



# The Cobbler and His Elves

## (Cobblers' Corner Cozy Mystery)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** My grandfather taught me everything about fixing shoes, but his lessons in cobbling never prepared me to keep his shop alive during the Depression. Now I'm down to a handful of customers, watching his legacy slip away one day at a time.

Then the Sterling brothers strutted in. Two wealthy alphas who planted their gleaming shoe store across the street, flaunting their imported leather and factory-made footwear while I struggle to make ends meet.

When a shipment of rare leather vanishes from Thompsons Tannery, our sleepy town's veneer of respectability cracks. Someone's trying to frame me for the theft, and those two insufferable alphas seem determined to protect me—whether I want their help or not.

Truth is, I'm not sure I can trust them. Or myself, when I'm near them. But in a town overrun with secrets and lies, trusting two alphas with my heart might be the deadliest gamble of all.

\*MMM

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# Page 1

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1

The bell above the door jingled as I stepped out of Hart's Shoe Repair into the crisp winter air. Snowflakes danced on the breeze, settling on my worn woolen coat. I tugged my scarf tighter and set off down Main Street, my breath puffing out in small clouds.

Millcrest's town square bustled with activity despite the cold. Garlands of pine and holly adorned shop windows, and twinkling lights wrapped around lamp posts. In the center, our town's massive Christmas tree stood proud, a symbol of hope in these hard times.

I made my way through the square, nodding to familiar faces. Old Mrs. Peterson waved from her porch. She wore her ever-present cardigan with its fraying sleeves over a faded floral housedress and a simple cloche hat perched atop her gray curls. A pair of mended boots peeked out from beneath her housedress. I'd fixed those last week, refusing payment as usual. Times were tough for everyone, especially widows like her.

The scent of freshly baked bread wafted from Mabel's bakery, making my stomach growl. I hadn't eaten since yesterday's meager supper, and my stomach protested its maltreatment.

The tantalizing aroma of Mabel's fresh baked white bread lingered in my mind, but I pushed the tempting thought aside. I'd grab a day-old loaf of soda bread—it'd be cheaper. Supplies for the shop came first.

The bakery's bell chimed as I entered. Mabel's bright smile greeted me from behind the counter, her honey blonde curls escaping from under her cap.

"I was wondering when you'd show your face," she said, wiping flour-covered hands on her apron.

I grinned back, unable to resist her infectious cheer. "Morning, Mabel. Busy as always, I see."

She rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "You know how it is. Everyone wants fresh bread for Sunday dinner." She reached under the counter and pulled out a paper-wrapped loaf. "Here, take this. It's still warm."

The aroma made my mouth water, but I shook my head. "I can't, Mabel. You know I?—"

"Nonsense," she interrupted, thrusting the loaf into my hands. "Consider it payment for fixing Mama's shoes last month. And Papa's the month before that. And?—"

I laughed, holding up a hand in surrender. "Alright, alright. Thank you."

Mabel's eyes softened. "You're too kind for your own good, Milo. You need to eat, too."

I tucked the bread into my coat, warmth seeping through the fabric. "I manage. How's your family doing?"

We chatted for a few minutes, catching up on town gossip. Mabel's beta scent, warm and comforting like her baked goods, helped ease some of the tension in my shoulders.

As I turned to leave, Mabel called out, “Oh, I almost forgot! Did you hear about Mr. Thompson’s tannery?”

I paused at the door. “No, what happened?”

She leaned in, voice low. “Someone broke in last night. Stole a whole shipment of rare leather, they say.”

My eyes widened. “That’s terrible. Is Mr. Thompson alright?”

Mabel nodded. “Shaken up, but fine. He’s more furious than anything else. Sheriff’s investigating, but no leads yet.”

I frowned, mind racing. That leather shipment had been the talk of the town for weeks. Every cobbler and leatherworker had been eyeing it, myself included, though I knew I could never afford even a scrap of it.

“Thanks for letting me know,” I said.

Leaving the warm bakery, I headed towards Caldwell’s General Store. My meager savings weighed heavy in my pocket. I needed leather for repairs, thread, and shoe polish. And food for the next couple of weeks, my traitorous stomach reminded me with another growl.

Lost in mental calculations, I didn’t notice the two men exiting the store until I collided with a broad chest. Strong hands steadied me as I stumbled back.

“Whoa there, Hart. In a hurry?”

I looked up into Jack Sterling’s smirking face and felt heat rush to my cheeks. His alpha scent—cedar and bergamot with a hint of spice—enveloped me, making my

omega instincts sit up and take notice.

I cursed inwardly, hating how my body betrayed me at Jack's intoxicating scent. My inner omega purred, but my mind rebelled against the unwelcome attraction.

"S-sorry," I stammered, stepping back. "I wasn't paying attention."

Elijah Sterling appeared at his brother's shoulder, his scent—sandalwood and citrus—mingling with Jack's in a way that made me dizzy. The tantalizing blend of their combined scents made my mouth water against my will. I clenched my jaw, furious at my body's betrayal as it responded to not one, but both alphas.

"No harm done," Elijah said with an easy smile. "Heading in to do some shopping?"

I nodded, trying to edge around them. The Sterling brothers always made me uncomfortable, and not just because they were alphas. Their fine clothes and easy manner spoke of a life far removed from my daily struggles.

"Better hurry," Jack said, his tone casual but his eyes sharp. "Heard Caldwell's running low on leather polish. Shame if someone bought it all up."

My fists clenched at my sides. It was an open secret that Sterling's Fine Footwear often bought out supplies, leaving little for smaller shops like mine. "Thanks for the warning," I bit out.

Elijah shot his brother a look I couldn't decipher. "Actually, we were just?—"

Whatever he was about to say was cut off as my precious loaf of bread slipped from my grasp. the package hit the snowy ground with a soft thud.

"Oh, damn," I muttered, crouching to pick it up. I blinked rapidly, fighting the sting

in my eyes. Damn it all, I wouldn't let them see me break over a measly loaf of bread.

To my surprise, both Sterlings knelt to help. As we reached for the loaf, my hand brushed Jack's. A jolt of electricity shot up my arm, and I jerked back as if burned.

Jack's nostrils flared, his pupils dilating slightly. For a moment, the air between us crackled with tension. Then Elijah cleared his throat, breaking the spell.

"Here you go," he said as he picked up the loaf and handed it to me.

I took it from him, my fingers gripping the crinkly brown paper package Mabel had securely wrapped it with. I clutched the loaf to my chest like a shield. "Thanks," I mumbled, not meeting either of their eyes as I quickly brushed past them.

Inside the store, I tried to focus on my shopping list, but my mind kept wandering. The Sterling brothers' combined scents clung to my nostrils, stirring something deep and primal that I ruthlessly squashed.

At the counter, reality came crashing back as I counted out my meager coins. Even with skipping meals, I was short. I stared at the items before me, stomach sinking. Supplies for the shop or food? I needed both to survive, but?—

A hand reached past me, setting down a crisp bill. "Add his items to ours," Jack Sterling's deep voice rumbled from behind me.

I whirled around, face burning with embarrassment and anger. "I don't need your charity," I snapped.

Jack raised an eyebrow, unperturbed. "It's not charity, Hart. Consider it a professional courtesy."

“Professional courtesy?” I scoffed. “Since when do you consider me a professional?”

Something flashed in his eyes—hurt? But it was gone before I could be sure. “Despite what you might think, we’re not out to run you out of business,” he said quietly.

Elijah stepped up, his presence a soothing counterpoint to the tension between Jack and me. “We respect your work, Milo. The repairs you do, the care you take with each shoe—it’s admirable.”

Their words should have been comforting, but they only stoked the fire of my resentment. I didn’t need their respect or their pity. I needed customers, and their shiny new shop was drawing them all away.

“Keep your money,” I said, turning back to the counter. “I’ll just take the polish and thread.”

“Milo—” Elijah began, but I cut him off.

“I said no. Thank you,” I added stiffly, gathering my purchases.

I left the store without a backward glance, the bell’s cheerful jingle at odds with the storm of emotions in my chest.

The walk back to my shop seemed longer than usual, each step heavy with the weight of my pride and empty stomach. As I approached Hart’s Shoe Repair, a flicker of movement caught my eye.

A figure darted away from my shop’s window, disappearing down the alley beside it. My heart raced as I hurried to the door, fumbling with my keys.

Inside, everything looked as I'd left it. Shoes lined the shelves, tools sat neatly on the workbench. But something felt... off.

I moved through the shop, checking every corner. It wasn't until I reached my workbench that I saw it—a scrap of leather that didn't belong. My breath caught as I picked it up, running my fingers over its supple surface.

This was no ordinary leather. The quality was exquisite, far beyond anything I could afford. With dawning horror, I realized where it must have come from.

The stolen shipment from Thompson's Tannery.

But how had it ended up here? I never left my shop unlocked, and I certainly hadn't brought it in. Unless...

A chill raced down my spine as I remembered the figure I'd seen running from my shop. Had someone broken in? Planted the leather to frame me?

I sank onto my worn stool, the leather clutched in my trembling hands. The rich scent of it filled my nose, mingling with the familiar smells of my shop—polish and old leather and the faintest trace of vanilla and cocoa from my own omega scent.

What was I going to do?

As if in answer, my grandfather's voice echoed in my memory. He'd always said that in times of trouble, Christmas elves would come to help those with kind hearts and clever hands.

I almost laughed at the childish thought. I was a grown man, an omega struggling to survive in a world that often seemed stacked against me. I couldn't rely on fairy tales and Christmas magic to solve my problems.



And yet...

I looked down at the leather in my hands, then around at my shabby little shop. It wasn't much, but it was mine. My grandfather had built this business with nothing but determination and skill, and I'd be damned if I let it slip away now.

Setting the leather aside, I rolled up my sleeves. Elves or no elves, I had work to do. And tomorrow... tomorrow I'd figure out what to do about the leather.

As I settled into the familiar rhythm of my work, I pushed away the temptation of charming alpha smiles and thoughts of warm beds and full bellies. I had shoes to mend and a reputation to uphold.

Let the Sterlings have their fine shop and fancy, big city suits. I had my pride and my grandfather's legacy. For now, that would have to be enough.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:47 am*

2

The leather scrap lay on my workbench, innocuous yet damning. I ran my fingers over its supple surface, marveling at the quality. Such fine material could save my shop, but at what cost?

Mrs. Thackeray's order loomed over me. The wealthy widow had swept into my shop yesterday, her fur coat reeking of mothballs and self-importance. She thrust a crumpled page from a French fashion catalogue at me, her manicured finger jabbing at a pair of pumps that made my heart skip. The shoes were a masterpiece—sleek satin uppers with delicate beadwork cascading down the sides like frozen champagne bubbles.

“These. I want these for the Christmas gala,” Mrs. Thackeray declared, her voice brooking no argument.

I swallowed hard, my mind racing. This wasn't a simple repair job. She wanted me to recreate couture footwear from scratch, using only a grainy black-and-white photo as reference. My fingers itched to get started, but doubt gnawed at me.

“Ma'am, I'm not sure I?—“

“Nonsense,” she cut me off. “I've seen your work, Mr. Hart. I need them perfect. It's the social event of the season. I simply can't be seen in anything less than immaculate shoes.”

I nodded, already calculating. The job would pay handsomely—enough to cover next

month's rent and restock my dwindling supplies. But the pumps required a specific type of leather, the very kind that had inexplicably appeared in my shop, taunting me with its ill-gotten presence.

My grandfather's voice echoed in my head. "A cobbler's reputation is built on trust, Milo. Once lost, it's harder to repair than the oldest shoe."

"I'll have them ready by next Thursday afternoon."

Mrs. Thackeray's face lit up. "Splendid! I knew I could count on you."

"The pumps will require a calfskin vamp." My fingers traced the edge of the leather swatch nestled on the shelf beneath the counter where my ancient cash register sat.

I'd be crossing a line if I used it.

"If I may, I'll need a swatch of your gown." I flashed her a charming smile.

"A swatch?" Mrs. Thackeray's brow furrowed. "Well, I suppose... if it's absolutely necessary."

"The swatch is essential. It ensures the pumps match your gown. I'd like to dye the uppers to match perfectly."

Her expression softened, apparently satisfied with my reasoning.

I jotted down her address in my ledger, the nib of my pen scratching against the paper. "Thank you for your patronage. I'll have them delivered promptly next Thursday."

Mrs. Thackeray swept out, leaving behind a cloud of perfume and impossible

expectations. I found myself studying the catalogue page. The construction, the arch support, the precise placement of each bead—it would be a challenge, but an achievable one, given the right tools, materials, and talent.

I reached for my grandfather's old leather-working tools, feeling their familiar weight. Maybe, just maybe, I could pull this off. And if I did... well, it could change everything for my little shop.

I sighed as I wrapped the leather in a scrap of cloth. I'd take it to Sheriff Dawson, explain how I'd found it. Surely he'd understand?—

The bell above the door jangled, startling me. I shoved the wrapped leather into my workbench drawer. The worn wood creaked as I slid it shut. My heart raced as I turned to see Martha Sawyer hurrying in, her face pinched with worry.

My nostrils flared as the rich aroma of expensive leather hit me like a punch to the gut. The scent clung to the air, thick and unmistakable. I glanced at Martha, praying her beta nose wouldn't pick up on it. My heart hammered against my ribs as I forced a smile, willing my scent not to betray my anxiety.

“Miss Sawyer,” I said, my voice a touch too high. “What can I do for you today?”

“Mr. Hart,” she said, slightly out of breath. “I need your help.”

I forced a smile. “Of course. What can I do for you?”

She thrust a pair of well-worn oxfords at me. “The sole's come off. I need them fixed right away. Today, if possible.”

I examined the shoes. A quick job, nothing complex. “I can have them ready by closing time,” I said.

Martha nodded, her eyes darting around the shop. “Thank you. I’ll be back then.”

Martha hurried out the door, the bell jingling in her wake. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something wasn’t quite right with her today.

I didn’t know Martha all that well. She’d only moved to town about six months ago, setting up shop in old Mrs. Finch’s vacant storefront. She was a newcomer to Millcrest, still finding her place.

The rest of the day crawled by, each tick of the clock an accusation. By closing time, my nerves were frayed. Martha returned and paid without comment. I noticed her face appeared drawn, with dark circles under her eyes, but the nervous energy that had surrounded her earlier seemed to have dissipated.

Once she left with her newly repaired shoes, I locked up the shop and my attention turned to the leather scrap in my workbench drawer. I needed advice, a friendly ear. Leaving the shop, my feet carried me to Mabel’s bakery of their own accord.

The warm scent of cinnamon and apples enveloped me as I entered. Mabel looked up from where she kneaded dough, her smile faltering as she took in my expression.

“Milo? What’s wrong?”

I sank onto a stool at the counter, pouring out the whole sordid tale. Mabel listened, her hands never stopping their rhythmic work.

When I finished, she sighed. “Oh, Milo. What a mess.”

I ran a hand through my hair, feeling the weight of my predicament. “I’m in a real pickle here. Mrs. Thackeray’s got her heart set on those pumps, but I don’t have the leather to make ‘em. Not to mention the silk and pearls—or glass beads, if we’re

being honest. Who can afford real pearls these days?"

Mabel's eyes lit up. "What about that scrap you found?"

"No, I can't." I shook my head, my jaw clenching. "Much as I need it, using that leather wouldn't be right. I've got to turn it in to the Sheriff."

"Always the boy scout, aren't you?" Mabel teased, sliding a steaming cup of coffee my way.

I managed a weak smile. "Someone's got to keep this town honest."

"And who's keeping you fed, hmm?" She wagged a flour-dusted finger at me. "You can't cobble on an empty stomach."

"Is that your way of offering me a day-old danish?"

"Day-old? I'll have you know everything here is fresh as a daisy."

Our banter lifted my spirits for a moment, but the weight of my decision still pressed down on me. I was about to ask Mabel if she had any more practical advice when her expression suddenly turned serious.

"You haven't heard, then?" Mabel fidgeted nervously. She grabbed up a cloth and began wiping the counter furiously, her usual cheerful demeanor replaced by unease.

"What haven't I heard?" I asked, my stomach knotting with sudden dread. Mabel's serious tone set off alarm bells in my head.

"Mr. Thompson's threatening to close the tannery unless the stolen leather is found." I watched Mabel twist the cloth between her fingers. We both understood the

implications—if the tannery closed, my little store wouldn't stand a chance.

My blood ran cold. “Close the tannery? But that would?—”

“Affect half the town, yes. No leather means no work for cobblers, saddlers, bookbinders... It'd be a disaster.”

I slumped, the weight of the situation crushing me. “What am I going to do?”

Mabel reached across the counter, squeezing my hand. “We'll figure it out. We always do.”

I squeezed Mabel's hand back, bittersweet memories flashing through my mind. Through hardships and personal losses, the Wilsons and Harts had always banded together. Mabel's parents would slip us extra loaves when times were lean, and we'd patch their shoes for free. “That's the mark of good folk, Milo. Not just surviving, but making sure your neighbor survives too. It's how we weather the storms together.” Grandpa's words echoed in my mind. I could almost feel his calloused hand on my shoulder, smell the rich scent of leather that always clung to him. The memory brought a lump to my throat. “You're right, Mabel. We've always found a way, haven't we?”

I left the bakery with a heavy heart and a paper bag of danish rolls. Mabel had pressed them on me, refusing payment as usual. Her kindness only added to the burden of guilt I carried.

As I walked home, a thought nagged at me. The Sterling brothers. Their shop stood to gain the most from Thompson's closure. With no local tannery, smaller shops like mine would struggle to get supplies. But Sterling's Fine Footwear, with its connections to big city merchants, would thrive.

Before I could think better of it, I found myself darting across the street. Crouching low, I crept along the side of Sterling's Fine Footwear, my fingers brushing rough brick as I made my way to the back of the building. A sliver of light shone through the back window. They were still here, working late.

I crept around to the alley behind the store. A partly open window provided a perfect vantage point. I told myself I just wanted information, but the truth sat bitter on my tongue. I was spying, plain and simple.

Jack Sterling's voice drifted out. "...can't let Thompson close the tannery. It'd ruin half the businesses in town."

"I know," Elijah replied. "But what can we do? It's not like we can magic the leather back into his tannery."

"We could offer to buy out his stock," Jack suggested. "At least keep things running until the sheriff sorts this mess out."

I frowned. This didn't sound like the gloating of successful thieves. If anything, the brothers seemed genuinely concerned.

"It's not just about the money," Elijah said. "Thompson's pride is hurt. He feels like he let everyone down."

Jack snorted. "As if he's the only one affected. I can name several people who are depending on his tannery's leather for their very livelihood. What about Hart? His little shop won't last a month without local leather supplies... even if he only gets scraps."

My breath caught. They were worried about me ? I strained my ears, barely catching Elijah's words through the window.



“We could do something about it,” Elijah said.

Jack replied, his words unintelligible. I strained to catch Elijah’s muffled reply. The old brick building conspired against me, swallowing most of the sound. I caught only fragments—something about “...could help...” and “...not our problem...” My fingers dug into the wood window frame as I silently willed them to speak up.

The unexpected note of sympathy in their voices caught me off guard. I’d never thought the Sterling brothers paid me much mind, let alone considered my struggles. A strange mix of emotions churned in my gut—surprise, confusion, and a reluctant flicker of... what? Gratitude? Anger at being pitied and looked down on? I pushed the confusing jumble of feelings aside, reminding myself they were still my rivals.

I leaned closer, eager to hear more?—

CRASH!

I stumbled back, my elbow connecting with a stack of crates. They toppled, spilling their contents across the alley with a cacophony of thuds and clangs.

“What was that?” Jack’s voice, suddenly alert.

“Someone’s out there!”

Footsteps approached. I looked around frantically for an escape route, but it was too late. The back door flew open, spilling light into the alley. Jack and Elijah stood framed in the doorway, their expressions a mix of surprise and suspicion.

“Hart?” Jack’s eyes narrowed. “What are you doing here?”

My mind raced. I couldn’t tell them the truth—that I’d been eavesdropping like some

common sneak. An idea struck, born of desperation and half-truths.

“I... I came to ask for help,” I blurted out. “I have an order I can’t fill. A wealthy customer, needs special leather. I thought... maybe you had some scraps you were planning to throw out?”

The brothers exchanged a look I couldn’t decipher. Then, to my surprise, their faces softened.

“Come inside,” Elijah said, stepping back. “Let’s talk.”

Sweat beaded on my palms as I followed them into the workshop. The familiar scents of leather and polish wrapped around me, mingling with the brothers’ alpha pheromones. My traitorous body responded, a warmth blooming low in my belly.

Jack leaned against a workbench, arms crossed. “So, you need leather for a special order?”

I nodded, explaining Mrs. Thackeray’s request and the potential impact on my shop. As I spoke, I saw something like respect flicker in Jack’s eyes.

“That’s quite a predicament,” Elijah said when I finished. “We might be able to help.”

Hope surged in my chest. “Really? Once Mrs. Thackeray gives me the money, I’d be happy to pay?—”

Jack held up a hand, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Oh, we don’t want your money, Hart.”

I frowned. “Then what?—”

“A kiss,” Jack said, his voice low and husky. “One kiss, and we’ll give you the leather you need.”

My jaw dropped. “A... a kiss?”

Jack stepped closer, his scent enveloping me. “One kiss each,” he clarified. “That’s our price.”

My gaze darted between Jack and Elijah, heart hammering in my chest. Jack’s infuriating smirk taunted me, while Elijah shifted uncomfortably, avoiding my eyes. I glared at Jack, my mind racing. Was this some kind of sick joke? But the intensity in his eyes told me he wasn’t kidding. My gaze flicked to Elijah, silently pleading for him to intervene, but he remained frustratingly mute.

Jack’s lips curled into that infuriating smirk of his as he invaded my personal space. The scent of cedar and bergamot enveloped me, making my head spin. I took a step back, but found myself trapped against the counter.

“Well, Hart?” Jack’s voice was low, almost a purr. “What’s it gonna be?”

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. The warmth radiating from his body seemed to seep into my skin, and I cursed my traitorous omega instincts for responding to his alpha pheromones.

“You can’t be serious,” I managed to croak out, hating how breathless I sounded.

Jack’s eyes glinted with amusement and something darker that made my pulse quicken. “Oh, I’m dead serious, sweetheart. One kiss each, and all that lovely leather is yours.”

My fingers gripped the edge of the counter behind me, knuckles turning white. I

should've told him to go fry a stale egg, to take his ridiculous offer and shove it. But the thought of all that high-quality leather and Mrs. Thackeray's Christmas gala shoes...

All I had to do was kiss these alphas.

My traitorous heart skipped a beat at the thought. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't dreamed of it. My gaze lingered on Jack's chiseled jawline, then flicked to Elijah's warm brown gaze. A jolt of attraction shot through me before I could squash it down.

No. These men might be handsome, but they were vultures circling my grandfather's legacy. I'd seen how they operated—ruthless and calculating, they'd crush Hart's Shoe Repair without losing a wink of sleep.

I licked my lips nervously, and Jack's eyes followed the movement.

I should have been outraged at his proposition. Should have stormed out in a huff of righteous indignation. Instead, I found myself nodding, my mouth suddenly dry.

"J... Just one kiss each," I stammered, desperately trying to regain some semblance of control.

Jack surged forward, his large hand cradling my jaw as he angled my face upward. Our lips collided with unexpected intensity, his mouth hot and demanding against mine. A jolt of electricity shot through me as his tongue traced my lower lip, seeking entry. I gasped, inadvertently granting him access. He tasted of coffee and something uniquely Jack—rich and intoxicating. My fingers clutched at his shirt, torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer. A low growl rumbled in his chest, the vibration sending a delicious tremor racing through my body. My knees weakened, and I found myself leaning into his solid frame for support.

When Jack pulled away, I swayed on my feet, dazed. My lips tingled, still burning from his touch.

“Your turn, Eli,” Jack’s husky voice cut through the haze of desire.

Elijah’s warm brown eyes darkened with want as he stared at me. I shivered, caught between their heated gazes, my body aflame with need.

My heart raced as Elijah approached. His gaze locked onto mine, and I felt a magnetic pull drawing us together. He cupped my face with gentle hands. When his lips met mine, I melted into the kiss. Where Jack had been all fire and passion, Elijah’s kiss was slow and tender, yet no less potent. He tasted of honey and citrus, a sweetness that made my head spin.

I found myself responding with equal fervor, my fingers tangling in his thick brown locks. The world faded away until there was nothing but the press of his lips, the warmth of his body, and the intoxicating blend of our scents mingling in the air.

I broke the kiss, panting slightly. The brothers watched me, their eyes dark with hunger. For a moment, I imagined giving in to the heat building between us. Three bodies tangled together, hands and mouths exploring...

I shook my head, dispelling the fantasy. “The leather?” I managed to croak out.

Jack chuckled, moving to a cabinet. He returned with a roll of supple leather, far more than mere scraps.

“This should be enough for your order,” he said, pressing it into my hands. “And then some.”

I clutched the leather to my chest, overwhelmed by their generosity. “I don’t know

what to say.”

Jack’s expression turned serious. “Say you’ll be careful. This business with Thompson’s tannery... we don’t know the score yet.”

My body tensed as unease crept through me. “What do you mean?”

“Just stay out of it,” Elijah said, his voice gentle but firm. “For your own safety.”

I nodded, unsure of how to respond. As I turned to leave, Jack caught my arm.

“Milo,” he said, using my given name for the first time. “We mean it. Don’t go poking around in this. Please.”

The genuine concern in his voice shook me more than any threat could have. I mumbled a hasty goodbye and fled into the night, my mind whirling.

I crossed the street, heading to my shop. I tucked the leather under my arm and tried to ignore the taste of the Sterling brothers still on my lips. I smiled as I looked down at the leather the Sterlings had given me.

The cobbler’s elves, it seemed, had taken an unexpectedly alluring form. But whether they really intended to help or to hinder remained to be seen.

My smile faded.

Was I being a fool, blinded by a pair of handsome faces?

With a sigh, I quickened my pace.

Despite Jack’s warning, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was already in too deep to

back out now.

I made my usual preparations to open Hart's Shoe Repair just as the sun started to climb above the skyline. The familiar scents of leather and polish greeted me, a welcoming balm to my frayed nerves. I'd tossed and turned all night, my dreams a confusing jumble of stolen leather and stolen kisses.

As I flipped the sign to "Open," a flash of white caught my eye. A small envelope lay on the floor, as if it had been slipped under the door sometime during the night. My name scrawled across the front in an unfamiliar hand.

With trembling fingers, I tore it open. The message inside sent ice coursing through my veins:

I saw what you did. Your secret won't stay hidden for long. Leave town now, or everyone will know.

The paper crumpled in my fist. The Sterling brothers.

It had to be them. Their act of generosity last night, the kisses—it was all a ploy to get me to lower my guard. And now they were trying to bully me out of town.

Fury bubbled up inside me, hot and fierce. Without a second thought, I stormed out of my shop and across the street to Sterling's Fine Footwear. The "Closed" sign hung in the window, but I could see movement inside. I pounded on the door, heedless of the early hour.



Jack yanked the door open, his hair mussed and eyes bleary with sleep. Even in his disheveled state, he exuded a rugged allure that made my breath catch. His rumpled shirt clung to his broad chest, revealing tantalizing glimpses of tanned skin beneath. “Hart? What the hell?—”

I blinked hard, yanking my gaze away from the tempting expanse of Jack’s chest.

Elijah emerged from the back room, looking equally disheveled and alluring. “Milo?” He stifled a yawn. “What’s going on? What are you doing here?”

His questioning reminded me why I’d stormed over here at this ungodly hour, reigniting my fury. I shoved past Jack, brandishing the crumpled note. “How dare you,” I snarled. “I thought... I actually believed you wanted to help me. But this? Threatening me?”

I caught the flicker of confusion that passed between Jack and Elijah.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Jack’s voice was rough with sleep, but his eyes sharpened as they fixed on me.

I thrust the note at them. “Don’t play dumb. I know you wrote this.”

The brothers exchanged a bewildered glance. Elijah took the note from me. He smoothed out the paper, his frown deepening as he read. “We didn’t write this.”

“Oh, please,” I scoffed. “Who else would want me out of town? Who else knows about... about last night?”

Jack took the note, examining it closely. “Look at the handwriting. It’s nothing like ours.”

He disappeared into the back room, returning moments later with a leather-bound ledger. He opened it, revealing pages of neatly written entries. “See for yourself,” he said, holding the book out to me.

I glanced between the note and the ledger, my certainty wavering as my eyes darted between Jack’s precise, slanted script and Elijah’s more flowing, artistic hand. The note’s writing was nothing like theirs—a shaky, uneven scrawl that looked almost childish in comparison. It struck me as the sort of writing you’d see from someone trying to disguise their hand, like the ransom notes I’d seen in those dime store detective rags I sometimes read. The handwriting didn’t match. Not even close.

“Besides,” Jack added, a hint of his usual smirk returning, “why would we want to run you out of town? Can’t exactly kiss you anymore if you’re not here.”

“Y... you said one kiss each! That’s it!” I stammered. Heat rushed to my cheeks at the memory of those kisses. I pushed the thought aside, focusing on the matter at hand. “Besides, if you two didn’t write it, then who did?”

Elijah’s expression turned serious. “Someone who saw us last night. Someone who thinks they can use that information against you.”

“But why?” I asked, frustration coloring my voice. “I’m just a cobbler. I’m not important enough to blackmail.”

Jack’s eyes flashed with an emotion I couldn’t quite name. “You’re more important than you realize, Milo.”

An awkward silence fell over us. I shifted uncomfortably, suddenly aware that I’d burst into their shop before dawn, hurling accusations. “I... I’m sorry,” I mumbled. “I shouldn’t have assumed?—”

“It’s alright,” Elijah said softly. “We understand why you’d be suspicious of us.”

Jack nodded, his usual bravado softening. “We haven’t exactly given you reason to trust us.”

I looked between them, seeing them in a new light. Gone were the cocky businessmen I’d always assumed them to be. In their place stood two men who seemed genuinely concerned for my welfare.

“What do I do now?” I sighed, running a hand through my unruly red hair. My gaze drifted to the display window, where the first rays of dawn painted the shoes lined up in the window in a soft, golden light.

What now, indeed?

“We investigate,” Jack said, a determined glint in his eye. “Someone in this town is trying to scare you off. We need to find out who, and why.”

Elijah nodded in agreement. “We’ll start by comparing handwriting samples. See if we can match it to anyone in town.”

“I should do that,” I protested. “This is my problem. I can’t ask you to?—“

“You’re not asking,” Jack interrupted. “We’re offering. And we’re not taking no for an answer.”

The fierce protectiveness in his voice sent a sharp pang of heat racing through my body. My inner omega preened at the thought of two strong alphas looking out for me. I squashed the feeling down, reminding myself that this was just business. They were protecting their investment in the town, nothing more.

“Fine,” I conceded. “Where do we start?”

We spent the next hour planning our investigation. By the time we finished, the sun had fully risen, painting the sky in brilliant shades of pink and gold.

“I’ll take Milo to talk to Frank Adler,” Elijah said as we prepared to leave. “Jack, you check with some of our suppliers, see if they’ve noticed anything suspicious.”

I expected Jack to protest being separated from his brother, but he simply nodded. “Meet back here for lunch? We can compare notes.”

I fell into step beside Elijah as we made our way to Adler’s Leather Goods. Trying to remain casual, I stole a glance at him from the corner of my eye as we walked. His easy stride and relaxed demeanor contrasted sharply with Jack’s cavalier swagger.

How had I never noticed the differences between them before?

For the last couple of years, I’d watched the Sterling brothers strut down Main Street like they owned the place, their shiny leather shoes clicking against the cobblestones as they greeted townsfolk with practiced smiles and firm handshakes. The memory of their grand opening still burned in my mind—a lavish affair with champagne and canapés that had half the town swooning over their fancy footwear while my grandfather’s humble shop faded into the background.

I’d viewed them as bullies, out to steal my livelihood. Now, I wondered if I’d misjudged them both.

“You seem to know everyone,” I observed as he waved to yet another early-rising shopkeeper.

Elijah smiled, the expression warming his eyes. “It’s important to us, being part of

the community. This town has been good to us.”

I blinked in surprise. It had never occurred to me that the Sterlings might feel a connection to Millcrest beyond just running their business here.

We reached Adler’s shop just as Frank was unlocking the door. The burly alpha raised an eyebrow at our unlikely pairing but invited us in with a gruff nod.

As Elijah explained our purpose—under the guise of gathering information about the tannery situation—I found my gaze drawn to him. The morning light caught in his hair, highlighting strands of gold among the brown. When he smiled at something Frank said, a dimple appeared in his left cheek.

I shook myself, forcing my attention back to the conversation. This was no time to be admiring Elijah Sterling’s dimples.

I watched as Elijah deftly steered the conversation, his easy charm working its magic on Frank. “Say, Frank, didn’t you mention a new shipment of calfskin from that tannery up north? The one with that unique grain?”

Frank’s eyes lit up. “Indeed I did! Let me grab my ledger. I’ve got the details on that beauty right here.”

As Frank disappeared into a back room, I caught Elijah’s subtle wink. “Jack’s not the only clever bastard in our family.”

I stifled a grin, feeling heat rise to my face. His deft handling of the situation left me thoroughly impressed, despite myself. As much as I hated to admit it, they both had a way with people that I could never hope to match.

Frank reemerged from the back room, a leather-bound ledger tucked under his arm.

He set it on the counter with a thump and flipped it open, the pages rustling as he searched for the right entry. Elijah leaned in, his eyes scanning the neat rows of figures and notes. I couldn't help but crane my neck, curiosity getting the better of me as I tried to catch a glimpse of Frank's handwriting.

"Shame about old Thompson," Frank said as Elijah pulled a small leather-bound notebook and a stubby pencil from his jacket. He started jotting something down, his hand moving quickly across the page. "Never thought I'd see the day he'd consider closing up shop."

"You've known Mr. Thompson a long time?" Elijah asked.

Frank nodded, a faraway look in his eyes. "Since we were boys. Used to see his girl at the tannery sometimes, before... well, before she left town."

Elijah and I exchanged a quick glance. I furrowed my brow, trying to recall any mention of Mr. Thompson's daughter. Despite growing up in Millcrest, I'd never heard a whisper about her. She must have left town long before I was born. I caught Elijah's eye and gave a slight shake of my head.

"His daughter?" Elijah prompted casually.

"Aye, though he doesn't speak of her now," Frank replied. "Shame, that. She was a bright little thing."

