



# These Shoes Weren't Made for Stalking (A Cobblers' Corner Cozy Mystery #1)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Someone's targeting our historical district, starting with Rosie Wilson's beloved bakery. As the fourth-generation owner of Cobblers Corner, I won't stand by while our community crumbles.

Enter Dominic Steele, a corporate shark of an alpha whose designer shoes cost more than my monthly rent. He claims he wants to help save our district, but his presence sets off warning bells and other, more primal instincts I'd rather ignore.

When one of Rosie's former employees goes missing, what started as vandalism quickly unravels into something far more sinister. Every cobblestone in Millcrest holds a secret, and someone's willing to kill to keep them buried.

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The antique clock on the wall chimed seven times, its melodic tones echoing through Cobblers' Corner. I glanced up from the pair of well-worn boots I'd just finished resoling. Pride swelled in my chest as I admired my handiwork.

This shop had always been my sanctuary, even as a child. Every tool in its place, the rhythm of work, the satisfaction of mending what was broken. Here, I knew who I was. Here, I was master of my domain.

I inhaled deeply, savoring the rich aroma of leather and polish that permeated the air. My grandfather's presence lingered in every nook and cranny of this century-old shop. My thoughts drifted to Grandpa, and a wistful ache settled in my chest. The weight of his legacy pressed upon my shoulders, a constant reminder of the responsibility I'd inherited along with the family business.

The antique clock's chime echoed through empty spaces that once held laughter. Mom used to say the shop's leather scent reminded her of Dad's workshop where they first met. Now those memories lived only in my mind, preserved like the vintage shoe lasts lining our walls.

Grandpa stepped in when they died, teaching me not just how to repair shoes, but how to keep moving forward when life tore your world apart. "Every broken sole can be mended," he'd say, though we both knew some breaks left permanent scars.

The weight of his and my Dad's legacy pressed heavier now that he was gone too. I ran my fingers along his old workbench, wondering if I'd ever feel worthy of this

inheritance—or if I'd always be a little boy trying to fill shoes too big for his feet.

As I began my closing routine, wiping down tools and straightening displays, the bell above the door jangled. I suppressed a sigh. So close to freedom, yet so far.

“I’m sorry, we’re actually clos—” The words died on my lips as I turned to face the intruder.

He stood in the doorway, backlit by the warm glow of the setting sun, all broad shoulders and sharp angles. His crisp suit screamed corporate in a way that clashed with our neighborhood’s old-world vintage streetlights and cobblestone-paved roads. His presence filled the shop like smoke—dangerous, intoxicating. But it was his scent that hit me first—pine and sandalwood with a hint of spicy cinnamon.

Definitely alpha.

My omega instincts perked up, suddenly alert.

“I have a bit of a shoe emergency,” he said, his deep voice resonating through me like the warm vibration of a tuning fork.

I raised an eyebrow, crossing my arms. “A shoe emergency?”

I glanced down at his feet, my eyes widening at the sight of scuffed tennis shoes paired with his expensive tailored suit. A battered duffel bag dangled from his hand, completing the bizarre ensemble. Something wasn’t adding up here.

He strode forward, movements confident and purposeful. “I have a crucial meeting in less than an hour, and the heel just came off my shoe.” He held up a sleek leather oxford, its detached heel dangling pathetically.

I took the shoe, my fingers accidentally brushing against his. A jolt of electricity shot through me, and I felt my cheeks flush. His scent intensified, wrapping around me like a warm blanket on a cold day.

Trying to ignore the alpha's intoxicating presence, I examined the shoe. High-end Italian leather, barely a month old. The type of shoe worn by someone who valued appearance over comfort, who wanted to impress and intimidate.

"I can fix this, but it'll take about forty-five minutes," I said, looking up at him. Even with the counter between us, his towering frame cast a shadow that seemed to swallow my workspace whole.

He frowned, checking his watch. "I don't have that kind of time. Can't you just... glue it back on or something?"

I bristled at his dismissive tone. "If you want it done right, it'll take forty-five minutes—and that's if I rush it."

I sat the shoe on the counter. "Unless you'd prefer to hobble into your meeting with a half-attached heel?"

He sighed, running his fingers through thick dark hair peppered with distinguished silver at his temples. My breath caught—the motion drew attention to the powerful line of his jaw, the kind of bone structure that made sculptors weep. Even slouched against my counter, he radiated the quiet strength of an alpha in his prime.

"Fine. I'll wait."

As I gathered my tools and began working on the shoe, I felt his eyes on me. The air between us crackled with an electric undercurrent, like the air before a thunderstorm. It was a mix of attraction and annoyance that left me feeling off-balance.

“I’m Dominic,” he said after a few minutes of silence. “Dominic Steele.”

“Leo Sterling-Hart,” I replied, not looking up from my work.

My fingers worked the leather with practiced precision, each stitch flowing into the next as I repaired the damaged heel. Behind me, Dominic’s footsteps traced a meandering path through my shop. The crisp pine and sandalwood of his scent wafted over each time he moved, making my hands falter on the awl.

I noticed him studying the display cabinet where I kept my great-grandfathers’ cobbling instruments—weathered hammers and wooden shoe forms passed down through five generations of my family, each tool buffed to a shine by the palms of my ancestors. His fingers drummed against the glass as he studied a pair of brass shoe stretchers, the steady tap-tap-tap matching the quickening rhythm of my pulse.

“So,” he said, his deep voice sending another tremor of electricity crackling beneath my skin. “How long have you been fixing shoes?”

I paused, glancing up at him. “All my life. This shop has been in my family for over a century.”

Something flickered in his steel-gray eyes—interest? Calculation? I couldn’t be sure. “Impressive,” he murmured. “You must be very dedicated to your craft.”

“I am,” I said firmly. “Shoes, they tell stories. Each scuff and worn sole is a chapter in someone’s life.”

He leaned against the counter, his proximity making my heart race. “Oh? And what story do my shoes tell, Mr. Sterling-Hart?”

I held his gaze, feeling a rush of heat rise to my cheeks. “They tell me you’re a man

who values appearance and authority. Someone who's used to getting what he wants." I paused, then added, "But they also tell me you're not as comfortable in your own skin as you'd like people to believe."

His eyes widened slightly, and for a moment, I saw a crack in his polished facade. But then his expression smoothed over, and he leaned in closer, his scent enveloping me.

"Quite the insight," he murmured. "You can deduce all that from a person's choice of footwear?"

"You'd be surprised, Mr. Steele," I turned my attention back to my work, trying to regain my composure.

"Dominic, please," he flashed his perfect white teeth at me. My gaze stayed on his pointed canines for a moment longer than I'd intended.

"Your shoe is ready, Mr. Steele," I said, holding it out to him.

He took it, his fingers lingering against mine for a moment too long. A jolt of electricity shot up my arm, and I fought to keep my expression neutral.

I watched as he reached into his duffle bag, pulling out the shoe's mate. With practiced ease, he slipped off his tennis shoes and replaced them with the oxfords. The transformation was immediate—suddenly, he looked every inch the powerful, ruthless businessman. "Excellent work," he said. "How much do I owe you?"

I named a price, and he paid without hesitation, leaving a generous tip. As he turned to leave, he paused at the door.

"It was nice meeting you, Leo Sterling-Hart," he said, his voice low. His eyes, the

color of polished metal, stayed fixed on me for a moment longer before he vanished through the doorway.

I let out a shaky breath. A shiver ran through me as I recalled the strange alpha's unique steel-gray eyes and his intoxicating scent. The rich aroma of artisanal chocolate—my own omega pheromones—filled the air, a heady reminder of the impact our brief interaction had left on me. What had just happened?

My heart pounded, and I felt a familiar warmth pool in my belly. I panicked. It wasn't time for my heat.

Damn it, was my cycle shifting? I couldn't afford to close the shop for a week.

Trying to shake off the lingering effects of the encounter, I returned to my closing routine. But before I could finish, a commotion outside caught my attention. Shouts and the sound of breaking glass shattered the usual evening quiet.

I rushed to the door, my heart pounding. The sight before me stopped me dead in my tracks, leaving me paralyzed with shock. I stared in disbelief at Wilson's Bakery across the cobblestone street. Shards of glass littered the sidewalk, reflecting the warm glow of the streetlamps. Angry red graffiti marred the quaint storefront:

SELL OR ELSE

"Oh, Leo!" Rosie Wilson, the bakery's owner, sobbed as she saw me. Her plump frame shook with each breath. I crossed the street in a rush as I headed to Rosie's side, my heart aching at the sight of her trembling form in a floral nightdress. Who could do this to a woman who'd never harmed a soul, whose kindness touched everyone she met?

"Who would do such a thing?" Rosie asked, echoing my thoughts.

Wilson's, like its owner, was a beloved local fixture. It had served our town for generations. Rosie's question burned in my mind as I scanned the scene, searching for any clue that might lead us to the culprit.

I wrapped my arms around her and instinctively shifted my scent to soothe her distress. "I don't know, but we'll figure it out. I promise."

As I comforted Rosie, my mind raced through possibilities. Who would want to hurt her? And why?

I watched as a police cruiser pulled up, its lights flashing silently in the evening gloom. Rosie squeezed my hand, her eyes steely with determination. "I'll go talk to them."

I nodded. "I'll be right here, if you need me."

She squared her shoulders and marched over to meet the officers, leaving me alone with my churning thoughts. I caught sight of Sheriff Hawkins stepping out of his cruiser. His weathered face creased with concern as he surveyed the scene. I'd known the sheriff since I was a boy, and his presence here was nothing out of the ordinary.

I scanned the growing crowd, my eyes darting from face to face as curious onlookers gathered at the edge of the police tape, their whispers and speculative glances adding to the tension in the air. My eyes picked out Sarah Mitchell's dark ponytail bobbing near the front of the crowd—she must have rushed over from the Hideaway. Minnie Goldstein—the owner of Wilson's rival bakery—stood with her arms crossed, whispering to old Mr. Tang from Tang's Tea House & Apothecary. My attention shifted when I spotted a familiar slim frame weaving through the growing crowd, pastel pink hair bouncing with each step.

I made my way over, my eyes locked on my best friend's familiar silhouette. Penny's



light pink hair stood out like a beacon in the sea of muted, normal hair colors. As I approached, Penny turned, his vintage bell-bottom jeans swishing around his ankles. His eyes lit up when he spotted me, a grin spreading across his face. The fading sunlight caught the glitter in his pastel pink hair, creating a halo effect that matched his bubbly personality.

“Leo! There you are,” he chirped, bouncing on his toes. His almond-shaped eyes widened as he took in the scene. The sweet aroma of cotton candy mingled with a zesty twist of citrus tickled my nose. The unique fragrance of his pheromones captured his essence perfectly. “What in the world is going on?”

“Someone vandalized Wilson’s Bakery.” My jaw clenched as I surveyed the damage once more.

“Vandalized?” Penny’s hand flew to his mouth. “Oh no, poor Rosie! Who would do such a thing?”

I shook my head, frustration bubbling up inside me. “I don’t know.” My gaze swept over the shattered glass and graffiti once more.

Penny nodded, his usual cheerful demeanor replaced by determination. “What can I do to help?”

His offer warmed me, despite the circumstances. I watched as police officers milled about, continuing their work. The initial flurry of activity had settled into a more methodical pace. A couple of officers huddled near Rosie’s shattered front window, their heads bent together in quiet discussion. I watched as one of the officers scribbled furiously on a small notepad. The scene felt less chaotic now, but no less unsettling. My gut told me this was far from over, even as the initial investigation appeared to be winding down for the night.

“Once the cops finish their investigation and give us the all-clear, Rosie’s gonna need all hands on deck. She shouldn’t have to face this disaster alone,” I said. “Can you round up some volunteers? The sooner we get this place back in shape, the better.”

Penny’s mouth opened to respond, but my attention shifted to a figure lingering at the edge of the crowd. The silhouette struck a familiar chord.

“Hold that thought, Penny,” I murmured, my eyes still fixed on the shadowy presence. The figure shifted, and for a split second, I caught a glimpse of a face I knew all too well.

Jake Thompson.

Jake’s lanky frame hunched as if trying to make himself smaller, nervous green eyes darting around.

Rosie’s words from last week echoed in my mind—she’d had to let Jake go. A knot formed in my stomach as I pieced together the implications.

What was he doing here? And why did I have a sinking feeling he wasn’t just another concerned bystander?

I took a step forward, my shoe crunching on a shard of glass. Jake’s gaze suddenly turned toward me and he jolted as if startled. I couldn’t be certain if he’d noticed my observation, but before I could get closer, he melted back into the darkness beyond the streetlights’ reach.

“Leo? What is it?” Penny’s voice pulled me back to the present.

I shook my head, trying to clear the fog of suspicion. “Nothing. Just thought I saw... Never mind. You were saying?”

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My eyes opened, exhausted from tossing and turning all night, unable to drift off while a certain alpha's woodsy, sharp aroma lingered in every corner of my store. The weathered timepiece on the wall announced the hour with its daily chime.

Six in the morning.

I flung my blankets off and pushed myself up with a resigned sigh. Tugging on my favorite worn-out jeans, I pulled a flannel shirt from my closet. I grabbed my phone, my fingers moving swiftly as I typed a message to Penny.

As I headed downstairs, my phone buzzed a reply. The screen lit up with Penny's response:

Penny

On my way with caffeine. Double shot! 3 3 3

A faint smile tugged at my lips. Trust Penny to read between the lines of a simple text.

