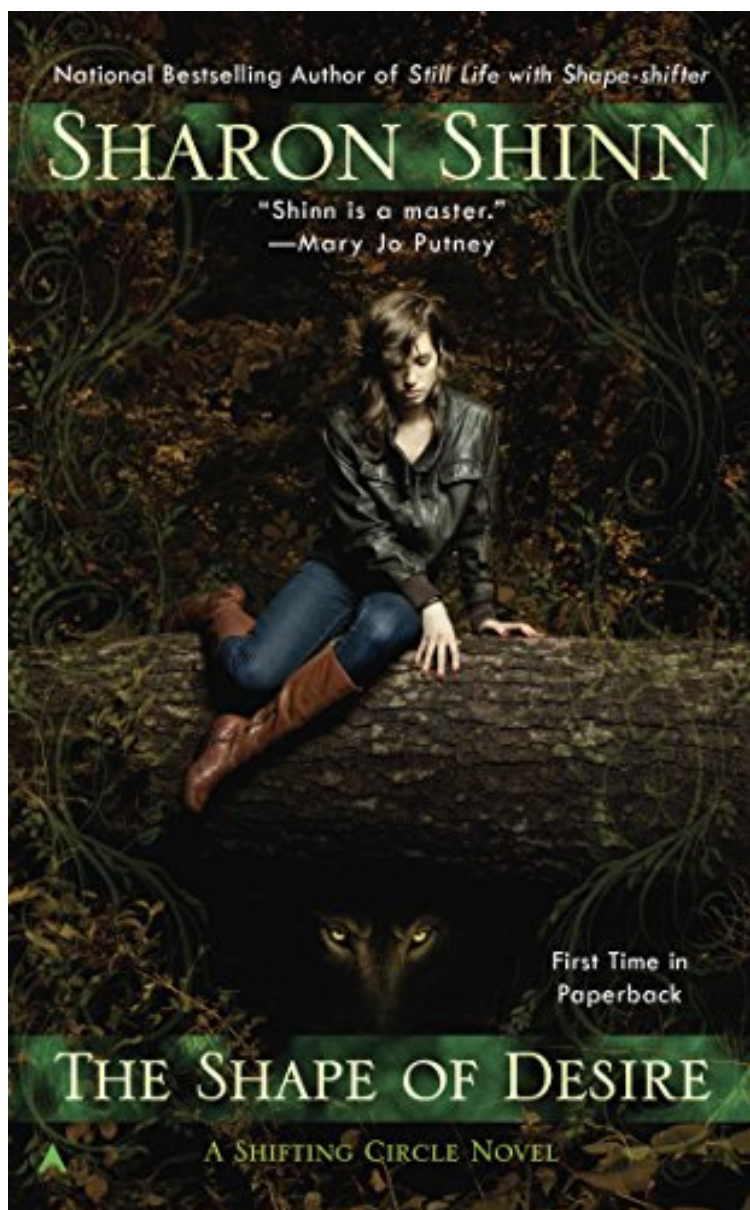


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The Shape of Desire



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurONE OF PUBLISHERS WEEKLY'S BEST BOOKS OF THE YEARMaster storyteller Sharon Shinn has thrilled readers with her national bestselling Twelve Houses series. Now experience her original new novel in which love and loyalty are tested at every turn.... For fifteen years, Maria Devane has been desperately, passionately in love with Dante Romano. But Maria knows that Dante can never give everything of himself backat least not all of the time. Every month, Dante shifts shape, becoming a wild animal. He cant choose when he shifts, the transition is often abrupt, and, as he gets older, the time he spends in human form is gradually decreasing.Maria has kept his secret since the beginning,

knowing that their love is worth the danger. But when a string of brutal attacks occurs in local parks while Dante is in animal form, Maria is forced to consider whether the lies she's been telling about her life have turned into lies she's telling herself...ExtraitChapter One

Its around two in the morning when I hear a rustle and bump in the kitchen, and I sit up in bed. I've left the light on over the stove for the past few days, since I've been half expecting Dante to show up. Still, you never know who might have come in through an unlocked door. I get up quietly, throw a robe over my T-shirt, and grab the cell phone in case I need to call 911. Then I creep down the hallway until I can peer into the lighted kitchen and determine whether what awaits me in the other room is a murderer or a lover.