After bidding Adler good day, we stepped out into the crisp afternoon air. The bell above the door chimed softly behind us as I pulled my worn coat tighter, bracing against the chill that nipped at my nose and ears.

"I didn't know Mr. Thompson had a daughter," I said.

Elijah frowned, his brows drawing together. “From the sound of it, he’s not keen on people knowing.”

We made our way back to Sterling’s Fine Footwear, where Jack waited with sandwiches from Mabel’s bakery. As we ate, Elijah and I filled him in on our conversation with Frank.

“Frank’s handwriting doesn’t match,” Elijah said, his voice low and thoughtful.

I reached for my coffee. The porcelain was warm against my palms, grounding me as I considered our next move. One piece of the puzzle had fallen into place, but it only raised more questions.

“Mr. Adler did mention that Mr. Thompson had a daughter who vanished years ago.” I drummed my fingers on the wood table, my mind racing. “Apparently, he doesn’t even like talking about her...”

“A secret daughter, eh?” Jack mused as he leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “Sounds like it’s time we paid old Thompson a visit.”

An hour later, Jack and I stood outside Thompson’s Tannery. The acrid smell of chemicals and leather permeated the air, making my nose wrinkle.

“Ready?” Jack asked, flashing me a grin that set my heart racing.

I nodded as Jack’s hand slid under my worn coat to settle on the small of my back. He guided me into the tannery, the warmth of his touch seeping through my shirt.

Gus Thompson looked up from his work, surprise flickering across his weathered face. “Mr. Sterling, Mr. Hart. What can I do for you?”

As Jack smoothly explained our presence—something about leather quality and market trends—I let my eyes wander around the office. A framed photograph on the cluttered desk caught my attention. It showed a younger Thompson standing next to a little girl with familiar features.

I listened as Jack smoothly steered the conversation, his charm working its magic on Mr. Thompson just as his brother's had with Mr. Adler. Before I knew it, the old tanner was pulling out his ledger, spreading it open on the desk between us. Jack's fingers danced over the pages, pointing out figures and trends while he kept up a steady stream of industry jargon that made my head spin.

I watched in awe as Jack swiftly tallied a row of numbers in the account book. The depth of his knowledge about the leather industry and shoe business far surpassed my own, despite my years of experience. A twinge of inadequacy twisted in my gut as I realized just how much I still had to learn compared to the Sterling brothers.

"Frank Adler mentioned your daughter earlier," Jack said, his tone casual, "I didn't realize you had children."

Thompson's face hardened. "I don't," he said flatly. "Frank must be mistaken."

Jack raised an eyebrow but didn't press the issue.

While Jack wrapped up our visit with Mr. Thompson, I lingered by his desk, pretending to adjust my shoe. My eyes darted to the photograph, studying it intently. The little girl's face tugged at my memory. Her features seemed achingly familiar.

Then it hit me—those eyes. Wide, bright, and full of promise. They were Martha Sawyer's eyes, before life had dimmed their sparkle. The Martha I knew drifted through town like a ghost. Though demure and polite, her smile never quite reached her eyes.



This photograph of a smiling little girl felt like a relic from another time, preserving a moment of joy that had long since faded.

Leaving the office, I casually sidled up to Jack. We exchanged final pleasantries with Mr. Thompson, my voice steady despite the tension coiled in my chest.

We stepped out of the tannery. The crisp air hit my face, a welcome respite from the pungent leather and chemical odors that had clung to my nostrils inside the tannery.

Jack let out a low whistle. “Well, that was interesting. Did you see how he clammed up at the mention of his daughter?”

I nodded, my mind whirling. “That girl in the photo—she looked just like Martha.”

Jack’s eyes widened. “You think Martha Sawyer is Thompson’s daughter?”

“I do,” I said.

“But why all the secrecy, I wonder?” Jack mused.

I nodded. “Something’s definitely not right.” The image of Martha’s trembling hands as she’d handed over her shoes for repair flashed in my mind. Her darting eyes, the way she’d flinched at every noise. Come to think of it, she’d been jumpy from the moment she’d stepped into my shop up until she practically bolted out the door...

Jack and I hurried back to Sterling’s Fine Footwear, where Elijah waited. As we filled him in on our suspicions, I couldn’t help but notice small details about the brothers I’d never paid attention to before.

The way Jack’s eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. How Elijah absently tapped his fingers against his thigh as he listened. The differences in their

scents—Jack’s spicier, Elijah’s sweeter.

I pushed the observations aside, focusing on the matter at hand.

“If Martha is Thompson’s daughter,” Jack said, “what does that mean for our investigation?”

“It means we need to talk to her,” I said firmly. “Tomorrow morning, first thing.”

Elijah nodded in agreement. “We’ll go together. Safety in numbers.”

The morning air bit at my cheeks as Jack, Elijah, and I made our way to Martha Sawyer's house. Frost crunched beneath our feet, and our breaths puffed out in small clouds. Despite the cold, my palms sweated inside my worn gloves.

"Remember," Jack said, his voice low, "we're just here to ask a few questions."

I nodded. We couldn't risk spooking Martha with heavy-handed questioning. My fingers fidgeted with a loose thread on my glove, betraying my nervousness despite my efforts to appear at ease.

As we rounded the corner onto Martha's street, Elijah suddenly stopped short.

"Look," he said, pointing.

Martha's front door stood ajar, swaying slightly in the breeze. We exchanged glances and quickened our pace.

"Martha?" I called out as we approached the porch. "Miss Sawyer?"

No answer. Jack pushed the door open wider, and we stepped inside.

The house was a mess. Drawers hung open, their contents strewn across the floor. Papers littered every surface. In the kitchen, a chair lay overturned, and a broken teacup lay in pieces by the sink.

“She left in a hurry,” Elijah murmured, surveying the chaos. “Or...”

“There was one heck of a fight,” Jack concluded.

We split up to search the house. I found myself in Martha’s bedroom, rifling through her belongings with shaking hands. What was I looking for? What did I expect to find?

As I ran my hand along the underside of her dresser, my fingers caught on something. A small latch, hidden from view. I pulled, and a secret compartment sprang open.

Inside lay a leather-bound ledger and a few folded pieces of paper. My heart raced as I opened the ledger. Page after page of entries, all detailing shipments of leather, including what must be the rare leather stolen from Thompson’s Tannery.

“Jack! Elijah!” I called out. “I found something!”

They rushed in as I unfolded a piece of paper. The small square piece of parchment looked suspiciously familiar. My eyes widened as I read it aloud:

Pay the piper, or you’ll wish exposure was your only concern. Tick tock, time’s running out...

Jack let out a low whistle. “Looks like Martha’s in more trouble than we thought.”

Elijah nodded grimly. “We need to call the sheriff.”

Twenty minutes later, Sheriff Hank Dawson stomped into Martha’s house, his heavy boots tracking snow onto the carpet. He was a bear of a man, with a bristling mustache and eyes that seemed to miss nothing.

“Alright, boys,” he growled, “what’s all this about?”

We explained our suspicions about Martha’s connection to Mr. Thompson and showed him the ledger I’d found hidden in the secret compartment. As I spoke, I couldn’t help but notice the sheriff’s dismissive expression.

“So, you’re telling me,” Dawson said, his voice dripping with skepticism, “that sweet, little Miss Sawyer is not only old Thompson’s long-lost daughter but she’s also involved in some kind of leather smuggling operation?”

Put like that, it did sound far-fetched. I felt my cheeks heat with embarrassment.

“We’re just reporting what we found, Sheriff,” Jack said, his tone carefully neutral. “Martha’s missing, and this ledger was hidden in her room. Don’t you think that warrants investigation?”

Dawson grunted as he flipped through the ledger, brow furrowed. “I’ll look into it. But I wouldn’t get your hopes up about some grand conspiracy. More likely, she just skipped town to avoid her debts.”

As the sheriff left, promising halfheartedly to put out an alert for Martha, I couldn’t help but wonder if we’d overreacted by calling him. Jack and Elijah shared a glance, their expressions reflecting the same unease that churned in my gut.

“Let’s head back to your shop,” Elijah suggested. “We can go over everything there.”

I flipped the sign on the door to “Closed” and ushered Jack and Elijah inside Hart’s Shoe Repair. The familiar scent of leather and polish wrapped around me, momentarily pushing aside the unease that had settled in my gut. I pulled up a couple of rickety stools for the brothers and perched on the edge of my workbench.

“I have a confession,” I said, my voice quiet. “I... I didn’t show the sheriff everything we found.”

Jack’s eyebrows shot up. “What do you mean?”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the threatening note and a couple of folded pieces of paper I’d taken from the secret compartment under Martha’s dresser. “I kept this.”

To my surprise, both brothers broke into grins.

“Well, well,” Jack said, a note of admiration in his voice. “I was wondering where that note got to. Looks like our little omega has some tricks up his sleeve.”

Elijah nodded approvingly. “Good instincts, Milo. I had a feeling the sheriff wasn’t taking this seriously.”

Their praise sent a warm flutter through my chest. I pushed the feeling aside, focusing on the task at hand.

I carefully unfolded the paper, smoothing out the creases with trembling fingers. Jack and Elijah pressed close, their warmth and scents enveloping me. Cedar, bergamot, sandalwood, and citrus mingled in the air, making my skin prickle. I fought the urge to squirm, acutely aware of their proximity.

Martha’s neat, girlish script covered the page in a jumble of notes and scribbles. My eyes darted across the paper, trying to make sense of it all. One line caught my attention:

SHD shirt—custom tailoring, paid IOU. No entry in my books.

I frowned, rereading the words. It didn't fit with anything else we knew. Why would Martha deliberately leave this out of her official records?

I tapped the perplexing entry with my index finger. "What do you make of this?"

Jack leaned in closer, his cedar-and-bergamot scent surrounding me. His breath tickled my ear, making me shiver involuntarily. The warmth of his body so near mine made it hard to concentrate. I swallowed, trying to focus on the task at hand.

Jack's finger traced the line. He tapped it thoughtfully, his touch deliberate. "Martha's involved in the leather theft, that much is clear. But this entry..." He paused, his brow furrowing.

I frowned, piecing together the fragments of information. "An IOU for custom tailoring? Maybe it's just a simple favor?"

I mulled over the information, not quite seeing the significance.

"Could be," Jack agreed, his voice low and thoughtful. "But why keep it off the books?"

"She's being coerced," Elijah said, holding up both threatening notes side by side. "The handwriting matches. Whoever threatened you also threatened Martha."

I leaned in, studying the notes. "You're right. And the paper... doesn't it look familiar?"

Jack's eyes widened. "It's the same type used in Thompson's ledgers at the tannery. I'd bet my last dollar on it."

We sat in silence for a moment, letting the implications sink in. Martha, Mr.

Thompson's daughter, involved in the leather theft. Someone blackmailing her, using paper from the tannery. And now, Martha missing.

"What do we do now?" I asked.

Elijah's expression turned serious. "We need to be careful. Whoever wrote these notes could be dangerous. And now that Martha's gone..."

"They might come after Milo next," Jack finished, his jaw clenching.

A chill rippled through my body, raising goosebumps along my arms. "You don't really think?—"

"We're not taking any chances," Jack said firmly. "We'll stay here. Keep watch."

Elijah nodded in agreement. "At least until we get to the bottom of this. Better safe than sorry."

I opened my mouth to protest, but the determined look in their eyes stopped me. Part of me—a larger part than I cared to admit—felt relieved at the thought of not being alone.

As night fell, we settled in for a long vigil. Jack and Elijah insisted on taking the shop floor, leaving me to sleep in my small apartment upstairs. I tossed and turned, unable to shake the feeling of unease that had settled over me.

