

Learning to Love... Book 1: Shade |

Return to Harvest Moon

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SHADE

Once we returned to Harvest Moon, Caelan hopped out and rushed around the car to open my door. He scooped me into his arms and started for the pack house.

“Caelan!” I squealed in protest.

“I wouldn’t fight it, dear,” Luna Maty chimed as she walked beside us. “He’s feeling overprotective of his mate after all that. He’ll calm down, but we’re lucky we got away without any bloodshed. Can’t say I wouldn’t have enjoyed getting a few hits in on your father myself.”

I glanced at her in surprise.

“Butch should know better,” she admitted. “Our pups are a gift. A piece of both you and your mate. Your mother would have been so upset to see how he’s treated you. Such a shame he’s lost his way.”

Caelan carried me inside, walking right past the stairs that led toward my bedroom.

“Uh, Caelan,” I asked. “Where are we going?”

“My office,” he muttered.

Luna Maty waved to me as we disappeared down the hall and into his study.

He kicked the door shut behind us and walked over to the couch, setting me down carefully. He took a deep breath as he knelt in front of me.

“How are you feeling?” he asked softly.

“I’m all right,” I assured him. “Like I said, I never belonged at Thunder Moon. Harvest Moon has felt more like home in the short time I’ve been here than it

ever did. And my family, well...they weren't there for me even before my mom's accident, so there's no loss there."

"You don't have to be strong with me, Shade," he replied, taking my hand. "No one would blame you for feeling upset. I know I'm still angry."

"I promise you I'm okay," I said with a smile.

And I really was. Sure, the things my father and Sunny had said stung, but it was nothing I hadn't heard many times before.

I actually feel lighter. Like everything that was holding me back is just gone. Now that I'm with Caelan, I feel like nothing can harm me anymore.

"I guess I never expected it to be that bad," he sighed. "That anyone would ever treat their own child like that. Your father didn't even set a place for you at the table. When was the last time you actually all ate together as a family?"

"Breakfast on the morning that my mother died," I admitted.

"You haven't been allowed to sit with them since you were seven?" he grumbled, clenching his fists. "No one should have to get used to something like that."

"Come here," I commanded with more authority than I ever expected from my own voice.

He leaned into me, and I reached forward, gently running my fingers through his hair. His reaction was instantaneous.

He sighed loudly, his shoulders drooping in relief as he eased into my touch. A look of peace swept across his handsome features as he closed his eyes.

"There is something that I'm worried about though," I admitted, chewing on my lip as he looked at me.

I watched his gaze drop to my mouth and smiled. No matter how eager I was to feel his lips on mine again, there were more important things that we needed to talk about.

"What?"

“What if Sunny was right? I don’t know anything about being a luna.” I gulped, the words feeling like sandpaper in my throat. “All I’ve ever known is how to be a warrior. What if I can’t do it?”

“Shade.” He shook his head, pulling away from my touch as he sat back on his heels. “Lunas come in all shapes and sizes. You are kind, caring, protective, and loyal. I have no doubt that with a little time and maybe some training, you’ll be exactly the luna that Harvest Moon needs.”

“But what about the pack?” I asked. “What if they can’t accept me because of what I am? Thunder Moon feared me. What if Harvest Moon does too? Not everyone is going to see me the way you do.”

“Well, I hope no one ever sees you *exactly* the way that I do,” he teased, giving me a flirty wink. “You’re my mate. I don’t want anyone else thinking the things I do when I look at you.”

“Caelan,” I replied, rolling my eyes. “Be serious.”

“I don’t know how the pack is going to react, Shade,” he sighed. “But I promise they won’t be like Thunder Moon. My pack is very welcoming and accepting of all walks of life. Most will probably be happy for us. But whatever happens, we’ll figure it out together, okay?”

He cupped my face, his hazel eyes intense as he gazed at me. “All that matters is that you’re my mate and the only one I want to be with. So, what do you say, Shade? Will you do me the honor of becoming my luna?”

I smiled, nodding even though I wasn’t sure I had what it took to lead a pack.

Caelan’s eyes brightened with hope. He grinned as he pulled me slowly toward him.

My breath caught as his lips hovered over mine.

“I’m going to need to hear you say it, Shade,” he whispered. “This is a big commitment, and I want to be certain you’re sure you want to do this.”

My fingers curled into his shirt, pulling him against me as I murmured, “Yes, Caelan. I want to be your luna and your mate.”

I kissed him, feeling his excitement race through our bond as we embraced.

Suddenly, Caelan swept me up into his arms, lifting me off the couch with ease. He spun around a few times, causing a small giggle to slip past my lips.

“Now *that* is my new favorite sound,” he breathed, beaming as he set my feet back down on the ground.

He sighed deeply, resting his forehead against mine, and I placed my hand against his cheek, feeling the soft stubble graze my palm. He shivered.

