

## 16 A Strong Maybe

~Liam~

As the time approached for our picnic on the mountain, Miles and Marvin had already gone ahead to help Noah and Sebastien with the preparations, leaving Oliver and me in our room. We were planning to catch up with them soon. I watched as Oliver meticulously tried on three different shirts, putting in a lot of effort to look good for Elaine. His fashion dilemma amused me, and he joined in on the laughter when he noticed me chuckling.

Out of the blue, Oliver asked, "What's going on between you and Josephine? Did you guys have some kind of disagreement?" I was taken aback by the question.

"Not really; why do you ask?" I responded, trying to hide any unease in my tone.

"I've noticed that she usually keeps her distance now. She used to be friendly—giving a little hi or hello and laughing at our jokes. However, she's been rather cold this week," Oliver explained, expressing his observations.

I couldn't hide the truth and told him, "She mentioned that we made fun of her two years ago at the mansion."

Oliver's eyes widened in surprise, "You mean she brought that up? That was in the past, and we certainly didn't mean any harm by it. We were just casually talking."

Realising that Oliver remembered the conversation too, I asked him, "So you do recall the conversation?"



"Yes," He confirmed.

"Elaine said she overheard us talking about her. But we never intended any harm by it. I think she might be taking it a bit too personally." 1

His words made me feel awful. Whatever Josephine had overheard must have hurt her deeply, and she kept it to herself for so long. It became clear that her exterior toughness didn't mean she was impervious to hurtful words. I regretted my actions and wished I had been more careful with my words back then.

After getting dressed, we made our way out to join the others. On my way, I happened to bump into Uncle Leo.

"Having fun?" he asked with a playful smile, and I instinctively dodged when he reached to tussle my hair. My reaction amused him, and he chuckled warmly.

"You're a grown man now, huh?" he teased, and his laughter was infectious. I couldn't help but laugh along with him. He then paused and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"You should enjoy life, Liam. I wish I were eighteen again. Don't let Mike's mistakes steal the joy and laughter of your youth. I admire what you're doing for your girlfriend, but remember to live a little too. No matter the outcome, don't let it weigh you down," he advised, echoing the same wisdom I had received from various people. I nodded, appreciating his words, and smiled at my uncle.

As I looked at him, an overwhelming urge to ask about the mate bond took over me. I felt like I was going crazy with all the uncertainty and emotions tied to it.



"Uncle Leo, can I discuss something with you?" I asked, and he raised an eyebrow, giving me a nod. Sensing my unease, he understood my need for privacy and guided me away from the hallway into a nearby room.

Closing the door behind him, he looked at me with a kind smile. "I'm all ears," he said, offering his full attention. I swallowed nervously, wanting to inquire about the mate bond, but cautious not to reveal that it was specifically about Josephine.

Curiosity and uncertainty filled me as I finally asked, "What does the mate bond feel like? Can you tell me about what happened when you met Aunt Amelia?" I asked him.

To my surprise, he suggested, "Actually, let me tell you about Amanda instead." It was a rare topic, as we seldom discussed her, despite her being the biological mother of Charlotte, Gemma, and Jewels.

"I'll share about Amanda because that was the first time I experienced the mate bond. By the time I met Amelia, I was already filled with apprehension and resistance due to the bad luck it had brought me with Amanda. So, my experience with Amelia might not give you an accurate representation," he explained, sighing softly.

"We were at a dinner party, and her scent caught my nostrils. I was in a trance, you see, and I couldn't control myself or my wolf. The pull was powerful, almost impossible to shake off," Uncle Leo recounted, and I nodded in acknowledgement, as I was already familiar with that part of the mate bond experience.

Curious, I asked, "What would have happened if you could feel the mate bond, but Amanda couldn't because she wasn't yet at the

mating age?" His puzzled expression showed that he needed a moment to process the question. Eventually, he grasped the implication.

Uncle Leo was indeed a brilliant man, and he studied me thoughtfully before arriving at a revelation. His eyes widened with surprise.

"That's why you're going crazy searching for Sophia?" he presumed, thinking it was her I was referring to. I immediately shook my head, indicating that it wasn't Sophia, which only seemed to deepen his confusion.

He went on to explain, "Well, it is a rare occurrence, but it has happened to a few people. Perhaps the person is close to the mating age, but the pull won't be as strong as it would have been if she had reached the mating age. That scent would simply let you know she is the one, and she is ready. Once that person is of age, the pull will become intense; you won't be able to tear your eyes away from her. Your wolf would go crazy, needing to complete the bond. It's a profound feeling, especially when you're still unmated, but it can be torturous if you're already mated," he explained, sharing his insight on the complex dynamics of the mate bond. He moved closer to me.

