Sympathy for the Devil

by KouriArashi

Summary

Stiles gets a job as a hospital orderly and finds himself becoming strangely attached to the catatonic man on the long-term care ward, and finds out that there's a lot more to Peter Hale than there seems...

Notes

Written for my friends on tumblr who requested 'slow burn Steter'. Takes place during season one but is an AU where Papa McCall is still around and Stiles lives with the McCall family for reasons that shall be explained at some point in the future.... I do want to specify that the 'child abuse' tags refer to Papa McCall, not Papa Stilinski. All will be explained in due time, trust me. <3

I do mean it about the tags, though; this story will be pretty triggery for child abuse both emotional and physical. (Papa McCall seems to be a huge jerk canonically; I'm sure season 3B will completely screw up the way I've portrayed him, but I'm posting first, hah!) And of course the Peter/Stiles relationship is underage, but let's just say that it will be healthier here than it is in my other Steter stuff (inasmuch as any relationship involving Peter can be healthy).

Basic AU is that Laura didn't come to town so Peter is still catatonic in the hospital, and Scott
doesn't get the bite, but then people start dying anyway, and Stiles and Scott start investigating...

(PS: as usual I will be using 'Tom' as Papa Stilinski's first name 'cause that's how I like it. =D)
“You know, if you really wanted to help out around here, you could try something revolutionary like getting a job,” Rafael McCall said with his usual condescending smirk.

That was how it all started, and later Stiles thought that it was the only good idea the asshole ever had.

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“Now, normally the hospital does require a high school degree to get a job as an orderly,” Melissa told Stiles, “but they’re willing to make an exception for you because I vouched for you and because you’ve had all the necessary prereq classes, like CPR and stuff. And we’re short-handed right now, we really need someone in the long-term care unit who can work evenings. So. You start tomorrow, just come straight after school and Beth will get your orientation started.”

“Okay,” Stiles said, pushing his carrots around on his plate. They were having this conversation at the dinner table. That would be one advantage of working evenings. Fewer awkward family dinners.

“We’ll expect you to keep your grades up, of course,” Rafael remarked.

“Yes, sir,” Stiles said, studying his fork with far more concentration than it deserved.

Melissa glanced at her husband and then tried to smile. “If you have trouble with the workload, just let me know, okay?” she said, and Stiles nodded. “Oh, and that reminds me – I should take you by the bank tomorrow afternoon. We can get an account set up for you, so you can get your paychecks done as direct deposit.”

“Oh, that sounds like too much of a bother,” Rafael said, looking up and smiling directly at Stiles. “He can just sign them over to me and I’ll give him the money, like I do for Scott.”

Scott looked up at this, as if he were considering lodging a protest, or perhaps even reminding his father of the time he had ‘lost’ the ledger which showed that Scott had saved up nearly four hundred dollars. Then he saw the look on his mother’s face and bent over his plate again.

“Sure,” Stiles said, because to be honest, he didn’t really care about the money anyway. He wouldn’t give Rafael the satisfaction of holding it over his head. He made a solemn vow to himself in that moment to sign over every paycheck without protest and never even ask about the money. He would let the asshole keep every penny before he saw Stiles beg.

“What’s an orderly do?” Scott asked, trying to change the subject.

“Oh, it’s pretty similar to the stuff you do for Dr. Deaton, just with human patients instead of animals,” Melissa said. “Moving patients around, feeding them, bathing them . . . .”

“Gross,” Scott said, wrinkling his nose, and Stiles laughed a little. He wasn’t exactly looking forward to it, but menial jobs were a part of life for the average teenager. He would take this over working at
“Well, it could be worse,” Rafael said, with his usual denigrating smile. “I mean, you could be working as a mall cop or something.”

Stiles pushed back from the table so quickly that he knocked his chair over. Scott reached up and grabbed him by the wrist, and Stiles nearly choked on his rage. He had to take a long, slow breath, in and out, before he managed to say, “May I please be excused?”

“No,” Rafael said, but Melissa said, “Yes,” at the same moment, and without looking at her husband, she repeated herself more firmly. “Yes, Stiles, go on and get your homework done. Big day tomorrow, after all.”

Stiles fled without further thought to the consequences. Rafael would make him pay for that loss of control later, but he wasn’t going to just sit there and be insulted. He made it up to the room he shared with Scott and quietly closed the door, *not* slamming it, as he had learned the hard way not to show his anger by doing that. He flopped facedown onto the bed and spent some quality time screaming into the pillows.

Scott came in about fifteen minutes later, quiet and awkward, because there was only so many times a guy could say, ‘I’m sorry my father is such a douche’ and Scott had surpassed that years ago. He knew that there was nothing he could say or do that would make it hurt any less, so he did what he was best at – went for a distraction. “Hey, can you help me out with my history homework? I still haven’t caught up from the days I missed while I was sick.”

“Sure.” Stiles rolled off the bed and went for his textbook. He managed to lose himself in the efforts of Napoleon for a little while. Not that he had any idea how that was going to mean anything to him in the future. Rafael McCall wasn’t short enough to have a Napoleon complex, and he probably wasn’t smart enough to conquer Europe, although he had sure as hell conquered Beacon Hills and the Stilinski family.

As if reading his mind, Scott said, “Hey, uh . . . you gonna tell your dad about the job?”

Stiles chewed on the end of his pencil. “Not yet. I guess I’ll let him know if I manage to keep it for more than a week.”

Scott nodded and went back to his work. He didn’t say anything else about it. That was one of the things that Stiles treasured about Scott’s friendship – that he knew when to just shut the fuck up for a while.

Stiles got his homework done, he showered and went to sleep and then went to school and everything was normal. Harris was being a jerk, Finstock made them run laps, Scott wound up in the nurse’s office after Jackson kicked dust up in his face and he had an asthma attack.

Beth was a short, plump woman with graying hair who took a copy of his driver’s license and had him fill out some paperwork and then showed him around the ward. There were currently twenty-one patients with a variety of conditions checked in. Some of them had been there for years. Just breathing the air was depressing. It had a certain smell to it that Stiles couldn’t put into words. The smell of disinfectant and death and despair. It reminded him so strongly of his mother’s last days on earth that it made him want to puke.

“Bobby and Linda are on tonight and they’ll look after you,” Beth said. “They’ll be bringing dinner up in about an hour and they’ll need your help then. Some of the patients can feed themselves, some can’t, and some have family members that come in and do it. Until then . . .” She showed him over to
a corner with a cart loaded up with fabrics. “Everyone’s sheets need to be changed. If you come across someone who’s in bed, just skip the room. Later, Bobby will show you how to get the patients in and out of bed safely.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Stiles said, taking the cart.

His mother had stayed in the long-term care unit for nearly two months as the cancer had ravaged her body. Stiles could remember it so clearly, all the afternoons spent at her bedside, proudly telling her about what he had done at school that day. Some of the nurses had thought he was a nuisance, others had always greeted him with a warm smile.

He started in the first room to his left. The woman was sitting in a worn chair, and she greeted him in a rusty voice. Stiles said hello and introduced himself. He was going to be seeing a lot of these people. He might as well be friendly. He changed her sheets while she asked him what was for dinner, and got annoyed at him when he didn’t know.

It went like that for the first several rooms. One of the women was asleep in bed. Another asked him to help her to the bathroom, which he did after checking to make sure it was okay with Linda. One of the men was recovering from surgery and asked him to open a window.

He hesitated outside the room his mother had been in. It seemed like it shouldn’t matter. It had been so many years ago. She had died in this room, while he sat there and held her hand. It had changed everything. Nothing had been right since that day.

He swallowed hard and told himself to buck up, then pushed his way into the room with his cart. He was unnerved almost immediately by the man sitting in the chair by the window. At first, he thought that the man was staring at him, but then Stiles realized that he was just . . . staring. Blankly. Like the space between them held the mysteries of the universe.

Stiles glanced quickly at the name on the door. “Hello, Mr. Hale,” he said, hoping his voice was steady. “My name’s Stiles. I’m new around these parts. Don’t mind me, just gonna change the sheets on your bed.”

Peter Hale didn’t respond in any sort of way as Stiles stripped the sheets off his bed and then put the new ones on. “Hospital corners,” Stiles told the catatonic man. “Learned how to do them a long time ago. Personally, I hate them. They make my feet feel smothered. But hey, we don’t want you falling out of bed, right?” Peter’s thousand-yard-stare was making him nervous. He was babbling, and told himself to shut up, but then something occurred to him. “Hey, do you mind if I – ”

He knelt down next to the bureau. On the inside of one of the drawers, he had written, ‘Stiles was here’, in tiny, dark lettering. To comfort the next kid who came along, maybe. He had been eight years old; forward thinking wasn’t his forte now and it certainly hadn’t been then.

“It’s still here,” he said to Peter, as if the man cared. “I wrote on the inside of the drawer. Oh, don’t tell anyone that. I mean, not that you can. I. Shiiiiit. That was pretty insensitive, I guess. My mom was here for a couple months.” He shut the drawer and stood up. “Uh, dinner’s going to be around shortly. So I, uh, I’m just gonna go.” He dumped the dirty sheets into the hamper on his cart and hastily exited the room.

The rest of the evening was hard work, delivering meals, learning how to move patients around, which patients were able to do what on their own. Half of them got bathed at night and half of them in the morning, Bobby told him, to stagger things for the staff. Stiles was strangely relieved to learn that Peter Hale was in the morning shift, and so he wouldn’t be seeing the man naked. He wasn’t sure why it mattered, but it did.
Then they had to get all the patients into bed, and the nurses were going around making their evening checks and distributing night-time medications, so Stiles and the other orderlies had to make sure not to get in their way. By the time that was finished, it was eight thirty. Stiles’ shift was until nine. He spent the last half hour wheeling loads to and from the hospital laundry, and then he got to go home.

Melissa picked him up and asked how it had gone, and Stiles told her the truth, that it was fine, nothing to write home about, but a job was a job. It wasn’t like the family needed the money. Rafael earned enough at his job as the sheriff that he was fond of saying he could support the whole family by himself, and in fact he didn’t approve of Melissa working, though he never pressured her quite enough to make her quit.

Much to his relief, Rafael was out on a call, so he wasn’t subjected to a lengthy interrogation about his new job. He retreated up to his room and started on his homework. Scott came bouncing in, his usual upbeat self, and he was practically going nuts because the pretty new girl at school had come by the vet’s office. Apparently she had hit a dog and been upset about it, and she and Scott had had a moment or something like that.

“How about you?” Scott finally asked. “Did you meet anyone interesting?”

“Oh, yeah,” Stiles said, chewing on the end of his pencil. “The catatonic guy was particularly interesting.” He glanced up, saw Scott’s blank face, and said, “I’m joking, Scott. I was changing laundry and feeding pureed squash to people with advanced Alzheimer’s. No, I did not meet anyone interesting.”

“Oh,” Scott said, and apparently took this as an opportunity to go back to talking about Allison. Stiles didn’t mind. He had decided long ago that if Scott could manage to be happy in this miserable existence they shared, he would do everything he could to keep it that way.

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It took Stiles about a week to settle in to his routine at the hospital. Every day was a little different. Since he worked evenings, it was rare that he needed to help move patients around or bring them to appointments. Mostly he changed sheets, cleaned things, and helped distribute dinner, then helped Bobby get all the patients into bed for the night. Some of them were more ambulatory than others. Out of the twenty-one patients in the ward, fully half were bedridden, and only two were completely mobile. Some of them just needed assistance getting in and out of bed, and some of them had to be lifted or carried.

After everyone was in bed, it was usually more cleaning, taking the trays of dishes down to the cafeteria or loads of laundry in and out until he went off shift. He was always tired afterwards, but it wasn’t a bad tired. Okay, the embarrassment of helping people in the toilet was pretty excruciating at first, but he got used to it.

During his second week on the job, there was a case of MRSA in the main part of the hospital, and everyone went on a cleaning frenzy. Stiles was given a bottle of disinfectant, a stack of clean rags, and told to scrub anything that held still. The janitorial staff would do the floors and the bathrooms, but he was to do everything else. “Windowsills, bookshelves, light switches, anything that someone could have touched, wipe it down,” Beth told him.

He started in crotchety old Mrs. Schubert’s room and worked his way down the hall in his usual
fashion. As always, he found himself hesitating outside Peter Hale’s room. His mother’s old room. Then he squared his shoulders and went inside. “Hi, Mr. Hale, it’s Stiles,” he said, even though Peter’s gaze never wavered from the window. Stiles started wiping down the light switch and the doorknob. “Just cleaning up a little round here. Scouting for rogue germs.”

He wiped down the bureau and the end of the bed and the nightstand. There wasn’t much on it. A box of Kleenex and a paper cup. He had never needed to help out in here much. Peter suffered from a state of catatonia that, according to Bobby, allowed him to respond to basic commands. If he said, ‘Peter, time for bed’, then Peter would get out of his chair and lie down in his bed without further instruction and only minimal assistance needed. He just never spoke, never really looked at anybody, and couldn’t respond to complex commands.

“What is he like that?” Stiles had asked on his third day at the hospital.

“Nobody’s really sure, though the doctors would love to tell you otherwise,” Beth had said. “Some combination of post-traumatic stress disorder and brain damage from smoke inhalation during the fire, maybe.”

Stiles had read enough to know that coma patients could hear and respond to voices, and since Peter’s hearing was obviously fine, he talked to the man even though he never responded. The room was depressingly bare. It wouldn’t take him long. He walked over and wiped down the window and the sill, then started on the tiny bookshelf. There were a few books on it, nothing special. “You like to read, huh?” He pulled out a book of the Just-So Stories and flipped it open. The inside said, ‘Happy birthday, little brother. – Talia.’ The edges of it were charred.

Stiles remembered the fire. Everyone in Beacon Hills remembered the fire. It had been a big deal. A family of fourteen people, three survivors. Laura had been away at college. Derek had been at school after the Friday night football game had gone into overtime. Everyone else had been home. Peter had been the only survivor inside. Stiles remembered it for a couple reasons. A girl in his class had been killed, a pretty, stuck-up brunette named Cora. And Rafael had talked about it a little, some bitching about a ‘conspiracy theory’ that it had been arson, something he was quick to dismiss.

“You know,” Stiles said, “they should bring in some decorations for you or something. Brighten the place up.” He darted a glance over at Peter, who didn’t respond, didn’t even twitch. Stiles wiped down the first shelf and then saw the framed pictures on the second, right at eye-level. One of them was clearly a family portrait, with – Stiles counted, yes, with fourteen people in it. The other was two men wearing tuxedos, posing underneath a tree. Peter was the shorter of the two, his cheek pressed against the other man’s shoulder.

“What’s a wedding photo?” Stiles asked, picking it up and wiping down the frame. “Your wife must . . . oh, husband, I guess,” he added, as he brought it closer to his face and realized both people in it were men. “So you’re gay, that’s cool,” he said, glancing at Peter. He looked at the family photograph and saw Peter and the same man on the left side. The husband must have died in the fire along with everyone else.

He wasn’t going to talk about that, so he said, “I sometimes think I am, too. I mean, there’s this girl I like? But then I also like to look at guys. I guess I’m probably bi. And sometimes I just want to be straight because it would be less trouble, but sometimes I want to be gay to spite Uncle Raf.” He set the photo down and continued cleaning along the shelf. “One time he caught me watching gay porn and we had a serious talk about it. By ‘we’ I mean ‘myself’ and ‘Raf’s fists.’” He scrubbed down the other chair in the room. “Since then he has religiously checked my browser history to make sure I stay on the straight and narrow as if I am not smart enough to get around that. Raf is a Grade-A douche.”
Stiles got back to his feet and looked around. “There, okay, sparkly clean, no germs here,” he said. “You take it easy, I’ll be back with your dinner in a while.”

As he left the room, he wondered why he had said any of that. But it was strangely comforting to have someone to talk to, even if it was someone who wouldn’t talk back. Peter Hale would never give away any of Stiles’ secrets. He was safe in a way that nobody else was, not even Scott.

“So, I got this job, and I want to tell my dad,” he said to Peter the next evening as he we restocking the paper towels, soap dispenser, and anything else that needed it. “It’s like, part of me knows that he would be proud, but then part of me feels like I would be rubbing it in his face, like I’m a productive member of society now. And I would want to give him some of the money so he can, you know, fix his place up a bit, but I know he wouldn’t let me.” He glanced up as Bobby wheeled the tray by with the meals. “Hey, should I keep doing this or help you out?”

“Paper towels and stuff can wait,” Bobby said. “Might as well start in here, since you’re already in here, he added, and shuffled through the trays until he found Peter’s plate and handed it over.

Stiles corralled the little tray table and wheeled it over, setting the plate down and looking at the unappetizing mass of mashed foods. He had said something about it the first time, and Linda had given him a harsh talk about not reminding the patients of what they had lost. After that, he had spooned pureed carrots and mashed potatoes into the patients’ mouths without a word.

Peter continued to stare off into the distance, and Stiles kept talking because he absolutely hated silence. “I want him to be proud of me,” he said, getting some applesauce on the spoon. “It’s just that, we have, uh, a complicated relationship. Actually I haven’t seen him in a few months. He was doing pretty well then, I mean, he was on the wagon and everything . . .” He delivered the spoon into Peter’s waiting mouth. The man swallowed without prompting. Stiles had gotten better at this over the course of the week, making sure he didn’t slop it everywhere.

“It’s hard, you know, when you live with an alcoholic, or even when you have one in your family, because you start to weigh every decision with . . . if I do this, will Dad start drinking again?” Stiles continued to feed the applesauce to the catatonic man. “But I should tell him. I mean, I want to tell him. What do you think I should do? You think I should tell him, right?” he asked, but Peter, of course, did not reply. “Yeah, I’ll tell him. Maybe I can go over after work.”

When work ended that night, he felt enough confidence to go see his father, and he knew from experience that he should do it before he lost his nerve. He took his bike over from the hospital and hoped that nobody saw him. Technically, there was no rule or law against him being at his father’s place, but he knew that Rafael hated it when he went there, so he tried to do it on the down-low.

Tom Stilinski lived in a one-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of town, and he was never any happier when Stiles came to visit. “It’s a rough neighborhood,” he always said. “At least don’t come after dark,” he sometimes added, but Stiles came when he could, and didn’t let the risks bother him.

He checked his watch and saw that it was about nine thirty as he chained up his bike and went inside, down a half-flight of stairs, and knocked on his father’s door. He answered dressed in his work uniform, the gray-green of the security company he worked for. He looked a little surprised to see Stiles, which he always did. “Hey, you,” he said, stepping back to let him in. “What are you doing here?”

“Oh, I just thought . . . I wanted to come say hi,” Stiles said. “You know, I was in the neighborhood, so . . .”

“I hope not,” his father said, turning for the fridge. “You want something to drink?”
“Uh, sure,” Stiles said, and tried his best not to glance over his father’s shoulder to see what was in the refrigerator. It wasn’t his responsibility to monitor his father’s drinking, he reminded himself firmly. But his father sat down with two cans of Coke.

“What’ve you been up to?” he asked.

There was so much empty space between them that just breathing it in hurt. So much lost time and words unsaid, so much that couldn’t be changed. “I, uh, I got a job,” Stiles said. “Melissa helped me. I’m working down at the hospital, as an orderly in the long-term care unit.”

“That must be tough for you,” Tom said, fiddling with the tab on his can of soda.

“Yeah, well, I got used to it,” Stiles said. “Anyway, uh, it’s interesting. I’m keeping up my school work, don’t worry. Uh, I had to quit lacrosse but there probably wasn’t much point in it anyway.”

“Oh huh,” Tom said. Stiles sort of wished he had argued about it. “How are things with the Mc Calls? How are Melissa and Scott doing?”

“Scott’s fine, they’re all fine,” Stiles said.

“Rafael treating you okay?”

That question had so many layers and mousetraps that Stiles wanted to slam the door in its face and run away screaming. “Yeah, sure, of course,” he said. “I mean, you know him, he’s not sunshine and flowers, but you know, I could do worse, right?”

Tom’s face tightened and closed off, and Stiles cursed himself for saying something so insensitive, for implying that his father, his real, actual father, was ‘worse’. He gritted his teeth and reminded himself that this wasn’t his fault, that he had asked his father to come back and live with him, that it was father who had said, ‘I don’t think that’s such a good idea, son’, and therefore he had no right to judge Stiles’ current living accommodations or his opinions on them.

They stared at each other in silence for a long minute before Tom said, “You should get home. It’s late, and I’m sure you have homework to do. I have to leave for work soon, anyway.”

“Yeah.” Stiles rose in defeat.

“I’ll drive you on my way,” Tom added, looking around for his shoes.

“No, that’s okay,” Stiles said hastily. The last thing he needed was Rafael seeing him get dropped off by his father’s beaten up old Jeep. “I have my bike. I’ll be fine.”

His father hesitated, but then nodded. “Okay. You, uh. Work hard. I’ll see you soon.”

They hugged, awkwardly, and then Stiles left as quickly as he could. Home – or back to the McCall house, which he was supposed to call home – was the last place he wanted to go. But he did anyway. He had nowhere else to go.

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“See, the thing is,” Stiles said to Peter as he ran a comb through the catatonic man’s hair, “Rafael is a jerk. Seriously, the biggest jerk. Like, he makes me sign my paychecks over to him and he keeps a ‘ledger’ of how much he owes me. He did that with Scott, too, and once he ‘lost’ the ledger and one time the amounts just changed and Scott and I did the math and we figure Raf has stolen like six hundred bucks from him. From his own kid. I’m never gonna see a dime of that money, you know? And it’s not like he needs it. He does it just to be a jerk.

“When I was ten and had just moved in with them, he kept trying to get me to call him dad, and I wouldn’t, and then he would get pissy about it. Like I didn’t have enough issues, having lost my mom, and now he wanted to take my dad away, too. Which of course he . . . come on, let’s brush your teeth.”

Stiles was quiet for a few minutes while he got that done. “Raf always hated my dad,” he finally said. “See, my dad and Melissa dated in high school, and so even though they never got serious and then my dad met my mom and everything, Raf was always jealous. And he’s that kind of guy who’s secretly insecure so he’s always accusing Melissa of looking at other guys or thinking about cheating on him. And after my mom died, Melissa was trying to help my dad out, you know, he was her friend and he was just . . . drowning in it. So she would make him brownies or stop by to bring him something and Raf just went nuts about it. Things were . . . they were pretty bad back then.”

He finished cleaning up Peter’s face and then huffed out a sigh. “You’re a good listener, you know that?” he said, getting the man arranged in bed. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Good night, Peter.”

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School had never been a particularly fun experience for Stiles. Before his ADD had been diagnosed, it was torture. His mind flitted from one subject to another and he almost never finished an assignment. Whenever he was called on in class, he never had any idea what the teacher was talking about, because he was off in his own little world.

In retrospect, it was lucky that his mother had noticed and he had started on medication before she got sick. If she hadn’t, he likely wouldn’t be on any sort of treatment to this very day. It was only a few months before she had gone to the doctor for the first time that she had handed him the pill and said, “It might help you concentrate, just give it a try, okay?”

The Adderall wasn’t magic or anything, but it worked. It kept him focused, although he wasn’t always focused on the right things. When he found something that interested him, he could shut out everything else. So it had problems, but it was certainly better than nothing. Rafael thought it was ridiculous, but it was one of the few arguments that Melissa had ever won, by virtue of the fact that she had actual medical training.

Junior high had been a miserable experience because junior high was a miserable experience for everybody. He had hoped that high school might be better. It was, but only marginally so. He struggled with being unpopular, with classes he didn’t enjoy, with teachers he didn’t like who didn’t like him any better. This year had some real doozies, Adrian Harris being the worst. Stiles’ experiences at the long-term care unit had caused him to become deeply curious about some of the
maladies he had seen there, particularly Peter Hale’s. He had written a twelve-page research paper on the different types of coma states for a project. Harris had returned it with a C minus, scrawling on the top, ‘this is biology, not chemistry’. Stiles tried to argue, saying that it was brain chemistry, and Harris had threatened to make it a D, ‘like he deserved’, so Stiles gave up.

“You have to come to the party with me,” Scott said as he was tossing the paper into the trash before Rafael could see it in his things and make a big deal out of it. “Allison’s going to be there, dude, you’ve got to come.”

“Dude, why would I . . .” Stiles let out a sigh. “Sure.”

“It’ll be fun,” Scott said, with the tireless optimism that kept Stiles afloat during the worst times. Stiles wondered what the hell he would do at a party, since hanging out with cool people really wasn’t his forte, but let it go. If the past couple days were any indication, Scott was going to spend the entire thing making googly eyes at Allison.

Of course, there was a hurdle to cross before they got that far. Scott’s parents were well aware of his huge crush on Allison, as he talked about her constantly. Melissa thought it was adorable. Rafael was on the fence, but generally speaking seemed ready to congratulate his son for showing signs of a social life.

“So, there’s this party Friday night,” Scott said, vigorously eating his green beans like it might help. “I asked Allison if she wanted to go and she does, so, I can take her, right?”

“Sure,” Melissa said, smiling at him.

“Don’t be too late,” Rafael said. “I want you in by ten o’clock. No drinking, no drugs, and no sex.”

“Okay, I promise,” Scott said. Melissa had long ago cornered both boys and embarrassed them with The Talk, which had come with an offer to buy them condoms if they wanted them, regardless of what Rafael thought about it. Melissa was a pragmatist at heart. Stiles didn’t know who she thought they might be having sex with, but he supposed it was a good thing to be prepared. “Stiles can come too, right?”

“You’ve got a date, what do you need your brother for?” Rafael said, cutting into his steak.

“He wants to go,” Scott said.


Rafael set down his fork. “Maybe you should try to find a date, Stiles. That might improve your overall demeanor.”

“Okay, Uncle Raf, I’ll get right on that.” Stiles said, rolling his eyes.

“So, we can go?” Scott asked, excited.

“You can go,” Rafael said. “Stiles can go if he finds a date.”

“What is this, some reverse 10 Things I Hate About You?” Stiles asked, annoyed. Rafael gave him an unimpressed look.

“C’mon, Dad, I really want him to be able to go with me,” Scott said.

“You’ll do fine with this Allison on your own,” Rafael said. “You don’t need your brother there
distracting you.”

Stiles gave Scott a ‘sorry, bro’ sort of shrug and devoted his attention to his dinner.

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“It’s stupid to be pissed, because it’s not like I wanted to go to the party anyway,” Stiles said, stirring the gravy into the mashed potatoes. Peter seemed to like them better that way. “And that’s just Raf being Raf. There’s no point in getting annoyed about it. Hell, for me this is a pretty good excuse not to go. It’s just . . .” He gave a frustrated sigh. “He has to be such a jerk about everything.”

Peter continued to stare into space, but that was par for the course by now, and it didn’t phase Stiles as he started to spoon potatoes into the man’s mouth.

“Family’s a bitch, isn’t it,” Stiles finally said. “I mean, not that Raf is actually my uncle or anything. But Scott’s my brother. I mean, even though he’s not related to me, he’s totally my brother. And Melissa’s been like a second mom to me for a lot of years now. And then there’s my dad, and I just . . . I never know what to do about him. I just want him to be my dad again. But it’s like . . . neither of us know how to get past everything that happened.

“But I guess you know all about family being a bitch, huh?” Stiles continued. “I asked Donna why nobody ever comes to visit you. I mean, I knew a couple other people in your family survived the fire, but I guess they moved to New York or something? Donna said Laura calls to check on you every couple of weeks. I don’t know if you knew that. Or if it would matter to you.

“I guess I can understand just . . . needing to get away from it. But still. It sucks that you’re here by yourself so much of the time. Even cranky Mrs. Schubert has a few grandkids who come in a couple times a week.” Stiles frowned a little as something occurred to him. “Sometimes I hope that you don’t really hear or understand me, because sometimes I think I’m really fucking insensitive. Yeah, let’s remind the catatonic guy that his family doesn’t come see him. Uh, sorry about that. Sometimes I kinda suck.”

He scraped the last of the potatoes into Peter’s mouth and gave the man a glance, but if the man was irritated at him at all, it didn’t show on his face. “All done,” he says, taking out a napkin and wiping off Peter’s mouth and chin. “I’ll come check on you later.”

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There were probably worse ways to spend his lunch at a table full of popular kids, but Stiles was sort of with Jackson on the whole ‘stabbing himself in the face with a fork’ thing. He couldn’t blame Scott for the fact that his new girlfriend was gorgeous, and therefore had won the attention of Lydia Better-Than-Your-Faves Martin. He couldn’t exactly leave Scott to sit at a table of beautiful women and deadly vipers by himself, so he was stuck sitting with him despite the fact that everyone else at the table had made their opinion on Stiles’ presence very clear.

“I’m a great bowler,” Scott said, and everyone tittered. Stiles suppressed the urge to start punching people in the face. He managed because Allison just smiled fondly at Scott like he was the most
adorable person that she’d ever seen and she didn’t give a good God damned about his skill at bowling. Which was a good thing. Stiles didn’t think Scott had ever gone bowling in his life.

At least Jackson didn’t pull a Rafael and tell Stiles he could join them if he could find anyone willing to go with him. Of course, Stiles’ crush on Lydia wasn’t very subtle, and he was sure that Jackson knew all about it. Fortunately, Stiles was so far below Jackson’s sight line that he didn’t consider him a threat. Which was fair, given that Lydia didn’t seem to have any idea that Stiles existed, even when he was sitting four feet away from her.

“So why didn’t you try out for lacrosse, Stilinski?” Jackson sneered at him. “We missed the usual comedy show.”

Stiles glanced up and figured that pretending he hadn’t heard would be immature. “I don’t have time. I got a job.”

“A job?” Jackson said with a snort, like such a thing was fit only for ants. “Doing what?”

“Working down at the hospital. In the long-term care unit,” Stiles said, against his better judgment. He had a vague hope that maybe Lydia would pay attention and realize what a compassionate individual he was.

“So you got a job wiping old people ass?” Jackson said, and several of his friends chortle. “Sounds fitting.”

“Yeah, actually, I really enjoy it,” Stiles said. “There’s this one ninety-year-old woman with advanced Alzheimer’s who still manages to be more intelligent than you.”

Jackson gave him an annoyed look and as usual when wounded, went for the throat. “Well, I guess I can see how you would need the money. Isn’t your dad still paying off his legal defense?”

Stiles grit his teeth and was about to say something he would probably regret when Scott jumped back in. “So, Allison, you said you had already read that book we’re doing in English, right? Is it any good?”

Jackson rolled his eyes and went back to ignoring the plebes at his table, and Stiles took a few moments to quietly seethe before he could manage to straighten up and appear normal again.

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“See, Jackson’s dad is the district attorney,” Stiles said as he thoroughly washed his hands in Peter’s sink. “So when things went . . . bad . . . with my dad, he got involved. And he and Uncle Raf are old college buddies, apparently. So, well, it’s not like they did anything illegal . . . I don’t think . . . but yeah, anyway, Jackson likes to rub my face in it. Mostly because he’s a dick and a bully.

“It’s not like I miss lacrosse. Well, I sort of do. I always just sat on the bench. You know, I guess it’s possible that I’d get on the field one of these days, but it wasn’t going to be any time soon. And in practice I usually just wound up being used as a punching bag. So I guess I can’t complain. I’d rather be here. Okay, all ready here,” he added, steering Peter into the chair in front of the mirror and reaching for the shaving cream.

Peter went tense as soon as Stiles started applying the foam, but Stiles was used to this by now. It
had concerned him the first time, since it was the first real reaction of any sort he had gotten out of Peter. “He’s always been like that,” Linda had told him. “He really doesn’t like people touching his throat or his face. That’s why we only shave him a couple times a week instead of once a day.”

Strangely, though, Peter was growing more relaxed about it, the more times Stiles did it. “Yeah, I know that I’m your favorite,” Stiles said, chuckling. His fingers lingered over the burn scars on Peter’s cheek and chin. “Do they hurt?” he asked curiously, studying Peter’s blank expression in the mirror. “Sorry, sorry, I’m a nosy prick sometimes. I’ll get on with it.”

He had gotten more relaxed about it himself, to be fair, and he wondered if Peter – and the other patients – could sense that in him. His hands were steadier, and he moved faster. The first half dozen times he had done this, he had been terrified that he would cut someone. He was barely even shaving himself; it wasn’t like he had a lot of experience. But like most things at the long-term care ward, it had quickly become routine.

“Anyway, I’ll still go to the games when I can, because Scott’s on the team – though he isn’t any more likely to get onto the field than I was – and I’ll just pretend Jackson isn’t there. I’ve gotten pretty good at doing that, though. Scott, you know, sometimes I think he just gets obsessed with lacrosse because of the way Raf is about it. I mean, he was just bound and determined to make first line this year because he wants to impress his dad.

“And the worst thing about it is, he was all worried about telling his dad about it, and when he was finally like ‘I didn’t make first line’ and Raf was just like ‘that’s a shame’ because Raf doesn’t even give a shit. It’s like, Scott could come home with a trophy and Raf would just say, ‘I suppose you think I should congratulate you’ or some bullshit like that. I don’t worry about impressing Raf anymore. I did for a while, but I grew out of it.”

Stiles wiped the remaining bits of shaving cream off Peter’s face and finished up in the bathroom before wheeling him out to his normal spot by the window.

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Stiles found quickly that working a four PM to nine PM shift while serving people dinner – no matter how unappetizing – was hell unless he had a sizable snack first. Since he usually wound up getting home fairly late, he tried to do as much of his homework before hand as possible. All in all, it led to a fairly hurried trip home. The last bell rang at 2:13, and he usually got home by two thirty. He ate a sandwich or two while doing chemistry or algebra, changed into his scrubs, and got to the hospital right on time. He had to bike there, since Melissa and Rafael were both at work.

Or at least, they usually were. He got home on a Thursday and was in the middle of constructing himself a ham and cheese sandwich when a door upstairs opened and Rafael came down. “What are you doing here?” Stiles asked, too surprised to think better of the question.

Rafael looked disappointed in him. “This is my house, remember?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” Stiles slathered mustard onto a piece of white bread and tried to pretend that Rafael wasn’t there.

“How’s the job going?” Rafael asked.

“Fine,” Stiles said.
“Keeps you out late,” Rafael commented.

“I don’t always clock out exactly at nine. I have to finish whatever it is I’m doing before I can go.”

“Mm hm.” Rafael folded his arms over his chest and leaned his hip against the counter. Stiles forced himself not to look over at him, his entire body going tense. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice how late you were getting in?”

That question is better not answered, so Stiles says, “Do you want a sandwich, since I’ve got everything out?”

“No,” Rafael said. “Do you know what I think? I think you’re using that time to get in trouble.”

He was half right. Stiles had, in fact, been stopping by his father’s apartment on a lot of the nights. He was never home, because he usually worked swing or night shift, but Stiles had a key because Melissa had one. Not long after Stiles’ father had moved out of the house and gotten an apartment, Melissa had gotten a key in case he ever needed anything, or just so she could check on him. Stiles had made a copy of it. Rafael didn’t know about Melissa or Stiles having said key, and Melissa didn’t know about Stiles having copied it, and Stiles was very invested in keeping both of them in the dark.

He went over to his father’s after work and put a casserole in his refrigerator or left sticky notes about his cholesterol on the table or a copy of some assignment he had done well on. He never knew what to say when he was in the same room as his father, but he wanted to make sure that he was doing well, and he wanted his father to know the same thing about him.

“Where are you going?” Rafael asked.

“Nowhere,” Stiles said. “I told you, sometimes I just work late, that’s all.” He shoved the sandwich into a Zip-loc bag. “I have to go.”

He was brought up short by Rafael’s arm across the door. “I’ll find out,” he said.

“Because you’re such a great detective?” Stiles retorted. “Did you know that although the crime rate in Beacon Hills has remained steady over the last decade or so, arrests that lead to convictions have gone down almost thirty percent since you took the office from my father? Maybe next on Beacon Hills CSI, you can figure out why your family hates you so much.”