Fifteen minutes later, Penny breezed in, letting in a gust of crisp morning air, clutching two coffee cups from The Hideaway. His vintage blazer, a navy wool with brass buttons, looked perfectly pressed despite the early hour. "You look terrible."

"Thanks." I accepted the coffee, the cardboard sleeve warm against my fingers as I

inhaled the familiar comfort of The Hideaway's house blend. Steam curled up, carrying notes of chocolate and hazelnut. "Couldn't sleep."

"Is that what that cryptic text was about?" He dropped into my grandfather's old leather chair, the worn cushion sighing beneath him. Morning sunlight filtered through the display window, catching dust motes that danced around his head.

The chair's leather creaked as Penny leaned forward, his pink hair falling across one eye.

"It wasn't that cryptic."

A perfectly arched eyebrow shot up as he pulled out his phone. "Hot alpha. Broken shoe. Suspicious timing."

I watched him read my message out loud before setting his phone aside. He lifted his lavender latte to his lips with mock delicacy, taking a theatrical sip. "Pretty cryptic, if you ask me."

I traced the rim of my coffee cup with my thumb, avoiding his knowing gaze. "I said mysterious alpha."

"Isn't that synonymous with hot?"

I gulped another mouthful of coffee instead of dignifying that with a response. The rich chocolate-hazelnut blend couldn't mask the cotton candy sweetness of Penny's omega scent, which always intensified when he thought he'd caught the scent of juicy gossip.

"So, spill. What happened last night... you know, other than Wilson's getting vandalized?" His lucky penny necklace caught the morning light, the silver chain

throwing tiny rainbows against my weathered workbench. The leather cushion squeaked as he stood, his cotton candy scent swirling through the air like a sugary fog.

I fiddled with my tools, arranging them in their familiar pattern across the scarred wooden surface, each one polished by years of use. “Something felt off. Expensive suit but wearing tennis shoes. Carrying a duffel bag. The way he moved...”

“Like?”

“Like he was too aware of everything. He moved with too much precision.”

“Don’t most alphas strut around like they own the place?” Penny swaggered toward me, chest puffed out like a peacock, his pink hair bouncing with each exaggerated step.

His spot-on imitation of alpha posturing made me chuckle despite myself. His flawless swagger—complete with an exaggerated alpha head-tilt—reminded me of every self-important alpha customer who’d ever waltzed into my shop expecting royal treatment. I shrugged, unable to pinpoint exactly what triggered this feeling in my gut. Was I reading too much into things?

“So what did this mysterious alpha look like? You know, for investigative purposes.” Penny’s eyes sparkled with mischief, his lucky penny necklace swaying as he leaned forward across my workbench.

I focused on buffing the leather of a worn dress shoe. “Older than us by a decade. Distinguished. Salt and pepper at his temples.” My hand stilled on the shoe. “The kind of presence that fills a room without trying.”

“Oh, Daddy material then?” Penny waggled his eyebrows at me.

“Penny!” I brandished my polishing cloth at him like a weapon. A flush crept up my neck, and I focused harder on the shoe in my hands, pretending the leather needed extra attention in one particular spot.

“Fine.” Penny sighed, innocently propping his chin on his hands. “Go on.”

“Custom tailored three-piece suit in charcoal gray. Probably Italian.” My fingers traced the edge of the shoe, remembering how the suit had draped over broad shoulders, each piece cut to emphasize his build without being ostentatious.

“Did this three-piece suit have a name?” Penny leaned closer, his voice laced with curiosity.

“Dominic Steele.” The name rolled off my tongue like honey, and I busied myself with arranging my polishing brushes in perfect alignment.

“Even his name sounds sexy,” Penny sighed, fanning himself with a vintage silk handkerchief he’d pulled from his pocket.

Heat crept up my neck. “But those tennis shoes really threw me off.” I said, attempting to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“Mhm. And his face?”

I knew better than to think Penny would let the subject drop.

“Sharp features. He had these steel-gray eyes that seemed to...” I cleared my throat and grabbed the shoe’s mate. “Look, it doesn’t matter what he looked like.”

“Oh honey, it absolutely—” A cheerful chime from Penny’s phone cut him off mid-sentence, the sound sharp in the quiet shop. He pulled it out, then froze. “Leo...”

My own phone buzzed against the workbench. The neighborhood watch group chat exploded with messages, each notification making my screen light up like a frantic firefly.

Mrs. Henderson

Did you hear? Wilson's Bakery was vandalized!

Mr. Gates

Windows smashed, graffiti everywhere

Mr. Tang

Bet it was Minnie. Everyone knows she has it out for Rosie.

Mrs. Henderson

Someone saw a suspicious car last night

Sarah

This is getting out of hand!!

"They can't seriously think Minnie did this?" Penny said, scrolling through the messages, his perfectly manicured fingers flying over the screen.

I remembered the way she'd looked standing in the crowd of onlookers yesterday evening, stress lines creasing her usually immaculate makeup, and her red hair pulled too tight in its severe bun. The fierce rivalry between the bakeries had been escalating, but this? "No. Minnie's competitive, but she's not a criminal."

“Tell that to the gossip mill.” Penny showed me another message thread, his lucky penny swinging with the movement. “They’re already planning to boycott her shop.”

I put the shoe on the counter and headed toward the door.

“Where’re we going?” Penny asked, trailing on my heels.

I grabbed my coat off the delicate brass coat rack—a gift from Penny—standing by the shop entrance. The soft, cracked leather settled against my shoulders like a second skin. “I need to talk to her before this gets worse.”

“Minnie? At this hour?”

“She opens early for the breakfast crowd. I don’t believe Minnie would stoop this low.” I hesitated, keys jingling in my pocket. “If she’s being falsely accused...”

“We need to get ahead of it before she’s made into a pariah.” Penny finished. “Well then, what are we waiting for?”

The bell above the door chimed as Penny and I stepped into Minnie’s Bakery, the scent of cinnamon and fresh bread enveloping us. Minnie Goldstein stood behind the counter, her severe bun of greying red hair immaculate as always. Her sharp features softened as she recognized us.

“Leo, Penny,” she said. “Welcome, dears. What can I get for you today?”

My eyes darted to the display case, filled with an array of pastries. I scanned the neat rows of treats, each one meticulously arranged next to its neighbor. “Actually, I’m here for one of those apple turnovers. Heard they’re to die for.”

Penny rocked on his heels as he peered into the display case. I watched him brush his



messy rose-colored bangs away from his face. “Make that two apple turnovers, please.”

“Coming right up,” Minnie chirped, her fingers deftly plucking a wax paper package from beneath the counter. The display case’s sliding door whispered open, releasing a gust of sweet-scented air.

“Guess you heard about Rosie’s place?” I fished out my wallet, watching her reaction from the corner of my eye.

“It’s quite the shock, isn’t it?” Penny added.

“Yes, I saw the damage.” Minnie’s fingers trembled as she reached for the tongs.

“Terrible business, really. Makes a person wonder what’s going on in this town. Do the police have any idea who’d want to cause such trouble?”

“No, can’t say I’ve heard anything about that.” I kept my expression neutral.

I caught Penny’s subtle head shake.

Minnie’s shoulders slumped, and for a moment, her carefully maintained facade cracked. “It’s awful. Rosie and I may be competitors, but I’d never wish that on her—or anyone.”

“Have you noticed anything unusual lately?” I asked, leaning against the counter.

“Any strangers hanging around, or someone showing too much interest in the local businesses?”

Minnie furrowed her brow, tapping a perfectly manicured nail against her chin. “Now that you mention it, there have been a few suits poking around. Not our usual clientele, if you know what I mean.”

“Suits? Like... business types?” I noticed Penny’s quick look my way. “Can you describe them?”

“Tall, dark, and handsome types,” Minnie said with a wry smile. “Expensive clothes, fancy watches. They’ve been asking questions about property values and foot traffic.”

I filed this information away, my mind racing with possibilities as I tapped my debit card on the payment terminal. “Thanks. If you remember anything else, let us know, okay?”

As Penny and I turned to leave, Minnie called out, “Leo? Tell Rosie... tell her if she needs anything, I’m here.”

I nodded, a small smile tugging at my lips. Despite their rivalry, she seemed genuinely concerned. “I’ll do that, Mrs. Goldstein.”

A flick of my wrist turned the brass key in the lock. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across Cobblers' Corner's weathered sign, the golden elf now a dark silhouette against the brick. The meeting at City Hall scheduled for this evening wouldn't pause for stragglers, and I was already risking being late despite Penny texting three times in the past hour to remind me.

As I turned from the shop, movement caught my eye. A flash of blonde hair, a hurried shuffle. Jake Thompson pressed himself against the brick wall of Miller's Alley, as if the shadows might swallow him whole.

"Jake?" I called out, quickening my pace.

He jumped at the sound of my voice, his nervous green eyes darting around as if searching for an escape route. "L-Leo! I... I was just..."

I held up a hand, trying to appear non-threatening. "Relax. I just want to talk."

He shuffled his feet, not quite meeting my eyes. "About R-Rosie's bakery?"

I nodded, studying his body language. Every fiber of Jake's being screamed anxiety, but was it guilt or just his usual nervousness?

"You were seen near the bakery the night of the vandalism," I said gently. "Can you tell me about that?"

Jake's face paled, and he began to stammer. "I-I didn't do it! I swear! I know I got fired, but I'd never hurt Rosie like that. She was always kind to me, even when..."

His voice trailed off, and I felt a pang of sympathy. "Even when what?"

He swallowed hard, finally meeting my gaze. "Even when I messed up. I... I have trouble sleeping sometimes. I bake to calm my nerves. Rosie let me use the bakery kitchen after hours. But then I started making mistakes during the day, and she had to let me go."

I processed this information, the pieces slowly falling into place. "So you were there that night to bake?"

Jake nodded vigorously. "I still have a key. Rosie said I could use the kitchen as long as I cleaned up after myself. But when I got there, I saw the broken windows and the graffiti. I panicked and ran. I should've called someone, but I was scared they'd think I did it."

His scent, tinged with anxiety and shame, told me he was being truthful. I placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Thank you for telling me, Jake."

"Oh, and there was something else. A black SUV idling across the street."

My pulse quickened. "A black SUV?"

"I figured it was just someone getting late-night food from Ming's takeout next door." Jake looked around skittishly, as if he was afraid someone might be listening. "You don't think it could be connected, do you?"

"There's a chance." I gave a short nod. "If you remember anything else, anything at all, please let me know."

As Jake hurried away, I checked my watch. The emergency city council meeting was about to start. I quickened my pace, my mind whirling with this new information.

The imposing facade of City Hall loomed before me as I jogged up the steps. Penny waited at the entrance, his pastel pink hair and eclectic ensemble of vintage pieces and modern accessories standing out against the austere backdrop of City Hall. Trust Penny to bring a splash of color to even the most serious of occasions.

“You made it,” he said, relief evident in his voice. “I was starting to worry.”

“Sorry, got held up. I ran into Jake. He had some interesting things to say,” I explained.

Penny’s eyes widened with curiosity as he nodded. We hurried inside, our footsteps echoing in the marble-floored lobby. As we made our way to the council chambers, I filled Penny in on my conversation with Jake.

“Poor Jake!” Penny exclaimed. He lowered his voice to a hushed whisper after catching disapproving looks from a pair of women. “Do you think he’s telling the truth?”

I nodded. “I do. His anxiety was genuine, and his story checks out.”

“So, what we know so far... suits asking about property values. And now, a suspicious SUV parked outside Rosie’s the night of the vandalism...” Penny mused, twirling the silver chain of his ever-present lucky penny necklace around his finger.

“But that still leaves us with no leads on who actually vandalized Rosie’s bakery.” I said as we entered the packed council chambers, finding seats near the back. The room buzzed with tension and speculation, concerned citizens whispering among themselves.

The sharp rap of Mayor Holloway's gavel echoed through the chamber. Whispers died down as he lifted his pudgy hand, commanding silence from the packed rows. His round face set in a grave expression as he spoke.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we're here to address the recent act of vandalism against one of our beloved local businesses..."

As the mayor droned on, my attention wandered to the crowd. That's when I saw him

Dominic Steele sat near the front, his broad shoulders and impeccable suit standing out among the sea of worried faces. What was he doing here?

As if sensing my gaze, he turned, his steel-gray eyes locking with mine. A jolt of electricity shot through me, and I felt my cheeks flush. His lips curved into a small, knowing smile before he turned back to face the mayor.

"Leo?" Penny whispered, nudging me. "You okay? You smell like a chocolate factory all of a sudden."

I blinked, realizing my omega pheromones had spiked. "I'm fine," I muttered, trying to focus on the meeting.

Mayor Holloway cleared his throat. "Now, I'd like to introduce a special guest. Mr. Dominic Steele, representing Vertex Acquisitions. He has some ideas about how we might revitalize our beloved historical district."

"Vertex Acquisitions?" Penny leaned close. "Aren't they the ones gobbling up mom-and-pop shops to build those soulless strip malls?"

My fingers drummed against my thigh. "And now they want our district," I mumbled.

Mr. Steele stood, buttoning his jacket as he approached the podium. The tailored fabric hugged his broad shoulders in a way that made my mouth go dry. His powerful alpha scent filled the room, causing a ripple of whispers. A familiar flutter stirred in my stomach. He had no business looking that good when he was the enemy.

“Thank you, Mayor Holloway,” Mr. Steele began, his deep voice commanding attention. His icy silver gaze swept across the room, pausing to linger on me for a heartbeat too long. “I understand the distress this act of vandalism has caused your community. At Vertex Acquisitions, we believe in preserving the charm and character of historical districts like yours while bringing in new opportunities for growth and prosperity. In fact, one of our first priorities would be implementing round-the-clock security patrols and surveillance systems to prevent these sorts of incidents from happening again.”

