7. Cora

"Let us begin the dark ritual."

The room was dimly lit by the light of a few small candles.

The smell of lavender and patchouli weighed heavily in the air.

The candle's ickering light casts a warm glow on Ava's face as she raises the blade above her head and, in one fell swoop, cuts into the esh of the smoked gouda cheese.

I turned the light on, half expecting her to hiss at me.

"Are you done yet?" I asked, my stomach growling loudly. "I would eventually like to eat

some of that cheese."

She rolled her eyes at me and kept cutting. "You know I wouldn't have needed to do any of this if SOMEONE had bought the cheese pre-sliced before I came over." She waved the cheese knife in my direction accusingly.

"I can't believe you forgot we were hanging out tonight."

I sat on the stool next to her while she returned to making her precise soft cuts.

"Geez, how many times am I going to have to say I'm sorry? I had a lot on my mind today,

and it just slipped my mind." She snorted, "You? Forget about cheese? Has hell nally frozen over? Were you hit on your

head and no longer want to scarf down a whole brick of cheese as your go-to coping mechanism?"

I hit her arm, not hard, but it wasn't a love tap.

"Ouch!" She yelped.

"That was the fattest thing you could ever tell me. Thanks."

She rubbed her arm and put the knife down.

"Hey, I almost stabbed you, and I didn't mean it like that. I'm aware of cheese and its mystical properties. I just wanna know what has you stuck inside your head, making you look all dark and twisty."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. "Really? I resent that! I'm not being all dark and twisty."

Ava artfully arranged the assortment of cheeses and meats on the wooden platter, not even glancing up at me as she spoke.

"Mmm," she murmured, "I don't know what else to call it. You get all sad and gloomy about your troubles, and your twisty little brain starts coming up with crazy ideas to x your problems- like devouring a whole cheese platter by yourself." She said, waving her hand over the cheese tray.

"Not all the time! I invited you over tonight to enjoy these riches."

"Which I appreciate, but you're avoiding the main question. What's going on inside of Cora's little blue head?"

Ava has always been super perceptive, or maybe I just can't hide my emotions for the life of me.

Either way, I hated being put on the spot, especially about my feelings.

It was tiring, and it felt unnecessary.

Plus, I never truly believed anyone was genuinely invested in hearing someone's sob story. But I knew my cousin wouldn't give up until I told her everything.

So now, I have to gure out the best way to explain the past events in a way that makes

She turned around and leaned her back against the counter.

sense when I still wasn't 100% sure what happened.

Folding her arms across her chest, she commanded, "Just spill it. The way you scrunch your top lip up to your nose tells me you're overthinking something."

I slowly lowered my lip back down, embarrassed.

"If you're not gonna tell me, even with how much I'm willing to push, then let's just sidebar this conversation and get this night started 'cause I wanna eat cheese and salami, watch horror movies, and get wine drunk."

She searched my expression for a clue as to what I would choose, maybe trying to gure out the direction of our conversation.

I could always count on her anticipating my moves, but it was as if she was setting up a snare, since she never let go of anything.

Oh well.

was covered in various snacks.

I stood up, choosing to get the night started, and opened the fridge to pull out the chilled wine.

"Let's get wine drunk, please," I shook the bottle back and forth as I spoke.

Then, I took two wine glasses out of the cabinet and went to my living room.

My living room was a snug space with an L-shaped gray couch as the main centerpiece and a soft black rug underneath.

My coffee table in front of my couch had an Ouija board as its surface, but right now, it

My couch was decorated with a variety of Halloween and Christmas cushions, with several

spooky blankets that keep me cozy and warm.

Every surface is lined with Halloween decorations, which I call home decor - all year round. So, I like creepy stuff. Sue me. It stays up.

I settled onto the couch's cushions, ipping on the two spider-webbed lamps on either

side.

Ava strode in with a tray of cheese, meats, and crackers, which she set down atop the already crowded table alongside the other snacks.

The sounds of the movie spilling through the TV took over any potential conversations, and we sat under our blankets, munching on our junk food.

It wasn't until the middle of the movie that Ava looked at me and questioned, "So those

marks on your shoulder...are you just not going to talk about them?"

I stiffened, realizing I had forgotten to conceal them.

Now I knew she wasn't going to drop it this time; silly me just gave her more fuel for her

The familiar chill of anxiety clamped down on my chest.

"Can we just for tonight, just watch the movie and not ask me about the obvious?"

She eyed me, clearly not happy with my answer.

I just didn't know where to begin.

I wasn't even sure I knew where the beginning was.

another direction.

re.