Rafael lifted a hand. Stiles flinched, and that made Rafael laugh. He reached out and gently patted Stiles on the cheek. “Get to work,” he said, and Stiles ducked out of the kitchen, trying to ignore the way his heart was racing.

When he got to work, it was still forty-five minute before he was due to clock in. He looked around for a corner to sit and do some homework in, but the lounge had several people talking, and Faulkner was hard enough to read without distraction.

On impulse, he jogged down the hallway, took a breath, and went into Peter’s room. The catatonic man was exactly where he always was. “Hey, Peter,” Stiles said, dragging the chair over. “I thought – you seemed to like to read, right? I mean, you’ve got these books. And I have this reading to do, so I thought, maybe you’d like it if I read to you for a while. Okay, it’s Faulkner so it’s depressing as shit, but hey, so is most of the shit they have us read in high school.”

He flipped to the chapter that he was on, cleared his throat, and started reading aloud. Peter didn’t twitch, and there were times when he felt stupid, but his studies had showed that a lot of patients in various depressed states of consciousness responded to this sort of thing. It might not help, but it
couldn’t hurt.

At quarter ‘til, he finished up the chapter he needed to have read. Peter was still just staring out the window, but he looked more relaxed to Stiles, his breathing a little slower, easier. Stiles found himself smiling as he got to work.

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“Scott’s my bro, so, don’t misinterpret that,” Stiles said, tugging the dirty sheets off the bed. “It’s not like ‘he’s the golden child who can do no wrong’ and Raf treats him like a king. Raf’s just as hard as him as he is on me – maybe harder sometimes, because I’ve always been a disappointment but Scott being a disappointment is relatively new and therefore gets on his nerves more.”

He tossed the sheets into the hamper and continued, “I’ve actually developed a knack for pissing Raf off enough so that he forgets that he was mad at Scott. Like, one time Scott broke curfew and he was really about to get it, so I had to come like falling down the stairs and announce that I had decided to write my term-paper on emotionally abusive husbands.” As he spoke, his hands were getting the new sheets on in motions that had become practiced.

“Oh, and one time Raf had yelled at Melissa so much that Scott got upset and threw a temper tantrum that turned into an asthma attack – we were twelve, so, you know, somewhat permissible – and Melissa wanted to take him to the hospital but Raf kept saying he was faking it even though his lips were turning blue. So I ‘accidentally’ dropped an armful of dishes, and Raf was so busy yelling at me that he didn’t notice when Melissa snuck Scott out to take him to the hospital.”

“Thanks for listening.”

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It quickly became a habit to go straight to the hospital from school. Stiles didn’t want to run into Rafael again and face further interrogation. Not that Rafael hesitated to interrogate him when Melissa and Scott were home, but he was never quite as intimidating then. Stiles just added an extra sandwich and a bag of chips to his lunch so he had a snack, stuffed several sets of scrubs into his locker, and skipped going home entirely.

Scott didn’t seem to notice, and in fact seemed oblivious to the growing tension between Rafael and Stiles. This probably had a lot to do with the fact that he was hardly ever home himself. After lacrosse practice he was always going somewhere with Allison, even if it was only for a romantic walk on the preserve. He ate at their house at least once a week, despite finding Allison’s father one of the most intimidating people he had ever met. On the weekends, he was always out with her. He invited Stiles along once or twice, but Stiles had no interest in third-wheeling it. Sometimes they doubled with Lydia and Jackson, and the idea of going along then was even worse. The less time Stiles spent in the company of Jackson Whittemore, the happier he was.

So he just went to the hospital and settled down in Peter’s room, reading him whatever his assigned reading was and then often a chapter of something more fun, just to temper things. Peter’s bookshelf
was fairly eclectic, but he had some Stephen King, some Tom Clancy, Michael Crichton, so he seemed to like thrillers. Stiles brought in some of his own and started going through them.

Linda, one of the other orderlies, poked her head in once after hearing his voice and said, “Stiles, what are you doing here? Your shift doesn’t start until four, right?”

“Yeah, I just . . . it’s out of my way to go home first, so I started coming straight here,” Stiles said. “Peter never gets any visitors, so I thought . . . it might be nice if I sat in here while I did my homework. Sometimes I read to him. Is that – okay?”

“Of course it’s okay,” Linda said, melting a little. “That’s really sweet of you, Stiles, to want to do that for him.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said. “I mean, it’s not like he cares, but . . .”

“Well, we don’t know that,” Linda said, “so if you’re willing to do it, I think you should.”

“Okay,” Stiles said, and went back to his book.

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“And it’s not like I have a chance with Lydia or anything, it’s just that sometimes I feel like the biggest loser in my high school. I figured Scott and I would at least be dateless together. So okay, he’s got a girlfriend, that’s cool. I am one hundred percent in favor of my bro having a girlfriend even if he never talks about anything else and they’re double-dating with my crush and my nemesis. But geez, sometimes I think that birds help her get dressed in the morning. I mean, it can’t be possible for a girl to be that perfect, right? I mean, ‘Allison Argent’, even her name sounds like Disney prin – ”

Stiles’ voice broke off as Peter’s head jerked around and for a few moments the older man’s gaze bored into him. He actually stumbled back, he was so taken off guard. Then he dropped the stack of linens he was folding and hastened over to kneel in front of Peter’s chair. “Peter? Mr. Hale? Can you hear me?”

Peter just stared at him for a few moments, and Stiles couldn’t begin to describe the emotions he saw in the man’s face. Then, gradually, the tight muscles went slack, the sharp, intense gaze became fuzzy again. Stiles called his name another time, but didn’t get any response. Frowning, he stood up and went out into the hallway. The nurse was at the desk, so he called over, “Hey, Donna? Can you please come check on Mr. Hale?”

“Sure, hon,” Donna said, grabbing her stethoscope. “What happened?”

“I don’t really know,” Stiles said. “I like to fold linens in here, you know, so I’m not in the way, and he just – he doesn’t get any visitors so I thought maybe he’d like the company? And I was just talking to him but suddenly he – he looked at me.” Donna had been around long enough that she would understand why that was unusual. “Like, he actually turned his head away from the window and looked right at me. I called his name but he didn’t say anything and then he just went blank like normal.”

“Hm,” Donna said. She checked Peter’s pulse and reflexes and got all the expected responses. “What were you talking about?”
“Nothing particularly important,” Stiles said. “My brother has a girlfriend and I was talking about her, that’s all. Maybe it made him think about his family?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Well, I’ll call the doctor. They’ll probably want to run an EEG on him. Why don’t you stay in here until the on-call doc gets here?”

“Sure, okay,” Stiles said. He pulled the chair over so he could sit next to Peter and waited until she was gone. “Hey, uh . . . you in there? Peter? Is it okay if I call you Peter? I guess I’ve never asked that. I just, uh, I’m sorry if I upset you. I guess I didn’t realize that maybe even a catatonic guy could find me irritating.” Since Peter didn’t seem to be responding, Stiles tried gingerly poking at the subject that had gotten a reaction. “Anyway, uh, yeah. Scott’s girlfriend. She’s super sweet, really smart, athletic . . . seriously, I don’t think there’s anything she can’t do. She’s lived in France for a while and took gymnastics as a kid.”

None of this was getting any sort of response, but Stiles kept at it until Dr. Parvathala arrived. He gave the man a quick description of what had happened, and then he began to confer with Donna, and she told Stiles to get back to his duties. He left the room somewhat reluctantly. The dinner hour was starting and he had a lot to do. Bobby wound up wheeling Peter out of the long-term care ward to get an EEG and an MRI, and Stiles found himself surprisingly irritated that he didn’t get to do it himself. In fact, he didn’t see Peter again until the end of his shift, and even then it was just a quick peek into his room to see that he was sleeping.

The next day, he jetted over to the hospital straight from school, dumped his stuff in the employee lounge, and went to find the doctor. He was in the acute ward, and Stiles waited impatiently until he came out of a patient’s room. “Hey, uh, Dr. Parvathala,” he said, and the man gave him a questioning look. “I was, uh, I was just wondering how Mr. Hale’s testing came out yesterday.”

The doctor looked at him somewhat curiously and said, “Maybe some slight increase in his beta waves on the EEG, but that was really all. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I just . . .” Stiles didn’t really know the answer to that question, if he was going to be honest. “I guess I was just curious.”

Dr. Parvathala picked up the chart for the next patient and began to give it a quick onceover. “Donna said you’ve spending a lot of time with him. Even coming in early for your shifts so you can read to him before you have to work.”

“Yeah,” Stiles says. “He . . . doesn’t have any visitors. Everyone else, there’s always family coming in and out. I guess I felt sorry for him.”

“Mm hm.” Dr. Parvathala nodded, not really looking at Stiles. “You know, I’ve known Melissa McCall for almost ten years,” he added. It was a complete non sequitur that took Stiles off guard until he continued, “How are things at home for you?”

“Fine,” Stiles said, automatically. If Melissa had told other people at the hospital about the way Rafael hated Stiles, that was her prerogative. Stiles had learned not to get involved in Melissa’s arguments with her husband unless he absolutely had to.

“Mm hm,” Parvathala said again. He tucked the chart underneath one arm. “Peter’s prognosis is very uncertain, Stiles. We’ve never really figured out why he went into a catatonic state. Physically, he seemed to recover from the fire fairly well, even quickly. We have a strong suspicion that his catatonia is more psychological than neurological. Which means there’s always a chance that things could change. But it’s not something that we would want to count on. The human brain is an amazing organ, and it’s always somewhat unpredictable. People have come out of comas or locked-
in states after years. It’s rare but not unheard of.”

“So . . .” Stiles rubbed a hand over the back of his head. “Peter’s beta waves being increased, is that
good?”

“Well, any increase in brain activity is good, from where we’re standing,” Parvathala said. “But yes,
beta waves are associated with normal, waking consciousness.” He considered Stiles for a moment.
“You’re right in that he’s been alone a lot. It’s possible that maybe you being there, a voice
becoming familiar to him, interacting with him even though he doesn’t interact back, is prompting
some sort of reaction from him. How far will that go, well, we don’t really have any way to tell. But
if spending time with Peter helps you, it certainly isn’t hurting him.”

Stiles nodded. “Thanks for . . . taking the time to talk with me,” he said.

“Tell Melissa I said hi,” Parvathala said, gave the teenager’s shoulder a squeeze, and then headed in
to see his next patient.

Stiles thought about this for a minute before he decided that he should keep treating Peter the same
way he always have. Changing things now might confuse him. So he got himself a soda from the
cafeteria and then went back to the long-term ward. “Hey, Mr. Hale,” he said, going into the room.
Peter was in his usual chair, staring out the window. But something was different. Stiles couldn’t put
his finger on it, but he had spent so much time in the room lately that anything out of place caught his
attention.

Then he realized that Peter’s wedding picture had been moved. It was on the end table instead of the
shelf. Stiles leaned over and picked it up. “Did you move this?” he asked Peter, but received no
response. “Well . . . we’ll just leave it there, if you want to see it,” he said, setting it back down. He
sat down in the other chair and pulled out his worn copy of Intruder in the Dust.

He had about half an hour to read, and then he had to get to work. He asked around, but couldn’t
find anybody who had moved the photograph.

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Let's kick things up a notch! =D

Student-teacher conferences weren’t something that Stiles had ever looked forward to. Even as a little kid, they had brought on stress. His mother had often found his antics hilarious, and his father tried not to, but even so, his behavior had sometimes raised eyebrows. It hadn’t gotten any better as he got older. This year was scheduled to be even worse than normal, because they had changed the format. Rather than having the parents meet all the teachers, one teacher was selected for each student and the meetings were held simultaneously.

It was a great idea for the school and the teachers, because it kept things from going on all night, but practically, what it meant for Scott and Stiles was that Scott’s mother would go to Scott’s conference, and Rafael would go to Stiles’. They could have done it the other way around, but as soon as Stiles found out that they wouldn’t both be attending both, he knew that Rafael would ‘volunteer’ to go to his.

Stiles was never sure how much Melissa did or didn’t know about the way Rafael tormented him. He kept it hidden from her as much as he could. It wasn’t her problem. And as he got older and wiser, he could see the way Rafael manipulated her, see the lines of an abusive relationship that it followed – the blow-up, then the apologies, the hearts and flowers stage, then gradually spiraling into the same old shit. And Melissa fell for it every time because, as far as Stiles could tell, nobody had ever taken the time to really make her believe how wonderful she was.

He knew that Melissa and his own father still talked, and sometimes he was just as suspicious of Rafael of their relationship. Not in a bad way – frankly he would have been thrilled if they could just boot Rafael out the door and replace him with anyone, let alone Tom Stilinski – but he wondered. Sure, they hadn’t been serious as young adults, and their break-up had been mutual and friendly. Then Tom had met Claudia, Melissa and Claudia had become friends, and everything had been good for a while.

So they hadn’t ever been serious as young people, but they were older now, and people changed, feelings changed. Stiles knew that Melissa went to Tom when she needed someone to validate her existence, and he knew that Tom came to Melissa when he needed to hope again. He pretended not to know because he didn’t want Rafael to find out, but it hurt a little, to know that Tom still talked to Melissa but would barely speak to him.

“Sometimes I think my dad is just still angry at me,” he said to Peter one sunny afternoon. “I mean, after . . .” His voice trailed off. “Given everything that . . . if I hadn’t . . .”

But he couldn’t talk about it, not even to someone who wasn’t listening. Even seven years later, the pain of it was still too fresh.

Sometimes he thought about not giving his father a choice in the matter. Just packing a bag, setting up residence on the sofa, and refusing to leave. But he’s pretty sure that that plan would only end in
tears. There’s paperwork, after all, custody issues – Rafael and Melissa have official custody of him, and he’s only sixteen. He can’t go living anywhere he wants.

One time he had gotten angry enough to try it anyway, and Rafael had caught him packing and laughed at him, pushing him up against the wall and telling him that he wouldn’t hesitate to charge Tom with kidnapping or sheltering a runaway if Stiles tried to go live with him. He already had a criminal record, the courts wouldn’t look on it too fondly. He could lose his job, even wind up going back to jail.

So Stiles stayed with the Mc Calls, and Rafael never failed to remind him that his father’s continued welfare was at least partly contingent on his good behavior. Rafael had ruined him once, he could do it again, if he felt like it.

The long and the short of it was that he had gotten so frustrated and worked up thinking about the parent-teacher conferences that he had let Rafael goad him and then he had suggested, “Maybe you two could both go to Scott’s and then my own dad could come to mine. Revolutionary, I know, but it’s just a thought.”

Rafael’s eyes narrowed but he kept his cool, saying, “Oh, I’m sure he wouldn’t have time. He must be so busy, with his job as night security.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to trouble you, I mean, faking concern is so fucking tiresome, right?” Stiles snarked right back, grabbing the bowl of mashed potatoes.

“Oh, if you’re not doing well in your classes, I’m very concerned,” Rafael said.

“Honey . . .” Melissa tried.

“Is there some reason why you don’t want me attending your parent/teacher conference?” Rafael asked, ignoring his wife.

Stiles gritted his teeth and forced himself not to rise to the bait. “No.”

“No, what?” Rafael asked, his voice sharp.

“No, sir,” Stiles said.

“Better,” Rafael said. “But we’ll have this discussion again after I get home.”

So things could have been worse, Stiles supposed, but then things really went to hell. Apparently, the day of the parent/teacher conferences was also Allison’s birthday. She was upset about it for some reason – she was turning seventeen, and apparently the unwashed cretins who attended their school thought this meant she was stupid and had been held back – so Scott ditched school and took her out for some romantic outing.

They were supposed to be back in time so Scott could have dinner before the conferences, but they weren’t. Stiles texted him to tell him he’d better get home before he got into mountains of trouble, but Scott didn’t answer. That didn’t really surprise Stiles, because he knew that Scott had started turning his phone off during a lot of his date.

Stiles picked at his pork chops during dinner, which was held mostly in silence. All Rafael said about the matter was, “Well, whatever he’s doing, I hope it’s important.”

Stiles didn’t say anything, but by the time Scott got home, he had worked himself up enough that he pounced on his brother the minute he walked through the door with that dopey grin on his face.
“Dude, where have you been, Raf’s on the warpath, the school called and told him you weren’t there and –”

“Oh, shit,” Scott said, looking chagrined. “I just – you know, we lost track of time.”

Stiles groaned, because his brother was an idiot sometimes, but at the moment he was an idiot in love, and Stiles felt like he couldn’t blame him for anything. He could only hope that the parent/teacher conferences went well enough that by the time Rafael got home, he would have forgotten about it.

Things didn’t look good when the McCall’s walked through the door, though. Melissa looked faintly frustrated – which made sense, given that her meeting had been with Harris – and Rafael was just stone-faced. His gaze fell on Scott, who was cleaning up the kitchen in an effort to win points, and he said, softly, “Where were you?”

“I went out with Allison, it was her birthday,” Scott said. “I know, I shouldn’t have skipped, it’s just that she was upset and she –”

“Stop talking,” Rafael said, and Scott’s mouth shut without protest. “Your teachers are concerned about you, Scott. Your grades have been dropping since you started hanging out with this . . . Allison. I’m afraid she’s not a good influence on you, and I don’t –”

Since the next words out of Rafael’s mouth were obviously going to be ‘I don’t want you to see her anymore’ and Scott’s eyes were wide and horrified like this was a fate worse than death, Stiles hastened to intervene. “Finstock didn’t tell him about the locker room incident, did he?” he said. It was sotto voce, intended only for Melissa, but Rafael’s bat-like hearing picked up on it and he swiveled to look at Stiles.

“What ‘locker room incident’?” he asked.


He had to be careful with Rafael. Although the man wasn’t anywhere near as smart as he thought he was, he wasn’t an idiot. A few times, Stiles had gone overboard in his attempts to piss off Rafael, been too gleeful or too over-the-top in his antics, and Rafael had figured out that the purpose was to distract him from Scott. Then they had both gotten punished, and that obviously wasn’t the goal.

So it was a fine line he had to walk, using something that was enough to annoy Rafael but try to be subtle about it. He had found that quiet comments that Rafael ‘wasn’t supposed to hear’ were usually a good way to accomplish this.

“You’re a terrible liar, Stiles,” Rafael said. “No, your coach didn’t have anything to say about any locker room incidents, although he had some fascinating comments on economics report on circumcision, your general lack of behavior and focus in class, and that tongue-twister you call a name. We’re going to talk about all those things in due time, but for the moment I’m intrigued by this ‘locker room incident’ you’re referring to.”

“Don’t make fun of my name,” Stiles retorted. It was a sore spot that Rafael was always stepping on. He could remember when he had first started insisting everyone call him Stiles, all the way back in first grade. Jędrzej was not a name that could be pronounced or understood by six-year-olds. His mother had laughed and gone along with it, because she wanted to honor her father, but she understood where Stiles was coming from.

For a while, after the McCall’s had taken him in, Stiles had tried to go back to his Polish name. He
missed his mother so fiercely that it was an ache inside that never went away. After her death, his father was the only one who could even pronounce his real name, and a small, petty part of Stiles had thought that he could rub it in Rafael’s face by trying to use it. But the constant mispronunciation had ended up bothering Stiles a lot more than it bothered Rafael, so after only a few months, he had gone back to Stiles. But he still wasn’t about to let Rafael insult his heritage.

“Don’t change the subject,” Rafael snapped back. “What is this incident you’re referring to?”

“You’re the detective, you figure it out,” Stiles said, and tried to push past him, but Rafael’s hand came down on his shoulder in a squeeze that was more of a pinch. “Ow, ow, owww,” Stiles said, as Rafael yanked him around. “Okay, okay! It wasn’t a big deal, if Finstock didn’t mention it – just, maybe, hypothetically, I might have asked Danny – he’s the goalie, he’s gay – to make out with me to see what it felt like and – owww, Raf!”

Rafael wasn’t even looking at him. Instead he looked at Scott and said, “Go upstairs.”

Scott opened his mouth, saw the way Stiles shook his head, and then hunched his shoulders together before jogging away.

“Rafael, I don’t –” Melissa tried to intervene. Rafael just looked at her, and her voice faltered. “There’s nothing wrong with –”

“Being gay, yes, we’ve had that discussion before and we’ve agreed to disagree,” Rafael said, which Stiles found highly dubious. “But there’s behavior that is and is not appropriate to school settings, and I’m just going to have a talk with Stiles about that. Why don’t you go upstairs with Scott and talk about his grades with him?”

Melissa’s face tightened, but then she nodded and turned and went up the stairs. Stiles was silent while he watched her go.

“Okay,” Rafael said. “Now that –”

“I’m really sorry, Uncle Raf,” Stiles said, because he had learned long ago that as soon as he got what he wanted – Raf’s attention – the best strategy was to backpedal hard and beg for mercy. He hated doing it, but he hated the consequences of his behavior more. Most of the time, at least. There were times when he was willing to tell Raf to shove it, but this wasn’t one of them.

“You think you’re very clever, don’t you, Stiles,” Rafael said, leaning against the wall. “I’m sure you think that you’re going to get away with a lot more than you do.”

“Yeah, you’re right, I –”

“So I’ll make a deal with you,” Rafael said. “If you tell me where you’ve been going after work – because I know that they don’t keep you feeding mashed peas to old ladies after nine o’clock at night – I’ll let this little incident go.”

Stiles’ jaw tightened. He didn’t know what Rafael would do if he found out that Stiles had been going over to see his father after work, and he was smart enough to figure out that he has a key and wonder where he got it. That sort of trouble could mean trouble for Tom, as well. Rafael was more than capable of causing it. He could lose his job, and getting a new one could be hard, given his record. The man currently employing him was an old friend, willing to overlook the convictions.

Tom Stilinski had been a good sheriff. Stiles knew it, everyone knew it. But they also knew that it didn’t pay to get on Rafael McCall’s bad side, or John Whittemore’s, for that matter. The fact that it was public knowledge that Tom had done the job better than Rafael only pissed the current sheriff
off more, so most people were smart enough not to mention it to him. But sometimes Stiles thought that Rafael’s vendetta against his father would never end. It wasn’t enough to have won. He had to keep grinding their faces in it every day.

“I haven’t been going anywhere after work, Uncle Raf,” Stiles said, doing his best to keep his voice even.

“Mm hm,” Rafael said. “So you think you can’t tell me. Is it a girl? Or . . . a boy?” he added, his lip curling. “Drugs? Gangs?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “Yeah, Uncle Raf. I’m having orgies with gang members while high on E. Jesus, what city do you live in? Is it the same one I live in, because I haven’t noticed a lot of crime, you know, given our awesome law enforcement department – ”

Rafael’s hand tightened on his shoulder again. “Don’t,” he said.

Stiles shut up.

“Try again,” Rafael said.

Stiles took in a breath and let it out slowly. “I haven’t been going anywhere after work.”

Rafael let him go and leaned back, folding his arms over his chest. “So that’s how it’s going to be, hm?”

“That’s how it’s going to be,” Stiles said.

“All right, fine,” Rafael said. “If that’s how you want it.”

~ ~ ~

“Hey, Peter,” Stiles said. “Long time no see.” He moved a little stiffly as he went into the room. Peter was staring out into space as usual. It was probably just his imagination that the man’s gaze was following him. “Sorry I missed shaving day. I know Bobby has ham hands.”

He waited for Peter to ask where he had been, for the questions to start. But there weren’t any. He didn’t know why he had expected it. The relief was potent enough that he just sat down for a few minutes. He knew he had work to do. A million things, really. The hospital had managed without him for a few days, and it wasn’t the sort of place where work really backed up. Still, he had all his usual work to attend to.

“I missed you,” he said, because that made sense. Missing the catatonic man who was his listening ear. “I don’t have anyone to talk to at home. I mean, I can talk to Scott, but he doesn’t really understand. Which is okay, God, I’ve worked so hard to keep it that way. Scott’s just . . . he’s so good. It’s kind of hard to explain. He just, he’s always been there for me. I can’t stand watching Rafael hurt him.”

He wiped the back of his hand over his eyes. “God, sorry. I’ve got, uh, I’ve got work to do. I’ll be back later.”

Stiles buried himself in the work. He found solace in the repetitive motions of folding laundry,
changing sheets. A lot of the patients greeted him cheerfully and asked if he had been sick. He told them that he had been. He didn’t have a better answer than that. He always had to act normal after one of Rafael’s punishments. He couldn’t let anybody see how much he was hurting. The consequences of that would be disastrous – he had learned that the hard way.

He brushed old Mrs. Nyqvist’s hair because ‘nobody does it like you do, they always pull’ and he rearranged the knick-knacks on Ms. Hawkin’s bookshelf because the cleaning crew had moved them and she was annoyed about it but nobody had had the time to put them to rights. He helped Mr. Windsor sort the mail he had gotten for his birthday and read him all the birthday cards. He kept moving, as well as he was able.

“It’s good to have you back, Stiles,” Linda said. “Melissa said it was a really nasty case of the flu.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “Got knocked flat by it, that’s for sure. Don’t worry, though. I know you guys can’t live without me.”

“Mr. Hale seemed to miss you particularly,” Linda said.

“Ha ha, yeah, okay,” Stiles said.

“No, I’m serious!” Linda said. “I think the change in him was so gradual that a lot of us hadn’t really noticed it, because we’ve been around him for so long. He’s just been a little more active, turning his head more, actually looking at people. It seems like such a small thing, but it was really noticeable when he stopped all of a sudden.”

“Well, I’m back now,” Stiles said, since he had no idea what else he could say.

There was no way he’d be going to see his father that night – or any night after work for a while, not with Rafael’s interest in his whereabouts – but he couldn’t bring himself to go home. Three days at home with Rafael – because of course he took the time off to see to Stiles ‘while he was sick’ – ‘you have a set schedule, Melissa, you can’t just miss work like that’ – was more than enough. Even though Scott and Melissa would be home this time of day, he wasn’t interested in spending any more time there than he had to.

Peter would be in bed by the time he got off shift, but he clocked out and went to the other man’s room anyway. Peter was lying on his side, one hand lying next to his face, eyes closed. The unmarred side of his face was pressed into the pillow, leaving the burns in plain view. Stiles studied them for a moment. Most people, he knew, would be horrified to see them. He had been, the first time. They would stop people on the street. He was surprised to realize that he had stopped seeing them. That when he thought about Peter, he saw in his head the man from the wedding picture, young and smiling and full of vitality. In both pictures, Peter was smiling.

“You have a nice smile,” Stiles told him. “You smile like you know something I don’t. Like you know something everyone doesn’t.”

Peter didn’t twitch. His breathing was slow and even.

“God, I just . . . can you imagine what Raf would do if he heard this?” Stiles chuckled without humor. “Here I am, hitting on a guy basically in a coma, literally twice my age. That’s my life . . . sounds more pathetic out loud. I just, I have this picture of you in my head, and you’re probably not anything like that in real life. Or weren’t like that, I guess, before the fire.

“I looked up some stuff about the fire, you know. I guess I was curious about it. You probably wouldn’t have wanted me to poke my nose into it. But there I go again, just assuming that I know
what you would want because I’ve been reading you Tom Clancy and William Faulkner. Maybe I’m just as arrogant and stupid as Rafael thinks I am.

“Rafael talked about it a little, when it happened. I mean, I guess a couple people thought it was arson, but he never gave it much thought. I wonder . . . what would have happened if my dad had still been the sheriff then. I mean, the fire was only about six months after . . . everything that happened with him. So Raf was the sheriff, and God knows he doesn’t know his ass from his elbow when it comes to crime. I wouldn’t put it past him to have ignored any suspicions he had just because he knew he couldn’t solve it and didn’t want the bad press.

“Geez, listen to me, I should probably shut the fuck up about this stuff, right? I mean, everyone seems to think you’re getting better, and that maybe you might . . . wake up someday. Which means you might be listening. And the way I talk about this probably . . . well, it would bother me, I won’t go assigning feelings to you again, thinking I know you. I just . . . God, I’m so stupid. Here I am feeling sorry for myself because my dad’s an alcoholic and my best friend’s ditched me for a pretty girl, and you . . . you lost everything, your life is like nine hundred times worse than mine could ever be. You probably just want me to shut the fuck up and go away.”

“No,” Peter said.

Now it was Stiles’ head that jerked around, his mouth slightly ajar. Peter was blinking at him slowly, a little dazedly. “No?” Stiles blurs out.

“No,” Peter said. “Don’t . . . leave.”

“Okay,” Stiles said. “Can I, uh – can I go get Donna? ‘Cause this is kind of like super important and I’m pretty sure that – ”

“No,” Peter repeated, and when Stiles just gaped at him helplessly, Peter’s face creased in what looked like momentary frustration. He was struggling to sit up. Stiles leaned over to help him, acting on impulse, not sure what else he could or should be doing. “Don’t tell. Please. I keep . . . your secrets. You keep mine.”

“Oh . . . okay, square deal,” Stiles said, swallowing. He had absolutely zero idea of why Peter might not want anyone to know that he could talk, but hey, the guy had had a rough year. He would cut him a little slack. “But you . . . don’t want me to stop talking?”

“I don’t . . . I’m tired.” Peter leaned over, resting his forehead on Stiles’ shoulder. “Please just . . . talk to me until I fall asleep.”

“Oh,” Stiles said again, though it was more of a squeak. Peter was suddenly very warm and solid, real in a way that he hadn’t been before. Instinctively, Stiles put his arms up around the other man’s thin frame, rubbing one down his back. Peter gave a quiet little shudder and went still. “I’m really sorry about what happened to you, Peter. In that photo, your family looks so nice. Like the kind of family that I would really like to have. I can tell that you all really loved each other.

“I wish there was something I could do to help. I know that you probably miss them. I mean, I try my best, but I just . . . I know what it’s like to be lonely. Okay, and now I should probably talk about something more cheerful, right? You’ll have bad dreams if I leave you on that note. When I was a kid – before my mother got sick – we used to go to the beach every summer. There was this one time, there had been a storm offshore, and it washed up some jellyfish . . .”

He told the story with bright, vivid detail. As he talked, he felt Peter gradually going limp against his shoulder. He eased him back onto the bed and pulled the blankets back up to his shoulders. Peter
slept peacefully, so Stiles got up and left.

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Stiles went to the hospital the next day feeling like what had happened was a dream, that he would walk in and find Peter staring blankly out the window and just go on chatting about his day like usual. But when he went in, Peter looked up, and there was even a slight smile on his face. “Stiles,” he said. His voice was still a little hoarse from the long lack of use. “That’s your name, right? Stiles.”

“Oh, yeah,” Stiles said. He sat down in the chair across from Peter and said, “Have you, uh, have you talked to anyone else?”

Peter gave a slight shake of his head and then looked at Stiles with that intensity in his eyes again. “You said you would keep it a secret.”

“Okay, yes,” Stiles said, “and I have. But I can’t help but think that it’s maybe revolutionary and someone with an actual medical degree should be told, because what I have is about six collective hours of CPR and Heimlich maneuver training.”

“Why?” Peter asked. “The doctors are here to help me get better. Now I’m better. So they don’t need to know.”

Stiles rubbed a hand over the back of his head and said, “Leaving aside the logical fallacy that I’m sure is in there somewhere, why don’t you want anyone to know?”

There was a long silence. Then Peter looked up at him and said, “I’ve decided to trust you, Stiles. Because I can’t do this by myself. But I need to know that you will keep this a secret. You can’t tell anybody, not your father, not your brother, nobody.”

“Oh, God, you really have been listening all these months,” Stiles groaned. He saw Peter quirk a somewhat amused eyebrow at him and huffed out a breath. “Yes, okay. I won’t tell anybody. I promise.”

Peter looked at him for a long moment, a thorough, searching gaze. Then he let out a breath and nodded. “I’m in danger,” he said. “The fire that killed my family was not an accident. And if the people who set it know that I’m talking again, they will come here for me.”

“Holy shit,” Stiles blurted out. “Are you serious?”

Peter rolled his eyes.

“Yeah, okay, sorry,” Stiles said. “Not something you joke about. Or pretend to be catatonic about for six years. Uh. Were you pretending?”

“No,” Peter said. “Not for a long time. I started to . . . wake up . . . not too long ago. You see, there was this obnoxious, persistent voice that kept reading Faulkner to me. I hate Faulkner. I decided I had better wake the rest of the way up to tell the owner of that voice to find some better literature.”

Delighted despite himself, Stiles said, “Blame the school curriculum, buddy. I don’t like it any better than you. Just be glad you came out of it before we get to Beneath the Wheel next month.”
Peter shook his head. “I need your help, Stiles. I need to get... strong again.”

“Okay, uh,” Stiles said, “look, I understand you’ve been out of it for a while. Maybe they didn’t have this stuff back when dinosaurs roamed the earth, but there’s this thing now called a ‘police force’, and if someone killed your family and is threatening you, don’t you think you should mention that to them?”

“After listening to you talk about the current sheriff’s sunny disposition for the last six weeks? No, thank you,” Peter said. Stiles had to admit that he had a point. “When I have proof, or at least evidence – maybe then. But not until I’m stronger.”

“Okay,” Stiles said. He thought about it for a long minute, then nodded. “Okay. What do you need me to do?”

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

It occurs to me that I should probably apologize to anyone in the audience who likes Faulkner... I just, uh, don't. But it's a matter of opinion. :)

Secondly, I'm really not sure about that deputy named Tara, if that was her first name or last name, I just made stuff up. I thought Rafael was Papa McCall's first name for some reason but apparently it's Kyle? IDEK, I'm sorry. ^_^;;;;

The first thing Stiles thought he needed was to know what the hell he was doing. Peter had long ago recovered from the physical damage inflicted by the fire – except for the scars, of course – but his muscles had atrophied from long lack of use. Stiles went to the library and took out every book on physical therapy that he could find. “For a school project,” he told Melissa, when she asked.

His second biggest concern was that the hospital staff would realize what they were up to in about five minutes. Peter had insisted that he would be able to continue to fake his catatonia without issue. Stiles was somewhat dubious on the idea of the man continuing to allow someone to feed him and bathe him when he was fully cognizant, but if Peter said he could do it, that was his business. But the hospital ward didn’t allow the doors to be closed all the way, although Stiles frequently closed Peter’s most of the way so his reading wouldn’t annoy anybody else. It wasn’t really the sort of place where people bothered to knock, either. Someone could walk in on them at any time.

Peter told him not to worry about it. He would hear when people were coming; they would just have to risk it. Stiles was a little skeptical, but didn’t argue at first because it wasn’t his ass on the line. Then he realized that it was his ass on the line, that if the nurses or doctors found out that Stiles knew about this and hadn’t reported it, he’d quite likely be fired. The thought gave him a panic attack that he spent twenty minutes quietly fighting off in Peter’s bathroom.

He didn’t mention his concerns to Peter because he didn’t want to seem like a baby. Nor did he mention his third concern: mainly, that if he started using that free hour and twenty minutes between school and work to help Peter, he wouldn’t have a chance to do his homework. He would have to do it all when he got home in the evenings, which would lead to a lot of late nights.

But he didn’t let that bother him, because for the first time in his life, he was doing something that felt meaningful. Peter wouldn’t tell him much about the fire. Stiles asked, “Do you know who started it?” and Peter said yes, but that was all he said. Stiles didn’t suggest he go to the police again. That obviously wasn’t going to happen.

“Is that why Derek and Laura never come visit?” he asked about a week later, supporting Peter’s arm as he tried to lift a book. “Because they’re afraid of the people who set the fire?”

Peter glanced at him and then said, “Yes, I assume so. Though I suppose it could be because they don’t really like me.”

“That’s crazy,” Stiles said. “I bet everyone liked you.”

Peter smiled a little, almost a smirk. “No,” he said, “I’m actually not a very good person.”
“Aww, I don’t believe that,” Stiles said.

