

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

Dead to Him

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SHADE

When we arrived at my father's pack house, Caelan instructed his warriors to stay close but to keep enough distance so as not to alarm any of the Thunder Moon wolves.

My father came bounding down the steps with his arms open wide and a bright smile on his face.

"There's my girl!"

Sunny raced toward him and jumped into his embrace. "Daddy!"

I stood there, feeling a small pang of sadness as he welcomed her home like a loving father should while ignoring me completely. He turned to the leaders of Harvest Moon and greeted them each with a handshake, still refusing to even acknowledge me.

It shouldn't have surprised me. I was a background ornament as far as he was concerned. A tool to be taken down when needed and then put away after the job was done. That was all I'd ever been to him.

He's never praised me for my work. Never thanked me for my sacrifice. He rarely even acknowledges that I'm a person. He only ever speaks to me when he's giving orders. Otherwise, it's like I'm invisible.

"I'm so happy that you were all able to make it," he greeted, showing them up the steps. "Why don't you come inside? Dinner should be ready momentarily."

"Are you not going to greet Shade?" Caelan asked, obviously bothered by my father's blatant disregard. "She's here as well."

"I should hope so," my father chuckled as though trying to make light of the situation, but I could hear the sarcasm dripping from every syllable that followed. "Shade would be failing in her duty if she wasn't watching over my precious Sunny."

Without another word, he turned on his heel, wrapping an arm around my sister's shoulders and leading the way into the pack house.

I could feel Caelan's anger radiating off him in waves. Luna Maty huffed in irritation, taking the arm of the stoic Alpha Leal as they started up the steps.

"He couldn't even be bothered to say hello to you," Caelan grumbled as we brought up the rear.

"It's okay," I assured him. "I didn't expect him to."

"Well, I did," he countered.

He grabbed my hand and placed a gentle kiss across my knuckles, reluctantly letting it go with a sigh.

"I'll just be happier when this is all over," he whispered.

"Me too," I admitted as we stepped through the door.

We went directly to the dining room. The table had been set with the pack's finest dishes and silverware. Even my mother's favorite crystal glasses were out, ready to be filled with wine for our guests.

He's really pulling out all the stops to impress them.

As my father took a seat at the head of the table and Sunny took her place next to him, I realized that he had purposely only laid out five place settings. There wasn't a place for me.

It wasn't the first time I'd been expected to stand there while they entertained dinner guests.

He's trying to show that I'm still beneath them. That I don't belong at their table.

I went to stand against the wall like I usually did, but Caelan grabbed my arm and pulled over another chair.

"Alpha Butch, it seems that we're missing a place setting," he pointed out as he settled the extra seat beside his.

“Oh yes! Is Briar going to join us?” Sunny asked, completely missing Caelan’s point.

Briar was my father’s chosen mate. I didn’t care for her. She was obnoxious, forever ordering me around like I was her personal servant with that squeaky, grating voice of hers. Sunny, of course, adored her.

“No. Unfortunately, she has other plans for tonight,” our father replied, quickly dismissing the subject.

I knew he was just making excuses.

The real reason Briar wasn’t at dinner was because she was a power-hungry gold digger who was much closer in age to Caelan than she was to my father. Caelan was a much more attractive option, and I bet that my father wouldn’t put it past her to jump ship for the more powerful alpha if given the chance.

“I wasn’t referring to Luna Briar,” Caelan growled as he guided me into the seat beside his. “There isn’t a place setting for Shade.”

“Apologies, Alpha Caelan. I didn’t realize she would be joining us,” my father admitted begrudgingly. “Here the omegas don’t dine at such a high-ranking table.”

He gestured for a passing omega to bring another place setting.

“Yes, well Shade is also still a candidate in the choosing,” Caelan reminded him. “This dinner is as much for her as it is for Sunny.”

My father gave a terse nod. It was clear that he didn’t like it, but he was trying to play nice with the leaders from Harvest Moon. He needed their allegiance, and he desperately wanted this mating between Sunny and Caelan.

The omega returned with my dinnerware, and I thanked her as she placed it in front of me. It wasn’t the same fine china that everyone else had, but I knew better than to say anything. My father was determined to remind me of my place even as he attempted to please Caelan.

I stared longingly at my mother’s crystal glasses. I’d never gotten to use them before, and I’d kind of been hoping I might get the chance tonight.

Caelan must’ve noticed because he swapped his glass for my plain one.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

He smiled in reply.

Is this what they mean when they say your mate always knows what you need? He didn't know the glass was important to me, but he didn't need to know. All that mattered was that it meant something to me, so he fixed it.

My heart fluttered at the revelation.

Dinner was served, a beautiful plate of roast venison placed in the center of the table with potatoes, handmade rolls, and salad. An omega came around with a bottle of wine and filled everyone's glasses.

My father offered a brief prayer of thanks to the Moon Goddess for all that she'd given us, something that I'd never seen him do before, and then encouraged everyone to dig in.

I was going to wait until the others had served themselves before grabbing any food as I usually did. I knew my father would throw a fit if I didn't follow the rules of hierarchy in his home. But Caelan didn't give me the chance.

He filled his plate and then set it in front of me before taking my empty one for his own meal. If my father or Sunny noticed, they didn't say anything, which I was grateful for. This dinner was going to be tense enough as it was.

Everyone ate quietly, but it wasn't exactly what I would call comfortable. This didn't seem like the getting-to-know-each-other event that Caelan had said it would be.

My father finally broke the silence.

“I can't begin to express how happy I am to have you all here,” he remarked. “Now that it seems like we're going to be family, I think we should make this dinner a monthly thing.”

I saw Luna Maty's jaw tighten as her sharp eyes snapped to my father. If I didn't know any better, I'd say she was furious with him.

“I have to say, you couldn't have made a better choice, Alpha Caelan,” my father continued. “My princess is smart, beautiful, and kind. She has all the

makings of a good luna. Once she gets used to how Harvest Moon does things, I have no doubt she'll make the perfect partner for you."

He smiled adoringly at Sunny as she took his hand.

"I couldn't be prouder," he gushed. "My daughter. A luna."

Of course, he's proud. He sent her on a mission to snag Caelan as her mate, the only thing he's ever given her to do, and from what he can see, it looks like she's succeeded. How upset is he going to be when he learns otherwise?

"Which one?" Caelan asked casually.

"I'm sorry?" my father questioned, awkwardly clearing his throat before taking a swig of his wine.

"I was just wondering which daughter you were referring to," Caelan clarified. "Did you mean Sunny or Shade?"

My jaw dropped open. I couldn't believe that Caelan had just come out and said it like that. I knew we planned on confronting my father, but I thought we were waiting until a little later in the evening.

I watched my father visibly pale, sweat breaking out along his brow as he scrambled for how to respond. His eyes darted to me for a moment before they settled back on Caelan.

Is he finally going to validate my existence now that the cat's out of the bag? Caelan made it clear that they knew. The Kendrick family is aware of his shameful secret. All that's left is for him to admit it.

"You have two daughters, correct?" Caelan asked again.

"No. I'm afraid you're mistaken, Alpha Caelan," he replied with a firm shake of his head. "Sunny is my only child."

His eyes darted to me again, and I held my breath as he stared directly at me for the first time in a long while.

"My other daughter is dead."

Next Chapter

Continue to the next chapter of Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade

