything had been thrown so turbulently out of control? Seemed like since she had gone to the reunion everything had changed.

Part of her wanted to cry, but crying never solved anything. Instead, she shook her head, started the car, and headed for her apartment. A part of her wanted to reach out to Alex, tell him what happened, and ask for comfort, but that also seemed so foreign to her. No, she needed a little bit of normal and independence, so she didn't feel like she was turning into something she wasn't. Alex being in her life was part of the problem. He had come in and changed everything. For years, ten years, she had been strong and independent. Now, it felt like she was spending every moment relying on some man to come save her. It just wasn't right or natural.

By the time she got to her apartment, she was no longer sad or upset; she was just downright angry. Rage was coursing through her. All this had happened because of that stupid reunion. She went down there and hung out with a bunch of people who hadn't cared about her in high school and hadn't thought about her since. Then she got mixed up with a guy who made her feel all warm and squishy again thinking about old schoolgirl emotions, and now her life was falling apart.

Letting rage fuel her, she blared loud heavy metal and danced around her apartment in an old Judas Priest T-shirt and panties, feeling like a person she hadn't been in a long time. Lita sang and danced, letting the world fade away and the realm of music take over. It was where she felt most at peace.

It was interrupted by the knocking on her door. Trying to compose herself, she was finger-combing her hair as she walked to the door. She was sure she still looked like a wild mess by the time she got there, but at least everything was kind of put back in place. On the other side of the door was Alex with a curious look on his face.

"Hey, I have been trying to reach you for hours. You didn't call me at lunch, so I called your friend Oliver, and he told me you got sent home. Why didn't you tell me?" Alex asked, waiting to be let into the apartment.

"I, umm, well, I was a bit frustrated and just needed some time to myself. I didn't realize that much time had passed." It wasn't the whole truth, but Lita didn't want to hurt Alex's feelings by telling him she was starting to feel like their relationship was out of control.

Alex gave her a concerned look, the wheels behind his eyes turning, calculating her answer. "You have been acting strange since Friday. I know things didn't go well, but I wish you wouldn't just push me out because of it."

“I’m not pushing you out. I just, I needed some time to myself to think. Look, how about we go out and just do something fun tonight. I’ll even brush my hair.” Lita stepped out of the way so Alex could wheel into the door. She was still feeling off about their relationship and life in general, but she also didn’t want him to feel bad. She did care about him. She just also wanted to feel like herself again.

“Well, I was actually hoping I could take you to this open mic night I had heard about. I know you haven’t been feeling great about your music, but you used to sing all the time. I really think that if you got up there again you would shine. It would be great for you.” Alex gave her that sexy smile he always did when he was trying to convince her of something. It was a wicked look, and one she often caved to.

She looked down at her wild appearance, knowing her hair was a mess and she looked like she was ready for a rock-n-roll pajama party, but when she looked back up, she was smiling. The music had done the trick, and she was starting to feel a lot better. “Okay, I can do that. But let me get ready. Maybe we go out to dinner or something first?”

That devilish smile only grew with his win, and he nodded to her. “Yeah, we will get some dinner and then head over. Make sure you get your guitar. We want to get there early enough to sign you up but not too early.”

Lita giggled a bit then headed for the back of the house. Looking in the mirror, she saw just how wild she looked. Her hair was a mess of frizzy waves, and her makeup was smudged; however, she decided to use that to her advantage. After all, she had showered that morning, so there was no need for another one. Grabbing some spray gel, she spritzed her hair and crimped it with her hand, taming the frizz but enhancing the waves. Then she added on more eyeliner and touched up some of the smudges until she looked more dark and brooding. Next, she added a bright red lipstick, giving a nice pop to the rest of her dark makeup.

Once she was dressed, she headed back out to where Alex was relaxing and messing around on his phone. He was good about waiting for her. The look he gave her, however, seemed to say the wait was worth it. “You know, when you dress like that and go out, I bet no one thinks you work in an office all day for a living. I swear, you are hot. Did you always look this good?”

He also knew how to make her blush, which she instantly did. Swatting in his general direction, she went and got a drink for the two of them and sat

down. They hadn't fully decided their plans, and she didn't want to just rush out of the door. "I showed a picture to Oliver once, and he thought it was my Halloween costume."

"Oliver is a nit with half the time and is after your job. Don't listen to him. He rather stirs the gossip pot and make you feel bad than say anything nice." Alex leaned over as far as he could to give her a kiss, and Lita met him halfway, giving him her cheek. She had put far too much time into her makeup to mess it up with making out.

"So, where did we want to go tonight? I know you mentioned a place for open mic, and I will need time to tune my guitar, but we need to eat and everything first." Taking a seat next to him. She loved the way he looked at her when she got dressed up. She didn't have to fit into a box for him but being with him seemed to be making a mess of everything else in her life. Shaking her head, she tried not to let her conflicting emotions mess with her night.

"I'm open to anything, so long as I get to see you sing." Lita shook her head at his gushy flirting. Sometimes, he was that way. Laying it on thick just to make her blush, and she always did. That was exactly what happened too. Her face lit up like a Christmas light, and she did all she could to hide it, and when that didn't work, and the smugness of his victory started to spread over his lips, she swatted him.

Not wanting to eat anything too heavy, she suggested a cafe she knew was near where she would be performing. They served a lot of salads and lighter meat options. Things she could eat and not feel bloated after. Singing on a full stomach was never easy to do. On top of that, the cafe had a nice outdoor sitting area where she could tune her guitar and get things ready. It had been far too long time since she had sung on her own and doing so had her a little terrified. Alex liked to push her, and she understood why, but it didn't make it easy to jump off the cliffs he led her to.

Chapter 27

By the time they made it to the club, Alex was pretty sure Lita was starting to turn green. He wasn't sure what it was about singing that made her so nervous now. She was incredible and always made the audience beg for more. However, when she was getting ready for the show, she looked like she was getting ready to fall over. Her turn would be coming up shortly, and she had already moved closer to the stage so to avoid tripping over people on her way there. Lita hated to look like a fool in front of people.

The person before her was a younger man with a deep country tone. He sung sad songs which her mellow and had the audience a little tuned out. Not because he wasn't talented, but more because they had heard it all before. There was nothing special about him, not like with Lita. Alex had every confidence that when Lita got on the stage, people would come alive again.

It wasn't long before her name was being called and she was walking toward the microphone in that sure, confident way she always did. Even with her toad-like coloring, she held herself high. People around him didn't seem to notice how freaked out she seemed to be. No, they noticed she looked nothing like any of the other performers who had graced the stage that night. She wasn't country down home goodness. Lita was rock-and-roll heartbreak, and it exuded from her with every move of her body. She was special. She was different, and it had garnered the attention of everyone in the room.

Lita had noticed it as well. She plugged in her guitar and looked out at the audience, seeing all eyes on her, and he saw the shock washing over her like ice when you had a fever. For a moment, she stood still, her chest didn't move, and he knew she wasn't breathing. No, she was just standing there, waiting for something to happen. There was an almost painful electricity in the room as people waited with her, wanting to know what she had in store for them. People were growing impatient, and Alex was starting to wonder what he had done. Maybe she wasn't ready for this.

It was reaching the point where she was taking too long, and then she struck the chords of her guitar, and the room filled with sound. She took a moment to play, letting the music speak for her while she desperately tried to gain control of her nerves. No one else could tell, but Alex could. He sat there, staring at her, watching her look down at her guitar, as her fingers flew over it, but not looking up at the audience. She had gone from not breathing at all to breathing too much. Her chest rose and fell in rapid succession. As much as Alex wanted to run to her, the room was too crowded for his chair to get through easily. Stupid chair.

When she tried to sing, though, nothing came out. The crowd once again started to grow restless. Some people started to turn away and talk among themselves, having lost all interest in Lita. Looking back to his girl, he saw her try to start singing again. This time, she did. Words started to flow, but her confidence just wasn't there. She was afraid, and it came out in the vibrations of her voice. It broke Alex's heart, because he knew he had pushed her.

She hadn't made it far into the song before she stormed off the stage, marching through the crowd, barely stopping long enough to grab her guitar case. Alex scrambled to go after her, but the crowd was still too thick, and it was going to take him a while to get through it all. When he made it outside, he found Lita on the curb, kneeling with her head in her hands. He couldn't tell if she was crying or just shaking out of anger. Either way, her entire body was vibrating.

"Lita," Alex whispered, reaching out toward her in a comforting way.

"Don't. I just want to be left alone." Lita shrugged away, turning and glaring up at him. He could see the tears which had rolled down her cheeks, but it was anger not sadness.

"I'm just trying to help," Alex explained.

"That's the problem. You are always trying to help. It's like you keep trying to make my life better, but there was nothing wrong with it to begin with. Everything was going great. I have a great job and I was going somewhere. Now, you come along and start dredging up all these memories of the past. We aren't eighteen anymore. Get over it." She stood up and grabbed her guitar case. "Look, I have to go."

"Wait, Lita, where are you going?" Alex called after her, trying to move after her, but the way she stormed off and the crowd on the street kept him

from being able to follow her. He had never seen her so angry. It was a shock.

Once he realized he couldn't catch up with her, a second thought hit him. Not only had she stormed off, but she had left him no way home. He was stuck, alone. Lita was just angry. She would come around. For now, he just needed to get home. Frustrated, he wheeled to a quieter spot and called Brandon to come get him. He figured his friend could pick him up, and it would give Lita time to calm down.

No, they weren't teenagers anymore, but if they couldn't believe in dreams anymore, then what the hell was the point of living. It occurred to him then that he had given up on everything before. He had let his own life setbacks make him discouraged and give up on everything about his life. So how was he supposed to expect her to jump on his positivity train. He wasn't even sure what it was about her that had pulled him out of his own sludge bucket. However, it had, and he had just assumed she would want to run alongside with him.

He had been wrong, and he had pushed too hard.

Brandon came and picked him up a few moments later, and the two of them rode home. "I don't know what to do. I was just trying to help."

"Dude, I hate to break it to you, but you were being pushy and trying to force something she wasn't ready for. Lita is amazing, I give you that, but it doesn't mean she was ready to get back out there and sing for the world. Lita has her own baggage to deal with. How about instead of trying to live vicariously through her, you just try to work on yourself."

He hadn't thought about it that way. Alex had remembered Lita dreaming of a life where she could sing and be happy. Now, she just wasting away in an office. He thought he was helping by encouraging her. He had been wrong. "I wasn't trying to live vicariously through her. I just wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to follow her dreams and do the things she had always wanted to do."

"Dreams change when we get older. Has it occurred to you that maybe her dreams changed over the last ten years? Things happened in her life that shifted what was going on, sent her down different paths. Maybe you should respect that and the person she is now." He hated that Brandon was right. He had been so focused on living in the past and remembering the girl he had grown up with that he hadn't thought about the woman she had become. It wasn't fair for him to treat her like that. He would have to make

it up to her. He just wasn't sure when he would get the opportunity. "Why don't you take all this energy you have for trying to make her dreams a reality and put it into fixing yourself. That is what she would want. That is what you actually want."

Alex had a moment of wondering why Brandon was always pushing him. A surge of anger, lingering from the past, raced through him, but Brandon was right and had been for a long time. Maybe it was time to face the truth. Alex had been trying push his desires onto someone else instead of working on himself. It was time for him to change that.

Her body was still shaking when she got home. She stormed into her apartment and tossed her guitar down on the couch. It wasn't just that she was humiliated. She was tired of being treated like a project, like someone who needed saving. Lita was no damsel in distress, and she certainly was not a project for someone who had given up on his own dreams.