“No, it’s true,” Peter said. “I’m self-centered, arrogant, unethical, and altogether too proud.”

“I like you anyway,” Stiles said. “Anyway, you found at least one person who liked you enough to marry you, so you can’t be that bad, can you?”

“Mm, true,” Peter said. “Although Oliver did always have a craving for things that weren’t good for him.” He looked down at his left hand thoughtfully, clenching and unclenching it. “I wonder what happened to my wedding ring.”

Stiles followed his gaze. While the burn scars were mostly restricted to the right side of Peter’s face, both of his hands and arms were badly scarred. Since Peter was being very matter-of-fact about all of this, Stiles strove to stay on the same wavelength. “My guess is that they had to take it off after the fire. It was probably too damaged to hang onto. It could have melted. Was it gold?”

“Lord, no,” Peter said. “One ring to rule them all? I’ll pass.”

“Silver?”

“No,” Peter said, with a little smile that Stiles didn’t understand. “Not silver. It was platinum. I suppose it’s probably long gone.”

“I’d ask, but I think it would look a little weird, and I can’t tell anyone that you wanted to know what happened to it, so . . .” Stiles saw the thin sheen of sweat on Peter’s face. “And, that’s enough for today,” he added. Peter gave him a look, but Stiles held his ground. “You wanted my help, well, I’m the one who read the books. If you push yourself too hard, you’re only going to set yourself back.”

“Fine.” Peter leaned back in his chair, looking annoyed.

“You are getting stronger,” Stiles told him earnestly. “I mean, a week ago you couldn’t even lift that little pad of paper by your desk. You just have to give it time, that’s all.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Peter leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. “What time is it?”

Stiles glanced at his watch. “Three forty.”

“Just enough time for you to get a little of your reading done, then,” Peter said.

Stiles hesitated. “Do you want me to read to you? I mean, you can read on your own now, so I don’t want to bother you.”

“It’s not a bother. I like your voice.”

“Enough to put up with Faulkner?” Stiles said, trying to pretend that his heart isn’t slamming its way around his ribcage at the off-handed compliment.

“Only because I’m formulating a paper for you to write that completely desecrates the man’s life and work. Go on, get your book.”

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Stiles didn’t know what would be considered a typical recovery, but Peter made progress by leaps and bounds. His muscles hadn’t atrophied completely, of course; the hospital staff had done a lot of work to prevent just that. He could shuffle around fairly steadily as long as he didn’t need to go far. Stiles thought that stamina would be his problem more than anything else. Peter didn’t need to be able to bench press anyone; he just needed to be basically functional.

“You’re really going to just . . . keep pretending to be catatonic?” he said about a week later, as one of their sessions had come to an abrupt halt because Bobby had come in to change out his sheets. Peter had heard him coming, so Stiles was midsentence in *A Time to Kill* when Bobby walked in. But after the other orderly left, he put the book down.

“That’s the plan,” Peter said, grunting slightly as he rose back out of his chair.

“Won’t it bother you?” Stiles asked. “I mean . . . letting people feed you and stuff?”

Peter shrugged. “They’ve been doing it for years. It doesn’t bother them. Why should it bother me?” He saw the look on Stiles’ face and said, “It might be different if I had to fake catatonia of more severity. But thankfully, the fire left me with enough faculties that I’m not in adult diapers. I can stomach some humiliation for a while.”

“You can’t stay here forever,” Stiles pointed out.

“I know,” Peter said, and then changed the subject before Stiles could ask what his plan was.

Around the same time that Peter was able to stay on his feet for several solid minutes, Stiles went into panic mode with his schoolwork. He just wasn’t getting it done. It shouldn’t have been an issue for Stiles to go straight home after work, spend an hour or two crunching through it, and then get to bed at the fairly reasonable hour of eleven. Seven hours of sleep a night wasn’t exactly his preference, but he could handle it. Any long-term projects or papers could be done on the weekend, when he didn’t work and couldn’t really go see Peter without arousing suspicion.

As usual, the problem was Rafael. He developed a charming habit of cornering Stiles when he got home to ‘ask him about his day’. When Stiles settled down to do his homework, Rafael would sit down near him and ‘supervise’, which was about as helpful as a load of rabid ferrets. Stiles couldn’t work in his room because Scott wanted to go to bed, so he was stuck in the kitchen or living room, where Rafael had free reign.

He got far behind enough in math and history that his teacher threatened to call home, which was the last thing he wanted. Rafael didn’t need to know that his method was working. And of course there was Harris, always quick to point out to the class in general that Stiles’ work wasn’t up to standard.

He thought about saying something to Peter, but watching the man slowly regain strength was too satisfying to give up. So instead he resumed his nightly visits to his father’s apartment. He was never there. Stiles alternated cooking or cleaning for his father with his homework. In the peace and quiet, it wasn’t as difficult to get done. It shaved another half hour off his sleep schedule, but he was okay with that.

Besides, doing his homework at his father’s place was . . . nice, in a way that he hadn’t anticipated. It started to feel like home, even if it was only in a small sort of way. His father knew he was there, and started leaving things for him: articles from magazines that he thought Stiles might be interested in, coupons to places like Game Stop or Starbucks that he found in the flyers dropped in their mailboxes, recipes. It wasn’t exactly correspondence, but Stiles took home each one of those little offerings with more care than he had showed anything in a long time.
Rafael wasn’t pleased by his new habit of coming home at quarter to midnight, and Stiles didn’t even try to pretend that they were keeping him at work. But he did pretend he was at the hospital, saying rudely, “I can’t get my homework done here, so I sit in the break room and do it there. If that’s a problem for you, maybe you should try toning down your ‘help’.”

Nobody went home from that argument happy.

Just when Stiles was starting to think that the tension between himself and Rafael was going to explode into something extremely messy, everyone was distracted by something else. Scott and Stiles woke up on a chilly Tuesday morning to find that Rafael was already gone. That wasn’t particularly unusual, since his job’s hours could fluctuate depending on what was going on, so neither of them worried about it. They biked over to the school only to find police cars everywhere.

“What happened?” Scott asked, directing the question generally to see if anyone would answer.

“Some guy was murdered or something,” a freshman replied, standing on her tiptoes to try to see over the crowd.

Stiles obviously couldn’t let that go without further exploration, so when the teachers were distracted trying to shoo everyone off to their classes, he and Scott ducked underneath the crime scene tape to check it out. There was a school bus parked in the school’s side lot, across several spaces at once. The door was open and the back window was busted out. Stiles could see dark red blood splashed across several of the windows.


“Let’s find out,” Stiles said, looking around to see Deputy Wilbanks standing by the front of the bus. He jogged over to her. “Hey, Tara – ”

“What are you two doing here?” she immediately retorted. “You should be in class. This is a crime scene, for Heaven’s sake!”

“Okay, we know that, but can you tell us what happened?” Stiles asked. “We, uh, we’re working for the school newspaper. You know. Obviously this is a big deal. Our readers need to know what happened. If there’s a killer on the loose – ”

“Can it, Stiles,” Tara said, though she was clearly trying not to laugh. “I know that this high school doesn’t have a newspaper. Anyway, we don’t really know anything yet. Yes, a man was killed. No, we are not going to release his name yet. Not to anyone, and certainly not to you. And no, we don’t know what happened. Looks like it might be some sort of animal attack.”

“What sort of animal?” Scott asked, wide-eyed.

“Scott, do I look like the Fish and Game Warden?” Tara asked. She looked over her shoulder as someone called her name. “Get to class, both of you.”

Stiles and Scott gave up, since there probably wasn’t going to be more information for them. The entire school was buzzing with the news, but nobody really knew anything. As the day dragged on, Stiles put it to the back of his mind. He was always busy now, doing homework at lunch and even when he could grab a few spare minutes between classes. Then he had to go to work, and forgot about it entirely.

Peter was asleep in bed when he got there, which was rare. “Is he okay?” Stiles asked Donna.

“Not sure,” Donna said. “He got up this morning like usual, but about an hour ago, Bobby found
him asleep in his chair, so we put him in bed. Vitals are okay, though. Everyone needs a nap on occasion, right?"

A nap sounded good to Stiles, but he knew if he buckled down and used this time wisely, he might actually get to bed at a reasonable hour. So he settled down in Peter’s room and focused on his homework. He was even able to clear up a little of his backlogged work before he had to clock in. Worry nagged at him, and he wondered if he had been pushing Peter too hard. It wasn’t like he really knew what he was doing.

Peter woke up about an hour after Stiles’ shift started, and Donna checked his vitals and then sent Stiles in to get him settled back in his chair. She left the door open, so Stiles just murmured, “You okay? Blink, uh, once for yes and twice for no.”

The look on Peter’s face, a mixture of amused incredulity and disdain, was answer enough to Stiles’ question. He found himself breathing a little easier as he went back to work. But he made sure that he was the one who brought Peter’s dinner to him. “Any chance I can get something a little extra?” Peter said quietly, scooping the pureed squash into his mouth like it was the best thing he had ever tasted.

“Geez, Peter, you’ve been working too hard,” Stiles said. “Maybe we should take it easy – ”

“No,” Peter said. “It’ll pass.”

“Well, I can’t exactly go tell Donna that you said you’re still hungry.” Stiles chewed on his lower lip. “But I can get you something from the cafeteria on my break and stash it in one of your drawers so you can have it after lights out. What do you want?”

Peter blinked at him for a long moment. “I don’t . . .”

“Geez, yeah, that is a big deal,” Stiles said. “The first thing you’ve actually wanted to eat in six years, yeah? So, I recommend you skip their pizza. It tastes like cardboard with a slightly greasy layer of cheese on top. Their burgers are good. They actually make kick-ass chili, but anything I bring you will be cold by the time you actually have the opportunity to eat it, so maybe we should go with something like one of their sandwiches and – ”


Stiles grinned. “Okay, yeah, I can do that.”

“Pepsi,” Peter reiterated. “If you bring me Coke, I will stop speaking to you.”

“Sir, yes sir,” Stiles said, smirking. He took Peter’s empty tray. “Be back in a bit.”

He did have just enough time on his break to run down to the cafeteria and get Peter’s sandwich and a bottle of Pepsi, which he then put in a plastic bag and deposited in Peter’s bureau. Then it was back to work, and he had plenty of it to do. By the time he got home, he had forgotten all about the events of earlier that day. Scott was still up, since he had come straight home for once, sitting on the sofa with his mother and watching some reality show with Melissa. Stiles decided to join them. It felt like ages since he had had an opportunity to just hang out with his family.

Rafael got home about half an hour later, as the show was ending. Melissa glanced up as he came in and said, “Hey, any leads on that body found at the school?”

“Just an animal attack,” Rafael said with a shrug.
“A lot of kids at school thought the guy was murdered,” Scott said.

Rafael rolled his eyes. “It’s rare that you actually raise the average IQ of a room, Scott, but you certainly do manage among your classmates.”

Scott flushed pink and looked down at the remote control. Stiles bit back an angry retort that wouldn’t help anything. “Who was the guy? I mean, what was he doing at school?”

“He worked there. Bus driver.” Rafael took off his jacket as he spoke and tossed it casually towards the hooks by the door. It missed by a few inches and crumpled onto the floor. Melissa stood and picked it up, hanging it up properly. “Probably just a mountain lion. Or a cougar.”

“A cougar is a mountain lion,” Stiles said, rolling his eyes. He saw Rafael’s pinched expression and added, unconvincingly, “Isn’t it?”

“But wasn’t the guy on the bus, though?” Scott asked, frowning. “I mean, a cougar wouldn’t have followed him onto the bus.”

“It attacked him outside and then he ran on the bus to get away from it,” Rafael said with another shrug.

“But there was blood, like, on the windows of the bus,” Scott pointed out.

Rafael folded his arms over his chest. “Would you like to come conduct the investigation, Scott?”

Scott winced. “No, I mean, I’m just . . .”

“Please, give me more of your fascinating insights,” Rafael continued. “I’m really interested in how a sixteen year old with a straight C average who spent a total of two minutes at the crime scene has done such a thorough analysis of the situation. Come on, speak up, don’t be shy.”

Stiles abruptly stood. “I’m going to bed.”

Rafael moved so he was between him and the stairs. “You weren’t excused.”

“Yeah, you know what, I don’t actually care,” Stiles said. “Because I’m tired and need my sleep and if all that’s going to happen for the next half hour is you making fun of Scott to soothe your feelings of inadequacy, I don’t need to be here for that.”

Rafael considered him for a long minute before moving out of his way. “Maybe some sleep will improve your attitude. Or your grades.”

“Doubt it,” Stiles said, but he went up the stairs anyway. He kicked his shoes off, left his jeans in a puddle on the floor, and flung himself down on his bed. Scott came in a few minutes later, but he didn’t say anything as he got ready for bed and then turned out the light.

Then he leaned over the top bunk and said, “Dude, so, what do you think?”

“That guy was totally murdered,” Stiles said immediately. “Either your dad doesn’t want anyone to know, or he’s honestly too stupid to have figured it out.”

“What are we going to do about it?” Scott asked.

“I dunno,” Stiles said. “Sleep on it. Wait for Raf to finish bungling the investigation and steal his files.” A huge yawn overtook him. “Screw this. I need to sleep.”
“Lately you’ve been . . .” Scott’s voice trailed off. “Dude, I’m worried about you. You’re not sleeping enough.”

“Yeah, I know,” Stiles said. “Don’t worry about it, Scotty. I’m just . . . wrapped up in a lot of things right now, but I’m okay.”

“Well . . . if you say so,” Scott said. “But you’d tell me if something was wrong, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” Stiles lied. “Of course I would tell you.”

“Okay.” Satisfied, Scott rolled over and went to sleep.

~ ~ ~ ~

Stiles missed four days of work after Rafael finally caught up to him for mouthing off. He worried about losing his job, but he knew that Melissa would convince the hospital to keep him. He hoped it wouldn’t become a trend. He would have to start behaving better. That was what he always thought, but he never managed to keep it up for very long. He would be able to hold his tongue around Rafael if it was only himself that got insulted or belittled, but when he went after Scott, Stiles could never help himself.

“Where have you been?” Peter asked, as soon as Stiles walked in.

“Hello to you, too,” Stiles said. He wasn’t in the mood to be yelled at. “Sorry. I couldn’t exactly tell Bobby to tell you I would be out for a few days. Though he probably did anyway, huh? They all think that I’m good for you. If only they knew.”

“Yes, Bobby mentioned that you were sick.”

“So, you know where I was. I was sick.”

Peter’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You’re lying. Why?”

“Wow, you know, it just suddenly occurred to me that this is none of your fucking business,” Stiles said, dumping his backpack in a corner. “Do you want my help or not?”

That answer didn’t seem to satisfy Peter. “I need to know that I can trust you.”

“Oh, you know what, fuck you,” Stiles said. “This entire time, I’ve done everything you’ve asked. I haven’t told anyone that you’re up and talking even though it could cost me my fucking job, and let’s have a few words about what Uncle Raf would do to me if I got fired. Meanwhile, I haven’t asked you any of the questions that I have every right to ask, like who killed your family and why and what you plan to do about it, because it sure as hell isn’t rot away in the long-term care ward while you pretend to be catatonic. I’ve let you make your own plans because – because you didn’t see fit to include me, fine, I’m fucking accustomed to being treated like my opinions don’t matter. You were listening all the time I was talking to you while you weren’t talking back, so you know damned well where I was and why I’m lying and saying I was sick. So unless you actually have something to say that won’t piss me off, maybe you should just shut the fuck up for a little while.”

Peter studied him for a long minute before lifting his hands in surrender. “As you say. You’ve given me no reason to doubt your loyalty. Although it does beg the question. Why are you helping me?”
Stiles’ gaze slid to the side. “Because . . . you asked me to. That doesn’t happen to me very often.”

Another long, considering look. Then Peter nodded. “Well, hopefully I haven’t turned into jelly during your extended absence. Let’s get to work.”

They did for a little while. Peter was up and around with proficiency now, so it was mainly his stamina that had them concerned. Any more than five minutes on his feet was exhausting to him. After a little while, he settled back in his chair and said, “You don’t talk about your family anymore.”

Stiles squirmed. “We’ve been busy.”

“True. But you talk about other things, like the books you’re reading and what the weather is like and lacrosse and insipid television shows.”

Stiles sighed and sat down. “It’s different now that I know you’re listening.”

“I’ve kept all your secrets. As promised.”

“Yeah, but . . .” Stiles’ voice trailed off. He wasn’t sure how to explain what he felt, how he could never look at a cognizant, coherent Peter Hale and tell him about whatever bitchy thing Rafael had done lately, or what he had done at his father’s the night before, or how lonely he felt. “It’s just different now.”

“You’re embarrassed.” Peter accurately guessed the reason for his reticence. “You feel like the sort of thing you told me makes you weak, and you don’t want me to think less of you.”

“Yes, thank you, Peter,” Stiles muttered. “That’s what I wasn’t saying out loud.”

“I could remind you that you spent several months feeding me and brushing my teeth for me, and that if anyone has a reason to be embarrassed, it’s me,” Peter said dryly. Stiles wrinkled his nose at him. “But if it helps at all, I don’t think you’re weak. You’re just caught in a bad situation. It happens to the best of us.”

“I’ll . . . think about that,” Stiles said. “Can we please talk about something less humiliating now?”

“Sure,” Peter said. But he didn’t let it go for long. He went right back to it the next day. “So what did you do to incur the wrath of your . . . he isn’t really your uncle, is he? But I suppose ‘stepfather’ isn’t really accurate. What parlance should I use for him?”

Stiles shrugged. “Call him whatever you want. As to what I did . . . so there was this guy killed at the high school, right? And Raf was saying it looked like an animal attack. Except it didn’t, because cougars don’t attack people on school buses. Anyway, Scott tried to tell him that, and Raf got snotty, so I told him to stop taking his compensation issues out on Scott.” He gave another shrug and said, “Typical day in the McCall household.”

“Did he believe you? About the man who was killed?”