Its the lover. Dante is standing with his back to me, drinking orange juice straight out of the carton. His black hair is greasy, tangled, and halfway down his back; he is shirtless, and I can see the pattern of his ribs through the roughened layer of skin. I wonder what creature he has been this time, and for how long. Where he has been staying, what he has been eating, if he has been in danger.

For a long time, I don't speak. I simply watch as he finishes off the juice and then opens the refrigerator door again. He's clearly ravenous. He rips open a package of cheese and consumes half the brick in two bites, still rummaging through Tupperware containers and wrapped serving bowls to find something to assuage his hunger. He actually grunts with pleasure when he finds the roast beef I defrosted and left on a plate on the bottom shelf. Setting the plate on the kitchen counter, he closes the refrigerator door and uses both hands to peel back the Saran Wrap, rolls a thick slice of beef, and eats it like a hot dog. He's halfway through the second piece before he stiffens all over and swings around to stare into the darkness of the corridor where I am hiding.

Just for a moment, I get the chance to see his face in full on feral intensity. My God, he is so beautiful. Beneath the grime and beard stubble, his skin is marble white; his deep-set eyes are a dense and impenetrable brown. His mouth is full and heavy, his cheekbones deliberately planed. Black hair sweeps back from his forehead in a theatrical fall. He could have been an actor, a model, a muse, some rich woman's companion, if only his life had been a little different.

If only his life had been completely different.

Maria? he says in his low voice. Its not hard to imagine that voice dropping a few notes, losing its consonants, and coming out as a wordless growl.

He must realize that I am the likeliest presence to be standing a few feet away in the dark; but he sets his plate down, frees his hands for combat, and continues to stare in my direction. Until moments like this, I think that I would like to see him in one of his alternate forms sometime; but I always realize, in those few seconds before he recognizes me, that I really wouldn't. I am not afraid of him now, but I might be if I saw him in some other guise.

I step out of the shadows. Yes, its me, I say. You look so thin.

He glances down at his chest, bare except for a necklace made of a leather cord holding a single key. Indeed, he's much leaner than I like. And I see a new wound cutting through the thin, dark mat of hair on his chest. The cut has already healed, though not long ago. Sometime in the past month, Dante has been in pain and in peril.

He lifts his gaze again and smiles at me, an expression that always reminds why, despite everything, I love this man so much. Its been a tough few weeks, he admits.

I come closer. I see you found the beef, I say. There's frozen pizza if you need some carbs.

Maybe later, he says. Proteins better for now.

This close, I get a pretty strong whiff of what I mentally describe as new Dante, the creature he always is when he first arrives. There's dirt and sweat and garbage and urine and some indefinable animal odor—the sort of scent that surrounds a zoo on a hot day. It doesn't bother me as much as you might think. I want to get closer still, throw my arms around him, press my mouth against his, remind myself of his shape and his strength. He's always the one who holds back at first. Im never sure if its the wild instincts making him shy away from human contact or his human instincts shunning his animalistic side, and trying to shield me from it at the same time.

He glances from my face to the plate of roast beef and back to my face. Its clear he's trying to determine if he's eaten enough to get him through the next few hours. I need a shower, he says, obviously deciding more food can wait. I step in his path as he heads for the doorway.

I need to kiss you, I say, holding him in place with my hand against his chest.

Maria Just . . . a kiss.

He holds utterly still as I stretch up and touch my lips lightly to his, but beneath my hand I can feel his heartbeat kick up a notch. I press in a little harder, just enough so that his mouth responds to mine, and then I step away. Im smiling; he's not.

There are towels and clean clothes in the bathroom, I say. Want me to make you a meal?

He's watching me with those unbelievable eyes. At times like this his expression is the most haunted, most unreadable. Is he sorry that he has disrupted my life so completely? Sorry he cannot exist beside me through ordinary days like an ordinary man? Sorry that he cannot stay away? Not sorry at all, merely roused to a passion he refuses to act upon until he has restored himself to some self-imposed level of civilization? Or is he simply still hungry and thinking of nothing more than food?

Dont cook, he says, his voice even lower, throatier. Ill come rummage some more once Im out.