Part of her could understand why Alex had tried to push her, but it didn't give him a right to try to change her whole life. This was her life, and she was going to live it however she saw fit. Damn it, everything was falling apart, and he didn't even seem to notice. All he saw was an opportunity for her to sing and write and become some sort of Bohemian artist broke and living for love. Well, as nice as that might sound, it wasn't realistic.

Not to mention her confidence was gone, and her love for it was gone. She no longer carried the passion for it she once had. Sure, it was nice to play now and then, but it wasn't the same as it had been when she was young and living life moment to moment. Now, she had a future to think about. She had real dreams to live. There wasn't time for her to play around with her reality.

Walking to her fridge, she opened it and pulled out a bottle of wine and a hidden box of thin mints she had tucked away for just such an occasion. She uncorked the wine and went to change into her oversized night shirt, giving the wine time to breathe, whatever the fuck that meant. Cozy and armed with her wine and cookies, she plopped down on the couch and turned on the TV hoping vegging out would help her calm down.

She didn't bother with a glass or plate, and instead, she drank from the bottle and popped the cookies directly from the sleeve. Barbaric but satisfying.

Alex might have had all the good intentions in the world, but his good intentions were destroying her life. She had so much she needed to rebuild. Not just because of him but also because of her own stupidity. Kammy had taken all her savings, and the stress between what happened to her friend and what had been going on with Alex had caused her to mess up at work.

Chapter 28

Lita had fallen asleep on the couch, cookie crumbs and an empty wine bottle as her companions. It certainly wasn't the best way for her to wake up. She was groggy and slow as she pulled herself out of her sleep and tried to move into wakefulness. That was when her second alarm went off. The one which told her it was time to start grabbing her things to leave. Usually, it wouldn't matter except she was a total mess. After her night of trying to play rock star, drinking, and eating cookies, her face was covered in makeup stains, and she was sure she smelled like the wrong side of a bar. She needed a shower.

With that revelation, Lita jumped off the couch, letting the bottle and wrappers fall. Rushing through the house, she stripped on the way to the bathroom, stumbling and hopping before stepping into a cold shower, not having enough time to let the water heat up. It would be nice soon enough, probably just in time for her to get out.

By the time she was clean and dressed, she was nearly ten minutes late leaving the house. There was no time for coffee or food. It would have to wait for later. Traffic was bad, pushing her arrival time to being fifteen minutes late.

Lita weaved her way into the office, doing her best to not be noticed. Her luck couldn't get better. It just wasn't possible. Just as she started to slide into her cubicle, Mrs. McDowell was standing there waiting for her. "I think it is time for us to talk."

There was a cold sound in her boss's voice which told Lita all she really needed to know. She was in all kinds of trouble. Lita walked with Mrs. McDowell into her office and took a seat in front of her desk.

"Lita, I don't know what is going on with you. You went from being one of the most promising prospects I had ever hired to a mediocre middle ground worker to finally shining like a star and then bombing out. I have never seen anything so unsteady in all of my career. I just can't risk it. If I give you any of the accounts or responsibilities and you screw up like you

did this last one, it could cost me my business. I understand you have had some things going on in your personal life lately, but I just can't have this going on here. I'm sorry, but, Lita, I am going to have to let you go," Barbara announced in that firm confident tone she always used. Barbara McDowell was a businesswoman, and she knew she had to be strong to be taken seriously.

There was nothing for Lita to say, and truth be told, there was nothing she wanted to say. Giving a weak smile, Lita just got up and headed for her desk so she could grab the few things she had there. It wasn't a lot. Lita had never been the type to bring her personal life to work. Which only made this whole situation more ironic.

"Hey, what is going on?" Oliver asked, peeking around the cubicle as she packed her things.

"Well, looks like you will be able to get ahead around here. I just got fired," Lita answered surprised she was able to say it without getting upset.

"You can't be serious. Lita, she can't do that," Oliver protested, not moving away from the opening of her cubicle.

"She can, and she did. Look, I need to go. I appreciate it, but I need to go." Lita put the last of her things into her oversized purse and headed toward the exit.

"Just because she can doesn't make it right," Oliver whispered, moving out of the way but wanting to get the last word. Lita didn't answer. She could see others watching the scene, and she certainly didn't want to give them any more of a show than she already had.

For some reason, she couldn't even bring herself to be upset. She had been so overwhelmed over the last week that maybe the tears would flow later. All she could feel as she marched out of the office was a need to escape, which was exactly what she did. Instead of going home, she just drove. She drove until she had no idea where she was going. She drove until the city faded into the long lines of the country.

Before she realized it, she was putting gas in her car at a gas station in Montgomery. Her mind had clouded over, becoming a blur of everything and nothing all at once. No more did she care about her life in Birmingham or moving to the city. No more did she think about her dreams of the West Coast. All she wanted was her friend, and that was where she was headed, straight for Ozark and Regan, the one person she needed more than

anything in the world. Lita's whole life had been torn apart, and Regan was probably the only person who could get her back grounded.

After she realized what she was doing, it all hit her. The second half of her trip was filled with far more emotion than her first. The tears began to fall, her body was shaking, and as she pulled into Regan's driveway, she had become a complete wreck of a person. Lucky for her, Regan was at least home.

"Hey, girl, what are—" Reagan started to ask. Her friend rushed over to her and wrapped her arms around her. It was everything she needed in that moment. Absolutely everything. "It's okay. Whatever it is, we will get through it. I promise you."

Lita buried herself in Regan's chest, clinging to her friend as she just let her emotions go. It had been so long since she allowed herself the freedom to completely fall apart, and she couldn't have felt safer than she did with Regan holding her. After what felt like forever, Lita finally pulled away, and the two of them walked into the house. Sierra had already started some coffee and was setting cups on the table with cream and sugar in case anyone wanted it.

