

A black and white photograph just showing two men, who look very similar, their mouths almost joined as they come in for a kiss.

Genre: Paranormal – wolf shifters

Tags: shifters/wolf, two alpha males, demi-sexual, first kiss, true mates

Content warnings: None

Word count: 16170

Title: **NOT EVEN CLOSE**

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Beta read – My beta reader

Proofed and Edited – beta reader and two friends

Read and critiqued – The Write Connection, writers group

Not Even Close

Chapter One

Connor sighed, hunched his huge shoulders and tried to disappear into the wallpaper. It wasn't easy, given that he was one of the biggest men in the pack, but he had to try. He hated being at these pack gatherings, but as beta for his pack, he really didn't have a choice. When Alpha Davis gave an order, he jumped, just like any other wolf in the pack with an ounce of commonsense.

But for the love of God. Did everyone have to be so damn forward and sex-minded? It made Connor's skin itch anytime anyone came close to him, although most of his regular pack members knew better than to try anything with him. Unfortunately this particular evening there were members of a neighboring pack in town. Davis decided to throw a meet and greet party and, despite Connor's extensive arguments, the Alpha had insisted that his beta attend.

Why can't everyone just accept that I'm a broken fucking wolf and be done with it, Connor thought as he watched the blatant sexuality around him. Like most shifters, wolves had a high sexual appetite and if they weren't mated, they were happy to get up close and personal with anyone who happened to catch their eye. Connor was deliberately trying to hide in the corner, because he didn't want to catch an eye, hand or anything else that might be offered.

It wasn't that Connor couldn't appreciate the aesthetic beauty of the people around him. He had noticed some really good looking men and women in the room – especially one particular male. Connor had caught the man's eye the moment the man walked into the room, and quickly looked away. He wasn't into leading anyone on. But after an hour of surreptitiously

looking he had to admit, to himself at least, the object of his appreciation was particularly tasty. Not that he was going to do anything about it. For a start there was a crowd six deep around that tasty hunk.

It would seem the delicious stranger wasn't averse to the attention either, flirting madly with men and women alike. Connor looked away as the man in question put his arm around the closest man and woman and was clearly getting down to the groping side of things. It wouldn't be long before the three would be off finding a dark corner, or a truck bed somewhere. Forcing himself not to watch, Connor turned his head, looking straight into the eyes of his Alpha.

"How long do you think you are going to prop up this wall?" Alpha Davis slid along the wall beside him and looked out over the crowd. There were more than fifty shifters in the room – everyone having a great time. The drinks were flowing, there was plenty of food on the long tables and most people had found someone to play with. The smell of arousal and testosterone was making Connor's nose twitch and he hoped he didn't sneeze on the Alpha.

"You said I had to attend, Alpha, so I'm here. Just making sure there isn't any trouble," Connor said, tilting his neck slightly to show submission. Although he and Davis were friends and had grown up together, it was never a good idea to disrespect someone the size of his Alpha. Connor was tall at six foot four, but Davis had three inches and about eighty pounds on Connor.

Davis sighed and handed Connor a beer. "These meet and greets are supposed to help pack members find their mates. You aren't going to find anybody if you keep hugging the shadows like you are. You need to get out and mingle a bit."

"I don't want to find my mate, you know that," Connor said quietly, knowing that Davis would hear him clearly enough, even with the noise around them.

"And I'm telling you your *ambivalence* towards sex will change when you scent your intended," Davis said.

Connor flushed. He wasn't ambivalent about sex. He just thought his first time should be with someone who took the time to get to know him first. Connor knew that being a thirty year old virgin was virtually unheard of in shifter circles. But he couldn't help the way he felt, and a casual fuck just wouldn't do it for him. Connor was worried sick that he *would* meet his mate one day. The whole *mine*, fuck and claim business was usually done within hours of meeting, but Connor knew that he couldn't be like that – not even with a Fated Mate.

"You know I don't want that to happen," Connor said, forgetting for a moment that he was speaking to his Alpha. "I meet my mate. He wants to fuck. I want to get to know him first. I can see that going down like a lead balloon. It would be better not to meet him at all. At least then this mythical person won't know his mate's a fuck-up."

"If he's your true mate, then he will wait. And you aren't a fuck up, you're just different," Davis said, looking Connor straight in the eyes. Connor had no choice but to bow his head. He wasn't stupid enough to challenge his friend.

"It would be a lot easier..." Connor started to say, still staring at the floor, when a honeyed deep voice interrupted them.

“Davis, thank you for your hospitality this evening. My pack members are all having so much fun.”

Connor felt a shiver of recognition shimmy its way down his spine. He could listen to that voice forever. His wolf, usually a grouchy bastard, was whining in his head, apparently more than happy to belly-up for the stranger. Connor kept his head bowed, determined not to look at anyone that could attract his wolf in such an uncharacteristic way.

“Leyden, wasn’t sure if you were going to come over this evening. Although I see you’ve been enjoying the company,” Davis said with a laugh.

“I’m just being friendly,” Leyden said with a laugh of his own, and oh my freaking god, Connor wanted to wallow in that sound and just...wallow in it. Nervous, because this was not the way he normally reacted to anyone, Connor decided a hasty retreat was in order. He needed to do some serious thinking and get his head on straight. He slowly sidled his way along the wall, away from his Alpha and that tempting voice. But the Fates weren’t smiling on him.

“Connor,” Davis said sharply, stopping Connor in his tracks. “Meet Alpha Leyden. Leyden is new to his position, but his pack are our neighbors. Leyden, this is Connor, my beta and pack second.”

Connor looked up and he knew it, he just fucking knew it. That honeyed voice Connor was already in love with just had to belong to his earlier object of appreciation. Connor wanted to run. He wanted out of the room. He had never seen such perfection before – especially so close up.

Leyden was almost as tall as Davis. Connor had already noted his sexy big build, long black wavy hair, legs that wouldn’t stop and an ass so tight in those pants he knew the man wasn’t wearing underwear. But close up Connor could see eyes of pale grey staring at him with an unusual intensity. He just had enough time to note the smooth tanned skin, the straight nose that was just the perfect size for the man’s face and a set of the plushiest, reddest lips he had ever seen. And his scent...

“Mine,” Leyden snarled, and his arm came out towards Connor.

Close to panic, Connor did the only thing he could think of doing. Nodding his head to both the Alphas, Connor turned and barreled his way through the crowd, as fast as he was able. Thank the Fates most people in his pack knew to get out of his way. He heard both Leyden and Davis call out to him but for the first time in his life, he ignored the pull of the Alphas and ran.

Bursting out the doors of the pack hall, Connor sprinted around the corner of the building, ignoring a few couples who were making out in the shadows. Flinging off his clothes so quickly he was sure they were ripped, Connor shifted into his wolf form and ran as fast as he could into the trees.

He had to get away. He just had to get away.

Chapter Two

Leyden tried to push through the crowds, just as he had watched Connor do just moments before. But whereas people got out of Connor's way, Leyden was just attracting so much attention it wasn't funny. Hands groping him, men and women both standing in his way, trying to catch his eye. Finally Leyden started growling, pushing out his Alpha power. As if by magic the way cleared for him and Leyden ran out into the night. But he already knew, before his nose even told him, that that delectable man named Connor was already long gone.

Davis came running up beside him as he stood out looking through the trees. "What the fuck, Leyden? You had no right using your Alpha power in my pack," he snarled.

Crap on a stick. Davis was right. Leyden bowed his head slightly and said, "I'm sorry Davis. Just meeting Connor, protocol flew right out of my head. That man is my mate. Please, permission to shift and follow him on your territory?"

Leyden was amazed when Davis shook his head. A mate was everything in the shifter world, and Davis knew that as much as he did.

"It won't do you any good. Connor doesn't think he's mate material and he won't be happy to see you, especially given that you're an Alpha," Davis explained. "Come on over to my house and we'll have a drink. Connor's been my friend for life, and if you're going to get anywhere with that stubborn fool of a man, then I will tell you all I know."

Throwing a last longing look through the trees, Leyden followed the Alpha to a large pleasant log home, complete with a large porch, sunny curtains and big windows. He barely took note of the décor inside, just following Davis through into the bright, clean, well-appointed kitchen. Davis took a couple of beers out of the fridge and passed one to Leyden, indicating he should sit on one of the kitchen bar stools.

"Connor doesn't do sex," Davis said bluntly, when both men were settled. "To the best of my knowledge the man hasn't even kissed anyone yet."

Leyden didn't bother to hide his shock. A wolf shifter who didn't have sex was unheard of. All sorts of scenarios flashed through his head. Perhaps the man had been hurt as a youngster. Perhaps...no, Leyden couldn't think of one good reason why a full wolf shifter, especially one with as much power as Connor had, would not want to have sex.

"What's wrong with him?" he said, immediately regretting his words when Davis glared at him.

"There's nothing wrong with him," Davis snarled. "He's my pack second. He fights like a machine. He's a fucking strong wolf, with more intelligence than I have. He cares for his pack, and keeps us secure. I trust him with my life."

"Then why?" Leyden left the question hanging, not wanting to say anything else to upset Davis. He was a visiting Alpha after all.