My fingers curled into my palms as his gaze swept over the crowd, studying us like an owl picking out its next meal from a field of mice.

“What kind of opportunities?” Mr. Tang called out.

Mr. Steele pulled out a vintage-style pocket watch, checking it with practiced grace before tucking it away. “Mixed-use developments. Boutique retail spaces. Perhaps even a luxury hotel to draw in tourism. All while maintaining the district’s historical facade, of course.”

“That’s developer speak for gutting our shops,” Penny whispered.

My fingers curled into fists as I shifted my weight in my chair. Someone needed to stand and challenge his corporate doublespeak. The last thing we needed was help from a white-collar wolf in an expensive suit, no matter how well he wore it.

“The Historical District Protection Act limits new construction,” I said, my voice

cutting through the murmurs. “How do you plan to work around that?”

A ghost of a smile played at the corner of his mouth. “There are always ways to modernize while respecting tradition, Mr. Sterling-Hart. I’d be happy to discuss the details with you after the meeting.”

As Mr. Steele outlined his company’s vision, I felt a knot tighten in my stomach, twisting with each word he spoke. The words sounded good on the surface, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to this than met the eye.

“Dominic Steele...” Penny leaned in close, his voice hushed. “Isn’t that the guy from your shop? The one with the shoe emergency?”

I nodded, my mind racing as I tried to connect the dots between Mr. Steele’s sudden appearance at my shop and his presence here at City Hall.

The memory of his face in my shop’s lamplight flashed through my mind, his steel-gray eyes watching me intently as I’d examined the damaged heel of his Oxford. A man like him didn’t wander a small, historical district such as ours at that hour without purpose.

My grandfather always said you could read a person’s story in their shoes. Mr. Steele’s? His spoke of secrets.

As the meeting adjourned, I watched Mr. Steele shake hands with the mayor and several council members. His easy charm and confident demeanor seemed to win them over effortlessly. He moved through the crowd with practiced grace, his vintage pocket watch chain glinting against his tailored navy suit. Each handshake came with a perfectly timed laugh or a knowing nod—a masterclass in corporate diplomacy that made my skin crawl. Mayor Holloway’s round face practically glowed with approval, his fake smile wider than ever as Mr. Steele leaned in to share what appeared to be an



inside joke.

“Come on,” I said to Penny, standing abruptly. “We need to get to Rosie’s. The police should be done with the scene by now, and she’ll need help cleaning up tomorrow.”

I pushed through the heavy oak doors of City Hall into the late afternoon sun. A flood of council members and citizens poured out onto the stone steps. Someone’s elbow jabbed my ribs. I stumbled, my leather satchel slipping off my shoulder.

I adjusted my bag, and turned, only to realize my pink-haired companion wasn’t beside me anymore. I scanned the crowd. “Penny?”

A sea of suits and blazers blocked my view. The steps descended in three tiers, each crowded with clusters of people discussing the meeting’s outcome.

“Over by the fountain, maybe?” I mumbled as I tried to catch a glimpse of a head of familiar pink hair or a whiff of cotton candy and citrus.

I searched the plaza where food trucks had set up every midday to serve lunch. The afternoon sun cast long shadows across the pavement as vendors switched out their menu signs and restocked condiments for the dinner crowd. Two women in matching pantsuits blocked my path, deep in conversation as they debated property values and which vendor to patronize. A courier on a bike weaved through the crowd, forcing me to step back.

I grabbed my phone from my satchel. No service—typical dead zone around these old stone walls.

“Save me a bubble tea,” I muttered under my breath, knowing Penny would make a beeline for his favorite cart if he ended up on that side of the plaza.

The crowd suddenly parted like water around a stone, revealing Mr. Steele's broad shoulders and that perfectly tailored navy suit. I froze mid-step as Mr. Steele and his three-piece-suited lieutenants swept down City Hall's weathered limestone steps like a corporate avalanche. His cool gray eyes locked forward, jaw set in that signature alpha determination while his expensive Italian loafers—the same ones I had repaired—clicked against century-old stone. The crisp scent of pine and sandalwood cut through the plaza's usual lunch hour aromas.

A sleek, silver Aston Martin purred to a stop at the base of City Hall's steps, its tinted windows reflecting the afternoon sun. One of Mr. Steele's suited minions emerged from the driver's side, keys extended toward his boss with a slight bow of his head. The gesture struck me as medieval—a servant presenting tribute to his lord. My fingers twitched against my leather satchel as Mr. Steele accepted the keys with the casual indifference of someone who owned far more extravagant things.

I watched as he held court near his fancy car, surrounded by eager faces vying for his attention like moths drawn to an expensive flame. The tie pin secured to his perfectly-knotted burgundy tie gleamed in the fading evening sun as he leaned against the hood, one hand in his pocket while the other punctuated whatever point he delivered to his rapt audience.

I spun on my heel, my vintage wingtips clicking against the worn cobblestones.

“Running away, little cobbler?” My skin prickled with awareness. His voice, low and rich as aged bourbon, was pleasant to my ears.

Too late to escape.

Pine and sandalwood wrapped around me, stirring something primal I refused to acknowledge.

I hadn't even seen him move. Damn alphas.

"Unlike some people, I have actual work to do," I said. "Not just schmoozing for sport."

He closed the distance between us, radiating heat. "It's called networking in my profession."

"Is that so?" My heart hammered against my ribs. "And here I thought you were just collecting souls for your tithe."

A dangerous smile played at his lips. "Careful. Someone might think you actually like me."

"You've caught me. Next thing you know, I'll be joining your fan club."

His laugh, deep and genuine, caused butterflies to vibrate in my belly. My pulse quickened as he stepped closer, forcing me to tilt my head back to meet his gaze.

"I'd have to start one first. Care to be a founding member?"

"Depends. What are the membership benefits?" The words slipped out before I could stop them, my voice lower than intended. I stepped back, fighting the urge to inhale more of his intoxicating scent.

"We could discuss that..." He smiled at me, his incisors white and sharp. "Alongside those revitalization plans you mentioned in the meeting, I'm thinking somewhere more... private. Maybe over dinner?"

A warm blush spread across my skin. Damn him and his bedroom voice.

“A key piece in our strategy could be your store.”

I bristled. “So our Historical District is next on your list... alongside all those souls, of course.”

“Everyone needs a hobby.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “Though I prefer to think of it as... private acquisitions. The souls, not the real estate.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but this particular asset isn’t up for grabs.”

His pupils dilated, a predator sensing his next meal. He leaned close enough that his breath tickled my ear, the spicy notes of cinnamon in his scent making my head spin. “I do enjoy a challenge,” he purred. My skin tingled from his proximity.

Are we talking about my shop or something else entirely?

“Mr. Steele? You have that meeting at six.” A woman in a tailored periwinkle suit approached, interrupting our exchange.

“Be right there, Abigail.” He straightened his tie, his silver eyes never leaving mine. “Until next time, Leo.”

I watched him stride away, cursing my racing pulse.

“Oh. My. God.” Penny’s voice cut through my daze as he materialized at my side, a bubble tea in each hand. You will not believe the gossip I just heard... uh, Leo... you’re doing it again. The chocolate thing.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it. “Sorry. Let’s go.”

I felt a prickle on the back of my neck and glanced back to find Mr. Steele observing

our departure, his expression unreadable.

I was exhausted.

All last night, my mind whirled with possibilities, each more unsettling than the last. On top of being restless over the revitalization plans and the vandalism, when I did finally fall asleep, my dreams were haunted by a certain silver-eyed alpha. The man was threatening everything I held dear, yet my omega instincts hummed with dangerous interest every time those steel-gray eyes locked onto mine. By dawn, dark circles had carved themselves under my eyes, and now my tongue tasted bitter from too many cups of coffee.

My fingers traced familiar patterns across worn leather, the steady rhythm of repair work a balm for my scattered thoughts. The brass bell above the door chimed throughout the day and a parade of shoes crossed my workbench—Mrs. Henderson’s orthopedic shoes needed new insoles. Mr. Gates’ work boots required resoling. A teenager’s beloved sneakers earned fresh laces and cleaned canvas. Each stitch and polish anchored me to the present, away from silver-eyed distractions.

The wall clock ticked past eleven. I flipped the “OPEN” sign and gathered my tools, tucking each into its proper place. Keys jingled as I stepped outside into the morning sun.

“There’s my favorite cobbler.” Penny leaned against the brick wall beside my door, sipping on what was probably his third bubble tea of the day. “Ready for some scheming?”

I twisted the key in the lock, testing the handle twice—an old habit I’d never bothered to attempt to break. “Scheming implies we’re up to no good.”

“Oh honey, I’m always up to no good.”

As Penny and I approached Wilson’s vandalized storefront, my heart ached at the sight of the broken windows and angry red graffiti.

Rosie stood in the doorway, her usually cheerful face drawn with worry. Her eyes lit up when she saw us.

“Oh, Leo, Penny! You’re angels, both of you,” she exclaimed, pulling us into a hug.

“We’re here to help however we can,” I said, feeling a lump form in my throat. “Just tell us what you need.”

For the next couple of hours, we worked tirelessly. Shards of glass tinkled against my dustpan like bitter wind chimes as I swept up what remained of the broken storefront window. Penny attacked the red spray paint with a wire brush, his pink hair falling into his eyes as he muttered curses under his breath. The scent of bleach burned my nostrils, mixing with the sweetness of the strawberry tarts that Rosie brought out to thank us for our help.

“Here, you two need fuel to work,” she said as she sat the tray on the counter. Penny and I accepted the offering, grabbing two of the sugary pastries each.

The bell above the door chimed and Mr. Gates from the hardware store entered.

“I’ll tackle that replacement window right away, Mrs. Rosie,” he said. “If I can get it in place this afternoon, I should be able to finish the signage by this time tomorrow.”

“That sounds perfect,” Rosie said, before offering Mr. Gates a strawberry tart.

One by one, our neighbors filtered in, armed with mops, brooms, and determination to lend a hand in any way they could. Mrs. Henderson from the flower shop arrived with a bucket of cleaning supplies. Behind her, the Martinez twins carried fresh rolls of paper towels.

“Chemical fumes giving anyone else a headache?” I rubbed my temples. The harsh cleaning products stung my sensitive omega nose. A gust of crisp air swept in as I propped the bakery door open with a worn brick.

“Here, let me get the back door too.” Penny darted through the scattered crowd, his pink hair bouncing. “Cross breeze will clear this out in no time.”

A knock at the door frame drew our attention.

Minnie stepped through, balancing a silver tray laden with coffee and croissants from her own shop.

“Room for one more?” she asked, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

I watched Rosie’s face flicker with surprise before she broke into a bright smile. Her hands fluttered to her apron. “Of course, so glad you could come!”

She bustled forward and relieved Minnie of the gleaming tray, placing the offering on the freshly polished counter beside what remained of her strawberry tarts.

“Who would’ve thought?” Penny whispered, elbowing me. “The queen of fancy pastries, slumming it with us common folk.”

“Hush.” But I couldn’t help smiling as Minnie rolled up her silk sleeves and grabbed



a sponge.

Things started winding down once the sun began to set, casting long shadows across the cobblestone street. We stepped back to survey our progress. The bakery looked better, the scars of the vandalism mostly gone now.

The bleach-scrubbed brick facade still bore faint traces of the hateful graffiti, like old bruises refusing to fade. But the new storefront window sparkled, and the brass fixtures gleamed with renewed dignity. I rubbed my neck, sore from hours of scrubbing.

“Not half bad for a day’s work,” Penny said as he extended his arms overhead, his shoulders cracking.

The first streetlamps flickered to life, catching the dust motes dancing in the air and transforming them into floating specks of light.

“Thank you all so much,” Rosie said, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I don’t know what I’d do without this community.”

I wiped my hands on my jeans, streaks of paint and grime marking the denim. Sarah materialized at my side.

“That’s what we do in the Historical District,” she said. “One of us falls, we all pick them up. Been that way since forever.”

“And we’ll make sure it stays that way,” Penny chimed in.

“See you at the Hideaway in the morning?” Sarah hefted her bucket, keys jingling in her apron pocket. “First round of coffee’s on the house.”

I waved goodbye to Sarah. Penny and I lingered, watching as the others began to disperse. Something nagged at the back of my mind.

“Rosie,” I said once the three of us were alone, “has anyone unusual been asking about your business lately? Maybe someone interested in buying the property?”

Rosie frowned, thinking. “Now that you mention it, there was a man in a fancy suit last week. Said he represented some big company interested in ‘investing in the area.’ I told him I wasn’t interested in selling, and he left. But he seemed... disappointed.”

My heart raced. Could it have been Dominic Steele? Or someone else from Vertex Acquisitions?

“Did you happen to catch the man’s name?” I asked. “Or maybe he left a business card?”

Rosie’s brow furrowed as she tried to recall. “Oh, dear. I’m afraid it’s slipped my mind. And that card...” She shook her head. “I tossed it in the bin. Didn’t think much of it at the time.”

Penny piped up. “What about his appearance? Anything stand out?”

“Well...” Rosie tapped her chin. “Tall fellow. Broad shoulders. Dark hair. And those eyes...” She shivered slightly. “He had the prettiest eyes I’ve ever seen on an alpha. Wore an expensive suit, too.”

Rosie’s cheeks flushed a rosy pink as she let out a girlish giggle. “Oh my, he was quite the looker. Handsome as they come, I’d say.”

My stomach clenched. It had to be Dominic Steele.

“Was it Mr. Steele from Vertex?” I asked. “Did you get a look at him at the council meeting?”

“I didn’t attend.” Rosie shook her head. “The sheriff had some questions for me, so I didn’t make it in time.”

“But I’d know him in a heartbeat if I saw him again,” she added, her voice firm. “Not the sort of face you forget easily.”

I caught Penny’s eye, a silent conversation passing between us. His brows furrowed slightly, mirroring my own concern. We’d known each other long enough that words weren’t always necessary.

“Thanks, Rosie,” I said, giving her a quick hug. “If you remember anything else, let me know, okay?”

“Of course, dear.” Rosie smoothed her flour-dusted apron, her eyes crinkling with worry. Just don’t go getting yourself in trouble, you hear? Sheriff Hawkins is already looking into it.”

My mind went to the collection of yellowed newspaper clippings and vintage photographs taking up one entire wall of the bakery. How often had my gaze lingered on that old monochrome print showing two brothers posing in front of what used to be Sterling’s Fine Footwear, before it became Wilson’s?

“You and Wilson’s are just as much a part of me as Cobblers’ Corner.” The words caught in my throat. “Someone’s threatening everything you’ve built here. I respect Sheriff Hawkins, and I wouldn’t dare step on his toes, but if my shop—or anyone else’s—had been vandalized, I know you would do everything in your power to help. It’s who you are, Rosie. I just want to do the same for you.”

“Ditto!” Penny said with a bright smile.

I matched my pace to Penny’s as we strolled toward our shops, our shoes clicking against the cobblestones. My mind churned with all the new information, pieces of a puzzle that refused to fit together.

“So, what do you make of all this?” Penny asked.

I sighed, raking my fingers through my hair. “I’m not sure.”

“You think Mr. Daddy Material’s involved?”

I cast Penny a dour glare. He just shrugged innocently in response.

“It’s clear Mr. Steele’s involved somehow, but to what extent?” I replied, placing emphasis on his name. “And why turn to vandalism?”

Penny nodded, his usual bubbly demeanor subdued. “It’s fishy, that’s for sure. And poor Rosie, caught in the middle of it all.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I said, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

I slowed my pace as we approached the intersection where our shops stood. The weathered brick of my store wrapped around the corner. A gentle evening breeze rocked the wooden sign hanging above the door, its paint-chipped letters spelling out “Cobblers’ Corner” in faded gold. I gazed up at the cheerful elf figurine perched atop the sign, its arms clutching a pair of shoes. A couple of doors down, Penny’s storefront burst with color, mannequins in the window sporting fashion from decades past.

“Night, Leo. Try not to let this keep you up til daylight, okay?” Penny said, giving

my arm a squeeze.

“No promises,” I replied with a wry smile. “Night, Penny.”

As Penny trotted off, I dug through my pockets for my keys. Something caught my eye at the base of the street lamp in front of my shop. I bent down to get a closer look.

There, glinting in the warm glow of the street lamp, lay a cufflink. Not just any cufflink, but an expensive-looking one with an intricate design. My breath caught in my throat as I picked it up, remembering the impeccable suit Mr. Steele wore at City Hall.

And the night of the vandalism.

The night he'd appeared in my shop with a conveniently broken shoe.

I straightened, my gaze drawn to Wilson's Bakery. The street lamp faced the bakery's direction head-on, its light creating a perfect spotlight on the storefront. A shiver of unease rippled through me, prickling my skin as I looked from the cufflink to the bakery and back again.

I clutched the cufflink tightly. The metal was cool against my skin, its weight surprisingly hefty for such a small object.

Was Dominic Steele's appearance that night not just a mere coincidence after all?

The sleek glass doors slid open as I stepped into the lobby. The stark contrast between the modern, steel-and-glass interior of Vertex Acquisitions and the quaint brickwork facades of the Historical District only heightened my unease. I slid my hand into my pocket and gripped the cufflink, its cool surface pressing into my damp palm.

I approached the reception desk, my shoes clicking against the polished marble floor. "I'm here to see Dominic Steele," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

The receptionist eyed me skeptically, no doubt taking in my decidedly non-corporate attire. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but?—"

"I'm sorry, sir, but Mr. Steele is very busy. Without an appointment?—"

"It's alright, Sarah," a familiar deep voice interrupted. "I'll see him."

I turned to see Mr. Steele striding towards us, every inch the powerful, accomplished alpha in his tailored charcoal suit. His scent enveloped me, clouding my senses and stirring primal omega urges.

"This way," he said, gesturing toward the elevators.

I trailed him into the lift.

The ride up to the 25th floor was silent. I was acutely aware of his imposing presence beside me. The elevator's mirrored walls seemed to closed in on me, making me prisoner to that intoxicating blend of pine and spice until my knees threatened to buckle. I gritted my teeth as I tried to ignore my treacherous body's response to this alpha's overwhelming presence. I dug my nails into my palms and fixed my eyes on the ascending floor numbers, desperate to keep my focus on why I'd come to Vertex Acquisitions in the first place.

The doors slid open and I followed him out of the elevator, his swift, self-assured steps forcing me to rush to keep up. The plush carpet muffled our footsteps as we made our way down a corridor lined with glass-walled offices. My eyes darted around, taking in the sleek, modern decor that screamed "corporate success."

At the end of the corridor, a solid oak door glided open under his touch, unveiling an office that could have swallowed the apartment above my shop. I paused at the doorway, hesitating a few seconds before stepping inside. My boots sank into carpeting so thick and soft it felt like walking on clouds. Floor-to-ceiling windows stretched from one end to the other, framing Downtown Millcrest in all its glass-and-steel glory. Sunlight bounced off the neighboring skyscrapers, casting geometric shadows across the stark white walls and the single piece of modern art—a splash of crimson that probably cost more than my yearly income. A sleek black desk dominated one corner, its surface bare except for a laptop and a vintage brass clock that seemed oddly out of place in this shrine to minimalism.

"What can I do for you, Leo?" Mr. Steele asked, leaning against his desk.

I pulled the cufflink from my pocket and showed it to him. "The night you visited my shop—the same night the bakery was vandalized. I found this near the scene of the crime. Care to explain?"

I studied his face for any flicker of recognition, but his expression remained neutral,

save for the maddening smile playing at the edges of his mouth. “That’s an interesting accusation you’re making.”

“Is it?” I stepped closer, my anger rising. “You show up at my shop the very night my friend’s bakery got trashed, then at our city council meeting talking about ‘revitalization.’ And now this cufflink. It’s a bit much for coincidence, don’t you think?”

He straightened, his eyes flashing as he loomed over me. “You’re jumping to conclusions. Even if that were my cufflink and I lost it that night—but, just to be clear, it isn’t and I didn’t—it doesn’t mean I had anything to do with what happened.”

I fought my natural omega urge to back away, refusing to let his dominant alpha status shake my resolve.

“Then why were you really at my shop that night?” I demanded.

“I told you, I had a meeting?—”

“At that hour? In the Historical District?”

His fingers drummed an agitated rhythm on his desk, frustration evident in every line of his body. “It’s complicated. There are things going on that you don’t understand.”

“Then explain it to me,” I said, taking another step closer.

We were inches apart now. My heart thudded rapidly in my chest as his scent intensified, a heady mix of pine and spice that made my knees weak. I felt my own pheromones responding, filling the air with the rich aroma of artisanal chocolate.

“You don’t understand what this means to me,” I said, the words bursting out before I



could stop them. “Those buildings... aren’t just buildings to me. My shop—it’s all I have left of them. My parents, my grandfather...”

Mr. Steele’s expression softened. “Leo?”

“No. You don’t get to look at me like that. Like you understand.” My voice cracked. “After the accident happened... Grandpa rebuilt my whole world in that shop. Taught me everything I know.” My fingers curled into fists at my sides. “And now your company wants to tear it down?”

“That’s not—it’s more complicated than that.” He stepped closer, his scent wrapping around me like a warm blanket. I knew what he was doing, trying to comfort me using his pheromones—a cheap alpha trick that made my muscles relax against my will. I wanted to stay angry, to keep my guard up, but my body betrayed me, responding to his calming influence. I hated it because it was working and I didn’t know if I could trust him yet.

“Then uncomplicate it,” I challenged, refusing to back down despite how his proximity made my pulse race. “Because right now, I don’t know if I should trust you.”

“Leo,” he breathed, his voice low and husky. His eyes dropped to my lips, and my breath caught in my throat... the way he looked at me—at my mouth—like he wanted to kiss me.

A sharp knock at the door shattered the moment. We sprang apart as a woman—the same woman in the periwinkle suit who’d approached us at City Hall—poked her head in.

“Mr. Steele, your 2 o’clock is here.”

“Thank you, Abigail. I’ll be right out,” Dominic said, his voice slightly strained.

I took a deep breath, trying to clear my head. “This isn’t over,” I said, retreating a pace to create space between us, the gap helping me to regain some measure of my common sense.

“No,” Dominic agreed, his steel-gray eyes intense. His gaze raked over my body from head to toe. “It isn’t.”

I stared at him. Was he referring to my accusation? Or the electric tension that had crackled between us just a moment ago? His eyes, smoldering with intensity, gave nothing away.

I turned on my heel, hurrying out of his office. I brushed my palms over my arms, noticing the goosebumps that had prickled on my skin. My body still tingled in reaction to his proximity—reacting to his scent, acknowledging him as a compatible alpha partner. It shouldn’t be complicated, but questions still gnawed at my thoughts.

A frantic drumbeat echoed in my chest as I stabbed the elevator’s down button and waited impatiently for the door to open. I tapped my foot against the carpet in a restless tempo, eyeing the floor indicator.

A man in an expensive suit approached just as the elevator doors slid open. A gray Armani suit hugged his athletic frame. The crisp scent of starched cotton and imported wool mixed with smoky Amyris in a manner that irritated my nostrils. He nodded politely, and I returned the gesture. I stepped into the elevator with the well-dressed stranger, and the doors slid shut behind us, sealing us in a mirrored box twenty-five stories above the city. His reflection caught mine, lips curved in that particular, practiced smile that spoke of corporate boardrooms.

“I couldn’t help but notice you coming from Mr. Steele’s office,” he remarked, his

eyes flicking to my face. “Are you new to the company?”

The question caught me off guard. I shifted my weight, acutely aware of the scuff marks on my work boots next to his polished oxfords.

“Oh, no. I’m not with the company. Just had a meeting with Mr. Steele.”

His eyebrows raised a fraction. “I see. Well, Dominic doesn’t often take impromptu meetings. You must be someone special.”

“How did you know it was impromptu?” I raised an eyebrow at him. My words carried more bite than intended, but something about this guy rubbed me the wrong way.

The elevator chimed, announcing our arrival at the lobby.

“I’m his executive assistant—Marcus Cretch.” He extended a manicured hand. “I schedule all his meetings. I’d know if I put you in his calendar. What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t.” I grasped his hand, noting the softness of his palm against my callused fingers. “Leo Sterling-Hart. I run Cobblers’ Corner down in the Historical District.”

I cleared my throat, aware of the contrast between us. The scent of leather and polish clung to me while Marcus Cretch exuded the crisp aroma of expensive cologne deliberately chosen to complement his natural alpha pheromones.

“It was nice meeting you,” he said, as we stepped out of the elevator. “I’m sure we’ll cross paths again.”

“It was nice meeting you too, Mr. Cretch,” I replied. I watched him stride away. A

niggling feeling settled in my gut, but I brushed it aside, chalking it up to the stress of the day. I had bigger things to worry about than some nosy executive.

I needed to follow up on another lead.

The bus carried me to Jake's side of the city, where rent prices dropped and graffiti decorated the brick walls. The weathered apartment building where Rosie said Jake was renting a room hunched against the gray sky. It had seen better days. Water stains streaked down the once-red bricks like dirty tears, and chunks of mortar littered the ground at my feet. A rusty fire escape zigzagged up the wall, its metal groaning with each gust of autumn wind.

"You should have seen Steele's face when I walked into Vertex," I said into my phone, stepping over a broken piece of concrete. "All cool and collected behind that mahogany desk of his."

I opened the main door and the musty hallway air pressed in around me, thick with the scent of someone's overcooked dinner and the metallic tang of rusted pipes.

"No, Penny, I didn't cause a scene. Just told him straight up that we won't let them turn our neighborhood into another soulless shopping district."

Well, that was kind of what happened...

I knocked on Jake's door. No answer.

An elderly woman poked her head out of the neighboring apartment. "You looking for Jake?" she asked.

"Hold on," I whispered into the phone. "I'll call you back, Penny."

I ended the call. “Yes, ma’am. Have you seen him recently?”

She frowned. “Not since the other night. He was arguing with some fancy-looking fella outside. Suit probably cost more than this whole building.”

My pulse quickened. “Did you hear what they were arguing about?”

“Nah, but Jake looked scared. Real scared. Haven’t seen him since.”

“Thanks for letting me know, ma’am,” I said. “If you see Jake, tell him to call Leo. It’s important.”

“Sure thing, honey.”

My boots clicked against the stairs as I descended. Jake, arguing with a man in an expensive suit?

Jake knew something—and whatever it was, it scared him enough to disappear. This case was getting more complicated by the minute.

My next stop was Wilson's Bakery. Sunlight reflected off the storefront window, highlighting its freshly painted lettering, but the cheerful atmosphere felt forced, like a smile that didn't quite reach the eyes.

