

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Chapter 2

The eyes stalk me from the shadows, unblinking. Unwavering.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

My hands tremble as I turn the key again. The engine sputters, coughs. Please. Please start. I can't die here. Not like this.

Another turn. A whine. A sputter.

The wolf steps out from the tree line, massive and menacing. Its fur blends with the night, a specter of death and torment.

I can't make out any distinguishing features in the darkness. No way to know which of my abusers has come for me tonight.

The engine roars to life. Thank God.

I slam my foot on the accelerator, tires screeching against pavement as I peel off down the road. My heart hammers against my ribs, blood rushing in my ears.

In the rearview mirror, I can see the wolf chasing me. Keeping pace with my car as I navigate the winding roads.

He howls, a promise of pain.

It's all a familiar, sick game. I hate it. I never know when it's coming; when someone's bored enough to begin.

It never ends well though. Not for me.

The streets of my neighborhood come into view. Mom and Dad won't save me, even if I'm being slaughtered in the front yard—but if I can make it inside, that's a different story.

No one disrespects the beta's home.

I whip into an awful parallel parking job, the car jerking to a stop. My hands shake as I fumble for my keys, dropping them twice before I manage to grab them.

I just need to get inside.

Throwing open the car door, I stagger out on trembling legs. The keys jangle in my grip as I stumble towards the front door.

Almost there. Almost—

I can smell wet fur. And rage.

I spin around, keys clenched between white knuckles. My heart stops.

The wolf stands mere feet away, lips curled back in a snarl. Saliva drips from dagger-like fangs. His russet fur tells me everything I need to know about his identity.

Todd.

He loves to torment me and always has.

But he just watches as I grab the door from behind my back, turn, and rush inside.

Tonight is a reprieve; I'll take it.

Locking the door behind me, I take a moment to lament the damage to my car. I have no idea how much it will cost to repair my cracked windshield; it'll eat into the savings I've been painstakingly gathering.

Damn it.

"Ava. Come here."

Ugh. Straightening my shoulders, I walk toward my parents, worried butterflies floating around in my stomach.

Dad, of course, says nothing about the wolf outside. He doesn't give a shit. He knows exactly what they do to me; as long as it isn't in his eyesight, where he has to deal with it, he won't say a word.

Dad is seated in his favorite armchair, his expression stoic as always. Mom stands behind him, her disapproving stare leveled over my shoulder. I can't remember the last time we had eye contact outside of being dressed down.

I bow my head as I enter the room, focusing my gaze on his muddy boots.

I don't bother greeting him with words. All he wants to see is my submission. Words are a waste of time coming from the lowest ranking member of our pack.

None of them say a word as I cradle my wrist; they're blind to any injuries or illness I suffer.

He clears his throat. "You will be attending the Lunar Gala this year. I trust you have enough money from your... job to be properly dressed for the occasion. Be grateful that our Alpha allowed you such a luxury."

My hands tingle with shock, and cold breezes straight through my limbs, shoving past all that anxiety to settle straight into my brain. *What?*

My heart skips a beat, thuds a little harder, and then skips another. The Lunar Gala. I've missed out on it for the past two years.

The gala is a big deal, encompassing the Northwestern Territories. Unmated wolves from all over will be there, hoping to find their fated mates.

Technically, the gala is a way to unwind after the Northwestern Council meets and talks all their pack politics—but in reality, the Lunar Gala is more of a matchmaking ball. Alliances are made when high-ranking shifters mate into other packs, and new blood is brought in.

It's strange for the Blackwood Pack to attend this year. Even Jessa hasn't been to one; historically, our entire pack avoids it. The official story is that there's bad blood between a few alphas and ours, but I doubt the other packs are the problem.

Dad's irritation at having to attend is a palpable force in the room, and I risk a quick glance upward. He's looking over my head, not even straight at me, like I'm beneath his notice.

His nose wrinkles as though some offensive odor came through, but of course there's nothing. Just me. "Phoenix and Jessa will be there, so make sure to present yourself without disgrace."

And just like that, he leaves. No more explanations. Just a beta throwing out his orders and expecting everything to fall into place.

I fight to keep my expression neutral, but inside, I'm buzzing with excitement at the idea of leaving this place even if it's only for a night.

The Lunar Gala is a chance to escape, to breathe outside of this stifling pack dynamic. But I know better than to show my true feelings.

Mom steps forward then, her voice causing goosebumps to erupt all over my arms. The back of my neck prickles at the force of her disregard.

"At least try not to act like a complete pariah, Ava," she says at last, as though it's hard for her to figure out what to say at all.

I stare down at my shoes, fighting against the urge to step closer to the jasmine and honey fragrance she wore. So much of me just wants to be enveloped in it like I had been in my childhood, back when I had a mother who embraced me and spoke lovingly in my ears.

"Of course," I respond, my voice smaller than a mouse. Her distance hurts so much more than Dad's. "I'll act appropriately." It sounds like they're interested in Phoenix and Jessa making a match.

Not me, of course.

I have no idea why I'm going, but I have the feeling it's nothing more than a PR stunt.

Mom sighs, forcing a look of patience over her elegant face. She moves as if to pat my shoulder, but her hand never touches me—just hovers right above, close enough to feel the warmth of her body, but without partaking in it.

"Jessa will take you shopping. Do something with your hair. Get something nice. You have enough from that... coffeeshop, don't you?"

Of course. They would never spend the money on me.

"Yes, Mom."

She grimaces. "Don't get something cheap. Remember that you're representing our family. And for my sake, try to avoid bruises where anyone can see them. You'll make our pack look feral."

And that's it, before she's off in a swish of perfume and rejection.

Despite the usual torture of wishing for affection from the family who had loved me once, my heart races with anticipation. Excitement. Fear.

The Lunar Gala—a rare chance for me to experience something beyond this suffocating world.

Maybe I'll catch a glimpse of what life could be like outside the pack's iron grip. Maybe I'll mate with someone and leave here. Maybe everything will change.

Is it so bad to think that way?