Davis shrugged. "It's just the way Connor is wired. He was born in this pack, he's only a few years younger than you or me. We've been friends forever. When he shifted first time, I started chasing tail and noticed that Connor wasn't following me. When I asked him about it,

he said he just didn't feel he could be with someone he didn't have a connection with, and you know what wolf shifters are like.”

“Yeah, looking for instant gratification, rather than anything else,” Leyden said with a sigh, knowing all too well, that he was exactly like that. Before becoming Alpha, Leyden would have sex with anyone who caught his eye – man, woman, didn't matter. He was used to having sex two to three times a day, and again at night, and becoming Alpha had simply increased his pool of potential bedmates, not lessened it. He didn't have as much time to indulge as he did before, but he definitely loved the sexual side of his life.

“It's not that Connor doesn't want to be with someone. He does. And he is more than appreciative of how some of the men look in the pack. But he's not about to go falling into bed with someone until he gets to know them first and wolf shifters are a more fuck-first-and-talk-later types.”

“But he's my mate,” Leyden said, well aware he was close to whining. “He's got to feel the pull and attraction between us, surely?”

“That's probably why he ran off like he did,” Davis agreed. “Connor knows that mates meet, fuck and claim each other within hours of meeting. To be honest, I thought Connor would be the same when he met his intended. But clearly, if the man ran off, then he is going to take some serious wooing before you'll get into those pants.”

Leyden thought of that delicious man and his pants and stifled a groan. He had seen Connor when he first arrived at the meet and greet, and was instantly attracted to the dark hair, green eyed hunk. He made a point of catching Connor's eye and was so sure the man would be after him like a shot. When Connor stayed away, to the point of remaining on the other side of the room, Leyden used his considerable charms to woo some of his admirers, thinking it would spark the man to make a move. After all, he was Alpha. It wasn't as though he had to go chasing after anyone to get them into bed.

But Connor had stayed against the wall, and when Leyden had stepped up his flirting, Connor had just looked away. When Leyden saw Davis talking to him, he knew he had an opening. What he hadn't expected was to get within five foot of the man and be hit by the most delicious scent he had ever smelled in his life.

Leyden had done all he could to restrain his arousal, curbing his cock and his wolf. He had found his mate and all he wanted to do in that moment was grab hold of the man and fuck him into the nearest wall. He hadn't been able to swallow the possessive “mine” that sprang from his lips as he realized just how important Connor was to him. And rather than run to him, his hunky wolf had run away.

“I'd better be heading home,” Leyden said, slipping off the bar stool and standing up.

“You're just going to leave your mate? Just because he might take a bit of work before you can claim him?” Davis was horrified, as Leyden knew he would be.

“Don't ever think that. Connor was mine from the moment I caught his scent,” Leyden said. “I just need time to think and plan my approach.”

“Yeah, well, you might want to curb your own *friendliness* while you’re thinking,” Davis said with a grin. “When you do get close to your mate, you don’t want your scent smelling of others. He’s likely to never give you a chance if that happens.”

Leyden adjusted the semi-hard cock resting in his pants, and shrugged. “My casual sex days are over, as from now,” he said. “I’ve scented Connor, I know he’s my mate and being with anyone else would be cheating, and I don’t believe in that. That’s why I have to think and plan quickly, or I’m going to have the worst case of blue balls in existence.”

“My territory is always open to you, to allow for your courting,” Davis said as he led Leyden to the door. “And if you ever want to talk about it, don’t hesitate to give me a call. Connor’s been my friend my whole life and I honestly want to see him happy.”

Leyden nodded his head in thanks and slipped out of the door. He took one long look at the tree line, and thought he caught sight of a large wolf, hidden in the trees not far from the hall. But there was no way of knowing if that wolf was his mate, so Leyden strode across the short distance from the Alpha’s house to the pack hall, and found his truck. The sooner he got home, the sooner he could start thinking of ways he could get to know Connor better. And he had a couple of people he had to kick out of his bed. Celibacy wasn’t something Leyden had ever practiced, but he figured now was as good a time as any.

The wolf followed Leyden’s truck all the way to the edge of Davis’ territory, stopping at the border. In his rear view mirror Leyden could see the wolf tip his head back, a mournful howl wafting in the open window of the truck. Leyden was tempted to stop the truck and go back, certain now the wolf was his mate. But Leyden forced himself to keep moving towards his own home. He had some serious thinking to do and he wasn’t about to fuck anything up. Connor was already that precious to him.

Chapter Three

Connor was out walking the boundaries of the pack's territory when his cell phone rang. Although he would normally do the patrol in wolf form, since he'd watched Leyden drive away three nights before, Connor didn't dare shift. His wolf wanted to get closer to the man he recognized as mate, and didn't care if he had to cross territory lines to do it. The human side of Connor knew that if he wandered into Leyden's territory then any one of the man's enforcers could chase him down, beat him up or even kill him if they wanted. Wolves were very possessive of their land.

Flicking a quick glance at the screen, Connor clicked the accept button and pulled the phone up to his ear.

"Alpha," he said gruffly.

"Where are you?" Davis asked. "I've been trying to get you all morning."

"I'm out by the eastern border," Connor said. "Did you need something done?"

"You're all the way out there in your human form?" Davis sounded incredulous. "Look doesn't matter. Just get back here as soon as you can. I have a job for you."

Connor waited until the Alpha disconnected the call and started running back to Davis' house. While his wolf was big and mean, Connor's human form was also super fit and he barely broke a sweat as he covered the fifteen miles back to the Alpha's house. The air was crisp and clean, and the forest was full of the sounds of spring. Connor loved this time of year.

As he ran, Connor's mind went back to Leyden. That was hardly a surprise, and Connor had gotten to the point where he just accepted that the man would dominate his every thought. He knew Leyden was his mate and felt the pull to be with him every second of every waking moment. But even though his wolf desperately wanted to be claimed by their intended, Connor knew now, even with a mate, he didn't feel the overriding need to have sex, like Leyden had clearly felt when they had met. So he stayed away, accepting that he would never be claimed by his Alpha and tried to deal with the unbearable hurt that thought was causing him.

Connor had done a lot of research since finding out that the way he felt was different from other wolf shifters. Being gay wasn't a problem. Wolves didn't care about the sex of their mates, they just enjoyed a lot of sex. Connor couldn't even get interested. He'd read about asexuals, grey-sexuals, demi-sexuals, trying to get a handle on what might be different about the way he thought. The range of different terminologies in the human world made Connor's head spin. Humans seemed to have a label for every shade of sexuality known to man.

Originally, Connor had thought that he was asexual but as he grew older, Connor did find himself thinking about sex by the time he was eighteen. He had become a master of masturbation. At the time, encouraged by the hard cock he had in the privacy of his own bedroom, Connor let Davis talk him into going to a human club about twenty miles away.

Connor had sat at the bar, watching men of all ages and types, and admired from afar. He decided he liked taller men with muscles, although none of the humans in the club were a

patch on a wolf shifter in the size department. More than a few men offered to buy Connor a drink and as the night wore on, the propositions changed from drink to blow jobs.

At one point, desperate to feel something, Connor had followed a man into the bathroom. But when the man dropped to his knees, clearly ready to find out what was in Connor's pants, Connor had walked away. He hadn't felt a smidgeon of attraction for the guy, and in the male gender, sexual arousal couldn't be faked. He spent the rest of the night watching Davis, who did go into the bathroom with men – three different times.

Reading about grey-sexuals and demi-sexuals gave Connor a bit of hope. It sounded like he wasn't alone in the way he felt, although he conceded that he probably was unique in the wolf shifter world. From what he could gather grey sexuals liked physical closeness and preferred non-sexual intimacy as opposed to sex itself. Demi-sexuals on the other hand had a problem feeling sexual attraction to anyone they didn't have an emotional connection with. Apparently even if a demi-sexual was in a relationship the desire for sex built over time.

Connor wasn't stupid. He knew even among humans sexual attraction was usually the first thing to blossom among two potential partners. Relationships were built from there. Among wolf shifters, casual sex was common. Wolves couldn't catch diseases, didn't have to worry about AIDs and while every wolf shifter ever born longed to find his mate, they were hardly going to stay virgins waiting for their intended to turn up.

Which was why, Connor thought as he trudged up the steps to the Alpha's house, he was still alone and a virgin. He had friends, but he wasn't sexually attracted to them – Davis was one of them. He'd never been closer to anyone than Davis in his life. But he didn't want to go to bed with the man even if he did admire the man's muscles on occasion.

In fact in his whole life, Connor had never felt sexual attraction to anyone he had been close to. He woke up with a hard on every morning, and took care of that. He quite often wanked himself to sleep at night – better than a sleeping pill. So he knew his equipment worked. It just didn't seem to want to perk up around another person. Even his mate, it would seem.

Cursing himself for being so fucking different, Connor stomped harder than normal as he went into the Alpha's office. Davis was sitting at his desk, the surface covered with papers. He looked up as Connor came in and stood in front of the desk, arms clasped behind his back, feet slightly apart, head tilted to show respect.

"You're sounding grouchy this morning, Conner," Davis said with a grin on his face. "Problem?"