It took a while for Lita to calm down enough to explain things, but once the quivering sound in her voice calmed enough, and she was able to speak, she explained everything that had been going on. She talked about how it seemed like life was finally going perfect. She had a great guy, and her job was on the up and up, and then it was like it all went crashing down. "It is like he made me some sort of project, and I was so overwhelmed with Kammy, and then work got all fucked up, and—I don't know. It was like everything spun out of control."

"Sounds like it. And the shit with Kammy is rough. She is still in the hospital and is going to be sent off to a rehab after that. Her family doesn't know what to do, so I understand how hard it all is. Alex should have thought about what all was going on in your life. I think he just saw something he could make better, and he wanted to fight for it, because it made him feel good." Regan reached out and patted Lita on the hand. "I'm sure his heart was in the right place."

"Yeah, well, you know what they say about hell and good intentions," Lita said in a surly tone before laughing a bit.

"True, but you know we are all going there anyway, so why not enjoy the ride," Sierra chimed in. Lita found she liked Sierra more and more with

each chance they got to see each other. She was certainly a perfect match for Regan with their dark humor and sarcastic ways.

The three of them burst out laughing, and Regan got up and went to the liquor cabinet to pull out a vintage bottle of whiskey. “Well, it turns out I have some personal days that I can call in, so I think it is time for us to just enjoy the night.”

“You know I don’t like that stuff, right?” Lita arched a brow in her friend’s direction.

“Girl, after a couple of drinks, you like anything,” Regan teased, pouring a round of shots for all of them, and so started the night.

Alex had hoped Lita had time to calm down after the night before. So, he decided to surprise her at work with a good apology and a promise to stop pushing her so much. Brandon was right. This was supposed to be about him fixing himself—not trying to fix her. The thing was, there was nothing about her that needed fixing. She was perfect just the way she was. He had just gotten out of his van when he saw Oliver walking up to him.

Oliver wasn’t really Alex’s favorite person, but the determined and concerned look on the small man’s face made Alex pause. “Hey, man, I have no idea why you are here, but I am guessing you haven’t heard.”

It was one of Oliver’s favorite things to say. He loved to spread the gossip after all. “Haven’t heard what.”

“Lita got fired this morning. She didn’t even make it to her desk. I’m surprised she didn’t tell you about it already.” Oliver sounded genuinely upset, which shocked Alex a bit but not as much as the news and knowledge Lita had gone the whole day without telling him anything about it. Was she really that upset with him?

“No, she was kinda pissed at me last night, and I was giving her time to cool off. I guess she still needed more time. Thanks for letting me know. I will go and check on her,” Alex answered.

He raced as much as traffic would allow in hopes of getting to Lita quickly and helping her feel better. Things had not been going well in her life lately, and he had done nothing but make things worse. Getting to her apartment, he saw her car was gone from its usual spot. Still, he went to her door to see if she was there. After knocking several times, he gave up and just tried to call her. Still nothing. Lita wasn’t answering.

Trying once more to call Lita, when he got her voicemail, he decided to leave a message. “Hey, Oliver told me what happened. Look, I know I have been a selfish jerk lately. I wanted to fix you because I thought if I could make your dreams come true it would make what happened to me feel less, well, anyway. I’m sorry, and it there is nothing about you that needs fixing, but there is plenty about me that does. I hope to hear from you soon. I’m going to head home now, but please call me back when you get this. I care about you, Lita, and I am worried about you.”

He didn’t want to go on too much more, but it hurt to think he couldn’t help her more. Instead, he headed home. He headed home with the realization that the only way to help her anymore was to help himself instead of using her to feel better about his own problems. She didn’t need a knight in shining armor, but he sure did need a kick in the ass.

Chapter 29

“I’m just saying, without a job, you aren’t going to be able to stay there long and being at your mom’s old house makes you stir-crazy after a time. You should stay here with us, get your bearings about you, and then go from there. You don’t have to move back full-time, just for a little while.” Regan poured the coffee and set it on the table before going back to cooking breakfast.

Lita could still feel the night before, but they had slept into the afternoon, so she had slept most of it off. Regan was making a breakfast of eggs and grits with some sort of homemade sausage she had stashed in her freezer. She had promised it was good, and Lita decided not to ask any questions. Besides, it all smelled too good to question. “I don’t know. It would feel like a complete failure in life for me to move back here. I worked so hard to get out of this place.”

“You keep acting like this place is the rosette. There is a lot of good here, or you wouldn’t come here every time something goes wrong.” Regan pointed at her with a greasy sausage fork.

“That’s a low blow. Low blow.” Lita laughed, leaning back in her chair and taking a sip of her coffee. “And maybe you are right, but I don’t want to move back. I don’t know. I will give it some thought.”

“Well, you don’t have a lot of time to think on it. You will either need to find a new job or something. It doesn’t sound like you will have a lot of options. I just don’t want things to get worse. Besides, you could use some time to get away from all the drama up there. Seems that boy had too much of an influence on you, and you could use a break from him to get your head back on straight.”

Regan was right. Lita needed to get away from Alex for a little while so she could figure out what it was she really wanted. He had gotten too deep into her head and messed everything up. The sad thing was, he had made her think about all the things she missed. She did love writing and singing and performing more than she remembered. Having free time on her hands made her wonder just how much she could get done with it. Unfortunately,

she didn't have the luxury of money now that Kammy had taken her life savings. Sure, she could get unemployment for a bit, but it wouldn't last long, and she needed to be able to support herself.

A plate of food was set down on the table, pulling Lita back from her thoughts and making her look up into the face of her friend. "You know, you always get this far-off look in your eyes when you are trying to put your thoughts together. You overthink everything, and when you do, you wear it all over your face."