"Sooo Leon?"

My stomach did another one of those funny ips just at the mention of his name.

We stayed quiet for a few moments before she abruptly shifted the conversation in

She shook her head.

Just don't word vomit.

Keep it simple.

the plague?"

"What about him?"

She took a sip from her glass.

It clinked against mine when she placed it back down and said, "Have you heard from him at all today? I know you said he's been bugging you about the position he wants you to

take. So?"

Ava stared at me, waiting for me to say something while she snacked on potato chips.

"No, I want answers to at least one of my questions. Why are you avoiding everything like

I sighed to myself as I realized I was being silly, like a teenager trying to hide the facts

Just thinking about him brought these small uttering butteries tickling inside of me.

I grabbed my wine and chugged the rest, hoping to drown them.

wine wasn't refreshing enough for me to chug.

When there was no more, I wiped my mouth and instantly regretted my decision, since the

"Want more wine?" I asked, getting up to pour myself another glass.

about what happened on prom night from their mother.

There's nothing hard about keeping the main details to myself.

Yeah.

"Come to think of it, the last time I saw him was at Chris's party. I remember leaving right after, but then I blacked out."

Shit.

That last part was meant to stay in my head.

I closed my eyes, probably as a stress response, since I wished I could just disappear by shutting the world from my view.

Ava's expression was an unreadable mix of emotions.

I couldn't tell if she was worried or mad.

"You passed out?" She asked, her words drawn out as if each had to be thought through carefully before being spoken aloud.

Her brown almond eyes widened when the realization hit.

"Are you okay? Did anything happen? Did you make it back home safely?" She was denitely worried.

I replied, "Yes, no, and yes." In response to her questions, I decided not to elaborate on the

second question and just keep it a simple no, since I didn't know how to answer that.

Something denitely happened, but I wasn't sure if I was hurt or if I consented to anything. But I didn't want to worry her.

She raised her eyebrow at me, not accepting my short answers.

"You have random marks on your shoulder that weren't there the last time I saw you, and now you tell me you blacked out last night! What the hell, Cora?? Either you start talking, or we're going to have a problem."

Denitely angry.

Ava is dicult to ght with.

She's stubborn, and thanks to her erce loyalty, she will not back down until I tell her what happened.

I decided not to argue with her, so I gured the best thing to do was just tell her the truth.

I closed my eyes and let out the air I collected before I told her what I remembered. I gave her my thoughts on what could have happened and how I suspected it was Lee, but I couldn't prove anything, and I didn't even know what had actually taken place-or who was at fault.

For all I know, I could be at fault.

I also mentioned what transpired between Lee and me just hours ago at the cafe.

Ava sat in silence, paying close attention to every word I said.

Just watching her concentration made me feel tired.

The cracking of her hands caught my attention, and when I looked down at them, her sts were balled and white-knuckled.

I grabbed her hand and told her it was okay, but that amount of reassurance barely made a dent in her anger.

She pulled her hand out of mine, her eyes darting from place to place as if looking for something to target.

When her eyes landed back on me, she declared, "I'll talk to Lee, and I'll get to the bottom of this!"

She grabbed her cup and downed the rest of the wine in one gulp.

"No, the hell you're not!" I protested. "You're not gonna bring him into this until I can gather more solid evidence about what happened last night."

"Ha!" She shouted, sounding sharp and bitter.

"You think sitting around and waiting for that type of proof to fall into your lap will happen? While you wait, the evidence is disappearing as we speak!"

The word 'evidence' gave me a jolt.

It didn't seem right to use it here, as if I had been wronged somehow.

When I think about what happened last night, it appears to be more of an accident than something done to me against my will.

My heart feels oddly content, but who am I to trust myself when I can't even remember what happened?

"No, that's not what I meant, but I'll be damned if I go accusing an innocent person of something they had no part of. Besides, I can't explain this to you, Ava, but I don't feel like it was wrong."

Wrapping my arms around myself, I shivered from the chill that had nothing to do with the air conditioner.

"I can't explain why I feel this way, but I do. I know it sounds absurd, and I'm not covering up for anyone, so don't even try to go there either, but please believe me when I say I will handle this, not you. Me. This is my problem, and I will sort it out."

Ava's shoulders relaxed as they let go of some of their tension, but she wasn't okay.

She just didn't know where to throw all that energy that built inside her.

Seeing her deate put me more at ease.

This meant one less problem to worry about. The night was already looking better.

I reached out and held her hand in mine, applying gentle circles with my thumb on the back of her hand in an effort to soothe her.