"Nothing I can't handle, Alpha," Connor said firmly. He knew he wasn't looking the best. The black circles under his eyes were a dead giveaway that he hadn't been sleeping well and he knew he had lost a few pounds because the thought of food made his stomach churn. He seemed to spend a lot of his time controlling his wolf, who wanted to go and find Leyden. Given that his wolf was such a grumpy soul, that sort of control was tiring at the best of times.

Davis seemed to accept Connor's assertion and looked down at the papers on his desk instead. "Alpha Leyden has requested that I send someone over to his pack to supervise the beta challenge he is holding. His old beta is exactly that, old, and Leyden has sent out a memo to all packs asking for contenders for the position. He asked me if I had someone who

had the skills and expertise necessary to do background checks on all of the contenders, and provide him with security before and during the challenge. All of his enforcers will be attending as contenders. You will need to be at the pack for three days.”

The word “no” teased Connor’s tongue, but a look at his Alpha’s face had him swallowing it just in time. Taking a deep breath, before he did something he would regret, Connor said instead, “permission to speak freely, Alpha.”

Davis nodded and indicated that Connor take a seat. Connor slumped in his chair, wondering what on earth to say. He’d never taken advantage of his friendship with Davis before, but he knew he couldn’t go to Leyden’s pack.

“Davis, please. You can’t ask me to do this. Send Bruno or Ivan, they both have the skills. You said yourself that Alpha Leyden asked for *someone* and either man could do the job just as well as I could. Don’t put either me or the Alpha in a difficult decision.”

“I lied,” Davis said, a grin cracking his handsome face. “Leyden asked for you specifically, and given your situation, I saw no reason to refuse him. You’re mates after all.”

“I am not saddling someone like Alpha Leyden with a mate that doesn’t want to have sex. Have you seen the man?” Connor burst out. “Everywhere he goes he has men and women falling all over him and he seems more than happy with the attention. He’s not going to want to take the time to get to know me, like I need, and I can’t, Davis, I just can’t watch him fooling around and screwing other people. It would fucking break me. Please send someone else.”

Davis leaned over his desk, his face showing all of the compassion Connor knew he was capable of. “Your mate might be in danger, Connor,” he said. “Now I am guessing, from what you are saying, that the urge to rut didn’t hit you when you smelled your mate, but surely your other instincts are there.”

“That’s why I don’t want to go,” Connor said miserably, looking down at his hands. “I won’t be able to stand it if anyone else touches him – my wolf is so possessive it’s beyond a joke.”

Davis studied Connor intently and then seemed to come to a decision. “I had a talk to Leyden, after you ran off from the meet and greet. No,” Davis said, holding up his hand as he saw Connor was going to speak. “I know this wasn’t easy for you, but Leyden was in shock when you left. I had to explain to him why you did it. He understands that you two need to get to know each other before any claiming can take place, and he respects that.”

“But you know damn well that he can still have sex with anyone else he wants to until he’s bitten me. He’s a strong Alpha wolf shifter. He’s not going to be able to stay celibate waiting for me to feel something. I wouldn’t expect him too, but I know I couldn’t handle seeing any sign of his mucking about if I was there,” Connor said, angry at the thought of his mate being intimate with someone else. He might not feel the desire necessary for sex, but possession, and yes, the need to protect, were rampant parts of his makeup.

“When we had our chat the other night he told me that he would not cheat on you now he has met you. When I spoke to him this morning, he promised me that he hadn’t been with anyone else since the other night. He honestly wants the chance to talk to you, work

alongside you and get to know you. I thought this sounded like the perfect opportunity for you both.”

Connor didn't know if he was pleased or pissed off that his mate seemed to have no problem talking to Davis about their apparent relationship, when Connor hadn't heard from him at all since he ran from him. In a way he was glad that Leyden and Davis had talked – that could have been a really awkward conversation if Connor had tried to explain to his drop-dead gorgeous mate why he didn't want to have sex with the man. Davis had been Connor's friend for as long as he could remember, and Connor trusted Davis with his life. While Connor had spent since puberty feeling like a freak because of some twisted link in his brain, Davis had never made him feel like that.

“Connor, listen to me,” Davis said firmly. Connor looked up and could see that Davis was being deadly serious. “You only get one mate, you know that. You are different, you know that too. But there is honestly nothing wrong with you. Just because you want to wait before having sex – want to make a connection to the man first, and get to know him, that doesn't make you weird. The Fates made you perfect exactly the way you are. Can't you trust that they knew what they were doing when it comes to pairing you with your life partner?”

“What if I never want to have sex with him?” Connor whispered, voicing his biggest fear. He'd never felt sexually attracted to anyone, not even Davis, who was his closest friend, and was his type. He knew he wasn't asexual, because he did think about sex, just not with anyone specific and not very often. He masturbated because it felt good, it helped him sleep and because his plumbing worked. But actually feeling desire – having sex? He was terrified he would never actually want to.

The only reason that Connor had identified himself as demi-sexual as opposed to grey-sexual or asexual was because he did yearn to find that *connection* with someone. Someone special to him. He didn't like people touching him, he wasn't into hugging and stuff, despite being a wolf shifter who usually craved touch. Yet he dreamed of what his first kiss would feel like.

“You've got to give Leyden a chance,” Davis said kindly. “Get to know the man, work with him, protect him because he is your mate, and it's your job. And if you can't handle it, if you feel nothing at all, then I know you will find the strength to explain it to him and let him go. I will hold your position secure here for the month, I promise.”

For a moment, Connor was confused, and then his brain clicked. If he and Leyden mated then Connor would become Alpha Mate of his pack, and would have to move there permanently. Knowing that his position in his home pack was secure for a month at least did help and Connor stood up, his decision made.

“When do I leave?”

“As soon as possible,” Davis said with a smile. The big man came around the desk and gave Connor a quick hug. Davis had always respected that Connor wasn't keen on the whole touching thing. As Connor left the office to go and pack, for some reason he felt his best friend was saying goodbye.

Chapter Four

Leyden was a bundle of nerves. His mate was coming today, at his insistence and he had no idea what sort of mood Connor would be in when he arrived. Given how big and strong Connor was he was more likely to walk in and slug him one, for pushing the situation between them. But Leyden refused to feel guilty about using his position to get what he wanted.

Having rung Davis a half a dozen times since leaving the meet and greet, and doing some research of his own when Davis bought up the term demi-sexual, Leyden knew if he ever had a chance with his mate, then he was going to have to take time for Connor to get to know him. Leyden didn't have any doubts on his side of things – his cock was hard and his wolf was panting the moment he caught Connor's scent.

Initially when Leyden had got home from the meet and greet, he had wondered if having a mate that might never want sex was worth it, especially when he was greeted with the sight of Lonnie and Trixie in his bed, naked and clearly waiting for him. Leyden couldn't help getting aroused – hell, he'd enjoyed the couple more than a few times since taking over as Alpha of his pack. They were his favorite couple of playmates.

But, fixing a picture of his delicious mate in his mind, Leyden had firmly, but kindly removed the two from his room and then stripped down his bed, and made it with not only fresh sheets, but covers and pillows as well. If he ever did get Connor into his room, the last thing he wanted his mate to smell was the scent of other shifters. In fact, he wondered if he should just take a new room. He nixed that idea because he loved his huge bed, with the four posts so handy for tying someone down, the warm rich colors of the furnishings and carpet that would complement his mate's perfect skin.

Stifling a groan, Leyden thumped his cock. If just thinking about his mate could make him feel so horny, then being around the man for the next three days was going to be impossible. Davis had rung him earlier, letting him know that Connor was on his way and told him that he had offered to keep Connor's job open for a month in the event that Connor wouldn't allow Leyden to claim him. But for the moment all Leyden had was the three days he had asked for. If he couldn't convince Connor to at least try and give their mating a chance, then Leyden had no doubt Connor would be heading back to his own pack again as soon as the beta challenge was over.

"Your visitor's here," Leyden's retiring beta, Matthew said, coming into Leyden's office. "Do you want me to show him to his room, or bring him straight here?"

For a quick moment Leyden was tempted to put off the meeting for another half an hour or so. But protocol dictated that Connor be brought to him first, before being allowed access to the rest of the house, and Leyden didn't want Connor to feel uncomfortable.

"Bring him in here please. Organize some coffee for us both and then see to it that we are not disturbed," Leyden said, pulling on his Alpha face.

Reminding himself he was not some wet-behind-the-ears pup, but a strong Alpha, Leyden purposefully stayed sitting down as Matthew ushered Connor into the room. He knew if he stood up nothing on earth would have stopped him from grabbing and kissing the stuffing out of his mate. As he caught sight of the man that had haunted his dreams for three days, Leyden

was thankful he was sitting down. His dick hardened so hard and so fast he was glad his desk was covering his lower half.

Connor was not beautiful, he was stunningly handsome. His hard face looked carved out of granite –high cheek bones, a long straight nose and a set of full pink lips, all set off by a pair of the greenest eyes Leyden had ever seen. Connor was only an inch or so shorter than him, at around six foot four, and every inch of that tall frame was covered in muscles. Yet as Connor walked across the room and came to stand in front of the desk, the grace that the man showed in every movement was mesmerizing.

Then Connor spoke.

“Beta Connor, from the Davis pack, reporting as requested. Alpha Davis sends his respects and goodwill towards you and your pack.”

