

Tangled in Moonlight: Unshifted Chapter 5

Chapter 5: Ava: Gala (I)

I stand in front of the full-length mirror, my hands shaking as I fumble with the zipper of my dress. The fabric is soft and silky, just as beautiful as the day I bought it. It's the nicest thing I've ever worn, but I feel like an impostor in it.

I twist and turn just a little, enjoying the feel of my skirt swirling around my legs. As a child, I remember twirling just like this, wishing my dresses would spin like they do for Disney princesses. The little girl in me is satisfied with what she sees in the mirror, while the older me, the current me, thinks I shouldn't even be here.

Jessa and Mom look me over, their eyes critical as they take in my appearance.

"Oh, Ava," Mom sighs, even her disappointment sounding cultured and elegant. "Couldn't you have at least tried to do something with your hair?"

I reach up, touching my hair in surprise. I thought it looked nice with the forced makeover Jessa had dragged me to, but Mom's face says otherwise. "I thought it was fine," I mumble, my cheeks burning with shame.

Jessa rolls her eyes. "Of course you did. Come on, let's get this over with. I bet you didn't even bring anything. Let's just do a quick french twist."

She grabs my arm and drags me back into the room, pushing me down into a chair in front of the vanity. Mom follows, her lips pursed in a tight line.

"Sit up straight," Mom snaps, her hands on my shoulders as she forces me to straighten my spine. "And suck in your stomach. Those hips of yours are far too wide for this dress. It isn't much better than a potato sack. Honestly, Ava. If your dad didn't need to bring you to show the other packs that you're alive and well, I wouldn't dare be seen with you. You look like some hobo from the city. What's that saying, Jessa? A cow's ear can never be a purse?"

I bite my lip, fighting back unwanted tears as they continue to criticize every aspect of my appearance. I want to ask why the packs even care if I'm alive and well, but I know Mom will be upset if I push.

That little girl deep inside of me, so satisfied with the swirling skirt of my dress, hides so far in my psyche that I'm not sure she will ever come out again. Every bit of stolen joy I'd felt in the mirror is gone, crushed under my mother's elegant heels and cruel words.

Jessa yanks a brush through my hair, tugging it into an elegant updo with ruthless efficiency.

"I can't believe you're making me do this," she hisses, her breath hot against my ear. "You owe me big time, Ava. I should be concentrating on myself, not you. You don't even have any prospects here." As if she isn't perfection walking already.

I nod anyway, not trusting myself to speak. I know I'm a burden, a disappointment to everyone in my family. But tonight, I have to put on a brave face and pretend to be something I'm not. Tonight, I have to take everything they say with a smile, just like before. Just for a little longer.

I'll be free soon. It's a mantra I repeat to myself as I cower before the disapproval of the people who are supposed to love me the most.

Mom grabs my chin, forcing me to look left, then right, before giving a slight nod. "At least you no longer look homeless. For Moon's sake, Ava, you should know how to take care of yourself. How do you think this makes me look, like I've taught you nothing? You couldn't even bring a pair of earrings?"

I refrain from reminding her that she hasn't taught me anything since the day I turned twelve, and I don't own a single piece of jewelry. Well, no, there's one... but somehow, I don't think the friendship bracelet I made myself when I was thirteen would pass her muster.

Jessa moves on to my make-up, her hands rough as she applies foundation and blush to my skin. I try to stay still, but my nerves are getting the best of me.

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"Stop fidgeting," Mom snaps, her hand coming down hard on my shoulder. "You're going to ruin everything. Jessa, honey, that shade will make her look sallow. We don't need her to look ill. Imagine what rumors that would create. As if our pack doesn't have doctors and hospitals."

I take a shaky breath and force myself to relax, letting Jessa work her magic. When she's finished, I hardly recognize the girl staring back at me in the mirror. My skin is flawless, my eyes smoky and alluring, my lips a deep, sultry red.

"There," Jessa says, stepping back to admire her handiwork. "At least now you don't look like a complete disaster."

Mom just sighs. Again. How many has that been in the past hour? Probably at least ten. "It will have to do."