A sudden chill jerked me awake. The fire in my small stove had gone out, leaving the room freezing. Shivering, I pulled on my worn flannel robe and stumbled out of bed. My toes curled against the icy floorboards as I fumbled for matches in the dark.

With stiff fingers, I struck a match and coaxed the stove back to life. The coal caught



slowly, reluctant in the unusual cold. I added a few pieces of kindling, watching the flames lick hesitantly at the fresh fuel. The radiator pipes groaned and creaked as warmth began to seep back into the room.

As feeling returned to my extremities, my thoughts drifted to Jack and Elijah downstairs. With their hardier alpha constitutions, the brothers probably didn't feel half as frozen as I did. Still, the shop's old walls offered little insulation. This sudden cold snap likely troubled even those two, despite their robust alpha physiology.

I grabbed an extra blanket and made my way to the rickety stairs. The wooden steps protested under my weight as I descended to check on my two guardians.

I found Jack and Elijah huddled around the shop's old potbelly stove, cursing softly as they tried to get it lit.

"Damn this infernal contraption," Jack muttered, striking another match.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Here, let me show you."

With practiced ease, I lit the stove, coaxing the flames to life. Soon, warmth began to spread through the shop.

"How do you stand it?" Elijah asked, rubbing his hands together. "It must be freezing up there."

I shrugged, suddenly self-conscious. "You get used to it, I suppose."

Jack's expression softened. "You shouldn't have to. Come on, stay down here where we can keep each other warm."

Before I could protest, they were arranging blankets on the floor near the stove. I

found myself sandwiched between them, their body heat more comforting than any fire.

As we lay there, I became acutely aware of their scents. Jack's spicy cedar, Elijah's sweet sandalwood—they wrapped around me like a cocoon. My own scent, warm vanilla and cocoa, seemed to intensify in response.

Jack nuzzled against my neck, inhaling deeply. "God, Milo, you smell incredible."

A shiver ran through me, and not from the cold. Elijah's hand found mine, his thumb tracing gentle circles on my palm.

"Is this okay?" he murmured, his breath hot against my ear.

I nodded, not trusting my voice. My body thrummed with need, my omega instincts singing at the proximity of two strong alphas.

Jack's lips brushed against my pulse point, and a small whimper escaped me. That seemed to break the last of their restraint.

Suddenly, Jack's mouth claimed mine—thoroughly, passionately—his tongue exploring with eager curiosity. Then Elijah was there, his kisses softer but no less intense.

When we'd kissed in their shop, it had been a simple exchange of favors. I assumed they'd invented another way to torment me. But this... my lips tingled as Elijah pulled back only for Jack to claim them again, their unique tastes mingling until I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

The warmth of their bodies pressed against mine. Jack's breath was hot on my neck as his teeth grazed the sensitive skin of my throat. Elijah's hands roamed beneath my

shirt, his calloused fingertips tracing intricate patterns across my ribs.

“We want you,” Jack growled, his voice thick with need.

Elijah’s lips brushed my ear. “Say yes. Please.”

I nodded, unable to form words as arousal coursed through me. With a low growl, Jack rose and scooped me into his arms in one smooth motion.

“Bed,” he commanded, taking the steps two at a time. “We’re not taking you on that cold floor.”

Jack’s strong arms cradled me as he carried me into the bedroom. Elijah followed close behind. Jack lowered me onto the bed with surprising gentleness. The mattress dipped as both alphas joined me, their hands roaming over my body with eager reverence. I shivered as they peeled away my clothing, layer by layer, until I lay bare before them.

My breath caught in my throat as I watched them shed their own garments, revealing tanned skin and sculpted muscles. The sight of them, powerful and aroused, sent a jolt of desire straight through me. I couldn’t help but stare at their cocks, thick and hard. My hole clenched at the thought of being filled by them, aching to be stretched and claimed.

Elijah’s lips found my chest, pressing soft, warm kisses along my collarbone and down to my sternum. His touch ignited sparks beneath my skin, and I arched into him, craving more.

“Beautiful,” he breathed against my flesh, the word a caress in itself.

Jack’s dark eyes gleamed as he took in the sight of us. A predatory smile curved his

lips, sending a delicious shiver through me. "And all ours," he growled, voice thick with possession and promise.

Jack's calloused palms slid over my hips, his grip firm and sure, pulling me closer. Elijah's lips, soft and teasing, brushed against my neck, his breath warm on my skin. The contrast of their touch, one teasing and demanding, the other coaxing and almost hesitant, sent a thrill through me.

I shivered as Elijah's lips traveled downward, his stubble scratching against my sensitive skin. My muscles tensed in anticipation as he nuzzled the hollow of my throat, his mouth trailing lower still. Jack pressed his thumbs into the sensitive flesh of my inner thighs, urging me to open wider for him.

The scratch of Elijah's scruff against my nipple made me gasp. He teased it with his tongue, sucking gently, then nibbled a path down my torso.

I tensed when Jack's finger pushed inside me. "Easy. That's it," he urged as he slowly prepared me, his finger sliding inside, stretching me, before adding a second.

I felt Elijah shift beside me, his body radiating heat. His fingers traced lazy circles on my thigh, eliciting shivers as he watched his brother work me open.

"Touch him, little brother." Jack's voice was low and rough, his eyes dark with desire.

"Please," I begged, my voice hoarse. "I need..."

Elijah's hand closed around my cock. Heeding Jack's instruction, he began to stroke me in a steady rhythm. A groan tore from my throat, my back arching as sensations overwhelmed me.

“Use your thumb,” Jack said. “Stroke the tip.”

My breath caught as Elijah obeyed, the pad of his thumb circling the sensitive head. My hips jerked, seeking more pressure, more stimulation. A needy whine slipped past my lips.

“Feeling good, sweetheart?” Jack asked, flashing me a wolfish grin.

I moaned, reaching for him. “Jack, please...”

I gasped as Elijah’s tongue swirled around my nipple, licking and sucking, his breath hot against my sensitive skin. “Eli!” I cried out, my body arching, my hands gripping Elijah’s shoulders as I spent myself, my release coating his fingers.

Jack’s voice, low and demanding, filled my ears. “Taste him.”

“Oh, god,” I whimpered, my face heating with embarrassment. Boneless, I watched through hooded eyes as Elijah’s tongue swiped over the pad of his thumb, his eyes closing briefly as he savored me. “That’s... that’s...”

“You should take the first ride, little brother,” Jack purred, his voice low and husky. His dark eyes met mine. “What do you say, sweetheart?”

My breath caught in my throat at his words. Heat pooled in my belly as I nodded, a soft sigh escaping my lips. I glanced at Elijah, whose eyes had gone wide.

“You sure?” Elijah’s voice wavered slightly, his hand gentle on my thigh. “I mean... wow. This is really happening?”

Jack chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest. “Oh, it’s happening alright.”

Elijah swallowed audibly. “What about you?” He asked Jack, his fingers tracing patterns on my skin.

“I’ll get my turn soon enough,” Jack said, giving me a wink that made my stomach flip flop.

I couldn’t help the flush that crept up my neck at his words. My skin prickled with heat, a warmth that spread from my collar to the tips of my ears. Both alphas pressed closer, drawing a soft whimper from my lips.

Jack’s fingers touched my knee. He traced a tantalizing path upward, reigniting sparks through my body. I bit my lip, trying to stifle the small sounds threatening to escape. The air was thick with the musk of their arousal, making my own penis throb with need even though I had just come.

Jack’s hand slid higher, teasing me.

Elijah swallowed hard, his gaze flicking between Jack and me, asking silent permission. I nodded eagerly, and he breathed out a shaky "Okay."

“Just wait till you see him fall apart,” Jack murmured as he urged Elijah between my legs. “It’ll be a sight to behold.”

Elijah positioned himself, his hands trembling slightly. Jack guided his brother with a steady hand on his hip, his deep voice instructing Elijah to penetrate me.

“Easy now,” Jack encouraged. “Slowly at first. Just like I told you.”

I felt the stretch as Elijah pushed inside, a sharp mix of pleasure and pain that made me keen.

"That's it, take your time," Jack encouraged, his voice gentle but firm. "Let him adjust."

Elijah's hands braced on either side of me as he began to move, his breath coming in short gasps. Jack's fingers tangled with mine, his thumb stroking my wrist as he murmured instructions to his brother. "Nice and steady, Eli." The rhythm of Elijah's hips built a coil of tension in my core.

"Deeper, Eli," Jack said, his voice hoarse. "Look for the spot that makes him go dizzy."

Elijah groaned, his body working mine as he sought a deeper angle. I cried out when one well-aimed thrust sent a jolt of white-hot electricity through me and clenched around Elijah's length. His hips snapped forward in response, his pace quickening to a frantic rhythm that left me breathless and clinging to the sheets and to Jack. The pressure built, a delicious burn that had me panting and writhing beneath Elijah.

"God, sweetheart, you look so fucking perfect taking my brother's cock," Jack growled, his eyes dark with lust.

Elijah's release triggered mine, and I cried out as pleasure crashed through me, each pulse of bliss more intense than the last. Elijah's fingers bit into my hips as he spilled himself deep within me, his body shuddering with the force of it. Jack's hand gentled on my wrist, his thumb brushing over my pulse as he soothed me through the aftershocks.

My body trembled as Elijah and I remained locked together, our breaths coming in ragged gasps. The intensity of what we'd just experienced left me reeling, my mind struggling to process it all. I'd never done that before, much less being knotted, and the unfamiliar sensation sent waves of conflicting emotions through me.

Elijah's arms tightened around me, his face buried in the crook of my neck. I felt his heartbeat thundering against my chest, matching my own frantic rhythm. Neither of us seemed to know quite what to say or do next.

"You two doing okay?" Jack's deep voice rumbled, cutting through the charged silence.

"How are you feeling, sweetheart?" Jack asked, his fingers brushing a stray lock of hair from my forehead.

I opened my mouth to respond, but only a shaky exhale escaped. Jack nodded in understanding, his thumb tracing soothing circles on my cheek. He turned his attention to Elijah, tilting his chin up with gentle fingers.

"And you, little brother?" he murmured.

Elijah made a soft sound, somewhere between a whimper and a sigh. Jack chuckled warmly, the sound vibrating through the air.

"That good, huh?"

As Jack continued to murmur words of praise and reassurance, the initial shock began to fade. In its place, I felt a deep bond forming, linking the three of us in a way I'd never imagined possible.

I felt Elijah's knot subside, his warmth slowly withdrawing from my body. A shiver ran through me at the sudden emptiness, but it only fueled my desire for more. Eli rolled off me, his absence leaving my skin prickling with goosebumps. He settled close, his body a comforting furnace against my side. I found myself instinctively leaning into his warmth. My gaze locked onto Jack, his dark eyes smoldering with barely contained need.



“Jack,” I breathed, voice hoarse and needy. “Please...”

He understood without further explanation. In one fluid motion, he moved between my legs, strong hands gripping my hips.

"God, you're incredible," Jack growled. "It was torture waiting my turn."

My breath hitched as I felt the head of Jack's cock nudge at my entrance, thick and insistent. I gasped as he entered me, my body stretching to accommodate his impressive length just as it had his brother's.

"That's it, sweetheart. Take all of me."

The feeling was indescribable—different from Elijah, yet equally intoxicating, a delicious burn as he thrust forward, filling me. A whimper escaped my lips in response to his words.

Elijah pressed closer, his lips finding my neck. “Never imagined we’d have you like this,” he murmured against my skin. His fingers tangled with mine as Jack set a steady rhythm, each thrust sending jarring shocks of pleasure rippling through my body. I clung to him, nails digging into his broad shoulders as I lost myself in the sensations. The room filled with our mingled scents and the heady musk of arousal.

