public.

me another cup of tea?"

you know we need the extra help."

even without being able to see him.

around and walked back to where I was sitting.

normally like him."

between them.

avoided it.

~.~

for support.

him,

```
3.Cora
```

A loud shattering crash lled the cafe as another ceramic mug met its demise, courtesy of James, my all thumbs, and two left-feet coworker.

My boss Lee swore loudly, "James, what the hell? That's the fth one today!" His booming voice echoed around the small shop.

I shifted uncomfortably, watching my coworker get yelled at.

I noticed James dart his gaze from me to Lee in an instant.

Lee sighed in frustration as he surveyed the mess sprawled across the oor.

"James, why don't you take a break while I clean this up, okay? I'll keep an eye on the front while you're gone."

As I watched James head towards the back, I gave him an encouraging smile, and he returned it before almost stumbling as he made his way past me.

often he broke or spilled something when we worked together. Lee looked over at me, his face brightening for a second before his expression turned wistful.

My heart went out to James. It was a miracle that he still had this job, considering how

"Do you really have to be here on your day off?" He asked with a sigh.

My face twisted into a frown, and I tucked my chin in.

"Seriously? So I can't go to my own local cafe when I'm not working?" I questioned him.

He took a seat across from me, my eyes focusing on my open palms instead of him.

He was so attractive it made it hard to look at him directly.

He had his dark hair, which was wavy and hung just below his shoulders, secured in a ponytail while he worked.

His blue eyes were partially hidden by their almond shape, but they stirred something inside me that I knew I shouldn't feel when I looked into them.

He had tattoos that stretched from the ends of his ngers all the way up to his elbows. I was thankful that, as the cafe owner, he wasn't judged for openly carrying his artwork in

Though it wasn't likely to happen since Lee was an Alpha, and not many people picked ghts with Alphas.

"I swear, half the time, you're always stuck inside your head. But seriously, Cora, who relaxes at work on their day off? Not that I mind, of course. You're just weird." He teased.

In response, I thrust my cup toward him and demanded, "How about you shut up and get

He waved his hand in front of my face, bringing me out of my thoughts, and he chuckled.

He grinned as he snatched the empty cup from my hand and headed behind the counter.

He began making my tea when he said, "You know James wouldn't have such a hard time

if you weren't here. So, I'll make it a to-go cup 'cause imma need you to get on out of here."

I grimaced at him.

"Why do I have to go? I'm a paying customer... In fact," I said, glancing over my shoulder.

"It looks like I'm your only customer right now." He peered over his shoulder briey. "It's always this quiet before lunchtime," he remarked.

He knew I was aware of this, and his tone reected it. I rolled my eyes and ddled with the sugar packets on the table.

"You know, besides James's inability to work in front of women, you really should ease up

on him. He's just a baby, and it hasn't been that long since he started working for you, and

I lowered my gaze to his back, waiting for his response. "Why do you care so much about James?"

The words came out sharp and unexpected, and I could feel his body language change

After tidying up the packets, I stood, offering a light-hearted response: "I think it's only fair

that I show my coworkers some extra care - since they have you as a boss, after all."

Lee kept his focus on making my tea, not responding to me at all. I sighed in frustration that he liked to start little ghts with me for no reason.

I noticed Lee's body tense up momentarily at the mention of Leon before he slowly turned

"Whatever, I got to go anyway. Leon has been breathing down my neck, which isn't

He forced a smile and tried to relax his jaw as he handed me my cup.

"Then, I'll see you tomorrow when you come to work," he said, emphasizing the last word, ending our conversation. A strange emotion ickered in his eyes. I had no idea what was going on inside his mind.

I knew Lee and Leon used to be best friends, yet I never found out what had happened

It didn't help that he would get uncomfortable whenever I brought up Leon's name, so I just

cold? "Oh, Cora!" Lee said before I opened the door. "Don't forget about the party tonight at Chris's house to celebrate him joining the warrior's team."

My face twisted with confusion as I stared back at him. "All right, boss... See you

tomorrow then," I drawled, the uncertainty ringing in my voice. Why had he become so

took a sip from my cup and nodded, letting him know I heard him clearly, and left.

The party at Beta Chris's house was loud and chaotic.

There were people passed out on the lawn already-it was only 10 pm.

A clump of girls gathered around their friend, holding her hair back while she emptied the contents of her stomach onto the side of the house, all while crying about someone's shoes she ruined.

As I scanned the crowd, my eyes landed on Lee chatting with a group of people. Suddenly, he locked eyes with me and held his gaze for what felt like an eternity.

I looked away quickly, feeling embarrassed for acting so strangely in front of my boss.

Though he was only ve years older than me, I needed to maintain a level of respect for

It's not like he saw me any differently than any other employee, and he wasn't the weird

It took my breath away and made my heart race from the intensity of it all.

I didn't want to be too obvious about it.

one here having these thoughts.

'What's wrong with me??' I thought, as I scolded myself.

random direction as if to say I needed another.