"Leo, dear!" Rosie's face lit up as I stepped through the door. "What brings you by?"

I perched on a worn wooden stool at the counter. My fingers absently traced the edge of a repurposed shoe display case, now filled with golden croissants. "I wanted to ask you about Jake. Did he seem... off to you lately?"

Rosie's smile wavered. She wiped her flour-dusted hands on her apron, leaving ghostly handprints. "Now that you mention it, he did seem nervous these past few weeks. Jumpy, like a cat near a rocking chair. Said he had a 'big problem,' but wouldn't tell me more."

My eyebrows rose. "Did he give you any hints?"

She shook her head, curls bouncing. "I offered to help, of course. Even tried bribing him with his favorite cherry Danish recipe.

"You know, the one Minnie Goldstein's always had her eye on?" Rosie added, her mouth curving into a smug smile.

I chuckled, recalling Minnie's intense love for that particular pastry.

“I’m surprised she hasn’t tried to kill me for it yet.” Rosie said with a laugh. I watched as her expression shifted from amusement to concern. “But Jake... he just clammed up tighter than my gran’s secret recipe box.”

Her fingers twisted the corner of her apron. “I had no choice but to let him go.”

“What happened?” The old wooden stool creaked as I leaned forward.

“Little things at first. Coming in late. Forgetting orders.” She walked to the window, her shoulders tense. “Then the cannoli incident...”

“Cannoli incident?”

“Three trays. Burnt black as coal.” She turned back, her eyes glistening. “Found him asleep in the kitchen. The timer had been going for twenty minutes. Could’ve burnt the place down.”

“That doesn’t sound like Jake at all.”

“No, it’s doesn’t... it’s not. And when I tried to talk to him about it...” She dabbed at her eyes with the corner of her apron. “He just shut down. Wouldn’t look at me. Wouldn’t say a word.”

The bell above the door chimed as a customer entered. Rosie squared her shoulders, plastering on her signature smile. “Be right there.”

I mentally tucked away the tidbit of information about Jake. “Thanks, Rosie. If you hear from him, let me know, okay?”

“Of course, dear.” She patted my hand affectionately before turning to the customer.

I stepped out of the bakery, the bell's gentle chime fading behind me. My heart skipped.

There, striding down the cobblestone street like he owned every inch of it, was Dominic Steele's unmistakable silhouette. His broad shoulders cut a striking figure against the backdrop of quaint storefronts, and for a moment, I forgot how to breathe. When I did inhale, the scent of pine and sandalwood carried on the breeze, tickling my nose. Something about his purposeful walk, the set of his shoulders, sparked my curiosity. My feet moved of their own accord, propelling me after him before my brain could catch up.

I ducked behind a parked delivery truck, tracking his movements. Dominic Steele played a role in all this, even if I couldn't pinpoint exactly what part. And after what Rosie just told me, I needed answers. Once I was certain he hadn't spotted me, I crept forward, making sure to stay a few paces behind.

My footsteps faltered as he suddenly veered off the cobblestone path toward a secluded park tucked between two brick buildings. The wrought iron fence cast delicate shadows across dewy grass, and a pair of sparrows scattered from the stone fountain at his approach. He settled onto a weathered wooden bench, his posture relaxed but commanding.

"Lurking in the shadows now, are we?" he called out, not turning around.

Heat crept up my neck—he'd known I'd trailed after him this whole time. Sheepishly, I approached and sat beside him. "How did you know?"

He chuckled. "Your scent. I'd recognize it anywhere." The brass links of his pocket watch caught the light as he shifted, those steel-gray eyes pinning me in place.

We sat in silence for a moment, the tension between us a living thing. I cleared my



throat, trying to sound casual. “So, what brings you to the Historical District, Mr. Steele?”

His lips quirked, but his eyes remained unreadable. “I thought we might continue our... discussion from earlier.”

“You came all the way here for that?”

“I did. But imagine my surprise when I found your shop closed.” He turned, fixing me with a pointed look. “Didn’t expect you’d be too busy playacting as my shadow to keep your business open.”

My cheeks flushed red. “I wasn’t—That’s not—“ I sputtered, fumbling for words. “I was just taking a walk. Purely coincidental.”

“Of course,” he replied, his tone dripping with amusement. “And I suppose your walk just happened to follow my exact route?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. There was no way to explain this without sounding like a complete fool.

“Someone who might have a connection to the vandalism may be missing,” I finally said.

He turned to me, his expression serious. “What? Who?”

I filled him in on what I’d learned from Jake’s neighbor and Rosie. As I spoke, I watched his face carefully, looking for any sign of guilt or knowledge.

“Did you notify law enforcement?”

I shook my head. “I reached out to the Sheriff’s office, but since Jake’s over eighteen, he’s free to disappear if he wants to.”

I sighed. “It’s odd that Jake disappeared just as things began to heat up, isn’t it?”

I couldn’t help but notice the timing.

“Leo.” He shifted on the bench, turning his body toward me. “I know you don’t trust me, but I want to help. Let me use my resources to try and find Jake.”

I hesitated. Could I trust him? But if Jake was in trouble...

“Alright,” I said slowly. “But I want to be involved every step of the way.”

He nodded. “Of course. We’ll work together on this.”

“Fine,” I agreed, trying to ignore the thrill that ran through me at the thought of working closely with him.

Stupid omega instincts.

“Where do we start?” I asked.

“Let me buy you dinner,” he said, his voice dropping to that dangerous register that made my knees weak. His smile crumbled what little remained of my defenses.

Every instinct screamed that this was a bad idea. But the way he looked at me, like I was something precious, something worth pursuing... “Alright.”

I trailed behind as he led me to his parked Aston Martin where it waited at the pharmacy’s curb. The car probably cost more than my shop made in five years.

Dominic opened the passenger door, and I slid onto butter-soft leather. The interior smelled of expensive cologne and leather, distinctly alpha, distinctly Dominic Steele.

He tossed his jacket and tie into the back before sliding behind the wheel. “French okay?” he asked while pushing up his crisp white sleeves to expose sun-kissed skin.

“Ah, yes,” I said, fighting to pull my gaze away from the way his unbuttoned collar and rolled sleeves transformed him from polished CEO to devastating temptation.

As we pulled away from the curb, I caught Mrs. Henderson watching from her flower shop window. By morning, the whole district would be buzzing with gossip.

He drove with the same precise control he seemed to apply to everything, one hand resting casually on the gear shift. The muscles in his forearm flexed with each movement, drawing my attention. I forced myself to look out the window instead, watching as the familiar brick facades of the Historical District gave way to Downtown Millcrest’s gleaming towers.

He pulled up to Le Petit Jardin, the kind of place where the menu didn’t list prices. A valet materialized to take the keys, and Mr. Steele was at my door before I could reach for the handle.

“Ready?” he asked, offering his arm.

I smoothed my worn jeans self-consciously. “I’m not exactly dressed for this.”

His eyes raked over me, hot enough to burn. “You’re perfect.”

The *maître d’* rushed over the moment we stepped inside. “Ah, Monsieur Steele! Your usual table awaits.”

We weaved through the maze of white tablecloths and crystal stemware to a private alcove tucked behind a carved wooden screen. The leather upholstery of the curved booth whispered against my jeans as I slid in.

“A bottle of the ’82 Bordeaux, Pierre,” Mr. Steele said. “And some water for the table.”

“But of course, monsieur. Excellent choice, as always.” Pierre scurried off to fetch the wine.

Soft jazz drifted through hidden speakers. Crystal glasses caught the candlelight, throwing rainbow prisms across the crisp white tablecloth. The silverware gleamed under the warm glow of the wall sconce, each piece perfectly aligned like soldiers at attention. My fingertips traced the delicate embossing on a napkin. I felt distinctly out of place among the other diners in their designer clothes.

“Relax,” Mr. Steele murmured. “You belong here as much as anyone. Any allergies or food aversions I should know about?”

“Uh, no...” I replied. “Nothing really...”

A waiter appeared, and Mr. Steele ordered in perfect French. I tried not to find that attractive. I failed.

“Now,” he said once we were alone, “about that cufflink.”

He held out his hand, palm up.

“Mr. Steele...” I hesitated, my fingers toying with the cufflink in my pocket. The weight of it seemed to grow heavier with each passing second.

I had to trust someone.

Reluctantly, I pulled the cufflink from my pocket and placed it in his palm. Our fingers brushed, sending a jolt of electricity through me. The metal caught the light, winking like it held secrets of its own.

“You really need to start calling me Dominic.” His hand closed around the cufflink, and our eyes met. I felt a strange energy in the space separating us, like static electricity waiting to spark. “We are comrades now, after all.”

“Ah, okay...”

“Did you show this to the Sheriff?”

I bobbed my head. “According to him, there’s no way to prove it belongs to our suspect. Some random visitor might’ve dropped it just as easily.”

“I can try tracing where it came from,” he leaned back in his seat as he studied the cufflink resting on his palm. “It might give us a lead.”

I nodded, unable to look away from him. Despite my suspicions, despite the mystery surrounding him, I couldn’t deny the pull I felt towards this enigmatic alpha.

“Right.” I forced my mind back to the case. “You think you can trace it?”

“I have connections at most of the high-end retailers in the city. This design is distinctive—shouldn’t be hard to find out who bought it, if it was purchased in Millcrest.”

Our wine arrived, a rich red that probably cost more than my monthly income. The sommelier poured with practiced grace, and I took a sip to steady my nerves. Warmth

bloomed on my tongue, followed by notes of cherry and something darker.

“Good?” He asked, watching me over the rim of his glass.

“Dangerous,” I replied, setting the glass down. “Like everything about you.”

His lips curved. “You think I’m dangerous?”

“Mr. Ste?—”

His brow lifted.

“Dominic.” I corrected. “I think you’re more than you appear to be.”

“And what do I appear to be?”

“A corporate alpha playing some kind of game.” I met his gaze. “The question is, what are the stakes?”

His expression darkened. I watched him place his wine glass on the table. “Higher than you might think.”

The waiter arrived with our appetizers—delicate plates arranged in artistic designs. The waiter introduced each dish in flawless French as he positioned them in a meticulous row.

“So,” Dominic said, once the waiter had disappeared. “Tell me about this Jake friend of yours. What made him special to the bakery?”

I twirled my wine glass, watching the liquid catch the light. “He was more than just an employee to Rosie. She took him in when no one else would give him a chance.

Said he had a gift for pastries.”

“And now he’s missing.”

“Right after your mysterious visit.” I couldn’t help the accusation in my tone.

Dominic’s jaw tightened. “You still think I had something to do with the vandalism?”

“I think nothing about you is simple.” The wine was making me bold. “The suit, the car, this restaurant—you’re clearly successful. So why skulk around my shop at night in tennis shoes?”

“Maybe I just wanted an excuse to introduce myself to you.”

My cheeks grew hot. “Now I know you’re lying.”

His eyes darkened. “Do I strike you as someone who needs excuses?”

Before I could respond, a shadow fell across our table.

“Dominic! What a surprise.” A man in an expensive suit appeared, his alpha scent sharp with ambition. The scent of fresh cotton and smoky Amyris wood invaded my nostrils. I recognized him and his scent from Vertex—Marcus Cretch.

Dominic’s expression cooled several degrees. “Marcus. I’m in the middle of dinner.”

“I can see that.” Cretch’s gaze slid over me, dismissive. “But since you’ve been missing our executive meetings, I thought?—“

“You thought wrong.” Dominic’s voice could have frozen hell. “We’ll discuss business tomorrow. At the office.”

The dismissal was clear. Marcus Cretch retreated, but not before shooting me a look that made my skin crawl.

“Sorry about that,” Dominic said once he’d gone.

“Do you always handle your employees so... definitively?”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Only when they interrupt something important.”

The wine was definitely going to my head now, making everything soft around the edges. Making Dominic’s intense focus feel like a physical touch.

“Important?” I echoed.

“Very.” His voice dropped to that dangerous register again.

The rest of dinner passed in a haze of excellent food and heated glances. Dominic asked about my shop, actually listening as I talked about the craft of cobbling. I found myself leaning forward, drawn into stories about his travels, the way his hands moved as he spoke.

By the time we finished dessert—a decadent chocolate thing with a name I couldn’t pronounce—my head was spinning pleasantly. The wine had softened all my sharp edges, making it harder to remember why I shouldn’t trust the man sitting across the table.

“Let me take you home,” Dominic said, helping me up. His hand on my lower back felt like a brand.

The drive back was quiet, charged with something electric. I watched his profile in the passing streetlights, the sharp line of his jaw, the way his hands gripped the



steering wheel. His alpha scent filled the car, making my head swim with more than just wine.

He parked in front of my shop, coming around to open my door. Such an old-world alpha gesture. It shouldn't have made my knees weak.

"Thank you for dinner," I said as we reached my door. The words came out softer than intended.

"Thank you for trusting me." He stepped closer, his presence overwhelming. "Even if you're still suspicious."

"I am suspicious." But I was already tilting my face up to his. "You're hiding something."

"Yes." His breath ghosted across my lips. "But not what you think."

I'm not sure who moved first. One moment we were standing apart, the next his mouth was on mine, hot and demanding. I gasped, and he took advantage, deepening the kiss. His tongue swept in, tasting of wine and desire.

My back hit the door as he pressed closer. His hands framed my face, surprisingly gentle for how desperately he kissed me. I clutched at his shoulders, feeling the solid muscle beneath expensive fabric.

A whimper escaped me as he moved to my neck, his teeth grazing my pulse point. My hips jerked forward instinctively, seeking friction. Finding it. He was hard against me, and the knowledge sent heat pooling low in my belly.