Picking up her fork, Lita dug into her breakfast, moaning at how good her friend's home cooking really was. "You might be right. Maybe it is time for me to come home for a bit and just, I don't know, do something for myself for a change. I will give it some thought, but I don't want to be a burden on you."

"You won't be a burden on us. You stay with us for a bit, do things around here, and get your head on straight. Then you can figure out what you want to do next. You need that, and I would like to see you and have you around for a little while." Regan knew Lita would probably go back and forth about the decision for a bit, but it was nice to know her friend supported her so much.

"Well you certainly came with a vengeance today," Rita said, trying to help steady Alex.

It was true. He had come into therapy wanting to do something with himself. No longer was he going to wallow in his own self-pity feeling sorry for the hand he had been dealt. That hand had led him to the woman he wanted to be with. It had put him on the path he should have been on the whole time. "I'm tired of trying to push what I want on everyone else. It is time I do what needs to be done."

"Do you really think that is what you need? Do you think that is what is going to put your mind in the right headspace?" Rita asked, holding him still for a moment and looking him the eye. "I swear, Alex, you go from one extreme to the other. Either you hate everything and don't know why you are trying or you are trying for all the wrong reasons. Why can you never want to just get better for yourself?"

"Isn't that what I just said?" Alex asked, his arms starting to shake as he tried to keep weight on his feet. It was difficult, and it took all he had to hold himself up.

“No, you said you needed to do what needed to be done. There is a difference in needing to do something and wanting to do something. When you want to do something, it touches you on the inside. Think of it this way.” Rita could tell he was struggling and helped him head back into his chair. “People need to work so they can support themselves. But not all people want to do the jobs they do. There are millions of people who hate the jobs they do. They do it because they need them, but there is no passion to it. It gives you a completely different mind-set and has a huge impact on how it affects you.”

“I want this. I want to do this, and I realize now I was hiding behind everyone else. Rita, please, trust me.” Alex gave her the best smile he could. Then he reached out and started to pull himself up again.

“Well then, let’s see what we can do. However, let’s stop trying to run before we walk. How about you take baby steps.” Rita went to steady him again, and this time, he felt a calm wash over him. Rita had been right; this was more than doing something that everyone wanted or expected. This was about doing it for him.

Alex put in the work it deserved, and when he left, he left feeling proud of the work he had done. Brandon was waiting for him, holding a bag of fast food for lunch. “What, did you think I would need a pick-me-up?” Alex asked arching a brow at the worried look on Brandon’s face.

“Well, you said you weren’t going to play around with this anymore, so I figured you would be a little worn out. Besides, you looked a bit messed up after getting back from Lita’s last night.” Brandon tossed the bag in Alex’s lap before walking with him out of the building.

“This isn’t about Lita anymore. Look. I know I fucked up when it came to her. I pushed her to do what I wanted, and to be honest, I probably pushed her away, just like I did Clara. Hell, I am surprised I haven’t pushed you away yet,” Alex answered, getting to the van.

“You can’t get rid of me that easily. Besides, you put up with my whiny ass too. We went through hell together, so we just keep putting up with hell from each other. I tell you to shut the fuck up now and then.” Brandon helped him get in the van. Brandon was going to drive so Alex could eat, but he understood where his friend was coming from. They had gone through a lot together; it was why Brandon had followed him all the way to Alabama on a whim.

“Maybe I should just marry you, and we can just make this bromance official.” Alex laughed before taking a huge bite of his burger.

The two of them burst out laughing as they headed toward the house. Pulling into the drive, though, Alex felt his heart sink. Clara was standing there waiting for him, her phone in her hands and typing away until she saw the van pull up. “What the hell is she doing here?” Brandon asked, not sure if he should just put the van in reverse and leave. Alex could see his desire to do it.

“I have no idea. I haven’t talked to her since the divorce,” Alex answered. He balled up the wrappers from his meal and tossed them in the bag before starting to get out of the van. Brandon took that as the cue and moved around to help him.

Clara didn’t move. She just stood there and waited for him to get out. Alex rolled up to her, not sure what to expect from this visit. “Umm, what are you doing here, Clara?”

“It took me a while to find you, and you stopped answering your phone, so I came out here,” Clara answered, looking up at him.

“That didn’t answer my question. Why are you here?” Alex asked again, just wanting her to be gone.

“Well, you ran off and sold the house, which quite frankly pissed me off. I gave you the house because I wanted to make sure you had a place you could live in that was comfortable with your situation, and you just throw it away and run off on some wild whim! What the hell is wrong with you” Clara asked, shoving her phone in her pocket before tossing her hands up in the air.

“Why the fuck do you care? You left me, and you gave me the house. I made the choice I made. It had nothing to do with you. You had already moved on, found another man, found another life. So why do you care what I do with my stuff?” Alex answered, a hint of anger rolling into his voice. He hadn’t thought much about the divorce since moving back to Alabama but having her in front of him stirred up all of the old feelings. He had loved Clara once upon a time, but she had only loved him when he was whole. Once he came home broken, she had lost all interest in him. It was what made their breakup so much more painful. She had promised to love him no matter what, but it was the biggest lie. She only wanted a perfect him and was done with him the moment she couldn’t parade him around as some sort of trophy husband. No, he was trash now.

“It is my business because if you were just going to throw it away—”

“I didn’t throw it away. I sold it. There is a difference. What are you really pissed about? That you didn’t get money on top of getting to walk all over my heart. You cheated on me, you walked out on me, you hurt me. Not the other way around. Stop pretending like I did something wrong to you. When you gave me the house, you were right, it was built for me, and you had no use for it. You would have sold it too. So, unless you are sad because you lost some sort of sentimental value, then you have no reason to be here. I have followed all the rules of our divorce decree. Now, if you will excuse me, I have things to do.” Alex had no intentions of inviting her in or playing her game. She had no say in what he did with the house or anything else in his life. That time was long past.