I'm the one with the problem, but I'm having to talk my cousin off the ledge here.

There's something off about that.

I guess it was ne since I wasn't torn up about it like she was.

She stared down at my thumb, not saying anything, while the sounds of screams coming from the movie lled the awkward void.

A woman in the movie screamed, "Please! Please! Don't kill me, please!" Her voice rose to a deafening pitch.

I almost chuckled at the overacting, but I managed to catch myself by biting my inner cheek.

Ava had a twitch of a smile that bloomed into an all-out laugh.

I couldn't help but follow suit, both of us laughing so hard we were hitting our knees and thighs, desperately trying to catch our breath.

Leave it to one of us to never be serious for too long.

I was glad for this comedic respite.

The vibes were becoming way too intense.

We threw this awful tiff behind us and drank and stuffed our faces for the rest of the night. The following day, or should I say the next afternoon, since it took me ages just to get my ass out of bed, wash up and make my way to work.

I didn't throw up at any point through all that, so that's a point for me.

I had to call into work and explain to Lee, of all people, that I was going to be late, and he didn't seem bothered at all.

Why isn't he as messed up as me? Or maybe I'm just overthinking this?

I was trying my best not to sound awkward, but I was also never the best actress. Four years in high school drama club will attest to that.

Lee, who was as cool as a cucumber, told me to take my time.

This is why I say intrusive thoughts are a pain.

I'm the only one obsessing over our last encounter, but here's Lee living his best life

unbothered. When I got to the cafe, Lee was staring off into the corner; his face pinched as if he had

just swallowed something awful.

I followed his gaze to nd Leon sitting, playing with sugar packets, ripping them, and pouring the sugar into a pyramid of glucose.

The same sensation that I had grown used to bubbled in my stomach again.

Hated the guy, but damn, he was good-looking.

The sheer size of his frame and broad shoulders made the table appear petite in

comparison.

It was kind of funny to see but also very captivating.

One couldn't deny that man was very MAN.'

It's a small town, so everyone knows what everyone is doing, right?

Usually, he's in his oce or on the eld for training. Not that I would know, of course.

Now, what I'm actually curious about is what he was doing here in the middle of the day.

Not just me. Excuses? Me? Nah.

Leon's eyes rose from the mess on the table. As soon as he spotted me, he quickly straightened in his seat and began to clean up the mess.

I stepped around the counter and whispered to Lee, "What's Leon doing here?"

"Being an annoying thorn in my side," he hissed.

what had happened yesterday and decided against it.

I was about to pat him on the shoulder - something I usually did - but then I remembered

Lee continued to stare angrily at Leon, who was almost nished wiping down the table.

I wondered if he could feel the holes being burned into his back.

"Has he ordered anything yet?"

"Nope. He's just been here since I opened the cafe, sitting in that damn corner ripping up all of our sugar packets that ARE FOR THE PAYING CUSTOMERS!" Lee spoke the last part in a loud, irritated tone. More than likely trying to get a rise out of Leon, but I never saw him react.

It took a lot to annoy Lee, given how calm he usually was about everything.

I guess Leon was a different type of breed.

The under-the-skin type.

I looked at the time and saw that it was almost 2 p.m.

I had put my things in the back and was tying my apron when Leon popped up at the

counter, very tall, very intimidating.

How tall is this guy: 6'3?

I grabbed his arm before he passed and said apologetically, "I'm sorry for coming in late. I

Lee walked away, snatching a cup of coffee from the counter before dumping it in the sink.

wasn't feeling too hot, so thanks for understanding." He looked at me for a few seconds before his eyes cut back to Leon, who was patiently waiting at the counter, obviously ignoring Lee.

Lees's lips formed a hard line, and he replied rmly, "Don't mention it." Before turning to leave.

Knowing they hated each other was much more different than actually seeing it in person.

I gave Leon my full attention and said dryly, "Good afternoon, Leon. What can I get for ya?" Although my words were at, I wasn't in the mood to be social with anyone.

I wanted to nurse my hangover and go back to sleep.

Leon just stared at me, almost as if he was expecting something from me.

My sleeves were fresh out of magic tricks to offer, so I didn't understand the look.

Before we could truly enjoy the weirdness this moment created, he said in a low voice, "I need to talk to you. It's kind of private. Can you spare me a few minutes?" I could hardly spare myself a second to think.

"I just got here, Leon, and as you can see, I was very late for my shift."

"I'm VERY aware of that," He interrupted.

But I just smiled and kept my cool.

Leon was not going to piss me off today.

ass, but I think I can take him.