“Who knows? It’s Raf, so he might have already known and just not wanted to tell us about it. I mean, he’s actually not stupid. My life would be easier if he was. So it is completely possible that he wants to be able to conduct his investigation without prying questions from teenagers. Or it’s possible he’s overlooking things because he’s a lazy asshole who doesn’t want an unsolved murder on his doorstep so it’s easier to say it was an animal attack and close the book.”

“And you wonder why I don’t want to talk to law enforcement about the fire,” Peter said, rolling his eyes.
“No. I don’t wonder that. I’ve never wondered that. I just . . .” Stiles looked over at him. “I just want to know what your plan is. Because . . . I’ve gotta be honest, Peter. This,” he said, waving a hand around to indicate their circumstances, “is not permanently sustainable for me. The time I’m spending with you is the time I used to use to do my homework. So now I’m spending time doing my homework that used to be spent sleeping. I don’t want to stop helping you. But I can’t do this forever.”

Peter regarded him for a long moment, and then nodded. “It won’t be forever.”

“Whatever you say, dude.”

“Maybe I could help with your homework,” Peter said.

“Very funny.”

Peter shrugged. “I have a lot of free time on my hands. To the point where the idea of re-learning trigonometry and chemistry is actually riveting.”

Stiles laughed. “Okay, well, the problem is that I still have to learn it. It won’t help if you do all my homework and then I fail all my tests.”

“True,” Peter said. “I figured I would offer. But in any case, I think we’re getting to the point where I’ll be able to manage on my own some days of the week, and you can go back to doing what you need to do.”

Stiles breathed a sigh of relief. “Okay. That . . . yeah, I can make it work.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

This chapter is like 98% detective work, at least half of which involved me making stuff up to augment the canon, so I hope it's not boring, LOL.

It's been a while since I've watched season one, hopefully I didn't fuck anything up (although obviously it's happening somewhat differently since Laura wasn't killed). If the video store clerk had a name, I couldn't find it, so ya know, there's that.

Things gradually started to work themselves out. Stiles did his best to keep his mouth shut and tried to pretend that Rafael didn’t exist. It got better once he was getting more sleep. He hadn’t realized how short-tempered the sleep deprivation was making him. He went back to being to laugh off most of Rafael’s sarcastic comments. He still went to his father’s apartment after work several times a week, but didn’t stay as long.

Scott played his cards smart when it came to the February dance. He waited to ask Rafael permission to go until an evening that Allison was over for dinner. Stiles was home, too, because it was a weekend. By this point, Stiles and Allison were comfortable buddies. She and Scott were finally past the honeymoon stage, which was to say that they could spend time with other people, without spending the entire time getting lost in each other’s eyes.

Allison was funny, and smart, and charmingly down-to-earth. Even Rafael liked her, though he wouldn’t admit it. So Stiles spent an enjoyable afternoon goofing off and playing video games with them before heading downstairs to dinner. Allison began talking nonstop about the dance, and Melissa got gushy with her about corsages and dresses and shoes. About ten minutes into that, Scott looked at Rafael and said, “I mean, presuming I have permission to go . . .?” in his usual, eager puppy sort of way.

Rafael looked like he had bit down on a lemon, but all he said was, “Of course,” and Allison clapped her hands in glee.

Stiles was pretty sure that Allison and Scott had talked strategy before this little powwow, because Allison immediately continued with, “And even better, I know exactly who you should take, Stiles.”

“How I – what?” Stiles asked, blinking at her, startled by this foregone conclusion that he was going to the dance.

“Erica Reyes!” Allison said. “She’s got such a crush on you.”

“What? No, she doesn’t,” Stiles said automatically.

“She totally does,” Allison said. “A girl knows these things! And Lydia, well, Lydia knows everything worth knowing. I absolutely promise that if you ask her, she’ll say yes.”

Stiles knew Erica; it was hard not to know the girl who had had a seizure in front of an entire class. He remembered when people had been sending the video around. He had said, “it’s not funny, don’t
be such an asshole” to one of the guys who had been chortling over it in the hallway. It hadn’t
occurred to him that in doing so, he might have gained a fangirl. Mostly what he remembered
gaining was a wedgie in the locker room later that day.

If Allison said that Erica liked him, he would take her word on it; she’s certainly more likely to know
than he is. He thought that asking Erica to the dance would be nice for her, but at the same time, he
didn’t want to lead her on. And he really wasn’t interested in a girlfriend. He was too busy already. If
it were Lydia Martin who was available, that would be one thing . . .

“Yeah, I’ll think about it,” Stiles said. He really didn’t want to have the conversation in front of
Rafael, anyway.

Apparently there was one thing that Allison and Scott hadn’t talked about, however, because Allison
then says, “Hey, if she’s not your type, you could ask Danny. He broke up with his boyfriend a little
while back and I don’t think he’s asked anybody yet.”

Rafael looked up sharply at this, and Melissa’s mouth pulled into a little grimace. Allison caught the
sudden tension – she was observant, and smarter than a lot of people thought – but clearly wasn’t
sure what had caused it. Scott tried to defuse the situation by avoiding the problem entirely. “Nah,
Danny’s on the rebound right now, it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“No,” Rafael said, with a thin smile, “it certainly wouldn’t be.”

“Actually,” Stiles said, “there is this guy . . .” He didn’t know what possessed him to blurt the words
out. He was just so angry at Rafael in that moment, for being such a jerk, even right in front of
Allison.

“Oh, who, tell!” Allison urged.

“Someone I met at work,” Stiles said. “He, uh, he likes to read. We talk about books sometimes.”
This was technically true, although the idea of asking Peter to a school dance was laughable in its
ridiculousness. The idea of Peter being interested in him in that sort of way at all was laughably
ridiculous. Peter had certainly never given him any indication that he was.

“You should totally ask him!” Scott said, apparently bolstered by Allison’s presence into egging
Stiles on, even right in front of Rafael.

“Ha ha, yeah, maybe I will,” Stiles said.

“Well, I’m glad that you’re having such a good time at your job,” Rafael said, giving Stiles that cool
smile that meant he was in trouble. “I hope that they didn’t give you any trouble about the days you
missed last week.”

“Nope,” Stiles said, “but hey, if you start to suffer financially when I miss work, you let me know.”

Rafael’s jaw tightened further. “If you have a problem with the way I keep up the accounting, you
can let me know any time.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Stiles said, “I have no idea how much money I’ve accumulated, but I figure
that it has to be . . . let’s see, I’ve been working almost four months now, and I make eight bucks an
hour, so . . . eight times twenty . . . is one-sixty per week . . . times sixteen weeks . . . sixteen times
sixteen is two-fifty-six, so you probably owe me about twenty-five hundred bucks, right? I’ll take
that any time. Cash, would be good. You know, since you won’t let me have a bank account.”

“What do you need such a substantial sum for?” Rafael asked.
“You know what? That’s not your business. It’s my money, I earned it. Maybe I want to put it in a mattress. Maybe I’m going to get it changed to one dollar bills and blow it all on strippers. It’s actually not up to you what I do with the money that I’ve earned.”

Rafael studied him for a few moments, then looked at where Allison is shifting somewhat uncomfortably. “We’ll talk about this later.”

“Whatever you say,” Stiles replied, rolling his eyes.

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Three days later, Stiles was just coming home from a long day when he nearly walked right into Rafael, coming out the front door. He was dressed in his uniform despite the late hour, and holding his keys in one hand. As soon as he saw Stiles, he stopped, and his eyes narrowed. “Just getting home? It’s quarter to midnight.”

“Yeah, I had a lot of homework,” Stiles said, which was actually true. “Where are you off to?”

Rafael pushed past him. “From now on, I want you home by nine thirty. No excuses.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Stiles said, snapping off a salute and then heading into the house before Rafael could argue about his obvious lack of intent to comply. He glanced into the kitchen, where Melissa was still up, putting dishes into the dishwasher. “Hey, where’s Uncle Raf off to?” he asked her.

She looked up. “He got a call,” she said. “Didn’t tell me about what. Sit down for a minute, Stiles.”

Stiles frowned a little, but sat down. She put a mug of lukewarm tea in front of him. He sipped it and made a face.

“It would’ve been hot,” she said, “if you could have gotten home at a reasonable hour.”

Stiles took another sip and said nothing.

“Stiles. I’m worried about you.” Melissa reached across the table and gripped one of his hands with hers. “I know that Rafael . . . doesn’t always treat you the way he should. Yes, he can be a jerk sometimes. I know that. But this . . . you’ve been getting home later and later. When it was ten, I didn’t worry about it. When it was eleven, I tried not to worry. But it’s almost midnight, Stiles, and you have school tomorrow. Where have you been?”

Stiles fidgeted and said nothing.

“Look, I want you to know that you can talk to me. You can trust me. I won’t tell Rafael, I promise. But if there’s something wrong – if it’s drugs or anything like that – I need to know. And if it’s a good thing, like if you really are dating that guy at the hospital that you’ve talked about, I want to know about that, too. Stiles, I know I can never replace your mother. But I want to be sure you’re okay.”

At that, Stiles lifted his gaze to hers. Melissa had always been good to him, and she had never pushed him for more than he could give. He fiddled with his mug and then said, “I’ve been going to my dad’s.”
Her face softened instantly like she understood everything. “Oh. That . . . that’s okay, Stiles. That’s completely okay.”

“He just – he doesn’t eat right. You should’ve seen how many crappy TV dinners were in his freezer. I just – I go over after work and do my homework there and it’s nice, it’s like it’s home. And I sometimes make him something to eat or just tidy up around the house or do some of his laundry. I know it’s stupid, but I just . . . I like being there. Even if he’s not there.”

“Honey, I get that,” Melissa said. “I do. I know that you miss him like crazy.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, rubbing the back of his hand over his eyes. “But you know if Uncle Raf found out, he would hit the roof, and it’s not just me he would be mad at. He’d be mad at my dad, too. And then . . .” The words stuck in his throat. He doesn’t know how to say ‘the last time your husband was mad at my dad, my dad wound up in jail’.

“Oh honey, I get that,” Melissa said, and gave his hand another squeeze. “We’ll work it out, sweetie. Just give me a little time to think about it.”

“All right.” Stiles took another swallow of his tea. “I’m going to go to bed, okay? I’m really tired.”

“Of course, you go get some sleep,” Melissa said.

Stiles went up the stairs, peeled off his clothing, and crawled under the blanket. Scott was already sound asleep, dreams of Allison dancing in his head. Stiles closed his eyes and sank into it.

When his alarm went off what felt like five minutes later, he groaned and rolled over. Scott sprang out of bed – he was a morning person, something that caused Stiles no end of aggravation – and Stiles went back to sleep. He knew from experience that Scott would wake him when he got out of the shower.

Twenty minutes later, he was downstairs, nodding into a bowl of cereal and feeling surly. The front door opened and Rafael came in. He tossed his jacket over a chair and dropped his holster next to it. Stiles opened his mouth to say something about the proper storing of firearms, but then saw the thunderclouds on Rafael’s expression and decided against it.

“Are you just getting home?” Scott asked, clearly surprised.

“Yes,” Rafael said, his voice short and clipped. Stiles glanced over and saw a smear of blood on the man’s knuckles. He had a sudden suspicion about where Rafael had been, why he had been out so late, and why he was so annoyed.

It took him about thirty seconds on his phone to confirm. “Another murder?” he said casually.

Rafael’s eyes narrowed. “To use the word ‘another’ implies that there has been more than one. And since I think I was very clear with you about the incident last week being an animal attack, that’s obviously not the case. This one might have been an animal attack, too.”

Stiles skimmed the news article on his phone and nodded sagely. “Okay, yeah, I get that. I bet it’s pretty common for cougars to prowl the local video rental store and get upset when all their copies of The Notebook are checked out already.”

Rafael gave him a very long look. “Stiles,” he said, “I have been up all night. So maybe you should reconsider your decision to antagonize me.”

“Yep,” Stiles said, burying himself in his cereal. “Consider it reconsidered.”
Rafael made himself some toast and then sat down with his mug of coffee. Melissa had already left for work. The two teenagers ate in silence under Rafael’s glare, and then hastily left for school. The rushed quality of the meal meant they got to school about ten minutes before they usually did.

“Okay, so, what happened?” Scott asked excitedly, as they chain up their bikes.

Stiles took his phone out again and said, “Late last night, probably around eleven PM, a video store clerk was murdered at his place of business. He was the only one in the store, there were no witnesses. Under investigation, possibility of an animal attack, possible connection to the death of Garrison Meyers last week, blah, blah, blah.”

“There’s gotta be a connection, right?” Scott asked.

“Gotta be,” Stiles agreed. “If it looked like it could be an animal attack both times, then that’s the same MO, right?”

“We need more information,” Scott said, nodding. “Think Tara would tell us anything?”

“No unless your dad closes the book on them,” Stiles said. “If there’s an open investigation, she won’t say a word. But we can still find out. We need to go to the station and get your dad’s files.”

“What!” Scott protested. “Do you have any idea what he would do to us?”

Stiles did indeed. He had several ideas. But he didn’t care. There was a murderer on the loose. A murderer that his father, if he was still sheriff, would no doubt be able to catch. Since Rafael had run him out of office, Stiles would just have to do it himself. “C’mon, think of the look on his face when you bring a criminal to justice.”

“Oh my God!” Scott said. “That’s playing dirty.”

“So you’ll do it? I’ve got to work.”

Scott punched him in the arm. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll do it.”

~ ~ ~

It was one of Stiles’ ‘off’ days – he and Peter were now only working three days a week, so he got Tuesday and Thursdays to do his homework before work and then get to bed at a reasonable hour. He busted through as much of it as he could and only barely finished in time. Midterms were approaching. But he didn’t want to put any of it off, because he was going to have enough to do when he got home.

He only had time to stop into Peter’s room and give him a quick hello, which was returned somewhat unenthusiastically, before he scampered off to get to his duties. But he still spent a fair amount of time in Peter’s room. He and Bobby had a routine down pat when it came to dinner and then getting all the residents into bed. Bobby knew that Peter responded well to Stiles, so Stiles was always the one to give him his dinner and brush his hair and do all the other things that he no longer needed to do.

Peter set to his mashed potatoes with more enthusiasm than they warranted. “Any chance you could
get me a little something extra today?"

Stiles grimaced. "I, uh. I don’t have any money," he admitted.

Peter glanced at him. "You work here twenty hours a week, and I know you don’t exactly have a thriving social life. Where does it go? College fund?"

“Something like that,” Stiles said. “I get an allowance from it, from Melissa, but I’ve used it all up this week buying groceries for my dad. Which is what I usually use it for. He wouldn’t eat anything except Burger King if it weren’t for me."

Peter scooped another forkful of something pureed into his mouth. “Rafael keeps the rest, I presume?” he asked, and Stiles sighed and nodded. “That’s unfortunate. I’m really craving a cheeseburger.”

“I’ll see what I can do next week, I guess,” Stiles said.

“I have money, as it happens,” Peter said, “but I wouldn’t have the foggiest idea how to access it. I somehow doubt my checkbook or my wallet are sitting in the drawer over there.”

Stiles checked, just for the heck of it, and shook his head. “Nope. Sorry.”

“Mm. Worth thinking about, though. The time is going to come when money will be a necessity.” Peter finished off his meal with a flourish, and Stiles took his tray. “If you come in later and I’ve fallen asleep, don’t worry about me. I’m just tired, that’s all.”

“Have you been working without me?” Stiles asked.

“A little, yes.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” Stiles reminded him, before getting back to work. He was practically jittery by the time he got home. He went straight home for once, getting in at nine twenty-five exactly. Rafael was on the sofa, watching television, and he glanced up as Stiles came in and gave him a thin smile. Stiles saluted and jogged up to his bedroom.

Scott had been a busy worker bee while Stiles was gone. In fact, he had taken the sheets off their beds and made a blanket fort. Stiles grinned, kicked off his shoes, and crawled inside. “You got ‘em?”

“Shhh!” Scott said, flailing at him. The blanket fort would provide them a little cover from Rafael, should he decide to come charging into the room. Stiles noticed that Scott had set it up right next to the dresser, where any papers could be conveniently slid underneath and out of view, should the worst happen. “Yes, I got them. The bus driver’s case was still open, though it looks like it hasn’t been touched in almost a week. So he didn’t just put it down as an animal attack and close it.”

“Amazing,” Stiles muttered. He took the two folders from Scott’s hands and started looking through them. He had already gathered most of the information about the bus driver’s murder, and what was available about the video store clerk was much the same. “Geez, I can actually see how people would think of an animal attack. Humans usually aren’t this . . . messy.”

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“I know, right?” Scott said. He fished out a photograph from the video store. It seemed like half the shelves had been knocked over. “It was one hell of a struggle. And on the bus, the way the back window was busted out . . . whoever’s doing this must be really strong.”

“Yeah, but neither of his opponents were,” Stiles mused thoughtfully. “The bus driver was in his
sixties and had a heart condition. The video store clerk doesn’t exactly look like an MMA champion. And both of them were torn up pretty badly. Why all the collateral damage?” He flipped through the folder. “Video cameras?”

“The one inside the store shorted out,” Scott said. “So there’s really nothing. I can see why Dad is tense about this case,” he added. He looked up at Stiles earnestly. “Dude, maybe we should drop it.”

“Hell no, not if he’s not going to do his job,” Stiles said. “Okay. The first thing we need to do is figure out who the two victims were connected. But there isn’t much in here about that. How can we find out?”

“Well, some stuff would be public record,” Scott said uncertainly.

“That probably won’t be enough, but let’s start there, I guess,” Stiles said. “Maybe we can pretend to be reporters and interview their family and stuff.”

“Stiles, we’re like, sixteen,” Scott pointed out.

“Yeah, but people are stupid,” Stiles replied.

Scott had to admit that this was a fair point. Then he shook his head and said, “Seriously, though, are you coming to the dance? It’s this Friday. Mom’s taking me shopping tomorrow. You could come along.”