Simple words. A formal greeting perfectly acceptable from any visiting wolf shifter. But Leyden caught the hint of a tremor in the man’s gravelly tones and was entranced. The big solid man was as nervous as fuck and trying so hard to hide it. That cemented Leyden’s decision.

“Matthew,” he said as the older man stepped into the office with a tray. “I would like you to meet Connor, our new Alpha Mate.” The sound of breaking china as Matthew dropped the tray was nothing compared to the look on Connor’s face.

Connor couldn’t believe his ears. Leyden had said nothing to him, nothing at all except for that possessive “mine” back at the meet and greet. Yet he announced their mate status to his pack second within moments of Connor’s arrival. Unsure what to think, Connor was aware that Leyden had come around from the desk and had walked Connor to a couch, before helping Matthew clean up the mess from the spilt coffee.

Long moments later a cup of coffee was thrust into Connor’s hands. “Here, mate, you look like you could use this.” Looking up, Connor could see nothing but Leyden’s smiling face. A quick sniff assured him that they were alone in the office.

“Scotch would be better,” Connor rumbled. “Alpha Leyden, you shouldn’t have done that. I know what we are to each other. But you know that I don’t...what if I can’t...what if we don’t...?” Crap. Connor knew he sucked at having awkward conversations. He wasn’t good at conversations period.

“I still intend on biting you, Connor and I want for you to bite me. So we’ll be mates, regardless of whatever else happens,” Leyden said lounging back on the couch with an air of self-satisfaction. The man still looked too damn perfect for his own good, but Connor couldn’t dwell on that. His head was pounding with the thought that Leyden would mate with him regardless of whether or not sex was involved.

“Leyden, you can’t do that.” Connor was so worried about his mate that his lack of use of the honorific Alpha went unnoticed.

“I can’t let you give up your sex life for me,” Connor continued, his worry escalating until it overrode everything else. “I’m broken. I’m weird. I accept that. But you have the virility of

ten men and I won't have you shackled to someone who may never want to have sex. Mating is for life and once you bite me then you can't have anyone else."

"Which is why I think it is a good idea. It's not as though I haven't given it a lot of thought over the past three days," Leyden said, apparently not put off with Connor's protests. Connor was starting to think he had a really stubborn Alpha on his hands.

"Look," Leyden said, sitting forward and resting his elbows on his knees. "You're my mate – the one given to me by the Fates. I am not about to give up that gift for anyone or anything. We have been in each other's presence for five minutes and you are already trying to protect me. I imagine you are also as possessive as hell, right?"

Connor nodded.

"Well, then, I am formally asking your permission to bite you, and I want you to bite me. That will take care of any infidelity worries you might have, and it will keep my wolf calm enough when we are around other people. You're not the only possessive bastard in the room," Leyden said with a grin.

"But what about sex?" Connor said, thinking fast. He would happily tie himself to Leyden for the rest of his long life. Hell, he wasn't stupid. A mate was a gift from the Fates and in Connor's eyes, Leyden was perfect. An Alpha, strong, gorgeous to look at, and the caring way Leyden helped Matthew clean up the spilt tray showed Connor that the man was thoughtful and would be a good Alpha for his pack. Connor had noticed the really positive vibe around the pack from the moment he arrived. Everyone was happy, working hard and there wasn't a hint of fear anywhere.

"I do want sex with you Connor," Leyden said, and Connor found himself getting lost in those grey eyes. "I'm not going to lie about it, or say that sex doesn't matter, because it does. But I truly believe that eventually, when you come to know me, you will start to feel something towards me, and whatever those feelings are, we will deal with them together."

Connor didn't know what to say. Leyden was so full of confidence, so self-assured, and Connor would have to be blind to not realize how sexy the man was. But he felt no stirring in his cock, no tugging in his groin.

"What if I never feel the way you want me too?" There, he'd said it. He'd voiced his biggest fear to his mate. His mate who still looked amazing even as he laughed, the loud joyous sound bouncing around the room. Connor didn't know if he should feel pleased or insulted.

"If you don't feel that way about me," Leyden said at last, wiping his eyes. "Then you will just have to watch me wank off a lot."

"Listen to me carefully," Leyden continued, and Connor could tell the man was serious this time. "I want to bite you and claim you as my own. I want you as my Alpha Mate. I want you to sleep in the same bed as me at night. I want you working with me during the day. I want to protect you, and keep you from finding others."

Connor snorted at that. He had never been interested in anyone in that way.

"Mating isn't just about sex. It's about finding the other half of your soul. I have found mine, and I am not giving you up," Leyden said earnestly, catching one of Connor's hands with his

own. Connor's first instinct was to pull back – he really didn't like people touching him. But Leyden's touch didn't make his skin itch like someone touching him usually did, so Connor left his hand where it was.

“Okay,” Connor said simply, feeling a huge sense of relief as he said it. Connor knew he wasn't anywhere near ready to have sex with Leyden. He had to trust the Fates that if he was going to feel desire for anyone it would be his mate, eventually. But his own instincts to be near, to protect his mate, were really strong and they were never going to go away. Once claimed, the two men would have a lifetime to get to know each other, and Connor just prayed that Leyden proved to be as patient and understanding as he was being right now.

Chapter Five

Connor cursed as his big fingers fumbled with his tie. He barely ever wore one, preferring his t-shirts and jeans to a shirt and formal pants. But Leyden was taking him out to dinner, on an actual date. If the dinner went well, then Connor was going to allow the man to bite him, and they would be bound together for life.

After Connor had given his acceptance to the mating, and Leyden had recovered from his lack of argument, the two men had called in Matthew and started going over the applications that Leyden had received from possible beta contenders. Leyden had explained that while he would prefer that someone have the position from his own pack, because the pack didn't have a lot of strong males in it, Leyden had opened up the position to enforcers from other packs as well. Connor could appreciate the idea, even if he didn't like the thought of strangers coming onto what would soon be his territory.

"Damn and blast it." Connor cursed again as the tie once again ended up in an appalling knot.

"Here, let me," Leyden said from behind him, two strong arms coming over Connor's shoulders and taking hold of the ravaged tie. Connor could smell the heat of his mate, the scent of freshly showered man cascading over his senses. Leyden definitely smelled delicious.

In the mirror, Connor watched Leyden's fingers as they efficiently tied the errant tie. When Leyden had finished, his fingers grazed over Connor's chest just lightly, before dropping his hands away. For the first time in his life Connor wished those fingers had stayed on him for just a moment longer, but he shrugged it away. The last thing he wanted to do was tease his mate.

Leyden strolled across the room, dropping his towel into a hamper and pulling open his closet. Connor couldn't drag his eyes away from all of that delectable skin. The man truly was a chiseled God. In clothes, Leyden was a controlled powerhouse. Out of them, he was living perfection and while Connor still didn't feel any sexual desire, he wasn't going to ignore the show that Leyden was putting on for him. The man was too gorgeous to ignore. Long muscled legs sliding into tight pants, a tailored shirt that was eased over broad shoulders, Leyden flicking his long hair back so that it didn't get caught in his clothes. When Leyden bent down, straight legs, back arched, to slip on his shoes and socks Connor saw poetry in motion. He decided then and there he could watch his mate for hours.

"Ready?" Leyden said, and Connor didn't miss the self-satisfied grin on the man's lovely face. Connor couldn't blame Leyden for being as sexy as he was, or trying to flaunt that in front of his mate. He just felt a pang in his heart that he couldn't respond the way he knew he should.

As Leyden drove them to the restaurant he had picked out, Connor tried not to let his mood get him down. In himself he accepted that while he yearned for a connection with somebody, he knew it wasn't something that was going to spring up overnight. Of course, being a wolf shifter, it would happen more quickly than it might between humans, and given that Leyden was his mate, Connor fully expected to fall in love with the man. It was what wolf shifters did.

Instead of getting bogged down in a sea of self-hatred, Connor let his mind wander back over the day. The first thing that had struck Connor about Leyden, apart from his looks, was that Leyden was basically a happy person. All day people had waltzed in and out of the Alpha's office, mostly pack. Leyden had dealt with every concern, big or small, with a calm manner, and a smile on his face. It made Connor smile too, especially when Leyden had introduced him to everyone as the Alpha Mate.

The only downside was when some young bloke named Lonnie had bounced into the office and straight onto Leyden's lap. Connor couldn't stop the growl from bursting from his chest, his hands shifting into claws ready to tear the interloper from Leyden's body.

"Who's the big scary dude with the attitude?" Lonnie had asked Leyden.

"That's the Alpha Mate," Leyden said, and for the first time that day, Connor could see that his mate was angry. Lonnie didn't help matters by sniffing first at Leyden and then at Connor who was standing by the desk.

"You don't smell like each other," the young man said pertly, jumping off of Leyden's lap. "Not much of a mating for you, Alpha, if your mate's not going to put out. Still you know where I am when you need me. I'm always hungering for your cock inside of me."

Connor's growl was so loud that it rattled the office windows. It was only Leyden's hand on his arm that stopped him from shifting and tearing out the young man's throat. Now, in the quiet of the car, Connor's original misgivings about the mating resurfaced. The pack would know that he and Leyden hadn't had sex. Shit, one of the most possessive things a wolf could do was ensure that his mate was covered in his scent, inside and out. Connor hadn't even allowed Leyden to hug him, and he hated the thought of how that was making Leyden's wolf feel.