I felt like I got an adequate amount of sleep last night, as one could hope drunk off their

My inner wolf jumped at the thought of taking him in.

I wanted to strangle her. It wasn't s****I, dammit.

I took a deep breath and pushed the thought to the back of my mind.

"Well, I won't be able to make any time for you unless you want to wait for my break or when my shift ends."

"At 10, right?"

I felt myself blink slowly, "Uh yeah, at 10."

He ashed a bright, dazzling grin down at me, one not even sunglasses could block.

"If you have time after your shift, I'll come pick you up...Maybe we can get something to eat while we talk?"

What did he need to discuss with me so urgently that he wanted to eat together?

That wasn't at all like the normal Leon—usually, we would be screaming at each other.

And yet here he was, being friendly and inviting me out to eat.

It made me uneasy; my stomach felt like it was in knots, and I almost had an urge to run to the restroom.

"Is this why you were waiting? To talk to me?"

He rubbed the back of his neck with his hand, a nervous gesture he often does.

What did he have to be anxious about? Couldn't be 'cause of little ole me, right? "Ye-ah, I've been waiting to catch you so I could get a little bit of your time, but you didn't

show up at the beginning of your shift. So I waited." What a good boy. I snorted to myself, trying to keep from laughing.

Not the time for jokes, Cora.

I was feeling a bit slow since my brain was taking a back seat today.

More than likely the result of my hangover.

Drink too much, brain no work too much.

Leon tilted his head, focusing his gaze on me with an unreadable expression.

He was good at appearing emotionless when he wanted to, and I couldn't tell what he was thinking at the moment.

I press my hands onto the countertop, feeling the cool marble beneath my ngertips.

It brought me closer to him, and I could smell his cologne.

The smell was exotic, with a mixture of warm, earthy tones.

A faint hint of something more dangerous lurked beneath it all, captivating my attention

It was both alluring and terrifying, an intoxicating mix that drew me in like a moth to a ame.

Power.

The syllables of my name oated out of his mouth like delicate strands of fur grazing across my skin, sending a chill down my spine. "Cora?"

The smell of rosewood hit me rst before the familiar smell of honey trailed behind.

I felt like I was sinking into a pool of warm water.

Gentle waves lapped against my body, the sensation lightly brushing across my chest.

My head gradually bobbed in and out of the slow-moving current.

Suddenly, I jerked back from the rolling tide, gasping for breath.

"What the f*ck Leon?" I coughed.

I could still feel the small trickles of his pheromones leaking out.

I steadied myself against the edge of the countertop, bracing against his force.

The feeling of yielding to him and his power was overwhelming.

I could not hide the anger in my voice as I asked him, "What are you trying to do?"

I couldn't believe he would roll me like this with his pheromones so blatantly in public.

Had I said something wrong? Was he mad at me?

Lee came rushing back, probably because he could hear the anger in my tone, Or maybe he also felt the surge of power.

"What's going on out here? Cora, are you okay?"

"This doesn't concern you, Evans, so return to what you were doing!" Leon barked at him.

A ame of rage erupted in Lee's expression.

He stepped closer, and I felt the cool electrical current of Lee's pheromones seeping out.

Both of their eyes had gone golden. Damn, these Alphas.

"This is my place of business, Alpha. You don't get to throw orders around here like that." A low rumble escaped Leon's mouth as he bent forward, pushing against the counter to get closer to Lee.

"As your Alpha, I command you to do as you are f*cken told. This does not concern you. Now leave."

I noticed the tightness on Lee's face, a sign that Leon's pheromones were becoming overwhelming as he sought to demonstrate his dominance.

I could sense Lee's pheromones swell in response, but just as quickly as they ignited, they dissipated into nothingness.

Challenging the authority of the Alpha wasn't a ght that anyone would be willing to take

on.

Lee pursed his lips together with reluctance and bowed his head.

He stole a brief glance in my direction before turning around and retreating through the door he came out of.

Alpha or not, Leon didn't have the right to come into my place of work and cause a disturbance just to talk about whatever the hell he wanted to talk about.

He had a strict 'my way or the highway' attitude, but it didn't mean I had to give in to every

"Alpha Leon, for right now, I think it's best if you just leave," I said respectfully, emphasizing his title in hopes that he would understand the importance of my request.

I had wanted to hear him out, but that was gone, along with my patience.

He didn't get to boss us around at his discretion.

little request.

look dumb.

I swallowed hard, and knew he heard it, but I wasn't backing down.

I hated how my body reacted to him. I hated how his pheromones made me want to crawl

I hated that my body yearned for him-the joys of being a damn omega.