"Dom," I gasped, rocking against him shamelessly. The wine had stripped away my inhibitions, leaving only want.

He groaned, the sound vibrating against my throat. Then suddenly he was pulling away, putting space between us. The loss of his heat made me whine—the desperate mewl of an omega that I’d regret once sobriety hit.

“We can’t,” he said, his voice rough. “You’re drunk.”

“M’not,” I protested, reaching for him.

He caught my hands, pressing a kiss to my knuckles. “I don’t take advantage of drunk omegas. No matter how tempting they are.”

“But—”

“Get some sleep, Leo.” He stepped back, though it seemed to cost him. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

I watched him walk away, his broad shoulders disappearing into the darkness. The cool night air slowly cleared my head, bringing with it the weight of what had just happened.

I’d kissed Dominic Steele. More than kissed him.

And tomorrow, when the wine wore off, I’d have to face what that meant.

A dull throb pulsed behind my eyes as I flipped the sign in my shop window. The memory of last night's wine hit harder than the hangover. My lips still tingled from where they'd pressed against Dominic's. The ghost of his broad chest against mine, that intoxicating blend of pine and spice...

"Pull yourself together." I fumbled with my keys, nearly dropping them.

Fresh air. That's what I needed. And maybe one of Rosie's blackberry scones to settle my stomach. The cobblestones clicked under my boots as I crossed the street toward the warm glow of Wilson's Bakery. Each step sent little jolts through my skull, but the morning chill helped clear my head.

Not clear enough to banish the phantom pressure of those strong hands at my waist. Or the way his steel-gray eyes had softened just before?—

My boot caught on an uneven cobble. I stumbled, but managed to catch my balance before crashing onto my face. Right. Scones. Focus on scones.

I pushed open the door to Wilson's Bakery, the familiar jingle of bells announcing my arrival. Fresh bread and cinnamon scented the air, teasing my senses.

"Morning, Rosie," I called out, scanning the shop.

The morning sun streamed through the display window, casting long shadows across the empty pastry cases where freshly baked scones and danishes should have tempted

early customers. Rosie stood behind the counter, her usually flour-dusted apron pristine and starched. Her hands, typically busy kneading dough or frosting pastries, lay motionless on the countertop. Dark circles shadowed her eyes. She looked tired, as if she hadn't slept.

"Good morning, dear," she replied, her voice lacking its usual warmth. Her smile didn't quite reach her eyes. "I'm afraid I got a late start this morning. I do have a batch of muffins about to come out of the oven."

I frowned. Since the vandalism, Rosie hadn't been her usual self, but this... this was different.

"Everything alright?" I leaned against the counter, studying her face. "How are things holding up?"

Rosie's gaze flickered to the window, then back to me. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, shaking her head. Her shoulders sagged slightly, the weight of her worries visible in the lines around her eyes. "Oh, you know. I'm managing."

But something in her tone told me she was lying. "Rosie," I said gently, "is everything okay?"

She hesitated, then sighed heavily. "I suppose there's no use hiding it from you, Leo. The truth is, I've been struggling for a while now. Even before the vandalism."

My heart sank. "Financially?"

Rosie nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "The rising costs, the new health food craze... it's been hard to keep up. I've been dipping into my savings just to keep the doors open."

A cold tendril of suspicion coiled in my gut. Could Rosie have orchestrated the vandalism for insurance money? The thought felt like a betrayal, but I couldn't ignore the possibility.

"Why didn't you say anything?" I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral.

"Pride, I suppose," she admitted. "And hope. I kept thinking things would turn around."

The weight of Rosie's confession hung heavy in the air. My mind raced, trying to reconcile the warm, motherly figure I'd known all my life with this desperate woman before me. Rosie had a potential motive for the vandalism, but it felt wrong. The Rosie I knew would never resort to such tactics... would she?

"Rosie," I began, choosing my words carefully. "I wish you'd confided in me sooner."

She dabbed at her eyes with her apron. "Oh, Leo. You've got your own troubles. I couldn't burden you with mine."

She sighed. "You've got such a big heart, Leo. Just like your grandfather. You'd give someone the shirt off your back without thinking twice. Just look at you now—you've been dropping everything to help."

I reached across the table, grasping her weathered hand in mine. The skin was rough from years of kneading dough. "That's what friends are for. There must be something I can do?"

"Sweet boy." She patted my hand. "You've already done more than enough."

"Someone's targeting you... specifically you. And I'm going to find out why."

“Leo Sterling-Hart, don’t you dare put yourself in danger over this.” Rosie’s hand squeezed mine, her grip surprisingly strong for a woman her age.

“I’m already involved.” I corrected with a half-smile. “And I’m going to get to the bottom of this.”

I pushed open the door of The Hideaway Café, the bell’s familiar tinkle mixing with the aroma of fresh coffee and pastries. My steps faltered when I spotted Penny in our usual corner booth. That grin. That damned shit-eating grin stretched across his face meant trouble. He practically vibrated in his seat, pink curls bouncing with barely contained excitement.

News traveled fast in the Historical District. I slid into the booth, bracing myself.

“So,” Penny leaned forward, eyes bright with mischief. “A little birdie told me someone was seen getting into a certain alpha’s silver Aston Martin yesterday.”

Blood rushed to my cheeks. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh please. You practically oozed chocolate when Mr. Steele took the podium at the meeting. And just now? Your scent spiked at the mere mention of his name.” Penny leaned toward me, his voice taking on a conspiratorial tone. “So spill... what’s going on with you and Mr. Tall, Dark, and Alpha?”

I cleared my throat, fumbling for my water glass. “We’re supposed to be solving a crime here.”

“Mhm. And I’m solving the mystery of why you’re suddenly so interested in corporate real estate practices.” Penny grinned. “I mean you even stormed into his office to interrogate him.”

“I didn’t storm.” I rolled my eyes, but couldn’t quite hide my smile.

My fingers traced the condensation on my glass, avoiding Penny’s knowing look. The memory of being pressed against Dominic, his pine and sandalwood scent overwhelming my senses, made my skin tingle. But I wasn’t ready to share that particular detail, even with my best friend. “Focus, please.”

“Very well.” Penny sighed dramatically. His fingers absently toyed with the lucky penny dangling from his necklace. “What about that cufflink you found?”

I hesitated, my hand instinctively reaching for the back of my neck. “About that... I might have... given it to Dominic.”

“You what?” His voice hit a pitch I didn’t know was possible.

“He offered to help trace its origin. Said he had connections.”

Penny’s eyes narrowed. “Leo Sterling-Hart, you handed over evidence to a suspect? And since when are we on a first name basis?”

“He’s not a suspect, I think,” I protested weakly. “He’s... helping.”

“Right. And I’m the King of England.” He shook his head, pink curls bouncing. “What were you thinking?”

I sighed, the weight of my decision settling on my shoulders. “I don’t know, Pen. There’s just something about him. I can’t shake the feeling he’s on our side.”

“Or he’s got you wrapped around his finger.” He paused, a sly grin spreading across his face. “Though I can’t say I blame you. Those eyes of his alone could melt steel.”

I felt heat creep up my neck. “Can we focus on the case, please?”

“Sure.” Penny’s grin was unapologetic.

“Rosie’s bakery is in trouble.” My fingers traced the worn edge of the booth’s table, following a groove worn smooth by decades of use.

Penny’s expression turned serious. “Wait! What?”

“The bank’s threatening foreclosure. She missed six payments already.” The rich flavor of coffee and blackberry scone couldn’t mask the sour taste those words left in my mouth. “If she can’t come up with thirty thousand in four months, she’ll lose Wilson’s.”

“Sweet heaven! Thirty thousand ?” Penny’s warm brown eyes clouded with worry. The scent of cotton candy and citrus turned slightly sour. “Did Rosie mention what’s causing her financial troubles?”

“No, nothing.” I pushed my half-eaten scone aside. “But something about it doesn’t sit right with me.”

Penny leaned forward. “You don’t think she’d actually...”

“No,” I cut in, shaking my head. I paused to drum my fingers against the table. “Jake acted strange when we spoke before the Town Hall meeting. And now, he’s disappeared without a trace...”

Penny shook his head. “Jake couldn’t vandalize a sandcastle. What about Minnie? That woman’s got more ambition than scruples.”

I nodded, thinking about how Minnie and Rosie had professionally butted heads for



years. Minnie's frustration had always been evident, stemming from Rosie's consistent edge over her. Year after year, Rosie claimed the Millcrest Baker's Award—a prize Minnie had set her sights on since day one of opening her bakery in town. “True. She's been gunning for Rosie's spot for years.”

“Let me get this straight—we're looking at Rosie herself, Jake, Minnie, and Dominic Steele as potential culprits?” I watched as Penny ticked off each name on his fingers.

Before I could answer, my phone buzzed. A text from Dominic lit up the screen. My eyes widened as I read it.

“Speak of the devil,” I muttered, a hint of excitement creeping into my voice. “Dominic's traced the cufflink to some fancy men's store downtown. He wants to meet at his office in an hour.”

Penny's eyes lit up. “Ooh, intrigue! Want me to come along? I could be your Watson.”

I chuckled, already standing up. “Not this time, my dear Watson. But I'll fill you in later.”

I held the list of cufflink purchasers in my hand, my eyes darting over the names, each one a potential lead. The exclusive nature of this list meant only a select few had bought them.

“How’d you get this?” I waved the paper at Dominic. “Isn’t this kind of information usually under lock and key?”

Dominic leaned back in his leather chair, a ghost of a smile playing on his lips. “I have my ways.” His steel-gray eyes glinted with a mix of arrogance and amusement, the sharp line of his jaw accentuated by the office’s dim lighting. I couldn’t help but notice how his tailored suit hugged his broad shoulders. The scent of pine and sandalwood wafted towards me, tinged with that infuriating hint of cinnamon. His scent reminded me of Christmas season during my childhood—like someone had distilled the essence of December into cologne and bottled it up.

It did things to me.

My eyes drifted to his mouth, remembering how his lips felt against mine. A shiver raced through me at the thought of his strong hands gripping my waist, steadying me.

No.

The mahogany desk between us demanded professionalism, not daydreams about forbidden kisses on dimly lit cobblestone streets.

I raised an eyebrow. “Care to elaborate on that?”

“Let’s just say I have connections that prove... useful from time to time.”

I snorted. “Right. Connections.”

I sank into the chair across from Dominic’s desk. As I scanned the list again, a name jumped out at me. “Marcus Cretch? Doesn’t he work for Vertex?”

“Cretch?” Dominic’s eyes narrowed. “So you encountered him before our dinner?”

I shifted in my seat, the leather creaking beneath me. “Funny story, actually. Remember that day I came up here to um... speak to you?” I cleared my throat. “Well, I shared an elevator ride with him on the way back down.”

“Speak to me?” Dominic’s eyes glinted with amusement. “You stormed into my office fit for battle, if I recall correctly.”

My face grew warm. “I wouldn’t call it storming...”

“No? What would you call it then?”

I cleared my throat. “A passionate entrance?”

Dominic chuckled, a low, rich sound that made a delicious warmth flutter in my belly. “Passionate indeed.”

He leaned forward, his elbows on the desk. “And?”

“And?” I prompted, curious about his line of questioning.

“What did you and Cretch discuss during your elevator ride?” Dominic inquired, his gaze fixed on me.

“Nothing, really. Just small talk.” I shrugged, but my mind raced back to that day. I paused, my brow furrowing as I recalled the conversation. “Now that I think about it, Cretch seemed oddly curious about my visit to your office. He seemed to be prying.”

“He introduced himself as your executive assistant. The one who schedules all your meetings.” My fingers drummed against the wooden armrest. “And he made a point of saying I must be important because you never take guests without an appointment.”

“He is.” Dominic’s jaw tightened, a subtle change that drew my gaze to his chiseled jawline. “Though at times I’ve questioned his... allegiance.”

I pinched my bottom lip between my teeth as I considered the situation. “Why would he care so much about who I am?”

“Good question,” Dominic said, his brow furrowing. He leaned back in his chair, fingers steeped under his chin. “Cretch was an early liaison between Vertex and the mayor’s office.”

I mulled over this new piece of information. “You don’t think he’d use his position to influence the mayor somehow, do you?”

“It’s possible. He’s always been ambitious and I’ve never known him to give a damn about playing by the rules.”

“But why would he vandalize Rosie’s bakery? It doesn’t make sense.”

Dominic’s cool gray eyes met mine. “Perhaps he’s trying to manipulate property

values. Or create problems the mayor can solve.”

A chill raced along my spine as a thought struck me. “Wait. What if Cretch was the one Jake’s neighbor saw threatening him?”

“That’s... an interesting theory,” Dominic said, his voice low. “We shouldn’t jump to conclusions, but it’s worth looking into.”

I watched him rise to his feet with the smooth precision of a big cat pouncing on its prey. “Perhaps we need to have a talk with the mayor?”

“I think you’re right.” I nodded, my mind racing. What game was Cretch and Mayor Holloway playing? And how deep did this rabbit hole go?

Dominic’s polished oxfords clicked against stone in perfect rhythm with my worn work boots as we climbed the steps to City Hall. The security guard at the entrance perked up when he spotted me. I’d fixed his daughter’s favorite ballet slippers last month.

“Leo! Good to see you.”

“Good to see you too, Carl,” I said with a smile. “Is the mayor in?”

“Just finished his four o’clock. Should be free now.”

I checked my watch. “We have a little under an hour before City Hall shuts its doors for the night.”