"Stop thinking like that," Leyden's voice pierced the gloom in the car.

What? His mate was a mind reader now?

"No," Leyden said with a small smile. "I'm not a mind reader, but your scent changed. You're thinking about Lonnie in the office earlier and now you're worrying about how the wolves in the pack will react when they notice we don't smell like each other."

"Leyden, that could seriously weaken your position," Connor said. "I don't want to see your position threatened because other wolves perceive you as incapable of leading the pack."

"If they think I'm weak just because we aren't having sex, then my pack members are stupid. Do I look weak to you?"

Connor shook his head. Of course Leyden didn't look weak, and Connor knew that the man was anything but. Connor could understand now why some people within the asexual spectrum did have sex with their partners, even if it wasn't something they particularly enjoyed. The urge to submit to Leyden, even if it wasn't something that Connor wanted, was huge. If it would protect his mate and stop the slurs that were bound to occur, then maybe Connor could do it.

Connor had ample experience of how cruel wolf shifters could be with someone that they perceived as different. Until Connor had developed his strength and power, he had been

teased mercilessly for not behaving like other wolf shifters. Connor wondered if he had it in him, to let Leyden have sex with him, even if he wasn't ready and didn't get aroused by it.

Leyden turned off the car, and Connor looked around, realizing they must be at the restaurant. He went to open his door, but Leyden's hand held him fast.

"Don't ever think that either," Leyden warned, his voice low and Connor picked up traces of anger. "I have never fucked an unwilling partner in my life and I sure as hell am not going to start with you. I said I would wait until you were ready and I will."

Connor carefully put his hand on Leyden's, and found he liked the connection he could feel. Leyden was warm and solid, and he didn't make Connor's skin itch, which was a bonus. Through the hand Connor could feel how angry and hurt Leyden was feeling, and he hated that he had ruined his mate's good mood.

"I'm sorry Leyden. I didn't mean to hurt you, or make you angry. It's just...I've lived with the knowledge I am different since I shifted. And other wolves can be cruel, and they can and will capitalize on any weakness they can see. It's the nature of our animal, you know that. If I submit to you..."

"Stop right there," Leyden snarled and yep, his mate was still angry.

"It will protect you," Connor finished, his own anger rising fast. Didn't his mate understand how hard it was to live like he did? In a world where sex was the norm and everything in society seemed designed to try and trigger some sort of arousal response. Where the first thing people judged you on was whether or not you were sexually attractive. Wolf shifters were worse than humans in that respect. They not only went with their animal spirit and enjoyed sex for the pleasure it apparently was, but they could smell when others didn't feel the same way. Connor had gone through hell until his size stopped people questioning his nature. He didn't want to cause problems with his mate.

"You're forgetting something, mate of mine," Leyden said more softly this time. "I have an equal desire to protect you and to make you happy. I won't do anything that would make you feel uncomfortable and as much as I long to explore and plunder that sexy body of yours, I won't do anything until I know it is what you want too."

"Just as well we've both got size on our side then," Connor said, smiling at the man who really didn't know him, yet was willing to change his whole way of life for him.

"Exactly," Leyden said, smiling back. "Now let's go eat our dinner and you can tell me all about yourself."

Chapter Six

Leyden felt himself relax as the two men enjoyed some delicious food. As he expected with a mate, he found that Connor enjoyed similar things to him – exercising and working out, watching movies, music, although Connor confessed to not having ever danced. He described his one and only experience in going to a club and Leyden tried not to laugh. Leyden loved to dance, but he agreed with Connor that dancing was excellent foreplay.

They also talked about families. Connor had parents still alive, but they had moved away after Connor was grown. Leyden told about his parents, who lived in a neighboring town, and his tense relationship with his father when they both found out Leyden was an Alpha too. Two Alphas couldn't live in the same pack, and eventually Leyden had moved out. He came across his current territory when the Alpha was old and ready for a change. After the two men had spent a week together talking about what the Alpha wanted for his pack, Leyden had challenged him and allowed him to submit. The old Alpha had moved away to be closer to his family and Leyden had taken over the running of the pack.

Having watched his mate through the day, Leyden noticed that when there wasn't any danger of being treated like a sex toy, Connor was really good with people. He came across as rugged and mean, but he never made anyone feel bad about themselves, and Leyden knew the Fates had made a good match for him. Connor was also clever, and had pointed out a few problems with some of the candidates for the beta challenge, that Leyden hadn't even noticed. Leyden felt good that Connor was on his side.

One thing had been puzzling Leyden though, and while he didn't want to spoil the happy atmosphere between the two of them, by the time desert had been served, he felt compelled to ask, "How do you know when you know someone? How do you know when you feel comfortable enough with someone to try and have a sexual relationship with them?"

Connor looked up from his apple pie and cream, a spoon raised to his mouth. Very deliberately, it seemed to Leyden, the man took his mouthful, and Leyden wanted to moan out loud when the man's tongue flicked out, catching a piece of pie crumb from his lips.

"I'm not sure," Connor said at last, after he had swallowed his mouthful. And had Leyden watched the play of the man's Adam's apple in the candlelight – too right he had. Leyden kept quiet, hoping Connor would explain more.

"I really don't know a lot about it," Connor went on at last. "I did some reading online. I know I feel differently than other people. But I think it's different for everyone. I know I like the idea of sex – at least, I watch porn and it doesn't disgust me, and I've seen others in the pack having sex often enough and that doesn't really bother me either."

"So some demi-sexuals are actually disgusted with the idea of having sex?"

Connor glared at Leyden for a moment, and Leyden kicked himself because of course it hadn't been Connor that had mentioned he was demi-sexual, it had been Davis. But Connor must have come to some sort of decision in his head because he said, "I don't know what it is like for other people. I have read that some people who are asexual, demi-sexual or grey-sexual are disgusted with the idea of having sex. But at the same time anyone from anyone of those labels can also have sex, and some of them even have a high sex drive. Personally I

don't hold with labels at all. We are all individuals, so it stands to reason we are all different. I only know that I have never felt sexual desire for another person."

"But your equipment works, right?"

"Yes," Connor said, snagging another mouthful of his apple pie. "I get a morning hard-on just like any other male, and yes, before you ask, I do masturbate."

Leyden's eyes lit up. He couldn't wait to see that. "Awesome," he said with a grin. "We can wank off together."

Connor laughed, as he hoped he would, and Leyden finished his desert. After paying the bill, and Leyden holding the door open for Connor, which made the big man blush, they headed out to the car and back to the pack house in comfortable silence. Leyden was glad that Connor wasn't a man who seemed to have a need to fill a silence with meaningless chatter – Leyden got enough of that through the day with his pack members. It was nice just being with someone and not having to be on his game all the time.

It wasn't until Leyden drove up the driveway to his home that Connor spoke.

"What does desire feel like?"

Leyden parked the car and turned in his seat to look at the man who would be with him forever. Connor had a worried look on his rugged face and Leyden wondered what was behind the question.

"I'm not sure," he said echoing Connor's earlier words. "I think it's different for everyone. For me, I get the compulsion to touch your skin and feel you naked against me. I get a burning in my stomach whenever you're around and my skin tingles as though craving your touch. My lips ache with the desire to want to kiss you, to taste you and my hands seem to have a mind of their own when it comes to wanting to touch you."

"You feel all that for me?" Connor seemed almost awed by his response and again Leyden was struck with not knowing why. Hadn't anyone tried to talk to the man before they tried to get him into bed?

"From the moment I saw you," Leyden said honestly. He turned, and opened his car door and was pleased when Connor did the same. The two men quickly walked through the house, and Leyden opened his bedroom door, smiling at Connor who blushed as he went through. Then Connor let out an almighty roar and leapt, shifting as he went, clothes ripping and falling to the floor as a ginormous wolf pounced on something in the room. Hurrying into his room, Leyden stopped, gob-smacked, unable to believe what he was seeing.

Connor, still in his giant wolf form was on Leyden's bed. But that wasn't what surprised Leyden. It was the sight of Lonnie and Trixie, naked on his bed currently cowering under the wolf, that Leyden didn't understand. He had explained to his two previous lovers when he had got back from the meet and greet that he had found his mate, and he had told Lonnie exactly the same thing in his office earlier in the day. What the hell were the two of them doing, infusing their fucking scent in the bedroom Leyden wanted to share with his mate?

Connor hadn't stopped growling and the sound was so loud, so powerful, that Leyden knew he was going to have to control his mate, before he could deal with his two pack mates.

Hurrying to Connor's side, Leyden gently touched the wolf's shoulder, fully appreciating the roll of muscles under his hand. Connor had the power to be an Alpha in his own right if he had wanted to and Leyden was struck again about how lucky he was with his new mate. That is, if the man didn't leave him.

Under his hand, Connor's growling slowed to a deep rumble, but the wolf's eyes never left the two people on the bed.

"What the hell do you two think you are doing here? You know I have a mate and won't have anyone else in my bed now," Leyden said. It surprised him that he felt so calm. He had thought that Connor would rip the two interlopers to pieces but instead the wolf had done nothing but threaten the hapless pair.

Trixie looked at Lonnie and then back at Leyden.