Leon stood tall, his eyes serious and focused on me.

to him and beg for mercy for acting out like that.

I could feel the height difference, and it made me feel small.

The temptation to stand on the counter was strong, but I resisted.

Sure, that would make me taller, but it wasn't worth sacricing my job and making myself

"Cora, do you seriously have nothing to tell me?"

I did my best to stand taller, trying to project a sense of power and all that jazz.

"Not that I'm aware of. I don't think I have anything to talk to you about." I held his gaze steadily.

At that moment, Mrs.Dayes, the ower shop owner from down the street, walked in with a cheery smile, cradling a potted plant before she caught sight of Leon and me, looking as if we might start ghting.

Her beaming grin faltered for a second before resuming its usual cheerfulness.

"Oh my, what's going on here, dearies? Are we having some trouble?"

Without turning his head away from me, Leon assured her, "No, ma'am, we're just talking." Finally looking at her, he greeted her with his signature warm smile as if nothing had happened beforehand.

Mrs. Dayes eyed him and said, "My, my Alpha Leon, I didn't think I would see you here on a day like this. It's always good to see the handsome leader of our pack around town. I feel like the goddess herself has blessed my day."

Mrs. Dayes, an omega like me, was in her early fties but looked like she was still in her forties with how well she kept herself. Her soft skin had a thin layer of oral-scented lotion that glowed under the lights above

the counter.

lashes.

The neat part that ran down the center of her head revealed a cluster of white hairs nestled between the soft waves of reddish-brown strands.

The locks lay stiy yet elegantly on either side of her face, which carried a peaceful air as though she were constantly attempting to read you.

Her pale green eyes shimmered beneath her delicate eyelids framed with long, dark

I could see the faint crow's feet around her eyes as she blinked at me.

"Will you have the usual Mrs. Dayes?" She looked from Leon to me and smiled.

"Oh, not today, dearie. I'm just here to drop off these red-tinted Dahlias to Mr. Evans for the cafe."

She gracefully edged past Leon, saying, 'Excuse me,' before setting the potted plant down

on the countertop. "Do tell Mr.Evans to keep them in the sun for most of his working hours and to keep them

from harsh winds."

Gently, she reached out and caressed the plant's petals with her ngertips before turning her attention back to Leon.

"Alpha," She said, bowing her head.

"Cora, do stop by the store every once in a while. You know how I worry."

"Of course, Mrs.Dayes. Are you sure you don't want me to x you a cup of tea before you leave?"

She looked at her watch on her dainty wrist.

"Oh no, I do have to go. I'm already running a bit behind for my quilt guild. It seems if I'm not there on time, my people tend to get impatient, leading them to rush through certain steps that need to be taken and end up ruining the whole pattern even before I get there." She sent a knowing glance towards Leon, who stared respectfully but unreadable back.

Oka-ay.

After she left, Leon focused his honey-green eyes on me.

I could feel my resolve starting to crumble, but I steeled myself against his gaze.

"Alpha, with all due respect, I don't have time for any of this. I need to get back to work. Whatever you think I should know isn't as important as my job. So, please. Please leave."

The corners of his eyes seemed to melt, and he suddenly looked more gentle than

Then, he spun around and left the cafe without another word.

menacing, although the effect only lasted for a few agonizing seconds.

The door slammed right behind him.

Lee crept back in. "Is it safe to come out now?"

I laughed, although it came out lukewarm. "It's safe for now, but I can't guarantee it'll be safe once school lets out here in a minute."

He gave a fake shudder. "All those wild kids hopped up on caffeine; we'll need more than tranquilizers this time." He was trying to get me to smile, and it was working.

I shouldn't let Leon get to me, but sometimes it was hard.

My body wanted him. A small part of me wanted him, but a huge part of me also wanted to kick his ass.

"Any idea what he wanted to talk to you about?" Lee was close now.

I hadn't noticed him getting closer, but now I could sense our shoulders almost brushing up against each other.

Damn these two men for making me feel like this.

Everything seemed to be in a state of chaos, thanks to them.

Ugh.

I had the urge to turn around and go home, but I just got here.

Deciding a change of topic was in order, I shifted the conversation to something else.

"I need like ve shots of espresso right now. You think you can inject that right into my veins?"

Lee chuckled and picked up the coffee Iters, getting to work setting up the coffeemaker.

I guess he wasn't going to push more on the topic. Goody for me.

"I'll make you a cup of joe, a strong joe."

He knew exactly what I needed.

I needed something strong to sip and seethe while I worked.