

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade by M. L. Knight

Shade Mallory has spent her life cast aside, cursed, and treated as nothing more than a servant in her own pack. Hope feels like a cruel joke—until Alpha Caelan Kendrick opens his Choosing Ceremony to outsiders. Pressured to find a mate, he's resigned to duty over destiny. But when Shade steps into his world, fate refuses to be ignored. Sparks fly, secrets stir, and a bond neither expected begins to form. Yet, with shadows of the past looming and enemies watching, one question remains—will their connection be their salvation or their downfall?

Prologue: The Wolf Born of Sorrow

SHADE

“Oh, Shade. Honey, what’s wrong?” my mother asked softly as she settled on the ground next to me, tucking my silver hair behind my ear. “Why are you crying?”

I glanced up, more tears spilling over my cheeks at the look of concern in her eyes.

Sunny’s right. I’m a burden to everyone around me.

My sister and I had never been close, much to my mother’s disappointment. She had tried her best to encourage us to be friends and keep things between us fair, but Sunny had picked up on my father’s humiliation in having one daughter that was so different.

I was something to be ashamed of. A freak to be hidden away. A danger to everyone around me. It hadn’t taken long for my sister to learn to shun me as my father did. As far as he was concerned, Sunny was his only child, and she was perfect.

I swiped at my tears, wrapping my arms tightly around my knees as I whimpered.

“Come on, honey. Talk to me. Tell me why you’re upset,” my mother encouraged.

“S-Sunny said...,” I began with a sniffle.

My mother released an exasperated sigh, her golden locks shining in the sun as she shook her head. "That girl. What did she say now?"

"S-Sunny said that you named me Shade," I stuttered with a hiccup. "B-because I spread d-darkness wherever I go. That's why the pack ha-hates me."

I buried my face against my knees as my mother draped her arms around me and pulled me close.

"Well, Sunny is wrong," my mother stated as she ran a hand soothingly through my hair. "The reason I named you Shade is because the shade is such an inviting place to be."

"It is?" I asked, raising my head and cocking an eyebrow at her in confusion.

"On a hot day, where do you go to escape the heat? Where do you rest when the sun shines too bright for your eyes?" she asked.

"The shade, I guess," I admitted.

"Exactly," she confirmed. "The shade is the place you seek for comfort. Everyone enjoys the sunshine, but they always end up seeking the shade."

"No one seeks me for anything," I sniffled. "Everyone hates me."

"They don't hate you," my mother insisted. "They are just scared. Your gift makes you powerful, and that makes them nervous."

"Why? I don't use it on purpose."

"I know, honey, and you've gotten so much better at controlling it," she praised. "But wolves will be wolves. They can't help but feel threatened by anything that makes them look weak."

"Do you think that they'll accept me eventually?"

"I'm sure they will, sweetheart. Sooner or later, they will realize just how wonderful you are," she assured me as she rose and dusted off her hands. "Now, come along, sweet girl," she said, holding out her hand. "Let's go home. We really shouldn't be out this far from the village."

I reached out, letting her pull me to my feet. "Okay, Mom."

We started back when a foul scent, somewhere between rotting flesh and burning garbage, rolled over us. My mother froze, dragging me behind her.

A feral growl rumbled from the bushes to our left. A mangy wolf emerged, its deranged eyes trained on us as it stalked forward. Drool dripped from its snarling fangs as it snapped its jaws.

“Shade,” my mother said in a low voice, her eyes never leaving the rogue. “When I say so, run as fast as you can back to the village. Okay?”

I nodded furiously as I gripped her hand. I felt her call through the pack’s mind-link, alerting my father, the alpha of the Thunder Moon Pack, as to the threat that had infiltrated our lands.

“Ready?” she asked as she crouched. “Run!”

She shifted, her shaggy golden wolf facing off against the rogue.

I froze, shaking in fear as it launched itself at us. My mother barked, blocking me as she fended off the attack and screamed for me to run through our mind-link.

I should’ve done what I was told. I should’ve run. Then my mother would’ve been able to fight without worrying about me, but I couldn’t.

I stood, rooted to the spot as I watched the rogue dart in, its jaws clenching around my mother’s neck as its teeth sank deep into her flesh. It twisted its head sharply, and with a sickening snap, my mother collapsed.

I stared at her unmoving body, horror gripping me as I struggled to comprehend what had just happened. My mother, the only person that had ever loved me just the way I was, was dead.

My pulse hammered in my ears, my bones popping and resetting as my body violently changed form. A high-pitched, pitiful howl escaped my newly shifted throat as I threw back my head and wailed.

When I opened my eyes, the rogue lay on the ground, its body convulsing as its eyes rolled wildly in its head. Its paws scratched at the patchy fur on its chest as if trying to claw its own body open.