“I have to work,” Stiles said. He saw Scott open his mouth and said, “Look, bro, I just really don’t want to go. I know you and Allison think Erica and I would make a really cute couple, but I just don’t have time for a girlfriend right now, and I don’t even know her. Maybe I’ll ask her out towards the end of the year and I can get to know her over the summer, or something like that. I really just don’t want to fifth wheel it and listen to Jackson insult me all evening while Lydia somehow manages to still not notice that I exist in the same hemisphere as her.”

“Well . . . okay,” Scott said. “I just don’t like leaving you out, you know? I don’t want you to feel like we would mind you being there. I know that at first me and Allison were kind of . . .”

Stiles grinned at that despite himself. “Allison and I. Are you ever going to get an A in English?”

Scott tossed a pen at him. “I’m serious!”

“Yeah, okay,” Stiles said. “Seriously, we’re cool. I know that getting a girlfriend was a big deal for you. And I know that you two don’t mind having me around . . . most of the time. But dances are supposed to be romantic, and nobody needs me there. But I’ll tell you what – in a couple months there’ll be spring fling, maybe I’ll ask Erica then.”

“Or that guy you like,” Scott said, with a devilish grin. “C’mon, man, give me something. Give me a name.”

“Any name? Okay, Colonel Von Trapp.”

“Give me the name of the guy you like!”

Stiles just smirked at him and tried to think of a fake name for Peter. He didn’t want to use Peter’s real name, because he knew that Melissa knew he was reading to him, and he didn’t want her thinking he had a crush on a comatose guy. It took him a few moments to remember what Peter’s husband’s name had been. “Oliver.”
“Oliver?” Scott collapsed backwards, laughing. “You have a crush on a guy named Oliver?”

“Oh, come on, my name is Jędrzej, what can I say about Oliver?”

“Point,” Scott said, sitting back up. “Okay. But we’re not done with this subject! I will extract every available piece of information about your mysterious crush out of you. Don’t think I won’t.”

“I’m shaking in my boots,” Stiles told him.

Long after Scott had gone to bed, Stiles was still studying the information on the two murders, his mind gradually piecing together information. He slid the folder underneath his pillow and tried to get some sleep.

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Public records didn’t get Stiles and Scott particularly far. They found out that the first victim, Garrison Meyers, was divorced with two adult children. He had worked for an insurance company for several years, investigating claims of theft or fire or other destruction, before going into a semi-retirement about six years previous and taking up bus driving. He was sixty-one years old and had a mild heart condition. On paper, he was one of the least interesting people Stiles had ever come across.

The second man, Jason Stalls, was moderately more interesting in that he had a criminal record. Most of it was small-time like breaking and entering, vandalism, and petty larceny. None of it was recent. It looked like he had gone clean about five years previous. He was unmarried and had no children. The video store had employed him for about a year and a half.

Stiles can’t see any possible connection between the two of them. He just flipped back and forth between the two dossiers he had compiled for days, willing something to jump out and suddenly make sense. But nothing did.

The reports from the crime scene were no help, either. There were no witnesses to either crime. Both took place late at night, somewhere between eleven and midnight. Both bodies were badly torn up, and there was a lot of collateral damage as well.

The only interesting factor that Stiles could find was a note in the autopsy from the first victim that puzzled him. He had died from exsanguination, a process that most likely ‘took up to an hour’. He had died slowly. The second victim had died quickly. His throat had been all but torn out. The crimes were otherwise so similar that the disparity struck him as particularly odd.

“Maybe he didn’t actually intend to kill the first guy,” Scott suggested in their Blanket Fort of Clandestine Investigation.

“Tore him up pretty bad, though,” Stiles said. “Even if he didn’t specifically intend to kill him, he didn’t care if he died. Anyway, why would he beat the shit out of him but not kill him?”

“Why walk away without killing him, if he wanted him dead?” Scott countered. “It was just the two of them in an abandoned parking lot in the middle of the night. If he’d wanted to kill him, he would have.”

“Well, he did,” Stiles said. “Maybe he waited until he died. Maybe . . . maybe he wanted to kill him
slowly because he wanted him to suffer.”

“This guy?” Scott asked, tapping the dossier. “Dude played the trombone in his church orchestra. You’d be harder put to find a guy less deserving of being tortured to death.”

“Then maybe it wasn’t about him,” Stiles said, following his leap of intuition to its conclusion. “Maybe the killer was actually after guy two all along, but didn’t know how to find him, so he tortured guy one for information.”

“Maybe.” Scott sounded dubious. “You’re stretching things a little, but okay. Either way, it doesn’t get us any closer to finding the murderer.”

“The two victims have to be connected,” Stiles said, rubbing his hands over his face. “I just can’t see how.”

He found out two days later. It annoyed him, because it was actually Rafael that figured it out, not him. Of course, Rafael had access to police resources, but it still got underneath Stiles’ skin. Scott had been going to the police station in the evening and getting any updates from Rafael’s investigation. It was there plain as day once Stiles saw it.

Garrison Meyers, the first victim, investigated crimes. Not in a law enforcement capacity, to be sure, but it was still what he had done. Jason Stalls, the second victim, was a criminal. And approximately eight years previous, Meyers had investigated him in connection with a robbery.

“So maybe it was someone out for revenge,” Scott suggested. “Using the investigator’s knowledge of a crime to track down who had committed it.”

“Yeah, yeah, that makes sense,” Stiles said. “Not that it narrows down our field of suspects very much. I guess it’s a start, but, if Jason Stalls didn’t get caught or convicted for whatever crime it was, there won’t be any record of it now.”

“Yeah.” Scott chewed on his lower lip.

“You know what strikes me as odd?” Stiles said. “The timing. These aren’t exactly meticulously planned bank heists. So why is there the big gap between the two murders? You’d think, if he tortured Garrison Meyers to get the identity of Jason Stalls, he would have gone out and killed Stalls right away. Instead it’s over a week between the two.”

“Maybe he wanted to independently verify,” Scott said.

“Yeah, this guy seems real big on research,” Stiles said with a snort. He slapped the folder shut. “I don’t know, man . . . everything about this just seems weird.”

“Don’t give up,” Scott said, squeezing his shoulder. “We’ll figure it out.”

“Okay,” Stiles said. “Okay, uh . . . I guess a good place to start would be crimes that Stalls was implicated in, or a person of interest, but was never convicted, right?”

“How are we going to get that information?” Scott asked.

“I’ll figure something out,” Stiles said, but he already had it figured out. The next night was Friday, the Valentine’s Day Dance. He was going to have a window of opportunity miles wide, because Rafael, in his infinite dickery, had decided to be a chaperone. It wasn’t like the school needed them, there were plenty of teachers, but he had offered and it was difficult to tell him no. Stiles was sure it was just because he wanted to keep an ostentatious eye on Scott and Allison – and probably also to
make sure Stiles didn’t show, since he had been forbidden to attend after the disastrous conversation about who he might invite.

Melissa was working a late shift, so Stiles was going to have some free time for once. At work, he casually mentioned to Bobby that he was hoping he would still have time to hit the dance after work, shyly hinting that there was a girl he wanted to ask to dance. Over the course of the last few months, Stiles had become something of a mascot around the long-term care ward, and everybody liked him.

He let Linda catch him checking his watch a few times, hurriedly putting it away without mentioning it. She and Donna put their heads together for a few minutes while he and Bobby were getting dinner for the patients. When he came out of the last room and glanced at his watch again, Linda laughed and said, “Go! Bobby and I can handle getting everyone into bed.”

“Are you sure?” Stiles asked, and when she nodded, he said, “You guys are the best! I’ll see you Monday!” He dashed out of the hospital without another word.

It was a little before eight. The school dance had started at seven. Rafael would be at the high school for at least another two hours. He had plenty of time.

Stiles biked down to the police station and went into Rafael’s office. Hardly anybody was there so late on a Friday, and Stiles just told the unfamiliar woman at the desk that Rafael had asked him to grab something he had left there. Once inside, he sat down with Rafael’s copy of the case file and gave it a thorough onceover just in case Scott had missed anything. He hadn’t.

Stiles was disgusted to see that although Rafael had made the connection between the two victims, he hadn’t done anything beyond pulling the specific case file where Meyers had investigated Stalls. It didn’t seem to have occurred to him that there might have been another crime committed, which hadn’t had an official investigation.

With a quick glance around, Stiles got to work. He signed onto Rafael’s computer – guessing his password only took two tries, it was the name and jersey number of his favorite baseball player – and started typing out internal correspondence. He ordered Stalls’ complete criminal record along with known associates and their complete criminal records. He requested someone get the records of any investigations that Meyers had done for the previous ten years, then changed his mind and asked only for those with violent crime involved. People didn’t go on revenge-based killing sprees over stolen televisions.

Most of what he needed was computerized. That which wasn’t, he printed out the appropriate order and signed it himself. He had perfected Rafael’s signature in eighth grade after missing one too many field trips for lack of a permission slip. He left it all in Rafael’s outbox and slid out of the office.

It would take a little time to get all the data, he knew, particularly that which they would have to get from the insurance company that Meyers had worked for. Rafael would certainly wonder where all of it had come from, if he noticed it at all, but Stiles thought there was only about a twenty percent chance Rafael would realize he was behind it. It was far more likely that he had already dumped the brunt of the investigation on one of his deputies, and assume that they had requested the information and were now leaving it for him to review.

Being a Friday night, his father would be home. Tom worked the night shift, Sunday through Thursday, at the local community college. For that reason, Stiles rarely went over on a Friday night after work, and he wasn’t about to do it at this point, not when he was already so tense.

He didn’t exactly want to go home, because there was altogether too great a chance that Rafael would get bored at the dance and come home. Stiles never looked forward to being home alone with
Rafael. But there wasn’t really anywhere else for him to go, and the temptation of having the house all to himself, which happened so rarely, was too great to pass up.

Stiles rode his bike home, put on loud music, made himself popcorn, and ate all of it while surfing Tumblr and Reddit on his laptop in the living room. He put his feet up on the coffee table, which Rafael couldn’t stand. He acted like he owned the place, and enjoyed every minute of it. By the time Rafael got home, he was sound asleep.

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Getting the information that he had ordered turned out to be a lot more difficult than ordering it. It wasn’t that Rafael was always in his office, it was just that Stiles was really, really reluctant to risk getting caught. He didn’t want to wind up missing another patch of work, and didn’t want Peter to give him that annoyed look again.

In the end, it was a week later before fortune favored them in an unexpected way: food poisoning. Several members of the lacrosse team got sick and had to miss a game, and Scott got subbed in for a Saturday afternoon game. He spent the entire day having a complete freak-out about it, and of course, Rafael would be attending.

Stiles wanted to go too, of course, but he figured nobody would miss him if he snuck off for half an hour. Which is exactly what wound up happening. He went to the game, cheered in the stands, winced as Scott missed a goal, cheered when he caught a difficult pass. Then at halftime, he “went to go say hello to some friends” and headed for the station. It was crazy enough there that he was able to just head into Rafael’s office without needing to explain himself to anybody.

As he had expected, although the information had been received, nobody had done anything with it. He couldn’t tell whether or not anyone had even looked at it. He rolled his eyes and saved the computerized information to a jump drive, then made copies of the papers. He stuck it into his backpack with his school things and made it back to the game before anyone wondered where he had been.

Scott got sent back to the bench in the last quarter because he just couldn’t catch his breath anymore. Melissa went down to sit with him and gave him his inhaler. Stiles saw Rafael rolling his eyes, but for once the man didn’t have any amusing commentary. They won the game anyway, by a narrow margin, and Melissa decided that they should go out to dinner.

Scott was mostly recovered from his asthma attack, and was canoodling with Allison. They were joined in the crowd a few minutes later by Allison’s parents. Stiles had met them before on a couple different occasions. He wasn’t sure what to make of Victoria, and frankly found the way that Chris liked to terrorize Scott to be funny as hell. He had yet to witness a conversation that didn’t include the fact that Chris sold guns.

“You should join us,” Melissa said to the Argents, and about fifteen minutes later, they were gathered around a large table at a nearby diner. Scott and Allison were sitting close enough together that Scott was blushing, and from the way Allison’s eyes were sparkling, Stiles was sure that they were playing footsie. Chris’ guns had already been discussed twice.

They talked about the game and then ordered their food. All of Chris’ guns aside, Stiles was pretty sure that the man actually liked Scott. He was pretty sure that if he didn’t, he wouldn’t bother with intimidation. He would probably let Victoria go straight to using a weed whacker on Scott’s personal
regions, if the vibe he got from her was any indication.

He was surprised to realize early on that Chris apparently detested Rafael. This took about two minutes to establish. Rafael made a disparaging comment about Scott’s performance on the field, and Chris remarked, “Actually for his first time out, he didn’t do too bad at all.” Given that he had been threatening Scott with a firearm, however jokingly, minutes before, the turnaround was rather startling. Rafael didn’t miss it; his mouth tightened into that thin line that meant he was truly irritated.

Allison picked up that ball and ran with it like she was the one playing lacrosse, and proceeded to gush about Scott’s performance in the game so much that he turned bright red. Melissa was laughing at him, Stiles was laughing at him; everyone except Rafael was having a great time. As usual when he was annoyed, he started taking it out on other people. He seemed to know better than to continue to pick on Scott, so instead he started harassing the waitress, finding stupid things to nitpick about being wrong with the food.

“Does that look medium rare to you?” he said to the waitress.

“Yes,” three other voices at the table said immediately.

Once the poor girl had been sent on her way, Victoria got up to use the restroom. Stiles had a suspicion that she was going to follow the girl and promise her a large tip if she agreed not to spit in any of their refills. Chris picked up his hamburger and said, “How’s the investigation into those two murders going?”

Rafael’s jaw went tight again and Stiles looked up, interested. Officially, the press had reported that the two deaths were animal attacks. If Chris was under a different impression, he had probably gotten it from Scott. Rafael didn’t rise to the bait, however. “We think they were cougar attacks, actually.”

“Really,” Chris said, sipping his water. “Cougars go into video stores often around here?”

“It could be rabid,” Rafael suggested.

“Can cougars get rabies?” Allison asked.

“All warm-blooded creatures can get rabies,” Melissa told her.

“Still,” Chris said, “from the way the newspapers described it, it didn’t sound much like a cougar attack.”

“I’m not responsible for what the press prints.”

Victoria came back to the table and sat down, picking up her drink.

“Well,” Chris said, “how’s the investigation into those cougar attacks going?”

Melissa cleared her throat and shifted a little, like she wanted to diffuse the tension but wasn’t sure how. Stiles, for his part, wasn’t even going to try. He was enjoying the hell out of watching Rafael get picked on by someone his own size. He stole a sideways glance at Scott, who appeared to be caught somewhere between terror and the urge to burst into laughter.

“It’s under control,” Rafael said. “Fish and Game is handling it.”

“Have they had any luck?” Chris asked.

“My dad is a great hunter,” Allison said, for the benefit of anyone who didn’t already know, which
was nobody.

“Well, maybe you should go and offer them a hand,” Rafael said.

“Maybe I will,” Chris said.

Stiles took a large bite of his sandwich, because the alternative was bursting into cackles. Melissa finally found a subject to change the conversation to, and the rest of dinner went without a hitch. Allison kissed Scott goodbye while Chris glowered at them, despite it being one of the ten most chaste kisses in mankind. “Slip her the tongue!” Stiles called over to them, and they both started laughing.

Then they go home and Stiles thought that finally, he would get the chance to look through all the material he had brought home. Of course, he didn’t, because Rafael decided that since they were already having ‘such a great time’, that they should watch a movie. Stiles thought about arguing or playing sick, but in the end decided it wasn’t worth it.

Once they were finally upstairs in the Blanket Fort of Clandestine Investigation, he started going through the records. There were a lot of them. He started with a thorough review of Jason Stalls’ criminal record and found that Garrison Meyers had investigated him two other times for the insurance company. Once had been a case of vandalism when a shop’s windows had all been broken. The other time had actually been for arson. Both times, Stalls had been investigated by the police but no charges had been brought.

Most of the crimes he had actually been charged with or convicted of were small, but he had been investigated several other times in connection with larger crimes. Stiles chewed on his lower lip as he leafed through Meyers’ files. As his career had gone on, it seemed like more of his investigations had dealt with more violent crimes, like he had become something of a specialist.

“Man, I’d take an early retirement if I had to spend all my time doing this, too,” Scott remarked, tossing one of the cases aside.

“Yeah,” Stiles said. He didn’t know what to do next. There was just too much information. He didn’t know how to weed out what was important and what wasn’t. It was all well and good to pretend he knew what he was doing and talk about showing Rafael up by solving the crime, but the truth was that he didn’t actually know what he was doing.

He had a suspicion that getting any further information was going to be difficult unless someone else got killed, too. The next morning at breakfast, Rafael was all smiles and smug remarks about how the two deaths had been officially declared cougar attacks and the cases had been closed. He had obviously been stung by Chris’ questions about it, and decided to get it off his plate. That means that Stiles wouldn’t be able to get any more information without Rafael knowing someone is looking into it without his permission.

“Maybe we should talk to someone who actually knows something about this kind of thing,” Scott suggested, as Stiles was staring at the screen of his laptop.

“Like who, your father?” Stiles asked, but moments later, the idea struck him. He knew the best detective in town. He might not still be a cop, but . . .

Two hours later, he was standing outside his father’s apartment, shifting from foot to foot uncertainly. He had been going there at night for months now, but they hadn’t actually seen each other during any of that time. He grit his teeth and knocked on the door. Tom answered it a few moments later, dressed in a sweater and jeans. “Hey, you,” he said, seeming a little surprised to see
“Hey,” Stiles said. “I was wondering if you could, uh, help me out. With a project. For school.”

“Sure,” his father said, standing back to let him in. “What are you up to?”

“Okay, so, you heard about the cougar attacks, right?” Stiles put his laptop on the kitchen table as his father opened the refrigerator and pulled out a soda for each of them. “We-e-e-e-ell, I don’t think they were actually cougar attacks.”

“Nobody actually thinks they were cougar attacks,” Tom said, rolling his eyes. But he was smart enough not to say anything about Rafael’s general lack of skill at sheriffing.