“Perfect,” Dominic said. “No interruptions, no excuses, just straight answers from our esteemed mayor.”

I matched Dominic's purposeful stride down the marble hallway. The scent of pine and sandalwood from his alpha pheromones mixed with the musty air of old paperwork and floor polish as we made our way toward the mayor's office.

A clash of muffled shouts leaked through the heavy oak door as we approached, followed by the sharp crack of something hitting a wall.

"You can't do this! It's wrong!"

I exchanged a glance with Dominic. "That's Jake's voice."

My nose brushed against Dominic's jacket as he pulled me behind him, his pine and spice scent wrapping around me like a shield. The muscles in his back tensed beneath his tailored suit as he pushed open the mayor's door.

Mayor Holloway stood behind his desk, his face flushed red with anger. His eyes widened at our sudden entrance. Across from him, looking pale and disheveled, was Jake.

"Jake!" I stepped forward, but Dominic grabbed my arm, stopping me in my tracks.

Jake turned to us, relief washing over his features. "Leo! Thank God you're here. The mayor, he's been?—"

"Quiet!" Holloway snapped.

"This is a private matter." The mayor said. "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you two to leave."

"I don't think so," Dominic said, his voice low and dangerous. "We have some questions for you, Mayor. About the vandalism in the Historical District... and some

interesting plans for property acquisitions.”

I whipped my head toward Dominic. Property acquisitions? A chill crept down my neck as the pieces clicked into place—the vandalism, Cretch’s involvement, Jake’s disappearance. My fingers curled into fists at my sides.

I watched as the color drained from Mayor Holloway’s face. “I—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Jake swallowed hard, his gaze flicking between us and the mayor. “The mayor and Mr. Cretch... I overheard them talking about buying out all the businesses in the Historical District.”

My blood ran cold. “Is that true?”

Holloway slumped into his chair, the fight seeming to go out of him. “It’s not what you think. This redevelopment plan, it would bring prosperity to Millcrest. New jobs, increased tourism?—“

“At the cost of our history and community,” I interrupted, anger rising in my chest.

Dominic placed a hand on my shoulder, a calming gesture. “Let’s hear the whole story. Jake, what happened after you overheard this conversation?”

Jake ran a shaky hand through his hair. “The mayor found out I knew. He... he had something on me. Threatened to expose it if I didn’t keep quiet.”

“Blackmail,” Dominic growled, his scent spiking with anger.

Jake nodded, not meeting our eyes. “I panicked. I knew I had to do something, so I... I stole some documents from his office. Proof of the whole scheme. That’s why I

disappeared. I was scared, and I needed time to figure out what to do.”

“What kind of documents did you take?” I asked.

“The kind that proves the mayor’s working with the mob. Records of payments, contracts, emails—the whole deal. See, back in Boston I worked at this fancy Italian place, Bella Luna.” Jake’s voice cracked. “Turns out it wasn’t just a restaurant.”

“What do you mean?” My nostrils flared at the sour notes of fear in Jake’s scent.

“One night I stayed late prepping dough for the next day. Heard shouting, so I hid. Then—” Jake’s hands trembled. “My boss put two bullets in some guy’s chest. Right there in the kitchen.”

“Jesus Christ.” Dominic muttered under his breath.

“I ran. Ended up here thinking I could start fresh. But then Holloway spotted me at City Hall...” Jake’s shoulders hunched. “He knew exactly who I was. Said if I breathed a word about my ex-boss’ connection to the redevelopment plans, he’d tell him where to find me.”

“So you took the documents to protect yourself.” My fingers curled into fists.

“And everyone here. The contracts show how the mob’s laundering money through shell companies, using Cretch as cover for the whole operation. Once they own the district...” Jake’s eyes met mine. “Let’s just say their plans don’t include keeping the original buildings standing.”

Mayor Holloway leapt to his feet. “You little thief! Where is it?”

“Safe,” Jake said, a hint of defiance in his voice. “And if anything happens to me, it’ll



all go straight to the press.”

I felt a surge of pride for Jake’s bravery, mixed with concern. No wonder he’d been making all those mistakes at the bakery. His life had been completely turned upside down.

“Vandalizing Wilson’s Bakery,” I said, turning back to Holloway. “That was part of your plan too, wasn’t it?”

The mayor’s silence was all the confirmation we needed.

Dominic stepped forward, using his imposing height to pin Holloway to his chair. “It was a two-fold plan, wasn’t it? Create problems that would bankrupt local shops and then pressure them to sell.”

“You never had any interest in revitalizing,” I said. My accusation drew the mayor’s nervous gaze toward me.

“You don’t understand,” he said. “The Historical District is charming, but it’s not sustainable. Revitalization will only go so far. We need this redevelopment to prosper.”

“That’s not your decision to make,” I snapped. “These are people’s lives and livelihoods you’re playing with.”

Mayor Holloway’s eyes narrowed on Dominic. “And what about you , Mr. Steele? Isn’t your company interested in this kind of development? Don’t pretend you’re any better than me.”

I turned to Dominic, confusion and a hint of betrayal washing over me. But his face remained impassive, revealing nothing.

I thought Vertex only wanted to renew buildings, not bulldoze them? A bitter taste filled my mouth. My fingers curled into my palms, but I kept quiet.

“My company’s interests are irrelevant,” Dominic said coolly. “What matters is that you’ve broken the law, Mayor. Multiple laws, in fact.”

As if on cue, the door burst open, and two police officers entered the room.

“What is the meaning of this?” Holloway demanded.

“Richard Holloway,” one of the officers said. “You’re under arrest for corruption, extortion, criminal conspiracy, destruction of private property, money laundering, official misconduct, and accessory after the fact.”

As the officers led the protesting mayor away, I turned to Jake. “Are you okay?”

He nodded, looking exhausted but relieved. “I will be. I’m sorry for disappearing like that. I just... I didn’t know who to trust.”

“You did the right thing,” Dominic said, surprising me with his gentleness. “Those documents you took, we’ll need them as evidence.”

Jake reached into his jacket and pulled out a USB drive. “It’s all here. Everything I could find about the redevelopment plan and the mayor’s dirty dealings. I stashed another copy somewhere safe, just in case. I’ll get that one for you too.”

“You’ll need to give a statement, but afterwards, go home and rest,” Dominic said as Jake handed over the drive.

Jake hesitated. “What about Mr. Cretch?”

“Officers should be knocking on his apartment door right about now.”

I watched Jake’s shoulders relax, the worry draining from his expression. “Thank you,” he murmured.

Once Jake had left with an officer, I turned to Dominic. “What now?”

He held up the USB. “Now, we make sure justice is served.”

“About that...” My brow furrowed, watching as he pocketed the USB drive. “How did you know to call the police? The timing seems... convenient.”

“Cretch was on the list of cufflink purchasers, but he didn’t have an account on the books with that particular shop.”

“So he’d need someone to vouch for him as a new client?” I asked.

“Precisely... which raised my suspicions given his connection to the mayor. I admit, I gambled on a hunch.” Dominic’s eyes flicked away for a split second. “Sorry I didn’t give you a heads-up.”

“That’s okay.” I nodded, suddenly aware of how close we were standing. The adrenaline of the confrontation was fading, replaced by a different kind of tension. Dominic’s scent enveloped me, stirring my omega instincts.

“Leo,” Dominic murmured, his voice low and husky. “I...”

But whatever he was about to say was interrupted by a knock at the door. A police officer entered, asking for our statements.

As the officer scribbled notes, my gaze drifted to Dominic. I studied his strong

jawline and confident bearing while he spoke with the officer. I caught myself admiring how his brow furrowed slightly when he concentrated. His gaze flicked to me and the steel in them melted for a split second before he turned back to the officer.

The sun was setting by the time we finally stepped out of City Hall. Late afternoon sunlight painted long shadows across the steps. The full impact of the day's events suddenly crashed over me, pressing down like lead in my bones. My hands shook as the adrenaline drained from my body.

"Let me drive you home." Dominic fished his car keys from his pocket.

"I can take the bus—" I stopped mid-sentence when his cool gray eyes locked with mine, fixing me with a look that left no room for debate.

"Leo." The gentle command in his voice compelled me to yield.

"Okay," I said with a nod.

His warm hand settled on the small of my back, steadying me as he guided me toward the parking lot. I climbed into the passenger seat and clicked my seatbelt into place. My eyelids kept drooping during the drive, exhaustion finally pulling me under.

I blinked awake as Dominic's car slowed to a stop outside Cobblers' Corner. Pushing the passenger door open, I shifted to step out.

The warm glow of the streetlamps bathed the Historical District in a soft, amber light, transforming the quaint brick facades and Art Deco shopfronts into something almost ethereal.

I paused for a moment, drinking in the sight of wrought-iron lampposts and hanging flower baskets swaying gently in the evening breeze. My gaze drifted to Dominic, his

profile sharp against the twilight sky.

“I can’t believe it’s over,” I said, breaking the comfortable silence between us.

I studied his face, tracing the sharp lines of his profile with my gaze. His jaw clenched, a telltale sign of tension. Those cool gray eyes of his were fixed on some invisible point in the distance, lost in thought as we strolled side by side. When he finally turned to me, our eyes locked, and I felt that familiar flutter in my chest. A tingle raced through my body and I found myself holding my breath, caught in the moment.

“I know it’s been a long day, but...” I finally said, my voice softer than I intended. “Would you like to come back to my shop? I could whip up some dinner. Nothing fancy, just...”

I trailed off, suddenly unsure. Why was I feeling so shy, stumbling on my words like a lovesick kid? Dominic’s lips curved into a smile that made my knees go weak.

“I’d like that,” he said, his rich baritone causing my skin to prickle with goosebumps. “Lead the way.”

Metal scraped against metal as I searched for the right key in the dim orange light. My fingers brushed past the storage room key, Penny's spare key he always forgets, until—there. The brass shop key caught the glow from the old iron street lamps above. My stomach grumbled, protesting the meager half-scone that had passed as lunch. The sweet, buttery morsel seemed ages ago now, lost in the blur of everything that had transpired today.

“Hope you don't mind a simple meal,” I said as I lead Dominic upstairs to my apartment. Opening the door, I headed straight for the kitchen.

“Not at all,” he replied, his deep baritone trailing behind me. “What can I do to help?”

I turned from the cupboard, a bit surprised by his offer. The Dominic I'd met in his office at Vertex—all crisp suit and boardroom swagger—didn't strike me as the type to roll up his sleeves in a cramped kitchen. Since I'd known him, however, his icy demeanor had thawed, revealing glimpses of a warmth I hadn't expected from a high-powered, executive alpha.

“Could you grab some plates from that cabinet?” I pointed to my left. “And maybe uncork a bottle of wine? There's a decent Merlot in the rack by the fridge.”

I pulled out a well-worn cast iron skillet, the weight comforting in my hands. Olive oil shimmered as it heated. I tossed in diced onions, their sharp scent filling the air. Garlic followed, sizzling and fragrant.

My knife made quick work of mushrooms and bell peppers. They joined the onions in the pan with a satisfying hiss. I hummed an old tune as I worked, sneaking glances at Dominic. He leaned against the doorframe, tie loosened, a ghost of a smile on his face.

“Smells good,” he said.

I grinned, cracking eggs into the vegetable mixture. “It’s just a frittata. Nothing fancy.”

“Where’d you learn to cook?” Dominic asked as he retrieved two glasses and a corkscrew from the cabinet above the wine rack.

I sprinkled salt and cracked black pepper over the eggs. “Mom used to prop me at the kitchen counter while I struggled through math homework. She’d quiz me on multiplication tables between stirring pots.” The spatula scraped the edge of the pan, folding the eggs just so. “After she passed, Grandpa stepped in. Said a man should know his way around both footwear soles and kitchen souls.”

Dominic deftly pulled the cork from the bottle, shooting me a quizzical look. “Kitchen souls?”

A wisp of steam curled up as I tilted the pan. “His words. He swore every dish had its own personality. This frittata? Pure comfort food—straightforward, no pretense.”

“Like its cook?” Dominic’s mouth quirked up at one corner.

Heat crept across my cheeks, and I busied myself with adjusting the flame. “You haven’t tasted it yet. Could be terrible.”

“I’m positive I’ll enjoy every bite.”

The tips of my ears burned hotter than the stovetop. I cleared my throat. “Grandpa taught me how to cook the basics first—eggs, bacon, simple stuff. This recipe, though... it was my mom’s. One of the few things I remember about her, actually. She’d make it every Sunday.”

Dominic watched me from where he leaned against the counter. “Your parents... how old were you when?—?”

“Seven. One rainy night, one slippery road...” I focused on the eggs, refusing to meet his eyes. “Grandpa said I spent the first month after sleeping in the shop. Said the smell of leather probably reminded me of Dad.”

“I’m sorry,” Dominic said, his steel-gray eyes softening. A gentle note crept into his usual sharp tone.

“That was a long time ago.” I flipped the frittata with practiced ease, watching the golden-brown crust slide onto the ceramic plate. The eggs let out a final sizzle against the hot pan.

“Order up,” I called, a phrase picked up from too many late-night dinners at Maude’s Diner with Penny. “It’s not Le Petit Jardin, but Penny says it’s my signature dish.”

We settled at the small table, forks clinking against plates. The frittata was fluffy, studded with vegetables. I’d toasted some crusty bread to go with it.

“This is delicious,” Dominic said between bites.

“Thanks. So, um, about today...” I hesitated, pushing a piece of pepper around my plate. “What the mayor said about your company. Is that true?”