I nod and turn away to straighten up the little mess he's

made. I dont hear him leave but I can tell when hes gone. Even when hes wearing shoes, which he isnt at the moment, he moves almost without sound. The only reason I know he has left the room is that I miss him already. I busy myself in the kitchen for about ten minutes, putting away the meat, rinsing off some apples, making sure the sliced bread is out on the counter so hell see it if he comes hunting for more food later on. But I cant stand being in the kitchen when hes somewhere else in the house. I lock the outside door, turn off the light, and feel my way down the dark corridor toward the bathroom. The door is open just enough to allow a little light and a lot of steam to escape. I untie my robe, yank my Tshirt over my head, step out of my panties. I leave all of these lying in the hall as I push the door open and step into the hot, foggy bathroom. I can see his silhouette, dark and blurred, behind the translucent glass of the shower door. When I push it open and step inside, he spins around as if he is a woodland creature startled by a predator. Water sloshes over both of us, kicked up by his feet before it can swirl into the drain, streaming down from the nozzle overhead. It is almost too misty to see, but there is no missing Dante. I scoot carefully across the slippery porcelain of the tub, lifting my arms to twine around his neck. I can smell the toothpaste on his breath as I kiss him again. Water and soap make our skin slippery as our bodies come together. He is no longer resisting me; indeed, his arms close around me, hard, and he kisses me with a furious desire. The water continues to beat down on both of us as we make love in the shower until all the hot water is gone. It is the first time I have felt fully alive since the last time I saw him. I know Dante will sleep all day, so I go into work, even though I obviously didnt manage to get much rest the night before. Still, I hate to waste one of my few remaining vacation days moping around the house, waiting for him to get up. I work as an accountant at a midsize firm in Eureka, Missouri, about forty minutes outside of downtown St. Louis. The company provides Web design and marketing support to regional businesses as far away as Arkansas. There are about twenty of us scattered throughout two stories; the creative people have offices on the top level, while the nutsandbolts people like me populate the ground floor. Still, its impossible to work in such a small place and not be fairly well apprised of everyone elses business. Today, all the gossip is about one of the secretaries, who came in with what looks suspiciously like a bruise under a heavy caking of foundation. Its not the first time. We all suspect shes being abused by her husband, but whenever someone tries to approach her on the topic, she refuses to speak to us, on that subject or any other. There are several of us who feel like were failing her as friends and human beings, and we constantly debate what we should be doing for her. I have seen up close the effects of domestic violence; I know how badly such a situation can end. But I have no more clue about how to help Kathleen than anyone else does. The office manager drops by my desk around ten, just as Im yawning over the same spreadsheet that Ive been staring at for the past half hour. She perches on the edge of my desk, which is something of a feat since her clothes are exceedingly tight and her skirt is exceedingly short. Shes a wellendowed, fiftyish woman with garishly blond hair. She looks like she should be serving coffee at a diner and wearing a name tag that identifies her as PEARL or JOLENE, but, in fact, her name is Ellen. I simply love her. Well, I stopped to talk to Kathleen for a few minutes this morning and asked how she was doing. Said I thought she looked kind of unwell, and wanted to know if she needed anything or wanted to talk about anything, Ellen says. I always mentally fill in the pauses in her speech by imagining her taking a drag on a cigarette. She says she hasnt lit up in more than a decade, but you can tell, by the hungry way she watches other smokers, that she still wants to. Did she tell you to mind your own business? Her expression said, Fuck off, bitch, but you know Kathleen. Not the swearing type, Ellen replies. She just said she was fine, a little tired, and then she started going through her mail. Were all going to feel terrible someday when we learn shes been murdered by her husband. Nah, Ritchies too chickenshit to kill her. Hed rather beat her up for the next thirty years than try to break in a new rag doll. Even if you got her to talk to you, even if you got her to leave him, shed probably just go back to him. Whats the statistic about the numbers of abused wives who return to their husbands? Ellen shrugs. Shes said before that she doesnt care much about statistics, she cares about stories. Every time she says it, I think, Youd really love mine. And even if she left him, even if she got a divorce, theres no saying that he wouldnt track her down and kill her anyway, she points out. Happens all the time. Youre depressing me, I say, and its not even ten in the morning yet. She laughs and pushes herself away from my desk. Im going to go make a few calls. Ive got a friend whos a social worker. Maybe shell have some ideas about how I should talk to Kathleen. But if it wont do any good Ellen shrugs. Shes gotta live with him. Ive gotta live with myself. I have to try. At the door, she turns back. You feel like going out for lunch today? I left my brown bag at home on the kitchen counter. The cats are gonna have a field day with the tuna salad sandwich. I hadnt had time to make lunch, since Id waited till the last possible moment to get out of bed, so Im delighted by the suggestion. That would be great! Come