"Well...er...Lonnie said that you and your mate weren't having sex, so we figured you hadn't claimed him yet. Given that you two just seemed to want to talk to each other...well, when Lonnie was in your office he knew your mate didn't desire you. So we thought..."

"So you thought what exactly?" Leyden snarled. "You thought you would come into my room like common tarts laid out for consumption and I would rather fuck you than my mate? That I would claim you two?"

"We desire you. He doesn't," Lonnie burst out, with a cautious look at Connor who still hadn't stopped growling and was looking more menacing by the second. Leyden strengthened his grip on Connor's shoulder knowing that his mate would understand.

"You deserve someone who worships your body, who gets hard at the sound of your voice. Someone who will submit to you willingly every night if that's what you want," Lonnie went on. "That's what a true mate would do. That's what we would do for you."

Connor nudged Leyden's hand off his shoulder and climbed off the bed. Shifting into his human form, Connor stood magnificently naked. But Leyden didn't have a chance to appreciate the miles of muscles, as Connor walked over and grabbed his overnight bag and made to leave the room.

"They're right, and I can't do that to you," he said as he walked away, leaving Leyden with his mouth open and a hard on that wouldn't quit. Damn, that man looked amazing in the buff. Too stunned to do anything else, Leyden watched his mate walk out of his house, and out of his life.

Chapter Seven

A week later

Connor buried himself further under the bedclothes as he heard the sound of a vehicle coming up his driveway. He knew the only person it could be was Davis, and Connor was not in the mood to talk to his Alpha. Actually since leaving Leyden's territory the week before, Connor hadn't felt much like doing anything.

All he had done, since that fateful night, was think about his mate. Sometimes the memories were happy ones – Leyden being all Alpha in his office, the way the man looked so beautiful in the candlelight at dinner. As Connor had spent all of his time thinking about what he knew about Leyden, even though they had only been together for less than twenty four hours, he knew he would have loved the man, given half the chance.

Leyden was kind, which was unusual for an Alpha. Connor remembered how Leyden had described the fight he won when he took over his pack. Every word reeked of compassion for an older Alpha who wanted to leave with dignity. And Leyden had given it to him. In the office, Leyden was strong, but friendly with it. He took the time to listen to pack concerns, no matter how trivial. Connor realized the man had a knack of making everyone seem special.

Yes, and just like always, that's when Connor's memories hit the dark side of things. Leyden was special, and an amazing person in every way. Which was why there were two interlopers in Leyden's bed when they got home from their date. It was clear from first glance that both Trixie and Lonnie were comfortable in Leyden's space, so they had clearly been there before. That would have been obvious even without Lonnie's obnoxious comments earlier in the day.

Connor didn't think he had ever been so angry in his life. Through the course of the day, from Leyden's passionate speech when he pledged to bite and claim Connor as his, right through to the wonderful date the two men had shared, Connor had started to relax. He had started to consider that Leyden was his. He even felt some slight tingles of the things that Leyden had described when he was talking about desire. After all, Connor had never felt it before, which was why he had asked the question in the first place. The more Connor felt confident not only in his position as Alpha Mate, but also in Leyden's promise not to rush him into anything, the more optimistic Connor had felt about wanting to have sex in the future. And that was a definite first for him.

Connor hadn't wanted to walk away. But he'd smelled Leyden's arousal at the sight of the two people in his bed. He couldn't forget Lonnie's words. They might have felt hateful at the time, but the little shit was right. Leyden did deserve somebody by his side who wanted him, as badly as he wanted in return. No matter his personal feelings on the subject, Connor would take strength in the fact that he had put his mate's needs first.

“Connor get your ass out of bed, or I'll pull you out personally.” Davis's roar damn near shook Connor's small house. Knowing that Davis could not be ignored Connor bowed to the inevitable, stumbling out of bed, and pulling on a pair of jeans. Striding through to his small living room, he was all for tearing strips off of Davis for interrupting his thoughts, when he was stopped short. Lonnie. Sex-mad, pretty, Leyden's Lonnie was standing in his living room.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Connor growled. “Come to rub my face in the fact that Leyden’s claimed you and your friend as mates? Felt I had a dying need to know how many hours the three of you spent fucking after my date with my mate?”

“Leyden’s in trouble,” Lonnie said. Connor could barely hear the man’s tiny voice over the pounding in his ears. He couldn’t believe the man had come into his house.

Then the words the little shit had said made sense.

“What do you mean, in trouble? Leyden’s the Alpha, and perfectly capable of taking care of himself, especially if he’s mated now.”

“He’s not mated,” Lonnie confessed, tears in his eyes. “He kicked me and Trixie out of his room and won’t even let us in his house anymore.”

“Whatever,” Connor said, refusing to show how much Lonnie’s words meant to him. “Why is Leyden in trouble?”

“Leyden was all for coming after you when you left, but Matthew reminded him he had the beta challenge to take care of first. The challenge went ahead and some big guy, Rolf, or something, won. He became pack second. Leyden wasn’t happy about it...”

“He wouldn’t have been,” Connor was beyond frustrated. Rolf had been one of the contenders that Connor had warned Leyden about. Why the man decided to go ahead and let the man participate had Connor’s brain in a mess.

“Yeah, well it got worse,” Lonnie went on. “Rolf’s not only challenged Leyden for his position as Alpha, he has also got more than half of the enforcers on his side. Leyden stands to lose his pack, his home and everything.”

“Why do you care? You just want him for sex and for his position. Go and protect him like a good Alpha Mate should,” Connor snarled as his mind raced over what he could do to protect his mate.

Lonnie scuffed his foot along Connor’s carpet, his gaze firmly fixed on the floor.

“Leyden’s a good Alpha, okay,” the young man said at last. “He cares about everyone, and makes us all feel special, you know.” Connor knew only too well. It was one of the things he loved about the man. *Loved?* Connor reminded himself to focus.

“If he’s that good why did the enforcers defect to this newcomer then?” Connor asked as he galvanized himself into action, rushing about finding shoes, a shirt and where the hell were his freaking keys.

“Word is that Leyden wasn’t strong enough to keep his mate,” Davis said, holding up the keys Connor was looking for.

“He could have kept his mate just fine, if some little shits hadn’t got in the way,” Connor snarled at Lonnie. “Leyden and I had been getting to know each other, what the fuck was wrong with that?”

“You should have been all over each other if you were mates. It’s what wolves do,” Lonnie cried out, and Connor could see the little man was almost in tears.

“You think too much about sex and not enough about the other things that are important in a mating. Honesty, learning about each other’s likes and dislikes, integrity, learning to live with each other in the same space. That’s what I was looking for, and Leyden understood that. What business of yours was it whether or not Leyden and I had actually fucked yet?” Connor said in a rush.

Where the heck had he left his jacket? Spying it slung across the kitchen chair, Connor strode over, and slipped it on.

“It just didn’t feel right,” Lonnie said in a whisper.

“It was right for me and Leyden,” Connor said, coming to stand in front of the man, uncaring if he looked intimidating. Connor had intimidation down to an art form.

“You’re coming to help?” Lonnie said peering up at Connor through his bangs. Connor could see why Leyden would have been attracted to the man, although he wasn’t surprised that he didn’t feel anything for the little shit. He was more worried about Leyden.

“He’s my mate, and unlike you, I would support him in anything,” Connor said firmly.

Chapter Eight

Barely avoiding another slash of claws and gnash of teeth, Leyden skipped out of the way, and turned swiping his claws at his opponent. Make that opponents. Leyden had managed to take down Rolf, the main challenger, but it seemed that all of his other enforcers, men he thought he could trust, had now decided to get into the act as well. Leyden was beyond pissed off, but he tried to keep his focus on the fight. There were eight men opposing him, and Leyden knew the chances of getting out of the situation alive were slim.

Before the challenge Leyden had thought of just submitting. In a way his pack was right. He couldn't keep his mate, not because there was anything wrong with Connor, or him for that matter, but because their relationship had the potential to be something more than sex from the get-go. And the wolves in his pack didn't understand that. The stupid thing was, Leyden realized as he wallowed in self-pity before the challenge, was that Connor had done what any decent wolf would do when faced with a problem – put the needs of his mate first.

There's too much emphasis on fucking sex, Leyden thought as he dodged another set of teeth. Fuck, now there were two of them, no make that four. Leyden knew he had to focus on the fight, he had to protect his pack, but honestly, without Connor at his side, he wasn't sure it was worth the effort.

Connor had warned Leyden about Rolf, told him the man had been through too many packs and had apparently been banished more than once for challenging the Alpha. There was no way a man like that should have had the right to challenge for a second's position. But after Connor had left, and Leyden was all for heading after him, he had been tied up in one thing or another until the challenge. Rolf's application had gone through and Leyden hadn't realized it until the man turned up in the pack circle.

Wincing, Leyden snapped and twirled again. He was favoring his leg and wanted to keep the other wolves away from it. Rolf had managed to sink his teeth into his paw, just before Leyden had ripped his throat out. Although Leyden didn't hold with killing indiscriminately, Rolf's attitude and the way he had taken Lonnie's comments and used the information to stir up the enforcers was too much to take.