Dominic’s fork paused halfway to his mouth. He set it down slowly, something vulnerable flickering across his face.



“Why do you really care about this district?” I asked.

Dominic swirled his wine, his expression distant. “My father built himself up from nothing. Taught me that business was everything. Success at any cost.” He met my eyes. “His last words to me were about a merger deal.”

“I’m sorry.” It seemed so... cold.

“It was a long time ago.” I watched Dominic place his glass on the table. “That’s how he operated. All business.”

“And you, Dominic?” I traced the rim of my water glass. “How do you operate? All business?”

The intensity of his gaze made my heart skip. “It’s complicated, Leo.”

“Complicated how?” My appetite vanished. “You said you were here to help.”

“I am,” he insisted. “But there are... other factors at play.”

“Other factors?” My voice rose. “Like what? Tearing down people’s homes and businesses?”

Dominic’s jaw clenched. “You don’t understand the full picture.”

“Then explain it to me!” I stood, my chair scraping against the floor. “Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’ve been lying this whole time. Holloway said?—“

“Holloway’s a crook.” Dominic growled, rising to his feet. His eyes focused on me with a dangerous intensity that made my heart race. “And I haven’t lied.”

I stood my ground, fists clenched at my sides. The warmth of our dinner had evaporated, replaced by a chill that crept up my spine. Dominic's eyes, usually so controlled, flashed with something I couldn't quite place. Anger? Guilt?

"You haven't lied?" I spat the words out, my voice dripping with disbelief. "Then what do you call this? Coming here, pretending to care about our community? Helping Rosie, helping Jake, helping me ... all while your company plans to destroy everything we care about?"

Dominic's jaw worked, the muscles in his neck taut. "It's not that simple, Leo. There are layers to this situation you don't understand."

"Then make me understand!" My voice cracked, betraying the hurt beneath my anger. "Because right now, all I see is someone who wormed his way into my life, into my..." I swallowed hard, unable to finish that thought. "I thought we were... friends."

More than friends, even.

"Was any of it real?" I asked, my voice strained. "Or was I just a means to an end?"

The air between us crackled with tension. I could smell Dominic's alpha scent growing sharper, more potent. My own pheromones probably reeked of distress and betrayal.

Dominic rounded the table, his hand outstretched. "Leo, please. I can explain... not yet, but?—"

The tips of his fingers grazed my arm. I jerked back, my skin prickling where his fingertips had brushed against it. "No," I spat, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. "I think you've explained plenty."

Dominic's jaw clenched, a muscle twitching beneath his skin. His scent sharpened,

pine and sandalwood mixing with something darker, more primal. “You’re infuriating,” he growled, his voice dropping to a low rumble that sent a delicious shiver through me.

My traitorous omega nature flared to life, refusing to heed my rational mind. Every cell in my body hummed, yearning to submit to the powerful alpha before me. I clenched my fists, nails digging into my palms as I fought against the primal urge to bare my neck and whimper for his touch.

I lifted my chin, refusing to back down even as my pulse thundered in my ears. “You’re impossible,” I shot back, hating how my body betrayed me, leaning towards him even as my mind screamed to push him away.

Our eyes locked, and for a moment, I swore I saw a flicker of something—regret? longing?—in those cool gray depths. And then, as if drawn by some irresistible force, we crashed together. Dominic’s lips claimed mine in a searing kiss, his hands tangling in my hair as he pulled me closer. I gasped, my fingers clutching at his shirt as I melted into the kiss.

It was everything I’d been trying not to want—passionate, all-consuming, and utterly perfect. He tasted of wine and desire, his tongue exploring my mouth with a hunger that left me weak-kneed.

I gasped for air as Dominic and I finally broke apart. My skin prickled, every nerve ending alive. The world around us faded away, leaving only the thundering of my heart and the heat of his skin against mine.

His fingertips traced a path down my back, leaving a trail of electricity in their wake. I shivered, pressing closer, craving more.

“Leo,” he breathed, his voice husky with need.

I answered by claiming his mouth again, pouring all my pent-up longing into the kiss. We stumbled backwards, hands roaming, fumbling with buttons in our haste.

My back hit the edge of the counter and Dominic's strong hands gripped my waist, lifting me effortlessly onto the smooth surface. He insinuated himself between my legs, his body a wall of heat against mine. I arched against him, needing more contact, more friction, more of everything he could give me.

My shirt joined Dominic's jacket on the floor, and then I was skin against skin with him. A trail of fire blazed down my neck and across my collarbone as he devoured me with his mouth. I ground myself against him, pressing my erection against his hardening length. The smooth, cool surface of the countertop bit into my back as he urged me forward.

Dominic's fingers traced the curve of my waist, the contours of my hips, before sliding to the swell of my ass. He squeezed, his touch possessive, making me keen with need. I felt the ridge of his cock press against my thigh and I ground down, wanting to take him inside me. I rocked my hips against him, seeking more stimulation through the layers of fabric between us.

"You feel so good," he growled, his breath hot against my ear.

I lifted my hips as he tugged my pants down, the fabric sliding over my heated skin. Dominic's knuckles grazed my inner thigh, leaving trails of electricity in their wake. His hands guided me, positioning me at the edge of the counter as his mouth found the sensitive spot just below my ear. I shivered at the touch of his lips.

"So responsive," he murmured, his breath tickling my neck. His tongue swirled and teased, leaving a trail of flickering flames in its wake. Dominic's hands mapped my body, branding me with his touch. I arched into his caress, my skin singing beneath his fingers.

“Dom,” I gasped as his fingertips found my nipple, rolling and tugging, sending sparks of pleasure straight to my cock. It throbbed, full and heavy between my legs. I wanted—needed—more.

Dominic’s eyes darkened with desire as he looked down at me. “Tell me what you want.” His voice was hoarse, his control fraying at the edges.

I couldn’t form the words, so I decided to take action instead. I wrestled with the fastening on his pants until my unsteady hands finally succeeded in popping open the button and dragging down the metal teeth of his fly. I slipped my fingers beneath his waistband, wrapping my hand around his thick length. He hissed at the contact, his hips bucking involuntarily. I guided him to my entrance, positioning the tip of his cock at my hole.

“Fuck, you’re sure?” he growled, his eyes searching mine for confirmation.

I nodded, breathless. I spread my legs, offering myself to him, and he wasted no time in claiming what I’d promised. My breath hitched as Dominic’s fingers worked me open, stretching and preparing me. My hips rocked against his hand, seeking more.

“Please,” I found myself begging. My voice was hoarse with need, my body urging me onward.

His eyes darkened further as his fingers found my prostate, pressing and circling, sending sparks of pleasure through me. “You’re so beautiful like this, open and wanting.”

I bit my lip, my body tightening around his fingers as he stroked and teased me. “Please... I need you, now.” I was shameless, reduced to a quivering mess by his skilled touch.

Dominic’s breath quickened, his control slipping as my words hitched his desire.

“Greedy little omega,” he growled, his voice thick with lust. “You’ll have it all, baby. Every inch.”

The tip of his cock teased at my entrance, then with a sharp thrust, he claimed me. I cried out, my body stretching to accommodate him. A sharp ache bloomed deep inside as his thick length stretched me open. But my omega’s body welcomed him, my natural slick easing his way as my inner walls clenched and fluttered around him. Dominic stilled, giving me a moment to adjust to the burn and stretch. Then, slowly, he began to move.

It was intense, overwhelming, and perfect.

Our flesh slapped together, the sound filling the room. Dominic’s cock drove deep into my ass, again and again. I tightened my legs around his waist and eagerly attempted to meet his thrusts.

I struggled to match his rhythm, my inexperience painfully obvious. My hips jerked awkwardly, throwing off our tempo. Dominic’s jaw clenched.

“Move with me.” His voice came out rough, almost guttural.

Sweat beaded on my forehead as I concentrated, desperate to please him. The pressure of his hands on my hips increased, guiding me with firm insistence. I bit my lip, fighting the urge to apologize for my clumsiness.

“Like this?” I gasped, attempting to match his tempo.

I tried, I really did, but my body refused to cooperate. The cold edge of the countertop bit into my thighs each time he thrust, our flesh meeting with uneven, unsatisfying slaps. My elbow knocked against a utensil jar, sending it to the floor with a crash of wooden spoons and silverware.

Dominic's knee bumped a cabinet door with a hollow thunk. He snarled a curse, his fingers digging into my hips.

"Maybe doing this in the kitchen wasn't the best idea?" I giggled, the pitch hovering just this side of hysterical. My damp palm slipped against the laminate surface as I scrambled for a better grip. Dominic's hold on my hips readjusted, his hands sliding against the sweat gathering at the dip of my waist.

"Dammit." He snarled.

Heat flooded my cheeks. I wanted to please him so badly, but I just couldn't get it right. Dominic's eyes flashed, a predatory gleam overtaking the frustration. He gripped me tighter, taking full control.

"Fine. I'll do all the work." His voice dropped to that dangerous purr that made my pulse skitter. He repositioned me on the countertop, nudging my knees wider as he hauled me closer.

His next thrust punched the air from my lungs. My squeal bounced off the tile walls, mingling with the rhythmic clatter of ceramic jars trembling on open shelves. Heat exploded behind my eyelids when he angled upward, striking that secret place that turned my muscles to liquid strobe light.

"Not—" I gasped as his tempo quickened. "Not fair... you're—ah!—way more experienced than me."

Dominic's ragged laugh ghosted across my nape. Callused palms mapped my shuddering torso as his thrusts became harder, deeper. The new intensity stole my breath. My body trembled, overwhelmed by the onslaught of sensation. Dominic's aggression awakened something primal in me. Despite his ferocity, or perhaps because of it, pleasure coiled tighter in my core.

I cried out on a particularly hard thrust, my hands scrabbling for purchase on the smooth surface behind me. I felt Dominic freeze, his body tense against mine. His sudden stillness made me wonder if he feared he'd caused me pain. I tightened my legs around his waist, urging him deeper.

"Please," I whined. "Don't stop."

"Fuck, you're so tight," he groaned, his voice rough with restraint. His breath was hot against my skin. "Follow my lead, okay?"

I agreed with a quick jerk of my head, panting heavily as he resumed thrusting. We finally fell into sync. The sound of flesh slapping against flesh filled the room. I met his thrusts, rising to meet his body as he drove into me, again and again. The pleasure coiled within me, tighter and tighter, a spring ready to release.

"That's it, omega," he groaned. "Tighten around me. Take all of me."

I felt Dominic's control slipping, his thrusts becoming wilder, more desperate. His fingers dug into my hips, leaving marks I knew I'd wear much later. Sweat beaded on his forehead, a single drop sliding down the sharp angle of his jaw as he fought to hold back.

"Come for me, baby," he panted. "Come for your alpha."

His words pushed me over the edge. I shattered into a million pieces, my release pulsing around him. Dominic followed, his body tensing as he found his own peak. He buried his face in my neck, his breath hot against my skin as he rode out the waves of pleasure.

We stayed joined for endless moments, our hearts pounding in unison. Slowly, we untangled, our limbs heavy and sated. Dominic's hands gripped the counter on either side of me, his chest heaving.



His lips curved into a satisfied smile. My gaze fixed on his sharp, prominent canines—a trademark of his alpha nature. “I’ve wanted to do that since the moment I first saw you in your shop.”

His words hit me like a bucket of ice water. The lies. The secrets. Reality came crashing back.

“Oh god.” I shoved him away as I scrambled down from the countertop. “What have I done?”

I stumbled, my legs still shaky from our encounter.

“Steady now.” Dominic’s hands shot out, gripping my arms to keep me upright. The touch of his skin ignited a fresh wave of desire in my belly, followed immediately by guilt and shame. I shoved him away, desperate to put distance between us.

My hands trembled as I frantically searched for my pants. Dominic, in stark contrast, languidly pulled on his trousers, his movements slow and deliberate. He dangled my pants from his fingertips, a hint of amusement dancing in his silver eyes as he held them out to me.

I snatched them from his grasp, fumbling to step into them as my hands and legs quivered. Meanwhile, Dominic remained motionless, watching me. My gaze darted to his exposed bare chest. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from his sculpted torso, glistening with perspiration. His trousers—still unbuttoned—sat dangerously low on his hips, barely clinging to his waist. He looked like sin personified.

I tore my gaze away, shame burning through me. How could I have been so foolish? So weak?

“Baby, listen?—”

“Don’t.” I held up a hand, refusing to look at him. “Just... don’t.”

The air between us crackled with tension. I’d never felt more exposed, more vulnerable. And it wasn’t just because I was naked and raw from my first intimate encounter with an alpha—or anyone, for that matter.

“I... we shouldn’t have...” I stammered, as I fumbled to pull my jeans up, my fingers clumsy and uncooperative.

I watched as Dominic’s fingers raked through his dark locks, his face betraying his exasperation. “Leo, I?—”

But whatever he was about to say was cut off by the sound of shattering glass. We both whirled towards the direction the noise had come. I yanked my t-shirt over my head while stumbling down the stairs toward my shop and raced toward the storefront with Dominic following close behind. I circled my worktable, finding the floor covered with glittering shards of glass.

“Watch out!” A strong arm suddenly wrapped around my waist and bodily lifted me off my feet.

Dominic pulled me back from the shimmering mess before my bare feet could come in contact with it, but not before I spotted what had come through my shop’s window.

A brick.

And, tied to the brick with a frayed piece of twine, was a note scrawled in jagged, angry red letters:

**YOU’LL PAY. COBBLERS’ CORNER IS NEXT!**