I stand up, smoothing my hands over the fabric of my dress. My heart is pounding in my chest, and I feel like I might be sick. But I know I have to do this. I have to play the part of the perfect daughter, the obedient wolf, just for one more night.

And then, I'll be free.

* * *

I enter the ballroom later that evening, standing alone behind my family. Dad and Mom lead, and Phoenix escorts Jessa, leaving me to follow, feeling like the ugly duckling in a sea of swans. It doesn't help that Mom and Jessa are dripping in sparkling jewelry while I haven't the slightest bit of glittery rocks to my name.

Despite the comparison I can't help but feel in my bones, the grandeur and opulence of the Lunar Gala take my breath away. Crystal chandeliers hang from the ceiling, casting a warm glow over the room. The floors are polished marble, and the walls are adorned with intricate tapestries and paintings.

My head swivels more than a weathervane as I look around, my heart pounding in my chest. All I want is to find a quiet corner to hide away, to escape the scrutiny of the other guests. But before I can make my move, my father grabs me by the arm.

"Ava, come along," he says, his grip tight on my elbow as he steers me towards a well-dressed, older man. I think he is a beta from one of the packs, but my heartbeat in my ears makes it hard to focus on any words.

I force a smile, shaking his hand and mumbling a greeting. Then there's another person. And another. Their names and faces blur in my mind as my father introduces me to more people, each one more forgettable than the last.

A kind of mild, buzzing panic fills my head as I wonder if I will be given any freedom at all. I can feel the walls closing in on me, the air thick with the scent of perfume and the sound of forced laughter.

As we make our way through the crowd, I catch sight of a striking face, studying all of us with unfamiliar intent. He's old, older even than Alpha Renard, I think, but he has a youthful fluidity to his movements.

My father approaches him with some reserve. "Alpha Steele."

"Beta Grey," he responds, his rich voice surprisingly cold.

Dad seems more tense than normal. "This is Phoenix, our alpha heir. Jessa, my daughter. She's here in search of a fated connection, as it hasn't coalesced in our pack."

"A pleasure," Alpha Steele says, but I notice that he doesn't extend his hand. Phoenix stiffens, but no one says anything about it.

Dad turns to me, once again gripping my arm, hard enough to bruise as he shot me a hard look, as if to demand I remain on good behavior.

"And this is Ava, my youngest daughter."

"Pleasure to meet you, Alpha Steele." I recognize his name now, as the alpha of the Silvermoon Pack. Dad's eyes cut toward me and I struggle to find something else to say. "Um, this is all quite beautiful. I'm impressed."

The older alpha's eyes linger on me, particularly on the crescent scar beneath my left ear, and I feel a flush creep up my neck. He smiles then, holding my gaze with his own. "Thank you. I am quite happy to meet the mysterious youngest daughter of our esteemed Beta Grey. We've been waiting for you to step into the sociopolitical sphere, as it were, of the Northwestern Territories."

Dad's glare is hot enough to set my hair on fire. Instead, my neck flushes as anxiety has me tripping over my tongue. "Oh, no, I'm not... I mean, I never had much interest in this sort of thing," I say, wanting to kick myself for sounding so *inexperienced*. Then again, what else could possibly be expected of me? My parents have never helped me gain any exposure outside of our pack.

"Please, call me Xavier. My Silvermoon Pack takes pride in hosting the Lunar Gala this year. We are all excited to see the elusive Blackstone Pack here, though. It is quite the coup, as my mate likes to tell me. How are you enjoying it?"

"It's all quite grand." I can't really say much else, considering that Dad's been dragging me here, there, and everywhere. All I've managed to do is shake hands with people I don't even know. "I'm glad to be here," I tack on, awkward as ever, trying my best to return his smile.

A little thought jiggles in my brain. He doesn't seem to like Dad, or Phoenix, or hold the Blackstone Pack in high esteem. Maybe he would be willing to help? But—no, that's a silly thought. No alpha would shield a defective wolf from another pack.

Alpha Xavier raises his glass toward me, then turns back to Dad. "What a lovely daughter you have, Beta Grey," he says, his voice deep and filled with some emotion I can't quite grasp. "She is truly a beauty."