"If you're asking these questions, then I suspect you've found her," Uncle Leo remarked, looking at me intently, and I reluctantly shook my head.

"Don't lie to me, Liam; what you've described is an exceedingly rare occurrence. You wouldn't be asking me about it unless you've experienced it yourself or someone close to you has. So, tell me the truth," he insisted, and I felt a pang of shame for being caught in a lie.

"Can I keep it to myself for now? I'm still trying to sort out my feelings," I admitted, hoping to buy some time. Uncle Leo studied me with a

knowing expression, understanding the complexity of the situation.

"Are you romantically involved with Sophia?" he inquired, and I shook my head.

"I haven't yet expressed my feelings to her," I confessed, and he seemed relieved by that.

"And this person you believe is your fated, does she know about it? And do you have feelings for her?" he continued his probing questions, to which I again shook my head.

"I don't have any negative feelings towards her, but I don't see her in a romantic light either. She's unaware of my thoughts," I explained, being as honest as I could.

"Do you want to reject her and search for Sophia?" he asked, but I found myself unable to answer. The bond was strong, and neither Alex nor I wanted to let it go.

Uncle Leo noticed my uncertainty and gently said, "I see you're unsure. Take your time to figure things out." He advised, and I nodded, grateful for his understanding and guidance in this intricate matter.

"Well, I would advise you to give the bond a chance. Since you haven't confessed your feelings to Sophia and haven't made any promises yet, it would be unfair to discard the gift of the moon for something that isn't truly yours. Keep in mind that Sophia might find her own fated match, and unlike you, she might be more than willing to embrace it," Uncle Leo advised, echoing the same sentiments that Justin and Alex had pointed out. He sighed, placing his hands on my shoulders with a reassuring touch. 1



"Whoever this person is that you believe is your fated mate, I'm sure she doesn't deserve to be rejected without being given a chance. I made that mistake with Amelia, and I'm grateful she didn't give up on me. I don't want you to make mistakes that you won't be able to rectify, Liam. I was fortunate, but I don't want you to test your luck. Whatever it may be, I urge you to embrace it and give it a chance. We will still search for Sophia regardless," he emphasised, alleviating my fears. I looked at him, and he nodded, understanding the reasons behind my hesitation.

"I understand that might be a part of your reluctance, but at this point, we are all too invested to pull out. Remember, she is still your friend, Liam," Uncle Leo said, and I let out a sigh of relief. However, the realisation struck me that he could potentially share this information with my parents, and the last thing I wanted was for them to become involved in my love life, especially when I wasn't entirely sure about my feelings for Josephine. If my parents found out she was my fated mate, there would be no room for rejection. I needed time to figure things out before they knew.

"Please don't tell..." I started, and he finished the sentence for me, understanding my concern.

"I won't tell anyone. You lied when I asked, so I can see that you don't want anyone to know. Your secret is safe with me," he reassured me, and I thanked him sincerely. Uncle Leo extended a handshake, but then he pulled me into an embrace and playfully tousled my hair. We both shared a hearty laugh, and in that moment, I realised that no matter how old I grew, I would always be little Liam to him.

Uncle Leo's wise words reminded me of the importance of being fair to both myself and the person I believed to be my fated mate. His advice reassured me that there was room for both hope and



exploration, and it didn't necessarily mean closing off my heart to other possibilities. I felt a sense of gratitude for his guidance and support as I navigated through the complexities of the mate bond. I knew I could count on him to keep my confidence, allowing me the space and time to sort out my emotions without unnecessary interference.

After leaving my uncle, I made my way outside and realised that everyone was ready to go. Two vans were waiting, one already full and the other still open. Charlotte seemed unhappy, standing by the door of the open van. I quickly assessed the situation and noticed that the only available seat was next to Josephine.

As I hesitated, my eyes scanned the other seats in the van, unintentionally making Josephine speak up. She seemed defensive, saying, "I don't want to sit beside you either, but it looks like everyone else has paired up, and the other van is full," I felt the need to clarify my actions, as I didn't want her to think I was avoiding her. I shook my head immediately and sat beside her.

Taking a gentle approach, I looked at her and explained,

"I wasn't looking around because I don't want to sit with you, Joe. I was simply trying to figure out who else was in the van with us."

Josephine's scepticism was evident, but I wanted to put her at ease. So, I placed my hand over hers, intertwining our fingers. At that moment, my heart felt lighter, and my fears seemed to dissipate. The tingling feeling of the bond was undeniable, and I was determined to see where this journey would lead us.

"I was actually looking forward to sitting beside you," I whispered to her, noticing the furrow of her brows as she tried to understand the sudden change in my demeanour.