“Fuck, you’re incredible,” Jack growled, his hips snapping as he thrust into me. “Come on, sweetheart. Let us hear you.” The command shot straight to my cock, eliciting that sharp, familiar sensation that signaled my impending release.

Jack's dark eyes flicked to Elijah.

“Don’t just lay there watching, little brother. Come show our omega how good he is for us.”

My breath caught at his possessive words, my inner omega purring at being claimed by both alphas. Elijah's fingers ghosted across my cheek. His touch was gentle, almost reverent, a contrast to Jack's commanding presence. I leaned into the caress, craving more of that tender exploration.

"Tell him," Jack demanded, thrusting his cock deep inside me, "how perfect he is."

"You're doing amazing," Elijah said. "So beautiful, so perfect."

A tremor raced through me at his praise, my scent blooming sweet and rich with pleasure. His words made me feel cherished, wanted, desired.

The stretch and burn of Jack's possession pushed me higher, driving me to the brink despite my body's exhaustion. His cock filled me, his hips pumping relentlessly. My third release of the night crashed over me, dragging ragged cries from my throat. Jack's teeth sank into my shoulder as he found his own release, his cock pulsing inside me.

His fingers dug into my hips as he knotted me just as his brother had. Waves of pleasure rippled through my oversensitive flesh as Jack's cock continued to pulse inside me. The weight of his body pressed me into the mattress, grounding me as aftershocks made my muscles quiver and clench around his knot. His touch turned feather-light, fingers tracing patterns across my sweat-slicked skin. His lips brushed my neck, my shoulder, each kiss a wordless apology for the marks he'd left there—such a contrast to his usual confident swagger.

Elijah's warmth enveloped both Jack and me as he wrapped his strong arms around us. His scent—sandalwood, citrus, and honey—mingled with Jack's cedar and bergamot, while my own vanilla and cocoa wove through them both. The mix created a heady cocktail that made my head spin with contentment and belonging.

In that moment, I knew I was truly theirs, and they were mine.

Morning light filtered through the threadbare curtains, rousing me from a deep sleep. The bed beside me was empty, but still warm. Voices drifted up from the shop below, along with the tantalizing aroma of fresh coffee and... was that bacon?

I dressed quickly, wincing slightly at the pleasant soreness in my muscles. Heat crept up my neck as memories of last night flooded back. As I descended the stairs, the sight that greeted me warmed my heart more than any stove ever could.

Jack and Elijah bustled around the shop, laying out a feast on my battered workbench. Fresh bread, eggs, bacon, and a steaming pot of coffee. My stomach growled appreciatively.

“Ah, sleeping beauty awakens,” Jack teased, pressing a mug of coffee into my hands.

Elijah’s smile was softer, but no less warm. A pink flush stained his cheeks as our eyes met. “We thought you could use a good breakfast.”

I ducked my head, unable to stop my own blush or the sudden moisture that filled my eyes. I blinked back tears. “You didn’t have to do all this.”

“We wanted to,” Elijah said simply, his fingers fidgeting with the edge of his sleeve.

As we ate, conversation flowed easily. It felt... right, somehow. As if this was how mornings were always meant to be.

“Oh,” Jack said suddenly, gesturing towards my workbench. “Those shoes—they’re coming along nicely.” A knowing grin spread across his face as he winked at me. “I recognized the leather.”

I glanced at the half-finished pumps, guilt twisting in my gut. “Mrs. Thackeray’s order. I’ve been so distracted with everything... I’ll have to rush to finish them.”

Elijah squeezed my hand. “We’ll help. Between the three of us, we’ll have them done in no time.”

A knock at the door interrupted our cozy breakfast. Jack went to answer it, his easy smile faltering as he saw who stood on the other side.

Sheriff Dawson pushed his way into the shop, his face grim. Two deputies —Deputy Smith and Deputy Rogers—flanked him, hands resting on their holsters.

“Milo Hart,” Dawson said, his voice echoing in the sudden silence. “I have a warrant for your arrest.”

The room spun around me. “Arrest? But... why?”

Dawson’s mustache twitched. “We have a witness who saw someone matching your description near the tannery on the night of the theft. You’re coming with us.”

As the deputies moved towards me, Jack and Elijah stepped protectively in front of me.

“This is ridiculous,” Jack snarled. “Milo had nothing to do with the theft.”

Elijah’s voice was calmer, but no less intense. “Sheriff, surely you can’t believe?—“

“Step aside, boys,” Dawson growled. “Unless you want to join him down at the station.”

I placed a hand on each of their shoulders, gently pushing them aside. “It’s okay,” I

said, my voice steadier than I felt. “I’ll go.”

As Deputy Smith slapped the cold cuffs on my wrists, Jack’s nostrils flared.

“Are cuffs really necessary? He’s been a respected member of this town since he was in fucking diapers.”

“Standard procedure,” Smith muttered.

“To hell with procedure.” Elijah’s usual easy manner vanished. “Where’s he gonna run off to?”

Sheriff Dawson raised his hand. “Fine. No cuffs.”

The deputy removed the restraint, leaving behind a cold ring where the metal had pressed against my skin. I caught Jack and Elijah’s eyes. The muscles in Jack’s jaw twitched. Elijah’s fingers curled into fists at his sides. Something dark and protective flashed across both their faces, eliciting a storm of emotions inside me.

“Don’t worry,” I said, trying to sound braver than I felt. “We’ll get this sorted out soon. Just... just finish those shoes for Mrs. Thackeray, will you?”

As the sheriff led me out of my shop—my home—I clung to that one normal thought. Shoes to mend. Customers to please. It was easier than facing the reality of the cramped cell waiting at Millcrest Courthouse & Jail.

The last thing I saw before the police car door closed was Jack and Elijah, standing in the doorway of Hart’s Shoe Repair.

Whatever happened next, I knew one thing for certain.

I wasn't alone anymore.

The iron bars of the cell door clanged shut, the sound echoing through the Millcrest Courthouse & Jail. I sank onto the narrow cot, the thin mattress offering little comfort against the metal frame. The events of the past few days whirled through my mind like leaves caught in an autumn storm.

How had I ended up here? Just days ago, my biggest worry had been scraping together enough money to keep my shop open. Now, I sat accused of theft, separated from the two men who had somehow become the center of my world.

I closed my eyes, remembering the warmth of Jack and Elijah's bodies pressed against mine, their scents mingling with my own. The ghost of their touches lingered on my skin, a bittersweet reminder of what I stood to lose.

The creak of the jail's outer door jerked me from my reverie. Heavy footsteps approached, accompanied by the jangle of keys. Sheriff Dawson appeared, his mouth set in a grim line.

"You've got a visitor, Hart," he growled.

My heart leapt. Jack? Elijah? But as the sheriff stepped aside, my hopes crashed down around me.

Mr. Thompson shuffled into view, his weathered face a mask of discomfort. He couldn't meet my eyes as Sheriff Dawson ushered him to a chair in front of my cell.

“Go ahead, Mr. Thompson,” the sheriff prompted. “Tell me again what you saw the night of the theft.”

Thompson cleared his throat, his gaze fixed on a point somewhere over my left shoulder. “It was late. I’d gone back to the tannery to fetch some paperwork I’d forgotten. That’s when I saw him.” He jerked his chin in my direction. “Lurking around the back of the building. When he saw me, he ran off.”

I gaped at him, disbelief and anger warring inside me. “That’s a lie! I was nowhere near the tannery that night!”

“Now, now,” Sheriff Dawson said, his tone maddeningly calm. “No need for theatrics. Mr. Thompson has no reason to lie, does he?”

But as I stared at Thompson, I saw something flicker in his eyes. Guilt? Fear? Whatever it was, it vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

“If that’s all, Sheriff,” Thompson mumbled, already turning toward the door.

Dawson nodded, clapping the older man on the shoulder. “Thank you for your cooperation. We’ll be in touch if we need anything else.”

As Thompson shuffled out, I called after him. “Mr. Thompson! Please, you know I didn’t do this. Why are you lying?”

Mr. Thompson turned and his eyes locked with mine one last time. Something flickered across his weathered face—regret, perhaps. He hesitated for a heartbeat, before shaking his head almost imperceptibly. Then he was gone, leaving me alone with the sheriff and my growing suspicions.

Dawson turned to me, a smirk playing at the corners of his mustache. “Looks like



your goose is cooked, Hart. Might want to start thinking about who's going to run that little shop of yours while you're enjoying the state's hospitality."

With that parting shot, he strode out, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I paced the small cell, my mind racing. Something about this whole situation felt wrong. Thompson's behavior, the sheriff's smugness... And then there was Martha. Where did she fit into all of this?

As if summoned by my thoughts, a memory surfaced. The ledger we'd found in Martha's house. There had been an entry that had seemed odd at the time:

SHD shirt—custom tailoring, paid IOU. No entry in my books.

I froze mid-step. SHD. Sheriff Hank Dawson. The pieces began to fall into place with dizzying speed.

The sheriff was involved. Somehow, he was using Martha to blackmail Thompson. But why?

I chewed my lip, my mind churning. What was the sheriff's angle in all this? The leather theft seemed like small potatoes compared to blackmail. I sank back onto the cot, my head spinning. If I was right, then Martha and Thompson were both in danger. And I was stuck in this cell, powerless to help them.

My thoughts turned to Jack and Elijah. God, how I wished they were here. Their steady presence, their unwavering support... I'd come to rely on it more than I'd realized.

I shifted on the cot, wincing slightly at the lingering soreness from our night together. The memory of their hands on my skin, their lips tracing paths of fire across my

body, sent a shiver through me despite the chill of the cell.

The realization struck me. My breath caught in my throat, and for a moment, the world around me seemed to blur at the edges. This raw, all-consuming feeling that had been simmering beneath the surface—it wasn't just a fleeting spark of desire or the comfortable warmth of friendship. No, this was something far more profound, more terrifying in its intensity. My heart raced, pounding against my ribcage as if trying to break free. I clenched my fists, nails digging into my palms, anchoring myself to reality. Somewhere along the way, without my noticing, I'd fallen in love with them both.

The realization left me breathless. I'd always scoffed at the idea of true mates, dismissing it as romantic nonsense. I'd thought Jack and Elijah were the enemy, denying what had been right in front of me all along. But now, faced with the possibility of never seeing them again, I understood. They were my mates, my alphas. And I might lose them before I ever got the chance to tell them how I felt.

A commotion outside my cell drew me from my thoughts. Sheriff Dawson's voice, raised in anger, filtered through the thick walls.

"I don't care what it takes, Smith," he snarled. "We need to take care of Thompson and his girl before they talk. You hear me?"

My blood ran cold. Martha and Thompson were in immediate danger, and I was trapped behind these bars, unable to warn them.

I pressed myself against the cell door, straining to hear more. But the voices moved away, leaving me with nothing but the echo of the sheriff's threat ringing in my ears.

Panic clawed at my throat. I had to get out of here. Had to warn Martha and Thompson. Had to find Jack and Elijah before it was too late.

But how? The cell door loomed before me, solid and unyielding. I was no escape artist, no hardened criminal with tricks up my sleeve. I was just a cobbler, in way over his head.

I slumped against the bars, despair threatening to overwhelm me. Then, unbidden, my grandfather's voice echoed in my memory.

"Milo, my boy," he'd often said, his eyes twinkling with mischief, "a good cobbler can fix more than just shoes. With clever hands and a quick mind, you can mend any problem life throws your way."

I looked down at my hands, calloused and scarred from years of working with leather and tools. Then my gaze fell on the cell's lock.

It wasn't so different from the intricate fastenings on some of the fancier shoes I'd repaired over the years. Complex, yes, but not impossible to understand. Not for someone with clever hands and a desperate need. Hope, fragile but persistent, bloomed in my chest. I might not be an escape artist, but I was a damn good cobbler.