In a coordinated attack two of his enforcers barreled into him at the same time and all three wolves went down in a flurry of claws, legs and teeth. Fuck this isn't good, Leyden thought as he struggled under the weight, desperately trying to keep teeth from his neck. He raised his head, snapping and snarling, but he couldn't get free. One of the wolves had scraped his claws down Leyden's side and he could feel the blood flowing from the wounds.

Kicking, biting and trying to wiggle as best he could, all of a sudden Leyden could see the sky. The sounds of fighting hadn't stopped, but...Leyden shook his head and stood up. Another wolf was fighting off the enforcers, his strength and sheer power rippling through his muscles. For the first time in days, Leyden smiled, a freaky thing for a wolf to do, but Leyden felt his heart lift. Connor hadn't abandoned him and yet again he was in protector mode.

Watching Connor in action was sheer poetry. The wolf took on all comers, his actions fast, his retaliation brutal. Reminding himself that he was the Alpha in their relationship, Leyden

moved alongside his mate with renewed vigor, and in less than ten minutes all eight of the wolves were down, their submission evident.

Panting heavily, Leyden stood for a moment simply savoring the victory. That was until he felt Connor nudging his shoulder, and a long warm tongue licking the wounds on his side. While Leyden knew he would heal when he shifted, he was so blown away by the fact that his mate was tending to him, even if it was in wolf form, he stood under the caress, enjoying every lick.

Seeing one of the downed wolves move, Leyden growled and Connor nudged his shoulder again. Right. Time to shift and take care of the mess. Leyden shifted, glad that his wounds healed, although his hand was still a little sore. He stood tall and proud as his mate shifted with him, the man almost equally tall, definitely proud, and not at all pleased with his enforcers. Leyden slipped his arm around Connor's waist, the urge to have the man close to him too hard to ignore. Fortunately Connor made no move to get away from him. Instead Connor was focused on the enforcers who were still cowering in wolf form.

"Your disrespect to your Alpha is sickening," Connor snarled. "Shift your lame asses and explain yourself to your Alpha."

"You're not our second, or even in this pack. You have no say here," one of the louder mouthed idiots yelled, as one by one the enforcers shifted and knelt on the ground.

"I still bested you, and claimed or not, I am your Alpha's true mate. Now explain your actions before I rip your throat out." Connor didn't have to yell. His voice was powerful enough to ripple around the clearing and make every other wolf in the area take notice.

The wolves on the ground moved about nervously and then one spoke up. "Alpha. It was Rolf who spoke to us. Told us you weren't fit to be an Alpha because you haven't sexually claimed your mate. A wolf shifter who doesn't have sex is considered weak, you know that Alpha. A weak Alpha is unfit to lead or keep our pack safe. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

"There's a lot of things wrong with your story, Clancy," Leyden said, eyeing the man with distrust. "Firstly Rolf had never met my mate so had no way of knowing if I'd had sex with him or not. Secondly, DO EITHER ONE OF US LOOK WEAK TO YOU?"

"No Alpha." Clancy at least had the grace to look embarrassed. Looking around the pack, Leyden could see Lonnie had gone a bright red, and was consciously avoiding his gaze. He guessed the little twink had a lot to do with the gossip in the pack. Lonnie certainly had Alpha Mate aspirations, something Leyden hadn't even been aware of until Connor had come along.

Leyden raised his voice so the whole pack could hear him. "What I do in the bedroom or with my mate is my business and is of no concern of anyone else here. I thought I treated you all well. I take time to listen to your concerns. I help out where I can. I keep this pack safe and profitable. I thought I had your trust, your respect. I was stupid enough to think I had your support."

Gripping Connor a little closer, the man standing like a rock beside him, Leyden went on. "What is going to happen to you all if I decide that I don't want to live with this farce of a

pack anymore and walk away? That would leave you with no Alpha, no Alpha Mate, no second, and a bunch of enforcers who are that cowardly they would only try and attack me on mass instead of facing me in an individual challenge for leadership. What is going to happen to you and the way you live your lives?"

Leyden saw the fear and shock on the faces of his pack members and tried not to let it affect him. He cared for every man woman and child in his pack, and he hated the thought of hurting any one of them. But he could not, would not allow them to dictate how his mating went, or how he and Connor lived their lives. The actions of Rolf shouldn't have been surprising, but the way his enforcers had turned on him had cut Leyden to the core, and he was deeply hurt.

"Alpha, all wolves are sexual by nature. Your sexual prowess was something that typified your rule. You are known for your strength both in and out of the bedroom. Surely you can see how worried we would be as a pack, if that changed?" One of the older pack members said.

Feeling Connor stiffen beside him, Leyden shook his head. "Didn't you hear anything I just said, Walter? My mate is unique. He clearly isn't weak because he bested all of our enforcers. He has been living as the pack second for the Davis pack for freaking years. Connor has proven his worth to me in every way and would be a strong addition to this pack as Alpha Mate. Whether we have sex or not has nothing to do with it."

Leyden looked around at his gathered pack mates, ignoring the enforcers for now. "I shouldn't have to explain myself, because I thought I was trusted in my position. However, just this once, I will make an exception. My mate and I have not been sexually active yet, because my mate wants to wait until we know each other better. I agree with his decision. Mating is for life and is a serious decision to make. If the pack has a problem with that, or my mate, then I'll walk away and you lot can fend for yourselves. What has happened here today has sickened me."

"You would give up your pack for your mate?" Walter seemed surprised, and Leyden didn't know why he would be. Every wolf worth his salt knew how important a mate was. Leyden didn't want to have to fight every day for the right to keep his unusual mate by his side. To keep Connor, he would gladly walk away.

"Contrary to popular belief, there is more to being mates than having sex, Walter. Connor is compatible with me in every way. He is also protective and possessive and today he proved that he is a damn sight more supportive than any of you. What would you do in my position?"

Walter nodded his head, as did many others in the pack. Suddenly Leyden felt really tired as the events of the day, damn the whole week caught up on him, and he felt his knees turn to jelly. Connor tucked in tighter against him and held him upright.

"I am going to take my mate, shower, eat and enjoy my evening. You all have twenty four hours to make a decision as to what you want me to do. Know this, if you can't support me and my mate then I will walk away and you can find someone new to lead you. After the events of this week, I really don't care."

Leyden looked at his ex-enforcers. Their defection had hurt him most of all. "I may not be Alpha tomorrow, but I am today. All of you are banished, effective immediately. If you set

foot in my territory again you will be killed. All of your records will note the reasons for the banishment and the fact that you ganged up on me instead of challenging me directly. That's a fucking cowardly thing to do. I doubt that will help you in your efforts to find a new pack, but that's your problem. I won't be surrounded by people I can't trust."

Not bothering to see how his words had been taken, Leyden let Connor lead him back to the pack house. He seriously needed to lie down.

Chapter Nine

Connor didn't usually do emotions. He had learned a long time ago not to let the pettiness of other pack members about his lack of sexuality bother him, preferring to show his worth through his fighting strength and inner power. When he was with Davis or a few of the other pack enforcers he could let his guard down, laugh and relax with the best of them. He wasn't anti-social in any way, but he never got het up about things.

But seeing Leyden swamped by his enforcers stirred a rage in Connor he'd never experienced before. He would have cheerfully ripped out the throats of all eight men, and then started on the pack members. He was infuriated that none of Leyden's pack had supported the man.

He'd also been worried, and Connor by nature, wasn't a worrying person. When Leyden had slipped his arm around Connor's waist, Connor expected to feel itchy and uncomfortable. But he didn't, so he went with it, slipping his own arm around the man in return. He could feel that Leyden was still unsteady on his feet, and Connor would do anything to ensure his mate didn't fall on his face in front of the pack.

But hearing Leyden's enforcers and pack members confirm what Lonnie had told him, had Connor worrying big time. He didn't want Leyden to lose his pack simply because Connor needed more time to feel comfortable with his mate. The man was a walking sex god, and Connor could appreciate that from an aesthetic view point. But he wasn't sure that he actually felt the desire that Leyden had been talking about on their one and only date.

As he showered in one of Leyden's guest bedrooms, Connor tried to understand what else he was feeling. He hadn't minded being physically close to Leyden, which was a first for him. In fact, if he examined the feeling more carefully, he would admit to liking it. Leyden was big, tall and strong, and yeah...the man was his mate, so Connor was pleased he wasn't physically repulsed with the idea of touching the man.

Connor had also taken their week apart and thought about all of the things he did know about his mate. He wondered if there was more he could explain about how he felt, but honestly Connor was getting a bit sick of the fact that all anyone seemed to think about was the sexual side of things. Could his support, protectiveness and possessiveness, which Connor admitted to having in spades, be enough?

Still mulling over the idea, Connor strode through the house, looking for the kitchen. The last time he had been in Leyden's home, the place had been full of people. Now it was eerily quiet and Connor wondered why that was. As he walked into the kitchen he stopped short. Leyden was standing by the kitchen counter, which was full of Tupperware containers.

Leyden looked up and grinned. "It seems some of the pack women were worried we might get hungry," he said. "Come and grab yourself some food and we'll take it into the living room."

"All of this is for you?" Connor asked as he came forward, lifting lids and sniffing the contents.

"For us, apparently," Leyden said. "My pack members might not be fighters, but they can cook up a storm when they want to."