get me whenever youre hungry. We end up at a wannabe Fridays two blocks over. It serves mediocre food but its only a short walk away, which makes it a popular choice with those who work in our building. I order a hamburger, causing Ellen to give me a knowing look. You must be having your period, she says. You only eat meat about once a month. I laugh and nod, although, in fact, I am midway through my cycle. Its true that I rarely eat meat, but thats because of Dante. Im not always certain what animal shape he will take when hes away from me. What if he has chosen to become a pig or a cow? I cant stand the idea that someone could slaughter him and turn him into a Big Mac or a BLT. Only after I know he is alive and human again only when he is at home in my bed will I abandon my vegetarian diet. Ellen and I have just given our orders when were joined by Marquez, a copywriter in the creative department, who simply saunters over and pulls up a chair. Besides Ellen, hes my closest friend at the office. Hes a soft man with a paunchy stomach, a doughy face, a gentle voice, and an endearing smile. He makes no secret of the fact that hes gay, though I think hes between relationships at the moment; he isnt very forthcoming with the details of his love life. He is, however, perfectly willing to discuss everyone elses love life, a topic that Ellen and I also find endlessly fascinating. After we speculate about Kathleen for a few minutes, we turn our attention to Marquezs boss, an icy, regal woman with striking good looks who keeps her dark hair short and blunt and never wears anything but black. As God is my witness, I think shes having an affair with Grant Vance, Marquez says. Grant is a goodlooking African American who handles customer relations and has never, as far as Ive determined from personal observation, been in a bad mood. Grant Vance is young enough to be her son! Ellen exclaims. Really? I ask. Id guess hes thirty, but how old is Caroline? Forty? My age, and I turned fiftytwo last year, Ellen says. Marquez is nodding at me when I look skeptical. We had a party for her two years ago. The big fiveoh, he says. Well, so what? Men date younger women all the time. I dont care who sleeps with who as long as they dont want me to watch it on TV, Ellen says. But I would never have picked Grant and Caroline. What makes you so sure? I ask Marquez. I mean hes such a puppy dog. Big and friendly and goofy. Carolines like Cruella de Vils mean older sister. Caroline likes to order men around, Marquez says cynically. I think puppy dogs appeal to her. She can train them. Turn them into pit bulls, Ellen says with a snort. Caroline is about the only person that I have ever heard Ellen admit to disliking. In general, Ellen is so entertained by the antics of the human race that she enjoys everybodys company. But are you sure? Shes married, isnt she? I say. They each give me a look of derision. What world do you live in? Marquez demands. Married people have sex all the time with individuals who are not their spouses. She just seems so cold and dispassionate, I say. I mean, not the kind of person who would want an affair. Sometimes its not about sex, its about power, Marquez says. People always say stuff like that, and I dont know why, Ellen replies, just as the waitress brings our food. Sex is pretty damn good all on its own without having to be about anything else. I would have laughed anyway, but the look on the waitresses face makes it impossible for me to stop giggling. Marquez is grinning. None of us speak again until the girl leaves, giving us one last disgusted look before she marches away. Shes about eighteen; I think shes repulsed by the notion that anyone as old as we are might still be indulging in carnal acts. But you never told us, Ellen says, speaking around a mouthful of food. Why do you think Grant and Caroline are getting it on? He licked her face, Marquez says. I almost choke on my burger. He what? They were in her office. You could tell they thought the door was closed, but it never latches quite right and it had swung open a little. I was spying on them, he admits, because I just had a funny feeling. Theyve been hovering around each other. She calls him into her office five times a day. He gets this look every time she walks by. I just sensed something. Ellen snaps her fingers, eager for him to get to the good part. So? Theyre alone in her office, youre spying, the door opens, and And I see them. Shes just standing there, with her hands down at her sides. Hes about a foot away from her, with his hands at his sides, like shes told him not to touch her. And he leans in and he licks her face. He sticks his tongue out and he laps it along her cheek. Long and slow, like hes trying to draw out the whole experience. He does it a couple of times, like maybe shes spread honey on her skin and hes trying to get it all off. And then she turns her head, and he licks her other cheek. Just the same way. I think I might lose my lunch, Ellen says, but she chomps down on another French fry. I think its kind of sweet, I say. They both turn to stare at me as if I am the stupidest woman on the planet. Explain to me how and in what possible context sweet could apply to this situation, Ellen says. I shrug. Maybe Caroline wanted him to do something to prove he felt affection for her. Something that wasnt actual, you know, sex. Something that would demonstrate tenderness. Something that was creative, Marquez says with a grin. Something that would get her hot but didnt involve him grabbing her boob. Ellen tosses up her hands as if conceding a feverishly contested point. Whatever. Like I said, I dont care who does who as long as I dont have to watch. I like to watch, Marquez says. Youre a pervert, Ellen tells