My father accepts the compliment with obvious reluctance, his grip tightening on my arm. I can feel the tension radiating off of him, and I know he's not happy with the alpha's attention.

A handsome young man approaches our group, and I can feel my father's grip tighten on my arm once more.

"Beta Ashbourne," Dad says, his tone cold and dismissive. The contrast to his earlier respect for Alpha Xavier is stark.

Jessa steps forward, a vision in her midnight blue gown and wavy platinum blonde hair, a coy smile on her lips. "Hello, Beta. I am Jessa Grey, of the Blackstone Pack. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The man bows slightly, his eyes flickering to me briefly before settling on Jessa. "Kellan Ashbourne, beta of the Westwood Pack. The pleasure is mine."

I expect him to engage with Jessa, but to my surprise, he turns to me. His hand reaches out, and I extend my own without thinking. He bows over it, his lips nearly brushing my skin, and I feel a shiver run down my spine as our eyes meet. He seems to be scrutinizing me as some sort of curious mystery, and I don't think I like it.

"And who might you be?" he asks, his voice smooth as silk.

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Before I can answer, my father pulls me away, his grip bordering on painful. "This is Ava, my youngest daughter," he says, his tone clipped. "Ava, why don't you go mingle with some people your own age?"

It's a clear dismissal, and I jump at the chance to escape. I nod, mumbling a quick goodbye to Kellan and the others before slipping away into the crowd.

As I navigate the ballroom, I try to act normal, but my mind is reeling. Why had Alpha Xavier and Beta Ashbourne seemed so interested in me? And why was my father so quick to send me away, after dragging me around so much?

I risk a glance back over my shoulder and find Beta Ashbourne watching me, his gaze intense and curious. A foreboding shiver makes its way down my spine, and I wonder what Dad's *real* reason is for me attending this gala. Are rumors of his defective daughter causing issues with the other packs? It's the only thing that makes sense.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. I need to focus on my plan, on finding a way out of this life. I can't let myself get distracted by the plots humming under the surface of this grand event.

I spend the rest of the evening trying to avoid my family and the curious stares of the other guests. I can feel eyes on me, watching my every move. It's an intense sensation, like a physical touch, and it makes my belly quiver with unease. I look around frequently, trying to find the source of the gaze, but I never catch anyone in the act. At first, I suspect Beta Ashbourne, yet every time I check, he is always in conversation with someone. I really don't think it's him. But who is it?

As the night wears on, anxiety coiled in my belly forces me to find an exit. I need to get out of here, to escape before it's too late. I slip away from the ballroom, making my way towards the dimly lit garden. The cool night air is a relief after the stuffy atmosphere inside, and I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves.

There are some couples out here, and noises I never heard before. Still, I'm not innocent enough to not know what they mean, so I avoid them all with embarrassment bright in my cheeks.

I pull out my phone, bringing up the rideshare app. My finger hovers over the button, ready to summon a car to take me to the Moonlight Terrace Hotel. I repeat the name in my mind, a mantra to keep me focused on my goal. I just need to grab my bag, and I'll be home free. Or, well, home/less. In a good way.

Just as I'm about to press the button, a hand grabs my arm, yanking me back. I let out a yelp of surprise as I'm spun around, coming face to face with a stranger who seems intent to embrace me like a lover. He's tall and broad, with dark hair and piercing eyes that seem to see right through me. His suit feels more luxurious than anything I've ever felt, sliding like silk against my skin.

Something deep inside of me stirs with something unfamiliar. But, like those noises I recognized without ever having heard before, I know what it is.

Desire.

Holy shit.

Could this be?

"Where do you think you're going, little wolf?" he asks, his voice a low growl that sends shivers down my spine.

I open my mouth to respond, but no words come out. I'm frozen in place, my heart pounding in my chest as I stare up at him. His grip on my arm is tight, almost painful, and I know I'm trapped... torn between a desire to run and a desire to wrap myself around him until he can't breathe without me.

CREATORS' THOUGHTS

Lenaleia

Please add Tangled in Moonlight to your library so you don't miss future releases! This also helps me in the Cupids Quill competition! :)