“So that’s it, you have nothing to say for yourself,” Clara asked, stepping out of the way enough for him to open the door. Alex couldn’t help but wonder if she thought he was going to invite her in.

“Yeah, that is all I have to say. Go home, Clara. You shouldn’t have come at all. This was nothing more than a waste of both of our time.” Alex didn’t look back and went into the house, Brandon moving in close behind. There was a frustrated sound from behind them, which Alex could only assume was a final cry of frustration from his ex-wife. He didn’t care. He had other things to focus on, and it didn’t include that selfish bitch.

Chapter 30

It wasn't easy to give up her apartment, so instead, she worked out her monthly expenses with what she had saved up, which wasn't much. She then talked to her landlord about the situation and was able to work something out to hold her off for the next three months. However, she had agreed to stay with Regan for a while to get her head on straight. They had gone to get her notebooks and music so she could take a couple of months and immerse herself in her art. It felt strange. For years, it was all she had ever wanted, but she had gone on to do the more boring adult life. She went to school and got a real job.

Sitting on the back porch of Regan's house, she listened to the sound of nature and the pool pump gurgling. She had her guitar sitting next to her as she went over the lyrics of the last few songs she had written. The first couple she had written when things were going right with her and Alex. Smiling, she couldn't help but think about how fast and hard she had fallen for him. Not that she had ever not cared about him, but to actually be able to act on it was new. However, the last song she had started to work on was more about standing on her own and living life the way she wanted to. It was freeing, and she hated to admit it was everything Alex had said it would be. If only she were making money off it, then she wouldn't have to go back to her old boring life. It was a bit depressing to think about. However, she wasn't going to let it bother her. For now, she was just going to enjoy working on her music, her stories, and all the other artistic things she had put on the back shelf like they had no longer mattered to her.

Picking up her guitar, she ran through the songs again, letting the sound of the world around her flow with the songs. Something about the sound of the wind and trees made the song feel so much richer. She would have to work on that. It took her a couple of tries going over the song before it started to sound perfect.

She gave the song one more round, and she let her feelings ride the wave. The world disappeared as she sang, and everything became about the

music and the power it gave to her. Every moment she felt freer and more alive than she had in more years than she could remember.

It was shocking when Regan spoke to her after she finished her last song. “Hey, that is really good. I think you are starting to feel it again.”

Nearly jumping out of her skin, Lita exclaimed, “Eep! What the hell, Regan! You can’t just sneak up on someone like that.”

Regan burst out laughing and sat down in the chair next to her. “Well, what am I supposed to do, walk around banging a drum so you can hear me everywhere I go. You know I can do it too.”

“Ha, ha, funny. I don’t know. It all feels so strange, being here, working on this stuff, not being an adult.” Lita turned so she could see her friend better. “Are you sure this is all okay?”

There was this strange sense of not being enough that lingered over Lita lately. She wanted to be more. She wanted to be a woman in control of her life, but it just didn’t seem to be happening. Instead, she felt lost, and strangely, in the thick of her wandering, she had found a voice again. It was all a bit surreal.

“There is nothing wrong with this at all. It isn’t like you are Kammy, trying to suck the life out of everyone around you. You are breathing new life into yourself, and it is bleeding over. You need this, Lita, and seeing you finally doing it, well, it makes me feel good I am able to help you.” Regan leaned over and gave her a big hug. “You have always had something special about you, so don’t let it die again.”

Those words brought a huge smile to Lita’s face, and she tossed her guitar pick over to Regan in protest. She hated people complimenting her, but it was nice to be supported. More so, it was nice to be supported on her own terms. As much as she wanted Alex to know about her work and songs, she also didn’t want him pushing her and trying to get her to do things on his time line. She was more than just a project for him.

“So, I checked up on Kammy, speaking of the problem child. She is now in the rehab, but she isn’t liking it, which means it isn’t going to do her a lot of good. The guy she was seeing is getting put in jail for some unrelated charges, but either way, he won’t be around to mess with her for a long while. I’m not sure if she even cared about that. She is a mess.”

“Remember when we were kids and we would spend all our time at the river, you trying to convince us to fish and us swimming and scaring all the fish away?” There was a wistful tone in Lita’s voice.

“Yeah, it drove me insane. I hated it when you guys did that, and I ended up with nothing.” Regan’s words didn’t match the laughter barreling out of her. “But it was good times. Oh, what I wouldn’t give to have those times back again.”

“I have been thinking about it a lot lately. A whole lot. I would love for life to go back to that. I think Alex stirred up all those old memories, but I don’t know, we can’t go back. Though, sometimes, it’s nice to think about.” Lita laughed, leaning back and looking out toward where the edge of the river started.

“You know, I realize things didn’t go so well with Alex to start, but I really think he has a hold on you. I believe he may have gone about it the wrong way, but he has been good for you.”

“Well, it didn’t end well. I just don’t think it is good for me now. I should just keep focusing on this and putting my life back together instead of worrying with all of that.”

“Maybe, we shall see. He may come around in ways you don’t expect,” Regan answered and nudged Lita as she got up. “I’m just saying, he may surprise you. Now I am going in and getting out of my work clothes. I will leave you to all of this.”

Lita had heard about an open mic night not far from Regan’s in Dothan, so she decided to give it a try. She packed up her stuff, told all her friends about the show, and headed for the club. Her heart was pounding as she walked into the club and went to sign up for the night. She had already called in, and they knew she was coming, but she also wanted to check in properly. Walking up to the bar, she smiled as the young man standing there getting everything together for the night. There was a clipboard set out as well, where people could sign up for the show.

“Hey, my name is Lita, and I am here to perform tonight. Lita said with a smile.

“Oh, awesome! I’m glad you are here. I heard you were coming out. I’m really excited to get someone new up in here. Sometimes, it is like we hear the same old group every week, and nothing changes. Same people, same songs, it gets a bit monotonous. I’m excited for the change,” the bartender answered

“Well, I am a little rusty, but I hope I can give you a good show.” Lita put her name on the list.

“I’m sure you will. You look great, by the way,” he said. “Look, I’m George, if you need anything, just let me know.”

There was something about George that made her feel comfortable and more at home. She went to pull out her instrument and get herself in the right headspace. She had worn her favorite ACDC shirt and laced-up leather pants. She loved the look, and it made her more comfortable in the setting. She had just gotten ready when her friends started to show up. Regan ordered the first round of drinks, which Lita refused. She wanted a clear head so she could sing her songs to their fullest potential.

George the bartender was also the announcer, and he introduced a couple of other people first. They came up one at a time singing a couple of songs each before heading back to their seats with their own group of friends. Then it was her turn to get up there. She could feel the familiar rush of nervousness ticking at her, making her want to run away, but she pressed forward. The club had a moderate amount of people in it but not so many where she felt overwhelmed.

“So, I haven’t been in the singing business for a long time, but some things have happened lately and it led me back to my music. I hope you enjoy what I have come up with,” Lita said into the microphone before starting her first note.

The music was like her pulse, and with each note she felt more and more alive until nothing else in the room mattered anymore. She was one with it, and when she opened her mouth to start singing, everything else disappeared. There was no more drama from Kammy or Alex. No more stress over losing her job. She was just there, a rock goddess out there to scatter the pieces of her soul among the masses, and they were eating it up.

She could see, as if through a haze, people standing, cheering, and getting into the rough sound of her voice and the harsh tone of her guitar as she ripped into a powerful guitar solo. She went straight from one song to the next, barely taking a moment to breathe, and the crowd roared in excitement from it. By the end of her set, she was panting and sweating like she had run a marathon.

Lita hadn’t made it back to her friends before she was stopped by a rather tall and lovely woman. “That was incredible. I haven’t seen anything like that around here in years.” The woman held out a card.

Lita took the card and read the name on it. Carla Martin. “Umm, thank you.”

“I own a club up in Birmingham, and we are looking for good talent to fill out our amateur show, and I would love to have you open for us. We have two more known bands coming in, but I think you would be great, and it would get your name out there.” Carla brushed back her lovely dark hair from her face. Carla was dark and curvy and held herself in a confident and powerful way. It was something Lita certainly admired.

“A show, really?” Lita looked back down at the card then up at the woman.

“Think on it, and then give me a call on Monday, and we can hash out the details. I look forward to hearing from you, Lita. I think you have something special.”

The woman walked off then, stopping at the bar before heading out of the door. Apparently, like George, she had seen everyone else the club had to offer for the night. Lita wasn't sure what to make of her offer, but she had some time to think on it, and she was pretty sure she would be making a call on Monday.

Chapter 31

She had called Carla first thing Monday, and though it terrified her to do it, she let the cheerful woman know she would be more than happy to do the show. Carla informed her she would do a set of four songs, which was a lot more than she had expected. The show would be in three weeks, and during that time, she practiced and participated in more open mic nights. She wanted to make sure she was at her very best.

When the night came for the show, Lita felt more prepared and excited for a show than she had in a long time. Everyone had come up for the show as well, and they had rented out several rooms at the hotel nearby so they could enjoy the night. Some amazing bands were playing after her performance, and she was going to live it up.

Part of her wished Alex would be there. He would have been proud of how far she had come and that she had done it on her own, but she also needed to keep doing this on her own. Once she was on her feet again, then maybe she would think about crossing that bridge. For now, it was best she kept her attention focused on her music and the show.

Carla had shown her to a small room she was using as a dressing room. It wasn't much, but it was more than enough for her. She was touching up her makeup and going over the songs in her head one more time. It helped to calm her nerves and get her in the right headspace.

"How are you feeling?" Carla said from the door. "Are you doing okay?"

Lita turned to see Carla, a smile spread over her lovely face. Carla was tall, dark, and beautiful, fitting for her confidence, charm, and bright personality. It was enough to make anyone smile.

"Yeah, I think I am. I thought I would be terrified, but I honestly just feel pumped for the show." Lita gave her own smile and grabbed her guitar so she could head out to the stage. She had a set to play with a band and practiced with them over the last week. It made the sound so much better, and she couldn't wait for everyone else to hear it.

“I heard you at the rehearsal this afternoon. You guys sounded wonderful. I bet everyone is going to love it. Lita, I’m telling you that you should pursue this more. It could take you far,” Carla encouraged as the two of them walked toward the stage. “If you want, I would be more than happy to help usher you into a new future. I could get you some paying gigs here at the club, and I have some other friends who might be willing to pay for it as well. It would be a good start.”

“Why don’t I get through tonight before we move forward any further.”

The closer they got to the stage, the more she could feel the energy in the club. Carla’s place was huge, holding ten times more people than the place in Dothan. It was also packed to the brim with people, most of who were there to see the bands who played after her. She just had to get them started. Hopefully, it would work to pump them up.

Lita had truly believed she would be nervous before walking onto the stage, but a strange calm washed over her. It was beautiful and powerful, and when Carla called out her name and the crowd cheered, even though they had no clue who she was, she felt energized. The lights were dim on the stage with a spotlight following her as she walked toward the microphone. As always, there seemed to be this strange calming sound that spread over the room, or maybe it was just in her head. Either way, she let the moment sink into her, and then she turned toward the crowd.

At first, she didn’t look out to them; instead, she found someone and hazily settled her sight on them so she could get her bearings. Taking a couple of deep breaths, she struck that first note and let it vibrate through the club, releasing a power which was all hers. The note was just about to fade when she began to sing and the band started to play. The first song started out slow but picked up quick, and once it did, the crowd roared to life.

