

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Chapter 1

Chapter 1: Ava Grey, Pack Defect

4

Author Note: The first two chapters have had a complete overhaul, for a better reading experience. Please enjoy. [May 28, 2024]

What are you supposed to do when your pack—your *family*—has decided you're worthless?

Get a job.

Save money.

Dream of getting the hell out of there.

It's a futile thing to hope for, but it's the only thing I have that keeps me going.

Until then? I'm just me. Ava Grey. Wolfless. Weak. The shame of the Grey family.

Which is why I'm spending another Friday night working at Beaniverse, a popular coffeeshop in the middle of White Peak, a solid hour's drive away from pack land. No shifters, no drama, no bullying; the only people I run into all day are humans with a caffeine addiction. Or social media addictions. People love to use our lobby as a backdrop for their latest reel.

"Come out with me tonight."

Lisa pops her head into my field of view as I wipe down the espresso machine.

I have no major attachments to my job outside of my pay, but it is my favorite place to be because of her. Lisa is my best friend—okay, my *only* friend—and she makes me dream of something more than the Blackwood Pack and my uncertain future in it.

"Can't. Dad wants me home as soon as I can."

The grimace that twists her face gives me a warm little tingle in my chest. At least someone gets me.

Even if she's a human and has no idea that I come from a family of wolves.

Dad—our pack beta and an expert at curt text messages demanding my presence home—only allowed me to get a job because he was tired of seeing me at home, I'm pretty sure.

And because every single cent of my paychecks that didn't go to gas went to the thousand dollars I'd borrowed for my beat-up old clunker Taurus in the parking lot. It's my baby, and I love it, but I'm one weird splutter away from wrecking on the highway.

Still—the little freedom it allows me is worth it.

Anything is better than being home.

"You should just move out. We can get an apartment together and party all night." Lisa says this just about every day we work together, and it never grows old. I want that life, too. I don't even need the partying. I just want to get away from my pack.

But wolf shifters don't just *let go* of their own. Even wolfless defects like me.

I shove my glasses up the bridge of my nose, hating how they slide. I probably need a new prescription, but I haven't had the time—or extra money—to pour into that. I'm still wearing the same glasses Mom got me (much to her disgust) several years ago.

It's like a neon sign saying *she doesn't belong with us*.

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No shifter has bad eyesight. It's like a gift from our wolves.

Only I don't have a wolf.

I flick the dirty towel in her direction, watching her squeal and jump back. "I would if I could, and you know it. Aren't you supposed to be restocking our cups? Our dinner rush is going to come in any minute."

"Fine, fine—but I still think one night of telling him to fuck off won't hurt. Maybe it'll teach your parents that you're an adult and they can't control you."

Hah.

That won't ever happen.

Dad's the pack beta. Even if he acknowledged me as an independent adult, I'd still have to do what he says. The only person above him in the pack is our alpha—also not someone I'd like to cross on a daily basis.

"It's a cultural thing," I mutter, and she drops it. For now.

Lisa will come back to it. She always does. She's been showing me apartments for rent, coming up with mock budgets, even discussing our school schedules. Lisa's pushy in the sweetest way, where she's just desperate for me to become independent.

She was the first person to notice the control my family has over me.

The first person to care.

The first person to say words that I still can't admit out loud.

"Your family is abusive. Who the hell does this?"

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My family loved me once. Before I came of age and they realized I had no wolf at all.

I have warm memories. Sweet memories. Memories that I bring out at night during my lowest times. Memories of Mom when she used to smile and laugh and rock me when I cried. Memories of Dad when he would throw me onto his shoulders and tell me I could reach the stars. Memories of Jessa and Phoenix when they would call me their baby sister, and show me off proudly to anyone they saw.

Good times.

Gone times.

Maybe it would hurt a little less if I hadn't shared that affection with them once. Maybe it would hurt a little less if it hadn't simply... disappeared. If Mom's blue eyes hadn't gone from warm like a lake in summer to frigid winter skies. If Dad hadn't thrown me into the woods with no clothes, no food, and no shelter, telling me to survive. That the hardship would bring me what I wanted most, what I was missing.

My wolf.

Spoiler alert—it didn't work. He's still mad about it.

