

## Trying to Catch Up

When Charlotte turned eighteen, she was disappointed twice over. As planned, her brother had reluctantly left her in a secluded area of the forest near Hood River to go through her first shift. She'd hoped that her mate would arrive during the painful process, but he hadn't. That was her first disappointment, but she knew that he might have been too far away and hadn't been able to reach her.

Her second disappointment came when she had realized how small her wolf was. She had been born during the day, but because werewolves could only shift at night, she had started to feel the pain of her shift just after the sun had set. In the darkness, her wolf had still been able to see the distinct shape of cougar prints in the mud though. In comparison, her wolf's paws were about an inch shorter and narrower, probably making her the smallest werewolf in Hood River and possibly in all of Oregon.

Werewolves were larger than wolves and were supposed to be larger than cougars as well, but Charlotte was different. She was probably about the same size if not smaller than a female gray wolf. The one time that she had shifted in front of Greg so that he could train her in her wolf form, she had seen the icker of disappointment in his eyes. She had refused to shift in front of him or anyone else since.

She had been able to live with the disappointment of not having her mate and her the night of her first shift because she knew there was still hope of finding him. But the size of her wolf wasn't something that she could change. It was something she was stuck with, and even with all the training her mother and brother had put her through, it put her at a distinct disadvantage and had made her feel inadequate more times than she could count.

Standing in front of her mate, Charlotte was hit with that same feeling of inadequacy. He was the kind of guy that girls like Charlotte didn't end up with— everything about him seemed perfect. And if Hood River High and her own brother's disappointment had taught her anything, it was that she was nothing special, that she would never be good enough for someone like the amber-eyed Adonis in front of her.

"I'm Charlotte Hill," she introduced herself awkwardly, wanting to smack herself in the forehead when she remembered that he already knew her name somehow.

She could take down men twice her size, she was one of the top students in her senior class, she could make the best eclairs her chefs had ever tasted and she knew the science behind cooking like nobody in her college class did, but apparently talking to her mate was the one thing she was horrendously bad at.

"Liam Gold," he replied with an amused smile. Even his name was more exciting than hers for goodness sake!

Charlotte realized belatedly that his hand was still resting lightly on her arm from when he had reached out to steady her. She could feel the warmth of him through the fabric of the baggy shirt Lily had lent her, and something told her that she'd miss that touch as soon as it was gone.

"I'm glad to see you're awake and moving around," he told her. "I saw you in the pack hospital in Portland," he explained when she looked at him in surprise. "I knew you were my mate but I couldn't really introduce myself to you when you were sleeping."

"Oh, right," she responded with a small shake of her head, realizing that the smell in her dream hadn't been a dream at all. "I'm doing much better thanks," she said with a grateful smile. "Just need to wait until everything heals I guess."

"I know how that feels," Liam said with a small chuckle, gesturing down to his shoulder with a nod of his head. Charlotte had been so focused on his eyes that she hadn't even realized that his shoulder was bandaged up and one of his arms was in a sling as well.

"What happened?" Charlotte asked with wide eyes.

"Well, Erikson kind of shot me," he said with a grimace as if he was remembering the pain of the bullet entering his flesh.

"Oh my god," Charlotte muttered. And she thought she'd had it bad. If Erikson weren't already dead, she would have found him and killed him— she'd only just met Liam, but their mate bond meant that she was already feeling protective and possessive of him.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," Liam assured her with a lopsided grin. "Werewolf healing means I'll be fine in a week."

"Good," Charlotte replied with a relieved sigh. At least one of them would be fit and strong by then. "I umm... would you maybe" she started to say, trying to find a way to ask him if he wanted to go for coffee or lunch or something so they could get to know each other better, but the sound of the elevator doors pinging open and Greg shouting her name cut off her humiliating ramble.

The doors must have closed behind her after she'd stumbled into Liam's chest, but Charlotte couldn't recall hearing them slide closed.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," her brother declared, sounding both annoyed and relieved.

"Sorry, I was about to come up, but I ran into my, uh- I ran into Liam," Charlotte apologized with rosy cheeks.

"I can see that," Greg replied with a clenched jaw as he eyed Liam's hand on her arm.

Liam yanked his hand away from Charlotte like he was caught doing something he shouldn't be. She'd been right— she did miss his touch as soon as it was gone.

"I'll leave you two to talk," he mumbled while running a hand through his hair. "I was actually on my way to see Lil- the Luna- anyway," he explained, his amber eyes avoiding Charlotte's brown ones.

"Oh, okay," Charlotte said, trying to hide her disappointment with a forced smile. She opened her mouth to ask him if they could at least exchange numbers, but with a wave of his hand, he was already gone. They'd barely even gotten to talk, Charlotte thought, swallowing the lump in her throat.

"So you two really met," Greg said, and Charlotte could hear the anger in his voice.

"Do you two know each other or something?" she asked with raised brows.

"We have, and he's not good enough for you," Greg replied as he angrily stomped into the elevator and punched the button for the door of his apartment.