As her set went on, she sang and danced around the stage, putting on a true show. She sweated, and her hair became a mess. The cheers and screams of the people in the audience fed her, pushing her to do more and more. She had never put on a show like that before, and now that she had, she wasn’t sure she could ever give it up.

Having gotten so lost in the music, she hadn’t focused much on the details of the crowd much until she finished her final song. She looked down to the front of the stage, and she swore she saw Alex standing there. No, that didn’t seem right.

Her arms fell, and she knelt to get a better look, and sure enough, Alex was there, standing, as if waiting for her. Shock washed over her face, but before she could react, Carla came out to give her a rousing conclusion.

“What a show! Lita Reigns everyone! Give her another round of applause. We look forward to having her back soon.”

Lita gave a bow with another huge smile then walked off the stage. However, as soon as she was out of view of the public, she rushed to the front. Had she really seen Alex standing? When she pushed through the backstage door, she was sad to see him sitting. Of course, she hadn't expected to see him at all.

“Alex? What are you doing here?” she asked, rushing over to him.

When she got to him, he pushed a button on what looked like a remote and pushed himself up from the chair. Her eyes opened wide. Damn, she had forgotten how tall he was. He had to have been a good six inches taller than her. Reaching up, she cupped his cheek, and then she started to investigate his body. He pulled a cane over to lean on, but other than that, he stood there with her.

“That was the most incredible thing I have ever seen, Lita. I am so proud of you,” Alex whispered.

“How are you doing this?” Lita asked, not caring what he had said to her. Alex was standing.

“I took what you said to heart. The doctor did a surgery on me. I can feel and move. Not all the time, but I have a lot more control, and the pain is a lot less,” he answered. Taking her hands, he moved them to his back so she could feel where the implants were.

“This is incredible.” Lita was in pure shock. She had no idea what to say. The joy and wonder of her performance were intensified by the surprise of Alex.

“Not as incredible as you. Lita, look, I am sorry I pushed you so hard. I was trying to push my problems on everyone else, and I thought if I could fix you it would make my pain less. I can't swear to you I will be perfect. I am still broken. I still have night terrors, and the surgery isn't without its flaws, but if you will have me, I want to give this another shot.” Alex turned her face so she was looking up into those beautiful blue eyes.

For several seconds, she just stared at him, breathing hard and trying to control the rush of emotions flooding her. Instead of answering him, she

rose up on her tiptoes and kissed him with all the love and passion she had felt for him since they had been teenagers.

From around them, there were cheers and catcalls, and when their kiss broke, Lita realized they were surrounded by her family and friends who had come to see the show. The two of them laughed, and then the whole group went about enjoying the rest of the night.

Lita was shaking as she moved to straddle Alex's body. They had kissed and touched for hours, making the most of their reunion. However, this was the first time they would be together fully, and she was a bit nervous. Part of her was afraid she would hurt him, and another part of her was afraid she would disappoint him.

"You are so beautiful," Alex whispered, lifting her just a bit so he could position himself. He was hard and ready for her, probably more ready than her. After all, it had been over five years since he got to experience a woman.

"You will tell me if I—"

Alex kissed her hard, taking her breath away. "Stop it. I want to make love to you. I need to make love to you." He slid himself inside her.

She moaned deeply as she started to rock against him, adjusting to the feel of him deep inside her. His head fell back, and she watched as a look of pure ecstasy flowed over his face. It was probably the sexiest thing she had ever seen.

His hands roamed her body, and he grasped her hips and took control. He moved her and bounced her the way he desired, and it sent shockwaves of pleasure pulsing through every nerve of her body. He gripped her hair, pulling her down to him and kissing her like a starving man.

Passionate sounds echoed up from his throat as their sensuality turned more animalistic. He gripped her, empowered her, and made her feel like she belonged to him. He dominated her and gave her a sense of feeling protected. They screamed out as climax hit, and they shook and writhed against each other. No story or fantasy could compare to the real thing. There was nothing she could have made up that would measure up to that moment of pure orgasmic bliss.

Once she started to calm, she collapsed against his strong chest so he could hold her, wrapped up in his warmth and protection. Her heart was

pounding, and before she lost her nerve, she whispered, “I love you, Alex Houston.”

“I love you, too, Lita Reigns. I always have,” he answered, kissing the top of her head.

Calming relief washed over her, and she felt truly at peace. After ten years, she had finally made it to where she was always meant to be. That moment, in bed with Alex, after a perfect night on the stage, was all she had ever wanted.

About the Author

Cherron Riser was born in Dothan, Alabama on November 2, 1983. With her family being military, she spent a lot of her early childhood traveling all over the country, giving her a lot of new and different experiences, she would not otherwise have been given. When she turned ten, however, her family settled in the small town of Ozark, Alabama where she finished her high school career.

After high school, Cherron began college, however she also found herself in love with her old high school crush. The two of them were married in July of 2002, and welcomed their first child in October of 2003, after moving to Knoxville, Tennessee. In December 2008 they welcomed their second child and found themselves headed back to Alabama. They have now been married for over thirteen years, and Cherron has returned to school to finish what she had started all those years ago.

All through her life Cherron has been drawn to the arts. As a child she danced and sang all of the time, often driving her family crazy. During middle school, a group of friends and Cherron started "The Outcast" a club established for building a love of writing. Once the club was formed, Cherron was never seen without a spiral notebook and pen. She wrote daily, developing silly stories for her friends. After high school, Cherron began to write more serious stories and develop more original plot lines. It is a talent and love Cherron has developed over the years, filling her computer with story after story.

As an author, Cherron began her career as a self-published author, releasing the book *Defying Destiny* in March of 2015. She gives a lot of credit to her husband, children, and friends for inspiring her characters and worlds and looks forward to showing them to all of her readers in the near future. Cherron can often be seen at conventions, both for readers and for geeks, as she is and will always be a geek herself, and proud of it.