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Leaving work is always a little production in the parking lot after closing. Lisa never leaves until I'm safely on the road, half in worry that my car will break down (and honestly, I have the same fears), and the other half because she's concerned I'm going to get mugged.

When I pointed out to her months ago that she could have the same things happen, she grabbed my hand and said seriously, "You would help me. So I'm going to help you."

I love her.

There's a little guilt that even with my one and only friend, my ride-or-die girl, I have yet to admit that I'm a shifter. I haven't explained to her that I'm from the local pack.

She just thinks I'm neglected and abused from a normal human family, and I have to convince her not to call the cops at least twice a week. Especially when I show up with new bruises.

They wouldn't be able to do anything, anyway.

The pack has different laws. No part of the government would interfere in pack matters.

Honestly, the only way to guarantee my escape from my family and pack is to find my fated mate in another. I dream about it—we all do. It's a fantasy I can't let go of.

But sometimes it hurts to even think about the possibility, because there's always the chance that I have no fated mate.

Or worse, that my life in a new pack is just like my life here.

The night air is warmer than usual for the beginning of spring, but the crisp scent of rain is carried on the breeze, telling us all that a temperature drop is coming.

The scenery changes from the bright, artificially lit business strip to the quiet neighborhoods of White Peak, occasionally lit by a street lamp every block or so. Eventually, those buildings give way to an unlit rural road that leads into the Blackwood Pack territory.

The road is familiar; I've driven it countless times in my life, but tonight, it feels different.

It's darker than usual, under the waxing crescent moon. The trees seem to close in on me, casting long shadows across the road. My grip tightens on the steering wheel as I navigate the twists and turns, feeling my anxiety wriggle about in my belly, like a fish dashing about in shark-infested waters.

The silence in my car is palpable, almost suffocating. My eyes dart to the rearview mirror every few seconds, half expecting to see glowing eyes or shadows lurking in the darkness behind me.

Being the pack defect means you're also the pack punching bag. One of the young wolves' favorite pastimes is hunting the wolfless.

They can't go after humans. The only time the government can threaten our sanctuary is when we've harmed humans.

But they can go after the next best thing.

Me.

A shudder rips down my spine and through my arms, a familiar reaction to the memories floating through my head, of the pain my body remembers.

My hands jerk on the wheel as a hulking form dashes across the streak of my high beams.

"Shit!"

I slam on the brakes, my car fishtailing on the dark road. Tires squeal against pavement. The stench of burning rubber floods my nose. My head whips forward, slamming into the steering wheel as the car spins to a stop.

"Fuck..."

I groan, squeezing my eyes shut against the throbbing pain in my skull. Stars burst behind my eyelids. The coppery taste of blood fills my mouth.

I must have bitten my tongue.

Shit. They usually wait until I'm home to corner me. Fucking with me on the road so blatantly is new.

My hands shake as I peer out the cracked windshield. The road ahead is empty. No sign of whatever ran in front of my car.

There's about zero percent chance it's anyone other than a Blackwood wolf.

I swallow hard, my heart pounding against my ribs. I need to get home.

At least that way, even if I'm beaten to within an inch of my life, Mom and Dad will call a healer when it gets *too* bad. They've done it before.

Probably because they don't want to lose their live-in maid, but I like to think it's because they care at least a little bit.

I need to get out of here. Now. Before they come back.

I reach for the keys, still dangling from the ignition. Pain lances through my right wrist and I hiss, cradling it to my chest. Must have sprained it in the crash. Fuck.

Gritting my teeth, I use my left hand to turn the key. The engine sputters and dies. I try again. And again. Each time, I'm met with that same pathetic whine.

"No no no, come on..." Desperation bleeds into my voice. "Please..."

I glance in the rearview mirror, half expecting glowing eyes to materialize out of the darkness. My breathing turns ragged, panic squeezing my lungs.

I'm a sitting duck out here. A rabbit cowering in the open, just waiting for the wolves' jaws to close around me.

The snap of a branch breaking has me flinching, a whimper escaping my throat. I turn slowly, dread churning in my gut as I peer out the driver's side window.

That's when I see them. Two pinpricks of eerie yellow light, hovering at the edge of the trees.

Watching me.