Connor shrugged, and got down to the serious business of filling a plate. As he lived alone he didn't have people cooking for him very often, and the thought of eating something he hadn't had to prepare himself had him salivating. Once Connor had filled his plate, Leyden led him through to a large living area. It was homely, and comfortable, and seemed to have all of the necessary equipment, including a huge television on the wall. Connor hovered, not sure where to sit, but when Leyden patted the spot beside him on the couch, he got over his nerves and sat down. Fighting made a wolf really hungry.

The two men sat in comfortable silence, enjoying the food and the peace and quiet. When Connor had finished eating, Leyden took his plate and put it on a small table to the side of the couch, and then took Connor's hand in his, leaning back on the couch.

Connor's first instinct was to pull his hand away, but he realized that was more habit than anything else. Leyden's hand felt good against his. Hot, smooth skin with callouses that Connor knew could only come from hard work. Connor leaned back on the couch as well, his shoulders rubbing against Leyden's and savored how good he felt being back with his mate again.

"I should thank you for helping me out today," Leyden said quietly as though unwilling to break the peace. "But I know you would always have my back. Did you know I was in trouble, or was it divine coincidence that you turned up when you did?"

"Little shit Lonnie came and told me."

"Little shit..." Leyden laughed. "That's a good name for him. I will have to remember it. I have a feeling he's responsible for the gossip around the pack."

"Yeah, well, I don't know about that. But Leyden, you know, this picking a mate business. I know that you were aroused by the scene we walked into in your room, but honestly, you need someone just a tad stronger by your side. It doesn't have to be me, but it can't be someone like Lonnie."

"I have you," Leyden said firmly and then he half turned and looked Connor right in the eyes. "And what do you mean aroused by the scene in my room. For fucks sake, you thought my hard on was for them?"

"Yes, wasn't it?"

Leyden laughed again. "Idiot. My dick has only come up for you, and only you, since we met. I'd been half hard all through dinner. You were coming to my room. I was going to sleep with you in my arms. Of course I was fucking aroused. I can't help that."

Hmm, okay, that made sense. Connor thought about what Leyden had said and moved closer, so that their bodies were plastered together at the side. Connor might not appreciate touch, although he was getting to like it with Leyden. His mate was a wolf shifter with normal urges and he would appreciate the physical closeness even if nothing came of it.

"You know I wish I could give you what that little shit was talking about, don't you?"

"You are who you are, Connor. I like that. I like you. Once I've bitten you I will know if I make you uncomfortable through our mind link and can do something about it. You're going to let me claim you, aren't you? You didn't come to save me, just to walk away from me

again?” Leyden said, dropping Connor’s hand and putting his big arm around his shoulders instead.

“Someone’s got to watch your back,” Connor said, ignoring the flutter of butterflies that suddenly attacked his stomach. “That fucking Rolf wouldn’t have even been in the challenge if I’d been here.”

“You know most people only want to be around me for the sex, and the thought of being close to the Alpha. You truly do want to watch out for me.” Leyden’s voice sounded awed and Connor was struck by how empty a life that only had sex could be. Leyden had people falling all over him all the time, but there was a hint of loneliness in his mate’s voice. For all of his bed partners, Leyden hadn’t found anybody who totally supported him, who wanted a connection with him as a person.

Leyden needed him.

That thought struck Connor like a lightning bolt. Casual sex could only make a person feel good for a short amount of time. Leyden was known for his variety of bed partners, but the man was still lonely. His mate was looking for the same connection he was. Another piece of the puzzle fell into place and Connor knew he wasn’t going to walk away this time.

Turning to Leyden Connor tilted his neck, far more than considered submission.

“Bite me,” he said.

Leyden looked stunned for one split second, but he didn’t hesitate. Fisting one hand in Connor’s hair and the other tugging at his waist, Leyden pulled Connor across his chest and bit deep into the offered neck. Connor arched up, unprepared for the moment of pain. But what followed was such unimaginable bliss, that Connor cried out and then waves of pleasure flooded his body as he felt a decided stickiness in his jeans. He’d fucking orgasmed – with another person! Damn, the mating bite was a powerful thing.

As Connor came down to earth, he felt Leyden remove his teeth and lick gently over the bite mark. A scar would be formed in a matter of hours. A permanent warning to anyone that Connor was now claimed. Connor looked at Leyden, thrilled to see that besides the obvious lust, the man had such a look of wonder in his eyes.

“Now me,” Leyden demanded, trying to tug Connor into his lap. Connor let the man rearrange him as he wanted, his long legs bracketing Leyden’s thighs, their bare chests inches apart. Connor didn’t have to be a wolf shifter to know how aroused his mate was – he could smell it and see it. But Connor refused to allow that arousal to distract or upset him. Leyden was being true to his nature. The scent of a mate to a wolf shifter would trigger arousal in almost all cases, and the combined scents of both men were all Connor could smell.

Connor knew this moment was important. It would govern how the two men lived the rest of their lives. Leyden would know his every thought, as he would know those of his mate. They would be bound for eternity, and nothing but death would keep them apart. And while Connor knew that some might think him silly, he wanted Leyden to do little thing for him, before he claimed the man.

“Can I have a kiss first?” He said, looking deep into Leyden’s shiny grey eyes.

Leyden's eyes widened. "Have you ever?"

Connor shook his head. Leyden smiled then, a truly beautiful smile.

"My pleasure," he said, his voice husky and he leaned forward.

Connor expected Leyden to devour him. To take his lips, plunder his mouth with his tongue and yep...literally consume him. Although Connor had never allowed anyone to do it to him before, he'd seen enough pack mates kissing to know how it went. But Leyden surprised him yet again.

Soft breath ghosted over his lips, long fingers in his hair, big hands gently cradling his scalp, Connor couldn't help closing his eyes as Leyden came closer. And then he felt it. The gentle press of Leyden's soft lips against his. Connor inhaled sharply as a myriad of feelings swamped his body. Before he knew what was happening, or had a chance to process anything, Leyden backed off slightly, tilted Connor's head just a little bit, and then Connor felt lips on lips again. Slightly firmer, but still...there was so much caring in Leyden's actions – a response Connor hadn't believed possible.

Leyden's stubble tickled his chin. Connor found he was breathing in sync with his mate. Leyden's lips moved, alternating between the softest nibbles and the simple glide of skin over skin. Connor was unsure of what he should do, but Leyden didn't seem to notice. Annoyed at his own lack of response, Connor brought his arms up, cradling Leyden's head, and matched Leyden's movements.

Leyden's skin was clean and smelled slightly of soap. But his lips were plush, warm and so inviting, and when Connor attempted a little nibble of his own, the taste of the man seared his lips. On and on the kiss went, no pressure, no tongues, nothing but the gentle pressure of Leyden's mouth on his. Without realizing it, Connor found his breath was coming faster, still matching his mate's, and he found himself wanting to push forward harder, to feel more.

But Leyden pulled his head back, his fingers still in Connor's hair. Leyden's face was flushed, the man was pulsing with desire – Connor could see it, smell it – hell, he could damn near taste it.

"Bite me," Leyden whispered, pulling Connor's head to his throat. Taking a long sniff of Leyden's unique scent, Connor opened his mouth and bit down hard. Like everything else about his mate, Leyden's blood was sweet, warm and strong. Connor caressed the essence over his tongue, savoring every drop.

Oh my fucking God, Leyden's voice sounded in his head as the man in question pulled Connor forward until they were chest to chest. Seconds later Connor sensed Leyden's orgasm and the man climaxed with a spectacularly deep groan.

Being careful not to rip his mate's skin, Connor disengaged his teeth and lapped the blood from the bite mark. Leyden held tight to Connor's shoulders, his head thrown back, soft moans leaving his lips. When Leyden was clean the man lifted his head, a soft smile on his face.

"That has to be the most intimate thing I have ever done," Leyden whispered. "Thank you."

“So it doesn’t have to be all sex and fireworks to feel good?” Connor said, enjoying the feeling of his mate in his arms.

“Hell no, honey. By the time we get around to having sex, I think it’ll probably kill me.”

Connor couldn’t help smiling as he climbed off of Leyden’s lap and the two men headed towards Leyden’s shower. Sticky jeans were not fun, after all. But with Leyden’s hand firmly in his, Connor felt the stirrings of the connection he had dreamed of all his life. He imagined that his libido would soon follow. And even if it didn’t, Connor knew that with Leyden in his life the two men could rewrite the ideas of what intimacy was all about.

He didn’t know if or when he and Leyden might have sex. Hell, he didn’t know if his mate was even going to be Alpha the next day. But as Connor followed Leyden into the room they would now share, he found he really didn’t care. He’d been claimed, and he’d had the most perfect first kiss a guy could ask for. Anything else was just frosting.

Author Bio

Lisa Oliver adores her wolf shifters and a myriad of other paranormals. She is the author the Cloverleah Pack, the Bound and Bonded series, the Stockton Wolves series and the Alpha and Omega series.

When not writing Lisa can be found down the beach walking her dog, or spending time with her children and grandchildren. Although known to be a bit of a hermit, because of all of the delicious men in her head clamoring to tell their stories, she can be tempted away from her computer with chocolate. In her head the only thing better than chocolate is a man covered in the stuff.

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