

## Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

### Group Date

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#### SHADE

I was still worrying about it as I joined the group at the water's edge. The view was breathtaking, just as I had hoped it would be. It almost made me forget about the huge mistake I'd just made. Almost.

A large pool had formed beneath the falls, its calm waters the perfect place for lounging. The water glittered in the sunlight, beckoning us to jump right in.

"What do you think?" Taffy's bubbly voice asked from beside me.

"It's really pretty," I offered.

"Come on," she bid as she wandered toward the pool. "Let's get in."

I followed her, peeling off my coverup as I stepped into the refreshing water. A sharp crack rang out, and I jumped, dropping into a defensive stance as I glanced in the direction of the sound.

Alpha Caelan looked down in surprise at the rather large, now-fractured rock beneath his hand. He glanced up in my direction.

I quickly averted my gaze to avoid locking eyes with him, but I could feel the intensity of his stare burning its way across my skin.

"Oh my Goddess! Did you see that?!" Taffy whispered as she leaned in close to me.

"Alpha Caelan breaking the rock?" I asked with a shrug. "What's the big deal? He's an alpha. Maybe he forgot his own strength."

"Yeah, because he saw *you* in a swimsuit," she chuckled, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. "He probably had to fight to control his desire to come over here and ravish you."

"I...uh...I don't think that's what happened," I countered. "There's plenty of other she-wolves out here he was probably looking at besides me."

"Nope. He was definitely staring right at you," Taffy asserted confidently.

"You're imagining things," I insisted, shaking my head.

"We'll see," she sang, wading deeper.

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Alpha Caelan made his way around to the other she-wolves, spending private time with each of them as I watched, helplessly glued to every interaction.

I wasn't sure why I was so invested. I kept telling myself it was because I was trying to figure out a way to help Sunny, but even I didn't believe that.

He splashed around and laughed with them, but from what I saw, he was careful to maintain a respectful distance. He was always polite, courteous, and very much aware of who might be watching.

*He won't be able to manage that with Sunny. She's too forward for that.*

Trying to keep her safe when she kept disappearing into the bushes with any male she was attracted to had been a particular headache of mine for years. Unsurprisingly, she made a particular spectacle once she got Caelan's attention.

She laughed extra loud at anything he said, running her hands over his bare chest every chance she got. She even jumped into his arms when the water got "too deep" because she needed to keep her hair dry.

It made me sick to see him holding her like that. I don't think he was a fan either because he quickly hurried over to a shallow area and set her down as soon as he could without her squealing about the water's depth.

*I don't know why I care anyway. Just because he has a pleasant scent, and I don't mind his touch, doesn't make him anything to me. It's stupid to feel jealous over something that I'll never have.*

As soon as Alpha Caelan left Sunny, she started for me. I could see by the look on her face that she wasn't happy.

"I need to speak to Shade...*alone*," she declared as soon as she reached me and Taffy

Neither of us had a chance to respond before she grabbed my wrist and yanked me out of the water, dragging me toward the tree line where we wouldn't be overheard.

"It's going to be your turn with Caelan soon," she explained as we came to a halt beside a big oak. "Remember your mission. The only reason you're here is to help me become the new luna, understood?"

I nodded.

"Make sure you let him know how much danger I'm in because of Alpha Huxley. Tell him he's been trying to force a mating with me. That should make him jealous and make him want to protect me."

"Okay," I agreed sullenly. "I can do that."

"Good," she said, gripping my arm tightly. "He has to understand what an immediate threat Dark Moon is to Thunder Moon. Father called this morning and said they managed to break into the pack house yesterday."

"What?!" I hissed, dismayed to hear they'd gotten past our defenses. "Why didn't he call me? What were they even after? You're here."

This meant they were getting bolder. I would have to be extra vigilant to make sure they didn't get to Sunny.

"He didn't say, but he stressed that I'm the only chance the pack has got. We need this mating to unite Thunder Moon and Harvest Moon. Make Caelan understand that, Shade." She glared at me.

"Don't forget what you owe the pack. What you owe me."

"I haven't," I replied as I glanced around.

Alpha Caelan was coming our way, and Sunny shifted immediately, her cold sneer gone in a flash as she twirled her blonde hair around a finger and batted her eyelashes at him.

"Oh! Hey, Caelan," she purred. "Time for another swim?"

"No," he replied, turning to me. "Shade, I've been looking everywhere for you. Come with me. I have something to show you." He held out a hand, a dazzling smile spreading across his lips. "I think you're really going to love it."

My breath caught in my throat as I stared at his mouth. *Damn that smile of his, drawing me in and making me crave more. More of what is the question.*

I smiled, not taking his hand though I desperately wanted to. I needed to remember my mission. Thunder Moon was counting on me and Sunny. It was better if I didn't touch him. Safer, smarter, and less confusing.

I kept my gaze low, meaning for it to land on his chin, when I found myself staring at his bare chest.

Most wolves were fit. We had a naturally high metabolism which meant we burned a lot of calories without the need for much effort.

The warriors at Thunder Moon were always flaunting their chiseled chests and rock-hard abs around the pack house, but all of them paled in comparison to Caelan.

Every muscle was so well-defined, presenting themselves like a feast for my eyes. He wasn't bulky, but he was solid and slim in a way that screamed predatory grace.

I couldn't help myself as I eagerly watched the droplets from the pool travel over his taut muscles and down each crevice of his toned stomach. They slid lower, disappearing beneath his low-slung swim trunks, and I blushed, remembering all too well what I had glimpsed earlier.

I suddenly found myself extremely thirsty but not for a glass of water.

"Uh, okay," I said softly, nodding for him to lead the way.

"Follow me," he said, a look of hurt in his eyes as he turned around.

Sunny shot me a look as we started up the tiny trail leading up the side of the falls.

*She's right. One of the she-wolves here is destined to be his mate, and it needs to be Sunny. He wouldn't want me anyway. He probably wants*

*someone with at least some experience. Not a chaste warrior who's never been with anyone.*

I'd rarely even let myself imagine what it might be like to be with someone like that. I knew my father wouldn't allow it, and honestly, I couldn't imagine the kind of wolf that would want someone like me.

*Cursed wolves can't have mates.*

But still, I found myself thinking things I shouldn't have been as I followed Caelan up the trail.

*I wonder what it would be like if he touched me. Would he let me touch him back? Would he want to kiss me?*

I shook my head, trying to clear away the fantasy. I'd never desired anyone like this before.

I'd had crushes in the past, but they'd never had this kind of effect on me. The alpha drew me in unexpectedly, something about him appealing to my more primitive nature. A forbidden hunger suddenly awakened within me, and I had no idea how to handle it.

*It's a very good thing he doesn't have a romantic interest in me, or else I'd be in big trouble.*

I gulped, realizing that I'd been staring unashamedly at his rear for several minutes with my mouth hanging open rather unattractively. I snapped my jaws shut and felt the blush rushing to my cheeks.

*I can't believe I was so shamelessly checking out an alpha. What is wrong with me?!*

I dared to raise my gaze, finding him looking over his shoulder at me with a devious smile on his face almost as though he was enjoying the effect he had on me.

I blushed, completely mortified he'd caught me leering at him.

*Is he toying with me? I was clearly just ogling his butt, and he's grinning like the whole thing was his idea. Wait, was it? Is he using his alpha energy to influence me? Can they do that?*

I was so lost in my thoughts as we neared the top that I didn't notice how slick the rocks had gotten in the spray. I took a step forward, my foot sliding in the moss, and started to fall. I braced myself for impact as I hurtled toward the stone.

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