I slipped my hand into my pocket, fingers curling around the pouch where I kept extra thread and awl needles. With a quick glance at the cell door, I withdrew a thin, pointed needle and crouched before the lock.

I inserted the needle's tip into the keyhole, feeling for the tumblers inside. The cool metal against my fingers brought back memories of repairing delicate ladies' boots, their tiny buckles requiring a similar delicate touch.

I closed my eyes, focusing on the subtle vibrations transmitted through the tool. Each click and scrape told a story, just like the worn soles of a working man's boots. I manipulated the awl needle, coaxing the lock's inner workings like I would tease a stubborn leather seam.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I worked, the silence of the jail broken only by my measured breathing and the soft scraping of metal on metal. I thought of my grandfather, who'd taught me that patience and persistence could overcome any obstacle.

The lock resisted, but I persevered. This was no different than salvaging a pair of shoes others might deem beyond repair. Every mechanism had its weakness. I just had to find this one's.

As I worked, I thought of Jack and Elijah. Of Martha and Thompson. Of all the people counting on me, even if they didn't know it yet.

I couldn't fail them. I wouldn't.

The lock clicked softly beneath my fingers, and the cell door swung open.

## Page 6

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6

My heart pounded in my chest as I peered out into the dimly lit corridor. The sheriff's office lay just beyond, a thin strip of light visible beneath the closed door.

I took a deep breath, steadying my nerves. I had to get out of here, had to warn Martha and Thompson. And Jack and Elijah... God, I needed to see them, to make sure they were safe.

Slipping out of the cell, I crept down the hallway on silent feet. Years of tiptoeing around the shop to avoid waking my grandfather so he could get an extra hour or two of much-needed rest had taught me how to move quietly. I pressed my ear to the sheriff's door, straining to hear any movement inside.

"...just get it done," Dawson's muffled voice growled. "We need to tie up these loose ends before the state boys start sniffing around."

I froze, hardly daring to breathe. Deputy Smith mumbled something I couldn't make out.

"No, you idiot," Dawson snapped. "We can't just dump 'em in the river. It's got to look like an accident. A fire at the tannery, maybe. Kill two birds with one stone—get rid of Thompson and his brat, and destroy any evidence linking us to the theft."

My blood ran cold. They were planning to murder Martha and her father. I had to get out of here, had to warn them.

The sound of a chair scraping against the floor sent me scurrying back down the hallway. I ducked into a supply closet just as the office door opened, my heart thundering so loudly I was sure they'd hear it.

"I'm heading out," Dawson said. "You stay here and keep an eye on things. And for God's sake, don't let anyone near that cell."

Footsteps echoed down the corridor, followed by the slam of the outer door. I waited, counting to a hundred before daring to peek out.

The coast was clear. I slipped out of the closet and made my way to the back exit, praying it wouldn't be locked. The handle turned easily under my hand, and I stepped out into the cool night air.

Freedom. But no time to savor it. I had to find Jack and Elijah.

I ran through the darkened streets, keeping to the shadows. Sterling's Fine Footwear lay just ahead. But as I rounded the corner, my heart sank. The shop was dark, no sign of the brothers. A bitter wind whipped through the alleyway, carrying stinging flurries of snow that bit at my exposed skin. My thin shirt offered little protection against the biting cold. I longed for my grandfather's old coat, threadbare but warm, still hanging on its peg back at the shop. Even that worn-out garment would have been a blessing in this frigid night air. My teeth chattered as I hugged myself, trying to conserve what little warmth I had left.

A car engine roared to life nearby. I ducked behind a parked truck, watching as Sheriff Dawson's patrol car sped past, heading in the direction of Thompson's Tannery.

No time to search for Jack and Elijah. I had to get to the tannery before it was too late.

I ran faster than I'd ever run in my life, my lungs burning with each gasping breath. Slipping through old Mrs. Peterson's yard, I scaled her weathered wooden fence with practiced ease, then headed toward the railway. My boots scattered gravel as I darted between two abandoned boxcars, their rusted sides towering like steel sentries in the dark.

This shortcut behind the industrial district—a route learned during childhood escapades—cut through the old rail yard where locomotives once thundered past. The tannery's sharp, chemical tang stung my nostrils as I drew near. Sheriff Dawson's Model A rumbled in the distance, still winding along the main road that curved past the mill's grain silos.

A flash of headlights caught me mid-stride, and I stumbled on loose track ballast. The Model A's engine snarled closer as I crashed to my knees, stones biting through my trousers. Dawson's headlights swept across my back, pinning me like a butterfly to cork. I wedged myself between stacks of rusted barrels, their chemical stench burning my throat. The Model A's engine cut off at the tannery's loading dock, and Sheriff Dawson's boots crunched across gravel before the heavy door groaned shut behind him.

A faint light flickered in one of the tannery's windows as I approached. Creeping around to the back of the building, I found a door slightly ajar and slipped inside. The acrid smell of chemicals and leather hit me in full force, assaulting my nose.

Voices drifted from the office upstairs. I climbed the steps carefully, wincing at every creak of the old wood.

"...can't do this," Martha Thompson's voice, trembling with fear. "Please, Hank. We'll leave town, never breathe a word to anyone."

"It's too late for that," Dawson growled. "You've caused me enough trouble

already.”

I peered through the crack in the door. Thompson sat slumped in a chair, his hands bound behind him. Martha stood beside her father with Deputy Smith’s hand clamped on her upper arm, holding her firmly in place... or upright. Her eyes, wide with a mix of fear and defiance, darted between Thompson and Dawson. Tears streamed down her face as she struggled against her own bonds.

Dawson paced the room, a gun in his hand. “You just couldn’t leave well enough alone. And now look where it’s got you.”

Dawson’s eyes narrowed as he glared at Martha. “We had it all planned out. The leather, the money, our new life. But you couldn’t keep your trap shut, could you? Had to go crawling back to daddy. And then you tried to take back that scrap we planted?”

“Sloppy, Martha.” Dawson sneered.

Martha sobbed, her shoulders shaking.

“We could’ve let the Hart boy take the fall, but now?” He shook his head, his tone cold and calculated. “Now it’s all gone to hell.”

I felt my heart racing, blood pounding in my ears. This was worse than I’d imagined. The pieces were falling into place, but the picture they formed was uglier than anything I could have dreamed up.

I had to do something. But what? I was unarmed, outmatched. If I burst in now, all three of us would end up dead.

A floorboard creaked beneath my foot. Dawson whirled around, his gun trained on



the door.

“Who’s there?” he barked. “Show yourself!”

My mind raced. There was nowhere to hide, no way to escape. So I did the only thing I could think of.

I stepped into the room, hands raised. “It’s just me, Sheriff.”

Dawson’s eyes narrowed. “Hart? How the hell did you get out of your cell?”

I forced a sheepish grin. “You’d be surprised what a man can do with an awl needle and some ingenuity.”

“Milo, run!” Martha cried. “He’s going to kill us all!”

Dawson backhanded her, the crack of flesh on flesh echoing through the room. “Shut up!”

Rage boiled in my chest. I took a step forward, but Dawson’s gun swung back to me.

“Don’t be stupid, boy,” he sneered. “You’re in over your head.”

“I know about all of it,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady. “I know you’ve been blackmailing Mr. Thompson. Using Martha to keep him in line.”

Dawson’s face twisted with fury. “You don’t know anything.”

“I know enough,” I countered. “Enough to bring you down. The state police are on their way, Sheriff. It’s over.”

It was a bluff, but I prayed he'd buy it. For a moment, uncertainty flickered in Dawson's eyes. Then his face hardened.

"Nice try, kid. But you're not talking your way out of this one."

He raised the gun, and I closed my eyes, bracing for the impact. A gunshot rang out, but the pain I expected never came.

I opened my eyes to see Dawson on the ground, clutching his shoulder. Jack stood in the doorway, a smoking pistol in his hand.

"Sorry we're late to the party," Jack said, flashing me a grin. "Had a nice chat with the state bulls about the sheriff's extracurricular activities."

Relief overwhelmed me, so intense I nearly collapsed. "How did you?—"

Elijah rushed past Jack, his eyes wide with concern as he made a beeline for me. His hands gripped my shoulders, warm and steady.

"Are you alright?"

"I am now," I managed, my voice shakier than I'd like.

Eli's brow furrowed as he rubbed my arms. "You're frozen solid."

Before I could protest, he shrugged off his coat and draped it over my shoulders. The weight of it settled around me, and I couldn't help but breathe in deeply. Eli's scent enveloped me—sandalwood, citrus, and a touch of honey. My racing heart began to slow, my alpha's pheromones working their magic.

I watched as Eli's deft fingers picked at the ropes binding Martha. The rough hemp

threads fell away under his touch, each loop unraveling with practiced ease. Martha's soft whimpers subsided at his gentle murmurs.

"Easy now. You're safe." His voice carried that honey-sweet tone that made even Gus Thompson's scowl soften when Eli turned to tackle his bindings next.

The floorboards creaked under Jack's boots as he kept the sheriff in his sights. Sweat beaded on the lawman's temple, his adam's apple bobbing with each swallow.

"Not one move, Dawson. I'd hate for my finger to get twitchy." Jack's words dripped with ice. The revolver gleamed in the dim light, steady as stone in his grip. "Though I reckon lead poisoning might improve your disposition."

The screech of tires on gravel cut through the tension. Three state police cars roared up the drive, kicking dust everywhere. Half a dozen officers spilled out, guns drawn.

"Drop the heater!" one bellowed at Jack.

"About time you bulls showed up," Jack said, lowering his weapon. Jack passed the revolver grip-first to the nearest officer, who tucked it into his belt.

A officer slapped cuffs on our not-so-fine sheriff and hauled him to his feet. My gaze drifted to Jack. "How did you know I was here?"

"Frank Holloway saw you running towards the tannery," Jack explained. "He came and got us. We figured you might need some backup."

As if on cue, Frank's burly form appeared in the doorway. "Everything alright in here?"

"Just peachy." Jack leaned against the doorframe, a half-smile playing across his lips

as his keen eyes scanned me from head to toe. His cedar scent mingled with the acrid remnants of gunpowder in the air and the sharp chemical bite of lime and tannic acid.

I walked the officers through the whole sordid affair—the missing leather shipment, the blackmail letters, the trail of doctored ledgers that pointed straight to our crooked sheriff. My hands still shook from the confrontation, but my voice stayed steady.

A cobbler's hands should never shake.

A warm hand pressed against my shoulder blade as Jack stood to my right, while Elijah's fingers brushed my left arm. The Sterling brothers flanked me like protective bookends, their pheromones wrapping around me like a shield.

The cop taking my statement flicked his gaze first to Jack, then to Elijah, and then back to me, but he scribbled in his notepad without comment.

“That should do it, Mr. Hart. We'll be in touch if we need anything else.”

“Come on,” Jack's fingers pressed into the small of my back. “Our automobile's just around the corner.”

“Let us drive you home,” Elijah's hand slid down to my wrist, his thumb brushing over my pulse point.

I nodded, watching as Frank stalked off toward his shop, boots crunching on the gravel. Gus placed a weathered hand on Martha's elbow, guiding her away. The sharp clip of her heels faded as they rounded the corner toward Frank's house. My legs felt like lead, but I let Jack and Elijah steer me toward their Cadillac V-16, too drained to protest their fussing.

“You know,” Jack said conversationally, “most people just give us a call on the horn

when they want to see us. You didn't have to stage a jailbreak and foil a murder plot."

I chuckled weakly, the events of the night finally catching up with me. "Where's the fun in that?"

Elijah's arm slipped around my waist, steadying me. "Let's get you home. You look dead on your feet."