Was I really losing my sh*t between him and Leon?

At least Lee has never pissed me off...too much.

desk, examining some documents laid out before him.

It's honestly no surprise to nd him here by himself.

Working hard while a whole party is happening.

'What in the serious f*ck is going on with me?'

to a ame.

magnetism I felt toward him.

immersed himself in his work.

kitchen, and I was starting to feel a bit dizzy, so I leaned back against the living room wall

I was already on my third cup of some random mixed drink they had concocted in the

I watched him as he talked to a guy in front of him, though his attention kept drifting back to me. I pretended I didn't notice this, trying my damnest not to look in his direction, but there was a deep part of me that wanted him to keep looking at me.

It's not like he made it any easier. His clothes t him perfectly, especially with how he looked, accentuating every part of his toned body.

I let my tongue slowly wet my chapped lips and watched Lee gesturing for me to join him.

I smiled politely and shook my head as I motioned toward my cup, then pointed in a

He gave me a gloomy stare, which strangely made my heart swell.

But I quickly pushed the feeling away before it got too out of hand.

Finally, I peeled myself away from the wall and began to wander through the house in search of a comfortable spot where I could relax away from everyone.

As I walked by an open doorway, I spotted the familiar broad shoulders of Leon bent over a

His dark grey, tted shirt clung to his broad back and shoulders in a way I had to admit was just so unfair.

Nevertheless, the sight of those damn muscles made me powerless to resist like a moth

His mere presence made my body burn with desire, and I was too weak to resist the

My body's responses towards Leon and Lee lately have me seriously f*cked up.

His body generously gave me something to quench my visual thirst.

I was nally able to snap myself out of these thoughts.

radiating from my core in time with my racing pulse.

The music was loud, and the voices were all melding together,

I really thought that I could get by without him seeing me.

My wolf shuddered as if the arousal awoke her.

touch it, although maybe it was coming from me.

He turned around to lean up against the desk.

of his lips: "Close the door and come here."

hadn't heard him speak.

embarrassment.

loud and clear.

I just ran faster.

I seem to be running away more often these days.

gold as my scent hit them--f*ck.

of whoever had picked me up.

refreshing chill slightly hazy in my mind.

I didn't.

voice.

"Cora, please wait!"

He slowly tilted his head in my direction.

eyes.

I knew my heat wasn't due for another seven days, yet I was transxed by his gure as he

Honestly, if he hadn't started moving, I would have been able to turn away.

I saw Leon stiffen before saying, "You know...I can feel you staring, right?" A jolt of surprise ran through me, my heart thumping hard in disbelief that he knew I was there.

But, instead, his voice stirred something deep within me that should have stayed dormant.

His gaze grew heavy with a hint of darkness, the color of liquid gold beginning to II his

His desire was so strong it seemed to materialize in the room like I could reach out and

I couldn't stand Leon, but just the sight of him had an effect on me, like a wave of energy

On instinct, my eyes shot down to his crotch. I wanted to slap myself for that. It was like I had no self-control.

The noise of the party drowned out his request, but there was no mistaking the movement

"Um, where do I-I mean, is there a bathroom around here?" I tried to look clueless, as if I

He beckoned me to come closer with a gentle wave of his hand.

I stammered for a moment, trying to think of something to say.

He dropped his hand, pushed off the desk, and made his way toward me.

"Oowwww," I groaned, massaging my sore cheek. Who puts a door here?

The slap sent electrifying shocks through my arm into my lower abdomen.

I spun around, my face colliding with the hard surface of the door, spilling my drink.

"Cora, are you okay?' I saw his hand reach out toward me, and I slapped it away out of

I opened my mouth to speak but quickly shut it and rushed out the door. Though my mind was still foggy from the shock, I was still able to make out Leon's words

So, I started to look for a way out. My skin was still hot as I maneuvered my way through the crowd of people in the house.

I spotted a few Alphas turning in my direction as I moved past them, their eyes glinting

Would this count as exercise? Nope. Never mind, that's beside the point.

The air inside the house had become stiing, making it dicult for me to breathe.

was being followed.

The reality of the situation hit me: my heat cycle was beginning.

collapsed, breathing heavily on the ground. Amidst the chaos of yelling and ghting, I heard someone calling my name in a mued

Though everything still seemed fuzzy around me, there was no denying the feeling that I I tried to gather my strength to make a run for it, chanting mind over matter, but I

My cheeks were searing, and the cool breeze from outside washed over my skin, its

I tried to look around, but all I could focus on was the sound of my own heartbeat echoing in my ears.

Suddenly, I felt myself being cradled, and my head was bouncing around from the motion

The scent surrounding me felt like a warm embrace, which I was all too familiar with. Although I didn't have the energy to give it a name, my instincts told me it was an Alpha's scent.

An insatiable hunger stirred within me, sending my wolf into a frenzy.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not keep my eyes open.

Then, I felt the atmosphere around me shift, and I had a brief ash of an unfamiliar dark room before everything went black.