

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Chapter 3

[WARNING: Sensitive content ahead.]

Days pass with little regard for the anxiety building in my belly every time I crawl into bed at night, watching the phases of the moon, wondering what this next chapter of life will look like.

Aside from a brief shopping excursion with Jessa—who ignores me almost the entire time and scoffs at every dress I try on—I don't leave the house except for school and work, trying to avoid trouble.

I spend any spare moment I can manage picking up extra shifts at Beaniverse to help pay for the atrocious bill at the mall. Who spends three hundred dollars on a dress? But Jessa insisted that it was the only one that didn't make me look like I was wearing a silk potato sack.

Lisa's busy, too, so our texts are few and far between, mostly complaining about work and school.

My family's indifference weighs on me like a thick blanket, but beneath it, a tiny bud of hope sprouts—maybe, just maybe, I'll make it to the gala without incident. A week remains before the event that could change my life, or just as likely, confirm my place as the outcast.

Today, like the rest of the past two weeks, appears to be yet another day of unsettling peace as I head home after class with groceries in my passenger seat.

Phoenix is stopping by for dinner, so I have his favorites on the menu—a creamy garlic and parmesan roasted chicken, paired with bacon-wrapped brussels sprouts tossed in maple syrup and balsamic vinaigrette.

It sounds fancier than it is, but it really is delicious, thanks to the internet recipes I'd found years ago.

As the appointed alpha heir to the Blackwood Pack, Mom always fawns on Phoenix. Dad was thrilled enough that he had a son with alpha potential, but when Alpha Renard's last son was killed in a small skirmish with renegade wolves and Phoenix was named heir, he strutted more like a peacock than a wolf for at least a month afterward.

1

One day he will be Alpha Phoenix Blackwood, but for now, he's still a Grey.

I juggle the flimsy plastic grocery bags with the grace of a dying fawn as I make my way into the empty house.

The peace of these past few weeks must have rotted the self preservation sphere of my brain, because I don't pay any attention to my surroundings as I unlock the front door and walk in.

As I step further inside, a breeze tickles my neck and the door slams with a force that can only mean trouble, bringing a familiar and unwelcome scent to my nose.

Todd Mason, my childhood bully and ever-present tormentor, is here. Inside. With me. Right now.

3

Ready to finish what he'd started a couple weeks ago.

He stands right in the entrance of my home, his face twisted into a sneer that chills my spine. I can't even step away as my brain struggles to catch up to the situation, watching as he reaches behind him to lock the door.

"I hear you've been playing princess, thinking you're being sent to find some fuckwit willing to take you as a mate." His voice drips with malice as he steps forward, slapping a hand against my chest.

My back slams against the wall with a dull thump, and Todd's hand circles my neck, lifting me until I'm standing on the very tips of my toes.

All the bags fall to the floor, and for a moment my idiot brain focuses on the apples that thud against hardwood. They'll be bruised. We'll have to eat them faster than I expected.

"What makes you think you're good enough for the gala, huh? You think you can ever escape our pack?" His breath is hot and tuna fresh on my face, and I turn away, repulsed.

His other hand slaps against my cheek, forcing me to face him again. He growls every word, rejoicing as they stab into all my insecurities, bleeding me of all those precious hopes and dreams I've kept in secret. "Do you actually believe anyone would want you? A wolfless freak like you? You'd be rejected in a heartbeat."

My heart pounds against my ribcage, a trapped bird desperate for escape. His grip tightens in response to my struggle, and my mouth opens as I begin to pant for air.

"Defective," he hisses right into my ear, and I can feel his tongue flick over it. I shudder, bile rushing into my throat, making it even harder to bring air to my burning lungs.

Punches, kicks, scratches—those, I'm used to. Rocks thrown at my head. Jeers and taunts. But this? This isn't the torturous game I'm used to.

Anger flickers through my limbs as I grab onto his forearm, scratching long, angry swathes down his skin. I try to kick, but he steps in closer, pinning my legs against the wall with his weight. Sadistic prick.

"Get off me," I hiss, jerking my entire body and trying to ignore the hard evidence pushing against my belly of exactly how much he's enjoying this moment. "If any bruises show, Dad's going to be furious. You really want to piss off your beta that much?"

Normally, Dad doesn't give a shit when I come home with bruises, but now the gala is just around the corner. If his youngest daughter showed up with bruises all over, there might be questions.

Todd hesitates, his fingers flexing around the tender skin of my throat, and I lower my eyes. A long time ago, I would refuse to submit, taking every abuse thrown my way and plotting revenge. That was before I learned that real life is nothing like the storybooks we are raised on.