Home. The word had never sounded so sweet.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up in my own bed, sunlight streaming through the window. For a moment, I thought it had all been a dream. Then I heard voices drifting up from the shop below.

I made my way downstairs, wincing at the various aches and pains that reminded me of the previous night's adventures. The sight that greeted me stopped me in my tracks.

Jack and Elijah bent over my workbench, their heads close together as they worked on a pair of shoes. Mrs. Thackeray's pumps, I realized with a start.

"Well, well," I said, unable to keep the smile from my voice. "What's all this then?"

They looked up, matching grins spreading across their faces.

"Good morning, sleepy head," Jack teased.

Elijah's smile was softer, filled with a warmth that made my heart skip. "We thought we'd get a head start on these. You've been through enough lately."

I moved closer, examining their work. To my chagrin, it was actually quite good. “Not bad,” I admitted.

A wry smile tugged at my lips as I recalled my favorite bedtime story. As a kid, I’d beg Grandpa to tell it each evening before bed. “Seems I got my very own pair of elves.”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Elves?”

I felt my cheeks heat. “It’s... it’s a story my grandfather used to tell me. About a poor cobbler and some elves. How sometimes, when a kind-hearted cobbler was in trouble, magical elves would come in the night to help him finish his work.”

“Elves, huh?” Elijah’s eyes twinkled with amusement. “Is that what we are to you?”

The teasing note in his voice gave me courage. “No,” I said softly. “You’re both so much more than that.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted, charged with a sudden intensity. Jack set down the shoe he’d been working on, his eyes dark with an emotion I was only now beginning to recognize.

“What are we to you, Milo?” he asked, his voice low and husky.

My heart pounded in my chest. This was it. The moment of truth.

“Everything,” I whispered. “You’re everything to me. I... I love you. Both of you.”

For a heartbeat, silence reigned. Then Jack moved, crossing the distance between us in two long strides. His hands cupped my face, and he kissed me with a passion that left me breathless.

When he pulled back, Elijah was there. His kiss was gentler, but no less intense. “We love you too,” he murmured against my lips. “God, Milo, we’ve loved you for so long.”

Joy bubbled up inside me, bright and effervescent. I laughed, the sound mingling with their own chuckles as we held each other close.

“So,” Jack said, his eyes gleaming with mischief, “about those elves...”

I grinned, reaching up to tangle my fingers in his hair. “I think they deserve a reward for all their hard work, don’t you?”

Jack’s arm snaked around my waist, pulling me flush against him. “What did you have in mind?”

In answer, I kissed him again, pouring all the love and desire I felt into the gesture. Elijah pressed against my back, his lips finding that sensitive spot just below my ear. I turned, my lips finding Eli’s and kissing him just as passionately. I leaned into him, my fingers tracing the line of his jaw. Our kiss deepened, a perfect counterpoint to Jack’s embrace behind me.

As we stumbled towards the stairs, shedding clothes along the way, I sent up a silent prayer of thanks. For unexpected allies and helpful elves.

And most of all, for two alphas who had stolen my heart and given me both of theirs in return.

The bell above the door chimed merrily as Mrs. Thackeray swept into Hart's Shoe Repair, her fur coat rustling with each step. I looked up from the delicate beadwork I'd been repairing on her favorite pumps, a smile tugging at my lips.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Thackeray," I said, setting aside my work. "Your shoes are almost ready."

She beamed, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "Marvelous, Mr. Hart. Or should I say, Mr. Sterling-Hart now?"

I chuckled, one hand absently rubbing my swollen belly. "Milo is just fine, ma'am."

Mrs. Thackeray's gaze softened as she took in my pregnant form. "My, my. When are you due, dear?"

"Any day now," I replied, a mix of excitement and nervousness fluttering in my chest. "Jack and Elijah are beside themselves with anticipation."

As if summoned by their names, a crash echoed from the new addition to the shop, followed by a string of colorful curses that would have made my grandfather blush. Mrs. Thackeray raised an eyebrow, and I felt my cheeks heat.

"Speaking of my husbands," I said hastily, "why don't I fetch them? They can show you the plans for the new shop front while I finish up your shoes."



I waddled—there was no other word for it at this point—to the door connecting the original shop to the new L-shaped addition. Jack and Elijah stood amid a sea of sawdust and wood shavings, arguing good-naturedly over a set of blueprints.

“Boys,” I called, unable to keep the amusement from my voice, “we have a customer.”

They looked up, matching grins spreading across their faces. Even after two years of marriage, the sight still made my heart skip a beat.

“Coming, sweetheart,” Jack said, brushing sawdust from his trousers. Elijah followed, pausing to press a kiss to my cheek as he passed.

As they entertained Mrs. Thackeray with tales of our expansion plans, I returned to my workbench. The familiar scents of leather and polish mingled with the earthy aroma of fresh-cut wood from the addition. So much had changed in the past two years, but this—the core of our families’ now combine cobbling businesses—remained the same.

The bell chimed again, and Mabel bustled in, a basket of pastries balanced on her hip. “I brought you some of those cinnamon rolls you’ve been craving.”

My mouth watered at the heavenly aroma wafting from the basket. “You’re a saint,” I said, reaching for a warm, gooey roll.

She laughed, setting the basket on the counter. “How’s the little one today?” she asked, nodding towards my belly.

“Active,” I replied around a mouthful of pastry. “I swear, this child has Jack’s energy and Elijah’s penchant for late nights.”

Mabel’s eyes twinkled. “Well, with those two as fathers, what did you expect?”

Speaking of which, how's the expansion coming along?"

I gestured towards the open doorway, where we could see Jack and Elijah animatedly describing their plans to Mrs. Thackeray. "Slowly but surely."

I took another bite of the heavenly roll, savoring the sweet, buttery and cinnamon flavors. "You know, I still can't believe your family bought Sterling's. How's that working out?"

Mabel's eyes lit up. "Oh, it's been wonderful! Mama and Papa are thrilled. Jack and Elijah gave us such a good deal, we couldn't pass it up. They said something about wanting to focus on... well, you know." She winked at me.

I felt my cheeks warm. "Right, the merger." The word still felt strange on my tongue. "It's surreal, thinking about combining Hart's with Sterling's. If you'd told me two years ago..."

"Life's funny that way," Mabel said, her voice soft. "One minute you're rivals, the next... well." She gestured to my belly with a grin.

I chuckled, running a hand over the swell. "I guess life had other plans for Sterling's Fine Footwear."

"Who'd have thought?" Mabel teased. "But seriously, it's been great. The old shop had the perfect layout for display cases. And the location? Prime real estate."

I nodded, remembering the countless times I'd walked past that storefront, green with envy. Now, the thought only brought a bemused smile to my face.

We chatted for a few minutes more before Mabel had to leave, promising to bring more pastries tomorrow. As she stepped out, Martha and Mr. Thompson walked in, arm in arm.

The sight still amazed me sometimes. Two years ago, they'd barely been on speaking terms. Now, they were inseparable.

"Milo!" Martha exclaimed, rushing over to hug me as best she could around my protruding belly. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a beached whale," I admitted with a laugh. "But happy. How are things at the tannery, Mr. Thompson?"

The older man's eyes crinkled with genuine warmth. "Couldn't be better, my boy. We've just landed a contract with a big city department store. And please, call me Gus. You're family now."

As they settled in to wait for their orders, I marveled at how much had changed. The tannery was thriving under Gus and Martha's joint management. Millcrest had elected a new sheriff—young Deputy Rogers, who'd been instrumental in helping us in bringing down Dawson's corruption. And the town itself seemed to have shrugged off the lingering shadow of the Depression, its new vitality evident in the bustling streets and well-stocked shops.

The afternoon passed in a whirlwind of customers, shoe purchases, and repairs. Before I knew it, the sun hung low in the sky, painting the shop in warm, golden hues. As the last customer left, Jack flipped the sign to "Closed" and Elijah began sweeping up.

"I have a surprise for you," I said, unable to contain my excitement any longer.

They exchanged curious glances. "What kind of surprise?" Jack asked, a mischievous glint in his eye.

I rolled my eyes fondly. "Not that kind of surprise, you insatiable alpha. Come outside."

Taking each of them by the hand, I led them out onto the sidewalk. There, propped against the wall, stood a large, cloth-covered object. I'd arranged for old Mr. Callahan, the local woodworker, to deliver it earlier that afternoon while Jack and Elijah were busy with customers and the shop's add-on. The anticipation had been killing me all day, and I'd barely managed to keep my excitement under wraps.

"Ready?" I asked, gripping the edge of the cloth.

At their nods, I pulled, revealing a beautifully carved wooden sign. An intricately painted elf, arms full of shoes, grinned cheekily beside the words "Cobblers' Corner" in elegant gold lettering.

For a moment, Jack and Elijah stood silent, their eyes wide with surprise. Then, as one, they turned to me.

"Milo," Elijah breathed, his voice thick with emotion. "It's perfect."

Jack nodded, reaching out to trace the carved elf with reverent fingers. "Cobblers' Corner," he said, testing the words. "I love it."

"I thought," I said, suddenly shy, "since we're expanding the shop and our family, it was time for a new name. Something that represents all of us."

They pulled me into a tight embrace, mindful of my belly. I breathed in their mingled scents—Jack's spicy cedar and Elijah's sweet sandalwood—feeling utterly safe and loved.

"Thank you," Jack murmured against my hair. "For everything."

Elijah's hand found mine, squeezing gently. "We love you so much, Milo."

We stood there for a long moment, basking in each other's presence and the promise

of our future together. Finally, a sharp kick from my belly broke the spell.

Jack laughed, placing his hand over the spot. “I think someone’s feeling left out.”

“Have you thought any more about names?” Elijah asked as we made our way back inside.

I nodded, locking the door behind us. “I was thinking... maybe Christopher? After my grandfather?”

Their faces softened with understanding. “It’s perfect,” Elijah said.

“Christopher... Chris,” Jack mused, a grin spreading across his face. “I like it.”

As we climbed the stairs to our apartment—soon to be expanded along with the shop—I couldn’t help but reflect on how far we’d come. Two years ago, I’d been a struggling cobbler, barely keeping my head above water. Now, I had a thriving business, a loving family, and a community that had rallied around us in ways I never could have imagined.

Jack and Elijah moved around the small kitchen, preparing a light supper as I sank gratefully into my favorite armchair. The domestic scene before me, so ordinary yet so precious, brought tears to my eyes.

“Hey now,” Jack said softly, kneeling beside me. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

I shook my head, smiling through my tears. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just... happy. Overwhelmed, maybe.”

Elijah joined us, perching on the arm of the chair. “Good overwhelmed, I hope?”

“The best kind,” I assured them, taking each of their hands in mine. “I was just

thinking about my grandfather's story. About the cobbler and the elves who came to help him in his time of need."

Understanding dawned in their eyes. Jack pressed a kiss to my knuckles. "Are we still your elves, then?"

I nodded, my heart so full it felt fit to burst. "The best elves a cobbler could ask for. My mates. My alphas. My family."

Elijah leaned down, capturing my lips in a tender kiss. "And you're our omega. Our heart. Our home."

A sense of rightness settled over me. This was where I belonged. With my mates, our soon-to-be-born pup, and a future bright with promise.

My grandfather had always said that magic existed for those who knew where to look. He'd been right, of course. But the magic I'd found wasn't in helpful elves or fairy tales.

It was in the love of two alphas who'd seen past my prickly exterior to the lonely omega beneath.

It was in a community that had come together to support us through thick and thin.

And it was in the little life growing inside me, a perfect blend of the three of us.

As I drifted off to sleep that night, nestled safely between Jack and Elijah, I couldn't help but smile. The cobbler might have had his elves, but I had something far better.

I had my alphas. My happily ever after.

The End.