"Awww it's so cute when you get into protective brother mode," Charlotte teased him, but her heart wasn't quite in it. With Liam's presence gone, the tiredness she had been feeling was back.

"He's twenty-four, Charlotte," Greg bit out. "He's too old for you."

"He's my mate, Greg," she replied with some irritation. Call it fate or destiny or God's will, but mates were meant to be with one another.

"I know," Greg sighed. "I just want the best for you, Charlie, and I don't know if that's Liam," he explained gently.

"Maybe, but that's not for you to decide," Charlotte retorted as they stepped into the hallway and made their way to his apartment.

"Sometimes I forget that you're not a kid anymore, you know," Greg admitted with a helpless shrug. "But does that mean I'm not allowed to look out for you anymore?" he asked.

"No, of course not," Charlotte replied reluctantly— her brother was right of course; he was allowed to worry about her. "But Liam is my mate, and if you get in the way of that, I might never forgive you," she warned him with a no-nonsense look.

"I won't interfere," Greg promised with pursed lips.

"Good," she responded with a sharp nod, all the while thinking that it wasn't Liam that wasn't good enough for her— Charlotte, with her tiny wolf, dull brown eyes, and awkward rambling, was the one who wasn't good enough for him.

A part of her had imagined that when she did meet her mate, there would be some kind of romantic movie-like scene where they ran into each other's arms. Instead, the whole experience, from her awkward introduction to Greg interrupting them, had felt underwhelming and not quite right.

Her fears would haunt Charlotte in her dreams that night, when no matter how hard and fast she ran, Liam was always just out of her reach, the smell of oranges and pepper taunting her as she tried and failed to catch up to him.

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It was the first time Liam had looked into Charlotte's eyes. They were a dark brown color that reminded him of brownies and rich chocolate cake, and they were beautiful. Staring into those eyes, he had whispered her name without even meaning to, the word falling from his tongue easily, like he had said it countless times before.

She was even shorter than he had thought she was, standing at what he guessed was no more than five feet tall, but even in a crowded room, Liam knew that his eyes would have found her without trouble. There was just something about her that drew his attention, and he didn't think it was just about the bond between them.

When she had started talking, Liam was surprised by how nervous she seemed. He felt so comfortable around her, like they'd known each other for a long time, but based on the way her cheeks pinkened when she introduced herself and the way she had stumbled over her words before Greg interrupted them, she wasn't even close to feeling comfortable around him.

When Liam had suddenly recalled the reason he had taken the elevator up to the top floor of the Crescent— to talk to Lily— he was struck by how different Charlotte was to her. They might have both been small and young, but while Lily came across as confident and capable, his mate seemed shy and awkward. Guilt hit him for comparing the two of them, but once he had thought it, he couldn't seem to stop noting the differences.

As Lily opened her apartment door, he couldn't help but see the unique shade of her green eyes, and though the light brown color of her hair was a close match to Charlotte's, the way it hung down her back in waves was so different to how Charlotte's ended at her shoulders. And when Lily greeted him and they started speaking, there was none of the stammering awkwardness of Charlotte's speech.

"Are you sure you want to get involved in this Liam? You've already done enough to help," Lily assured him after he had explained to her and Finn why he was there.

"I'm sure," Liam insisted. "I need to find out the truth about the Council. If they've been killing off the remaining Lycans, then we need to stop them."

"How do you expect to do that," Finn asked skeptically from where he sat next to Lily on the sofa. "You know how much power they have."

"I'm not sure," Liam sighed. "At least not yet. But I have friends in the Council who I can trust to help, and that's a start."

"You can't trust them with Lily's secret," Finn argued, placing his hand protectively around his mate.

"I won't tell them about you," Liam promised Lily. "I'll only tell them the story you told me about what happened to Lycans in the past. It would help if I could talk to the contact who gave you that information though," he told them.

"I can get Shaun's contact information from my dad," Finn agreed after a moment's hesitation.

"Thank you," Liam replied with a nod. "I don't know if he'll be able to tell me anything you haven't already, but it's worth a shot."

"I'm really grateful that you're doing this, but you need to be careful, Liam," Lily insisted. "If anyone in the Council finds out that you're working against them, I don't know if we'll be able to help you."

Liam had the sudden vision of Lily in her wolf form, biting and tearing into Council Masters and members. He knew she would dominate in a fight, but it was true that she and the Seattle pack would be vastly outnumbered by the Council. No pack could go against them, which is just the way they liked it.

"It won't come to that," Liam promised, though he knew he couldn't guarantee it. Risking himself for Lily and for the truth was worth it. "I can't go back to Boston knowing I'm working for the same people who would see you dead. They need to be stopped."

"Even if your dad is one of them?" Lily asked softly.

"Even then," Liam agreed, having to look away when Finn placed his hand lovingly over Lily's stomach. Charlotte might be his mate, but the pain in his chest told him that she wasn't the one he really wanted.