If he's looking for submission, I can give him it all day long. Whatever lets me live to tomorrow. Whatever keeps his dick in his pants and out of mine.

"Please," I whimper, infusing the sound with a little vibrato, as though I want to cry. I tilt my head further back, baring my neck to him.

Todd loves that. His growl of approval sends revulsion shuddering through every millimeter of my skin, and I struggle to keep my face blank as he sniffs beneath my left ear, licking the crescent-shaped scar on my neck in a long, slow drag of saliva and mayonnaise-slathered fish.

Bile struggles to escape my body with force, but I somehow manage to avoid puking in his face.

"Please," I beg again, feeling his fingers loosen just a little. His other hand falls to my hip, tugging me closer, and I close my eyes, breathing through my mouth to offset the metallic tang behind my jaw. "I need to make dinner. Phoenix is coming home tonight."

Pain lances through me as Todd bites my shoulder, his jaw rigid and unyielding. The shriek that escapes me is beyond my control, and I slap at his shoulder in a frantic attempt to escape, writhing against his grip. "Todd! Fuck! That hurts!"

He grunts, finally letting go, but not before suckling a motherfucking hickey onto my skin. He grips my jaw, staring into my eyes, and I realize then that the game has somehow changed for him. For me.

I'd expected a beating, but instead my tormentor grins at me in maniacal satisfaction. "You'll never leave us, Ava. You're a defective piece of shit, but you belong here. There's no prince on a white horse among our packs. There's nothing to save you at the gala. You'll be our little omega breeder soon enough, even without your wolf."

My stomach falls to my feet. "Omega... breeder?"

He chuckles, squeezing my jaw harder. "You'll be our little pack whore, Ava. Even without a wolf." The relief when he lets go is replaced only by a horror as his hand slides slowly down my neck, between my breasts, and rests gently against my belly, pushing in, before sliding a little farther to cup between my thighs and squeeze. "You won't be good for much else, but at least we can fill this with little pups."

2

I'm beyond throwing up. I can't even feel most of my body anymore. Everything is dark around the edges, but his words keep slithering into my ear, poison to everything good inside me.

He holds my hips in both hands and pushes his erection against me, rocking hard, nibbling on my jaw, leaving a trail of slime. "You're lucky enough to be a pretty little defect, Ava. It won't be too hard to use you." He groans, rocking faster against me, pulling my legs around his hips. "Fuck, Ava. I'm going to breed you until you learn your place, you understand?"

Yeah, I get it.

Kind of hard not to, as he rocks and grunts and moans.

I don't think my body is even mine anymore.

He's panting in my ear, and I realize too late that he's giving me instructions. The fist in my abdomen brings me back to the moment that I was trying desperately to escape in a corner of my mind. I concentrate on the pain as he shoves me onto my knees and opens his jeans in frantic movements.

"Beg me for it, Ava," he rasps, forcing my hand around the length of him, smaller than I thought it would be and smelling like a gym bag full of dirty underwear.

But then I hear a familiar engine, and Todd freezes, his head tilting as he listens. Then he shoves it all into my mouth anyway, jerking in a frenzied kind of way as my lips split at the corners and I gag, my entire body heaving with the force of my rejection.

3

My mouth is full of something bitter and nasty in seconds, and he growls at me to swallow as he shoves his dick back into his jeans, just in time for the door to open.

My brother's distant brown eyes take us all in, pausing on the groceries scattered all over the floor. He doesn't seem to notice me on my knees in front of Todd, except for a slight lift of his upper lip in the faintest sneer. He nods to Tom in a curt motion. "Mason." I know he knows what happened, because his nostrils flare. He has to scent it in the air. But he does nothing.

Nothing.

Todd's smiling, rolling his shoulders back even as he lowers his head in submission. "Alpha heir. Ava was just telling me you were coming home for dinner. I was just stopping by to check on her." He speaks with an intimacy he shouldn't be able to claim, and my belly rebels against it all—his words, the taste in my mouth, and everything I had just endured.

I dash to the bathroom, ignoring Todd's laughter as it follows behind me. But the tears that come with my forceful retching aren't for the assault. They're not for my innocence. They're not for the rules of this new, changed game.

No.

They're for the brother who *knows* what he walked in on. The one who ignored it all. The one who doesn't give a shit that his baby sister was just assaulted in her own home.

3

Fuck.

I can't stay here. No matter what.

2