him. But I wonder if they do more than licking, I say. I mean, it would be kind of sad if he never got to touch her. At their incredulous expressions, I feel compelled to add, Well, if they really love each other. I mean, shes clearly a controlling bitch and hes in way over his head and there is no way this can end well, by any objective measure. But wouldnt it be nice if they could have a few moments of real happiness together? You know? If shes in a loveless marriage and hes lonely and somehow they come together as kindred spirits and they have really great sex and theres something in their lives, even for a short time? Dont you think that would make it okay? Marquez reaches out to squeeze my hand where it lies on the table. Sweetie, you really are a romantic, arent you? he says. Ellen snorts. Shes delusional. I just think there are all kinds of definitions of love, I say. There are all kinds of reasons were drawn to people. Maybe theres something in their relationship you dont understand something that makes it really precious to them. You shouldnt judge. Ellens tone is acerbic as vinegar. Once Ive talked to my social worker friend about Kathleen, Ill ask if she has time to come in and speak to you, she says. I think maybe you might be in a situation that you need to discuss with somebody. For the briefest of moments, I picture that conversation: My boyfriend is a shapeshifter. I only see him a few days a month, when hes in human form. And how does that make you feel? I think Kathleen has a better shot than I do of making any counselor understand what shes experiencing. Im not uttering any disguised cries for help, I say, making my tone match Ellens. Im just saying a nontraditional relationship might have benefits that arent immediately apparent to you. Uhhuh, says Ellen. Well, anytime you want to talk about it, you just let me know. I sigh and roll my eyes in an exaggerated fashion. Its time to change the subject. Hey! Did anyone see what Gage Jackson was wearing today? Was that supposed to be a tie? Its always possible to distract Marquez with the topic of fashion. He called it a cravat, he replies. Pretensions of British nobility, anybody? We finish the meal in pretty good spirits and leave the waitress a healthy tip. Ellen tips more heavily than anyone I know, usually making some comment like Because her life is clearly so much more awful than mine or Because if I had to wait on scumbags and dickheads Id be poisoning their soup and spitting in their beer. Today she says, So she can buy a new pair of thong underwear and impress her boyfriend with her youth and beauty. While they last. Marquez and I are both grinning as we follow her toward the exit. The waitress is standing by the front desk, and she joins the hostess in thanking us for our business and wishing us a pleasant day. Just as Ellen reaches for the door, Marquez leans over and licks her left cheek. Over the explosive sound of Ellen laughing, Im sure I hear the waitress gasp. Im smiling, too its pretty funny but Im not doubled over in mirth as Marquez and Ellen are. I dont think Im in a position to question anyone elses definition of love. Im not prepared to mock; Im not willing to recoil in horror. Im almost thirtyfive years old and for close to half of my life I have been in love with a man I cannot introduce to my family or my friends. People feel sorry for me; they try to set me up on dates; they think I might be a lesbian too shy to come out of the closet. They wonder if Im simply off, strange, missing some essential component of affection or desire. They dont understand that what I have is so precious, so intense, such an essential part of my life, that I would not give it up for any inducement. If I tried, or if someone forced me to, I truly believe I would die. *Revue de presse* Shinn has written an enthralling mystery with compelling, gritty characters. *Library Journal* A lyrical love story. *Night Owl* s The tale meanders like a stream, with strong characterizations and poetic prose polishing the story until it shines. *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)