“*Mom?*” I sobbed through our link, but there was no response.

There never would be.

I sat heavily, lifting my snout again and letting out a mournful howl followed by another. I couldn't stop. My mother was gone, and it was all my fault.

"Shade! STOP HOWLING RIGHT NOW!" my father bellowed in his commanding alpha tone.

My jaws snapped shut immediately. I cowered before my father and the pack warriors that surrounded him, pinning my ears back and trying to seem as small as possible. He stepped closer, and I whimpered.

"What happened to her eyes?" his beta gasped.

"I don't know," Alpha Butch grunted.

"I've never seen solid white eyes like that," the beta replied. "Do you think she's gone blind?"

I cocked my head, looking back and forth between them. *What in the name of the Goddess are they talking about? I can see just fine.*

"No, but she shouldn't have shifted so young. She's only seven." He crouched down, leveling his gaze at me as he spoke to me through our mind-link. *"What did you do, Shade?"*

I quivered at the anger in his voice, quickly explaining what had happened as my father glared at me. When I finished, he stood abruptly, placing his hands on his hips as he stared at the body of his mate. I reached out tentatively, nudging his hand with my snout, but he jerked it away.

"This is all your fault," he snarled. "Your mother is dead because of you."

I flattened myself to the ground as he let out a strangled sob, his eyes welling up as he stared at my mother's unmoving form. He cleared his throat, turning toward his warriors.

"Take that filth to the border and burn it," he growled, nodding his head toward the rogue's corpse. "Then take *that* home," he added, pointing a furious finger at me. "Have the sage meet us there. Don't let anyone see you. I don't want to

cause any panic until we know what we're dealing with. I'll be there as soon as I've buried my poor Brona."

"You just can't seem to catch a break, can you, child?" Sage Kendry muttered as he gripped my chin, turning my head from side to side as he scrutinized my face.

I shook my head, relieved when his bony hand finally released me. Dark, beady eyes peered at me from behind half-moon glasses perched low on his long, pointed nose. He tapped his wrinkled cheek, running his spindly fingers through his thinning gray hair as he stared at me.

"She was howling when we got there," my father said, his eyes rimmed red as he wiped away a tear. "The force of it was keeping us from reaching her. It felt like a vise closing around my heart. I'm certain that was what killed the rogue."

"Hmm...early shifting, whited-out eyes, howling that causes damage to others... I vaguely remember something about this," the sage said as he rummaged through his bag for a book.

He blew some dust off the spine, causing me to sneeze before he cracked it open. My father scowled at me for making a sound, and I cowered, tucking my tail as we waited in silence for the sage to continue.

"Here it is. *Lupus ad laborem natus ex. The Wolf Born from Sorrow*," the sage read aloud. "*If an unshifted youth is exposed to a triggering event, something so horrible and heartbreaking that their spirit breaks, their wolf's form can be forced out. The resulting wolf is cursed. Its howl is deadly to all who hear, literally breaking hearts with its mournful cry.*"

"How do we stop it?" my father demanded. "It's bad enough she already has her...affliction, but this could be a danger to the whole pack."

"I agree, Alpha Butch," the sage said as he snapped the book shut. "There is only one thing I can think of. Order her to never howl again. Your alpha command should force her to obey."

My father hesitated for a moment. It was a harsh punishment. Howling was innate to a wolf. It was considered a basic right. To deny anyone that was barbaric.

“Is there a chance that she could learn to control it like her other abilities?” he questioned.

“I don’t know, and who knows how many she could harm in the process,” Sage Kendry warned.

My father grew quiet, dropping his head as he weighed his options. I pleaded with him through our link, promising that I would never hurt anyone.

“Enough, Shade,” he snapped.

He took several steps toward me, leaning down so that his face was level with mine.

“You’re the reason my mate is dead. Why you and your sister are motherless. As far as I’m concerned, my daughter died out there alongside her mother.”

I whimpered as he gave a resigned sigh and stared hard into my terrified eyes. “YOU WILL NEVER HOWL WITHOUT PERMISSION FROM YOUR ALPHA!” he ordered.

Not allowing a wolf to howl, to do what came naturally, was cruel, but not as hurtful as my father’s words.

I had been the cause of my mother’s death. The reason my sister and I would grow up without her kind touch and gentle smile. The reason my father had lost his fated mate. I deserved far worse than this.

“Now, shift back,” he demanded. “You will go tell your sister what you did and beg for her forgiveness, even though you don’t deserve it. After that, I’ll determine what I’m going to do with you. But Shade Mallory is no more. Do you understand?”

I nodded as I shifted and shuffled out of my father’s office, tears freely falling down my cheeks as I went to tell my sister the heart-wrenching news.

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