“You’ve made me the happiest wolf in the whole world,” he whispered.

“I doubt that,” I replied, sure that my own joy might rival his. “So, what happens now?”

He sat down, settling me into his lap.

“Well, we’ll introduce you as my mate and initiate you into the Harvest Moon Pack. After that, you’ll meet with my mother for luna training. We can hold off on the ceremony officially naming you until you’re ready, but my father will want to know that you’re at least preparing to take over for her.”

I cringed, wondering how Luna Maty would feel about a cursed omega taking her place. I knew Caelan said she had known who I was for a while, but that didn’t necessarily mean she was ready to pass down her title to someone like me.

“My father has been planning their retirement since I graduated from high school,” he continued, shaking his head with a chuckle. “In the meantime, there are other traditions we need to observe. After I introduce you as my mate to the pack, there will be an opportunity for others to challenge my right.”

“Challenge?” I questioned.

“Yes,” he said nonchalantly. “Other males, or females if they choose, have the right to challenge my claim on you as my mate. If they do, I’ll have to prove I have what it takes to protect you through combat.”

I gave him a concerned look before it occurred to me that there wouldn’t be any challenges for my honor. My father didn’t care for me, and I had no brothers or former lovers to stand in his place. No one ever thought I was worth much of anything, except for Caelan.

"There won't be any challenges." I breathed, relieved that he wouldn't be forced to fight for me.

"Well, there will be at least one," he corrected.

"How can you be certain?"

"Because it's tradition," he said with a shrug. "There's always at least one wolf who will step up so that the challenged can prove they're worthy. If Dillon were unmated, he'd be the one to do it. Since he isn't, I guess it could be Oliver, but you're not really Oliver's type."

"Because I'm an omega?" I suggested sadly.

"Because you're a female, baby," he countered with a sly grin.

My brows rose in surprise. "Oh."

"So," Caelan continued, "one of my warriors will have to step up."

"I don't want you fighting over me," I murmured.

"Don't worry," he said, placing a soft kiss on my forehead. "It's mostly for show. It's rare for a challenge to be serious these days."

I nodded, an uneasy feeling settling in my gut at the thought. *What if someone doesn't approve of me? Could they use the challenge to force Caelan to reject me as his mate? What if he gets hurt because of me?*

I swallowed my doubts for the time being. "What then?"

"Once all the challenges have been answered, we'll hold a feast in celebration of our right to mate. It usually lasts late into the night...sometimes even into the early morning, depending on the couple," he said as he blushed.

"What do you mean?"

"Well," he said nervously. "At some point during the party...whenever we feel the time is right... uh, you and I will slip away...to complete the marking. Afterward, we'll return to the party and present our marks to the pack, solidifying our mating before the Goddess."

I could literally feel the color draining from my face. *We're going to have to mark and mate with each other in the middle of a party where everyone knows what we're doing?! Then come back and face them?! Oh Goddess... I don't know if I can do that.*

I'd never been with anyone before. Just the thought that my first time might be when the entire pack was waiting for us made me want to die of embarrassment.

Caelan must have sensed my sudden trepidation because his gaze shifted from calm to concerned.

"Shade, what's wrong? What is it?"

"I'm okay," I said dismissively with a shake of my head, my cheeks burning as I tried to hide my face.

"No. Tell me what's bothering you," he insisted, his voice firm but comforting.

"It's just...I'm a...I'm a virgin," I admitted, whispering the last word so quietly I couldn't be entirely certain he heard me. "I just...I just don't... I don't know how I feel about doing 'it' for the first time with everyone aware of exactly what we're doing, you know?"

Caelan nodded in understanding, looking away sheepishly. "Well," he began, "and please don't take this as me trying to pressure you into anything, but we could"—he cleared his throat—"we could always have sex for the first time before the marking ceremony."

My eyes went wide as I stared at him in surprise.

"Everyone will still know what we're doing," he continued quickly, clearly anxious about how I would respond to this suggestion. "And they'll be waiting for us to return, but if we did it before, then it wouldn't be your first time. Might take a little of the pressure off."

I glanced away, the thought of sleeping with Caelan sending a wave of heat through my body as a thousand nervous butterflies took flight in my stomach.

Am I ready to have sex with him? I want him. That much is very clear, but am I ready for that step? I just don't know.

“Do...uh...do you think it’s a good idea if we do it ahead of time?” I murmured.

“Shade, baby, I would make love to you right now if you told me you wanted to,” he groaned, fingers tightening around my hips.

I bit my lip, the effect he had on me vibrating pleasantly across my skin. *Goddess, his touch feels so good. What would it be like if we came together with nothing between us?*

The thought stoked a fire within me, and I gazed at him, need pulsing through every fiber of my being.

Next Chapter

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