“I know, right?” Stiles said. “So I, uh, was doing a little investigation . . .”

“Stiles . . .” Tom said, looking like he felt a headache coming out.

“No, wait, just hear me out,” Stiles said. “Yes, maybe, I snuck into the police station and stole a bunch of Rafael’s files. And it’s possible that I actually ordered a bunch more information because I needed it. But if I did these things, it was only my duty as a civil servant trying to catch a murderer before he killed someone else, right?”

Tom sighed. “You are damned lucky I’m not on the phone with Sheriff McCall right now,” he said, “but I’m assuming the reason you’re here is because you found something.”

“Well, I found a connection between the two victims,” Stiles said, “but I’m not sure what it means.”

He pulled up the file he had put together of the many times that Meyers and his insurance company had investigated Jason Stalls. Tom gave him the side-eye, but then sat down and started to read through it. When he was done, Stiles explained the disparity between the two murders, and his theory that the killer had tortured Meyers for information.

“None of these crimes that he investigated Stalls are really worth killing for,” Tom pointed out, taking a long drink of his Coke.

“I know,” Stiles said. “That’s the problem. What if he investigated Stalls for something but it never made it into his report?”

“Seems like he was pretty thorough,” Tom said. “I don’t know why he would have done that.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Stiles said, glum.

Tom leafed through the reports for another few minutes. “You know,” he said, “I think there’s someone else that connects these two men. Something that you – and apparently Rafael – missed.”

He saw the way Stiles perked up, and sighed. “Look. Stalls used to be a career criminal. Small-time, yes, but it was basically his life. But he shaped up, turned his life around. He didn’t go to jail and wind up on parole or anything – it’s just like one day he decided to stop being a criminal and make good.”

“Okay. So?”

“Well, aside from how rarely that actually happens, there’s a strong possibility there was some outside impetus. People don’t do a radical overhaul on their lives like that without reason. And he’s not the only one who did.” Tom tapped the folder and said, “Right around the same time, Meyers quit his job as an insurance investigator – it’s called an ‘early retirement’ but that’s basically the same
thing – and became a bus driver, of all things. That’s one hell of a shift. And his divorce was right around the same time, too. So the question then becomes, what the hell happened to these two guys?"

“And is it coming back to bite them now,” Stiles said, nodding. He was starting to feel excited. “So, we should pull up the last few cases that he investigated, right? When was that, like . . . five years ago?”

“Six.” Tom flipped through a folder. “The last thing in Stalls’ criminal record is August of 2005. Meyers quit his job in November of 2005, and his divorce was February of 2006. So we’re probably looking at something that happened in the fall of 2005.”

“Oh my God,” Stiles said. “Oh my God.” He grabbed the laptop and scrolled through the list of cases that Meyers had investigated in 2005. It’s right there where he thought it might be. The Hale house fire.

“What is it?” Tom was looking at him closely. Of course, Stiles thought, it wouldn’t hit his father the same way. He had been in jail when the Hale house had burned down. He might have heard about it through the grapevine, but it wouldn’t have been the big event that it had been for everyone living in Beacon Hills at the time.

Peter had said that he was in danger. That he needed to get strong again.

That it wouldn’t be forever.

The timing suddenly made sense, too. Why the gap between the two murders? Because Peter had needed to rest, to recover. Stiles thought back to the day of the first murder. The day he had gone to work and found Peter asleep in the middle of the afternoon, that he had asked him for extra food. Had he asked him for the cheeseburger the day after the second murder? He couldn’t remember what day that had been exactly.

“Stiles, what is it?” his father asked again.

“The, um . . .” Stiles floundered. There had been other people involved. There had to be. Otherwise Peter would have come out of his ‘catatonia’, started making preparations to rejoin the real world. Peter still thought he was in danger. “The Hale house fire was in 2005. Everyone thought it was an accident, I mean, officially it was an electrical fire, but . . .”

“But you think maybe it wasn’t,” Tom said.

“Well, Meyers was the arson investigator,” Stiles said. “His notes were never submitted to the police before, but now that we can see his actual file . . . it looks like he might have suspected arson but suddenly changed his mind. Like, he requested to see some people but then retracted the request.”

“Like someone told him not to go poking his nose into it,” Tom said. “He could have been threatened, or bribed. And then afterwards he quit his job because it was hard to live with what he had done . . . there were kids killed in that fire, right?”

Stiles nodded. “Yeah, eleven people were killed altogether.”

“Hell of a thing to live with,” Tom said. He hesitated. “Stiles, you need to bring this to Sheriff McCall.”

“What? No, I –”
“Stiles, listen to me,” his father said. “If you’re right about this, and it’s a pretty compelling theory, then there are two possibilities. Either someone else who was involved is afraid that his accomplices are going to start talking and is eliminating them, or someone is out for revenge. Either way, this is very dangerous.”

“But, Dad – ”

“No buts, Stiles. I know that you and Rafael aren’t exactly great friends. If you don’t want to talk to him, don’t. Give it to Tara. Submit it as an anonymous tip. Leave it on his desk. I don’t care, but you have to give him this information. Promise me.”

Stiles deflated. “Yeah, I promise.”

“Okay.” His father shut the folder. But then he smiled. “Not too bad, though, Stiles. You’re going to be a great detective someday.”

Stiles flushed bright pink. “No, I just, I mean.”

“Can it,” Tom said, tousling his hair.

Stiles hesitated, then blurted out, “Do you want to go see a movie or something?”

“Well – ” For a minute, Tom hesitated. “I’ve actually got a meeting in about an hour.”

“A meeting?” Stiles asked, blinking.

“AA,” his father said.

“Oh,” Stiles replied. “Oh, uh, okay. I wouldn’t want you to – to miss it. If you don’t want to. I could – maybe I could go with you?”

“I don’t really think that’s a great idea,” Tom said. But then he reached out and clapped Stiles on the shoulder. “But it was good seeing you, Stiles. I’ll see you again soon, okay?”

Stiles nodded. “Yeah, okay,” he said. He felt a little better as he left the house. Then the reality of the situation crashed back in on him. He forgot all about his father and his AA meetings and their awkward parting as he examined the possibility that Peter was killing people. He supposed it was possible that it was somebody else. But he didn’t think so. The pieces fit together too well.

There was only one place he could go when he wanted to be alone. It was a little house near the center of town, where he had used to live, before he had gotten sent to the McCalls. It had been on and off the market for years. The real estate agent had been a friend of his mother’s, and she knew that he went there sometimes, and hadn’t said anything about it or changed the locks.

He didn’t like to come and go through the front, so as usual he chained up his bike a couple blocks away and cut through the forest, climbing over the fence and going in through the back door. The house was, as always, completely empty. There was no electricity, although the water was still running, but the living room got enough light at this time of day that he was able to sit down with the files and think things over.

Peter clearly thought that someone else was still out there. He had gotten the identity of Jason Stalls from Garrison Meyers, but hadn’t bothered to torture the former for information. So he had been a small player. How many people did it take to burn a house down? Stiles flipped through the arson report, but it wasn’t of much use. It wasn’t like he knew anything about how to commit arson.
If someone had bribed or threatened Meyers so he didn’t come forward about it being arson, then at least one other person had to be involved. He flipped back to see if Rafael had ordered Meyers’ financial records pulled. He had, but only the last six months’ worth. If he had been bribed, there was no way he could find out about it now. With the case officially closed, he wouldn’t be able to get more information.

Then it occurred to him that there was one more place he could look. When Meyers had been investigating the fire, he had put in requests to see three people. One of them was Stalls, but the other two names were only vaguely familiar. Stiles looked through Stalls’ criminal record and found them easily enough. Other lowlife thugs that he had been involved with. And since Stiles had ordered the criminal record for all of Stalls’ known associates, he had both of their files as well.

However the fire had affected Stalls and Meyers, it hadn’t affected these two the same way. They were criminals back then and criminals now. Unlike Stalls, they seemed more likely to commit violent offenses. Both of them had multiple arrests for breaking and entering, assault, resisting arrest. It seemed a miracle to Stiles that they hadn’t wound up in prison for ten to twenty, but somehow they always seemed to squeeze through.

They moved a lot, that was obvious. A lot of the arrests were in surrounding towns or even as far away as Sacramento. But one of them had been arrested for public intoxication and disturbing the peace in Beacon Hills, two days after the fire. They moved around, true, but they were in town at the same time as the fire. Meyers had clearly suspected them. A quick check of Meyers’ other arson investigations revealed that he had implicated them in several other incidents.

Stiles shut the folder and pushed both hands through his hair. These two thugs weren’t the mastermind. They weren’t smart enough. Someone had systematically hired a bunch of petty criminals to burn down the Hale house and then cover it up afterwards. Someone smart, and thorough. It was no wonder that Peter didn’t want to start talking. Until he regained his strength, he was a sitting duck. But who could possibly have wanted the Hale family dead, and why? It didn’t make sense to Stiles. He had met some of them. Talia had once been behind him in line at a grocery store and given him a dollar when he came up short on his purchases. They seemed like nice people.

“I don’t understand any of this,” he said to the ceiling.

He should give it to Rafael. Tom had been right about that. This was dangerous shit, and he didn’t know how to deal with it. He had promised. He certainly wasn’t about to walk right into the house and tell Rafael what he had been up to, but he could send an anonymous tip and make sure it got routed to one of the deputies – to somebody who would actually pay attention to it.

But he couldn’t help but think that Rafael will inevitably connect the dots back to Peter – and he really didn’t want that to happen. If Peter was a murderer, he deserved . . . what? That was where Stiles’ train of thought fell apart. If someone killed his family, he would probably lose his shit, too. He couldn’t blame Peter for that. Especially since he didn’t know why the Hale family had been killed. If Peter was still in danger – if his remaining family members were in danger – didn’t he have a right to protect himself?

The sun had shifted and the living room was getting dim. Stiles groaned and got off the floor. He had to get home. He had promised his father he would tell the police, but he hadn’t promised when he would tell them.

It took him about twenty minutes to get home, so it was the perfectly respectable hour of five forty-five. Melissa was in the kitchen, making dinner. Stiles hung up his jacket and was about to go see if she needed any help when he spotted Rafael watching television.
“Where have you been?” Rafael said, a little too softly. He got up from the sofa. He didn’t move fast, but that was somehow worse. The deliberation of the movements made them far more intimidating.


Rafael sneered at him. “What friends? Scott was here.”

“Hey, I have friends,” Stiles protested, despite the obvious lack of truth to this statement.

“Oh, really?” Rafael just gave him a look. “Then I want their names. I’m going to call their parents and confirm that’s where you were today.”

“Dude, I am not six years old,” Stiles snapped back. “I am way beyond that. Anyway, what do you care? It’s a Sunday. I’m not getting home late. What does it matter to you where I’ve been?”

“What matters is that you obey me,” Rafael said, “and therefore you’re going to tell me. I’m your father, young man, and – ”

“No, you’re not!” Stiles shot back.

Rafael’s jaw tightened. “Whether you like it or not – ”

“Then what’s my name?” Stiles asked, and he saw Rafael blink, taken aback. “Yeah, asshole, what’s my name? Don’t say ‘Stiles’, you know it isn’t Stiles. Say my name. Spell it. Don’t forget the diacritic. Tell me who in my family I’m named after. When you’ve done all that, then you can call yourself my father, you limp-dicked piece of shit.”

“Okay, that’s it – ” Rafael reached out to grab him by the collar. Stiles jerked away and ducked backwards a few steps. Rafael stopped and looked at Stiles implacably. “You know that it’s only going to get worse from here.”

“Fuck you,” Stiles retorted, and bolted for the door. He made it – barely – and didn’t bother with his bike. He just ran. Right now, he needed time and a lot of space between himself and Rafael’s temper. He thought about maybe not even going home, but he didn’t want to worry Melissa.

Unsurprisingly, his feet gradually took him to the hospital. Where else? He wasn’t about to go back to his father’s; it was too likely that Rafael would think to look for him there. The long-term ward was quiet. He passed an orderly he knew on nodding terms, and, accordingly, nodded. Then he ducked into Peter’s room. He had no idea what he was going to do there. To his surprise, Peter was in bed, asleep. That was good. He could just take a few minutes to put himself back together, think about his next move.

But when he sat down in the chair next to Peter’s bed, the other man’s eyes opened. “What are you doing here on a Sunday?” he asked.

“Sorry,” Stiles said. “Did I wake you?”

Peter shrugged a little. “I don’t sleep much, these days. I think my body decided it’s slept enough. What happened?”

“Raf . . . nothing. It’s stupid. Just Raf being Raf.”

“Mm hm,” Peter said. He reached out and touched Stiles’ cheek. The motion was oddly gentle, and Stiles realized that he was crying.
“I hate him,” he blurted out. “I know that, that there are people in the world that are way more evil than he is, but he’s just so, so fucking petty, and I could handle it if it was just that he hurt me, I wouldn’t fucking like it but I could take it, but he just, the way he enjoys making me fucking suffer, I can’t . . . twenty years ago my dad and Raf’s wife went on like three dates and he’s still pissed off about it, and that didn’t even have anything to do with me and I don’t . . .” He swallowed it down, tried to force the rage and anguish back into his chest and stomach where it belonged. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Peter said.

“Give me a break,” Stiles said. “After everything that happened to you, I come in here whining like a little bitch because Raf is a prick. You probably want to slap me silly.”

“Well, I didn’t until just now,” Peter said, rolling his eyes.

It wasn’t exactly comforting, but it made Stiles chuckle a little anyway. He wiped the tears out of the corner of his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. The room went quiet for a long time while he tried to pull himself together.

Finally, he said, “Hey, Peter . . .?”

Peter had closed his eyes in the intervening few minutes, but he opened them again when Stiles spoke. “Mm?”

“You’re the one killing people, aren’t you.”

Peter’s eyebrows went up. He regarded Stiles for a long moment before said, “Yes.”

Stiles swallowed. “Because . . . they’re the people responsible for what happened to your family.”

Peter nodded and repeated, “Yes.”

Silence fell into the room, heavy, tangible silence.

When it looked like Stiles wouldn’t say anything else, Peter said, “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles said. “If I said I was going to tell somebody, would you kill me, too?”

“No,” Peter said. “I wouldn’t have to.” He shrugged slightly. “You’re a sixteen year old boy, you’re obviously troubled, you’re from a broken home. I’ve been catatonic for the last six years and nobody besides you knows differently. People would either think you were making it up to get attention, or worse, they would think your imaginary friend had become a full-blown delusion. Either way, nobody would believe you.”

Stiles thought about all of that for a minute. “Asshole,” he finally said. It seemed to sum things up nicely.

Peter just gave another remorseless shrug. “There’s something you need to know. I like you, Stiles. And I’m truly grateful for what you’ve done for me. But there is nothing more important to me than this. Nothing. Can you understand that?”

Stiles was quiet for a long time, thinking about the photos of Peter and his family, of obnoxious little Cora Hale with her hair in pigtails burned to a crisp, of kind Talia Hale who had given him a dollar to buy a candy bar once when he had come up short, of Peter sitting in a hospital room by himself for years, not even knowing what had happened to his wedding ring. He thought about how much he hated Rafael for taking his father away, even though it had only been temporary, and what he would
want to do to anyone who hurt his father, or Scott and Melissa. Finally, he nodded and said, “Yes.”

“Okay,” Peter said. “I’m not asking you to help me, Stiles. Just don’t try to stop me.”

Stiles had to force himself to swallow the lump in his throat. It would be okay. Nobody would ever know. He lifted his eyes to Peter’s and said, “I know two more people who were involved. That you hadn’t found yet, I don’t think.”

Peter’s eyes went just slightly wide, and Stiles was pleased to see that he had well and truly surprised the older man. “You – ”

“They’re both lowlife thugs, have priors for arson,” Stiles said. “Known associates of the guy you killed in the video store. They were in town that week even though they usually stick to the city. The arson investigator had put in a request to see them but then retracted it – after he got his bribe, I guess? I’ve been sneaking into Raf’s office and doing a little investigation. You know. Pulling arrest records and stuff.”

“You’re . . . amazing,” Peter said. His voice was a strange combination of shock and delight. “Give me the names. Do you know where I can find them?”

Stiles nodded mechanically. “But you have to promise me something.”

Peter arched his eyebrows.

“Don’t . . . get caught. Okay? I don’t want you to go to jail like my dad did.”

Peter studied him, then nodded slowly. “I have zero intention of going to jail,” he assured Stiles, with a somewhat wolfish smile.

“Okay.” Stiles took a pad of paper off the bedside table and started writing down the details. “But you know the mastermind, don’t you? I mean, someone hired these guys – they don’t work on their own. And someone bribed the arson investigator. You know who that is. Why haven’t you gone after them yet?”

“Distance,” Peter said. “She’s moved away. Hopefully, she’ll come back when she realizes what’s going on.”

“She?” Stiles said.

Peter nodded. “Don’t try to find her, Stiles. She’s dangerous.”

Stiles chewed on his lower lip, then nodded. “Okay. At least for now.” He rubbed both hands over his face. “I . . . may not be around for a few days.”

Peter tilted his head to one side curiously. “Why do you let Rafael hurt you, Stiles? What are you punishing yourself for?”

Stiles stood up hurriedly. His legs shook underneath him. “I have to go,” he said, and fled from the room without another word.

~ ~ ~ ~
In this chapter, I make up a bunch of stuff about arson. =D

Then more important stuff happens.

Stiles managed to duck Rafael during the early part of the week. He went straight to work after school and snuck back home as quietly as he could. Rafael typically didn’t punish him when Melissa or Scott was home, so he was usually safe at night. He avoided his father’s apartment, because he didn’t want Rafael to realize he was going there.

Wednesday night, the two thugs that he had identified as being suspects in the Hale house fire turned up dead. They had been camping out in the woods, they were drunk, and their campfire had gotten out of control. Rafael said it would take a little while before the coroner decided what exactly had killed them, because their bodies were so damaged.

Fire, Stiles thought. Peter must have been pleased.

He was sure that the coroner would eventually decide that it was another ‘animal attack’ and that the fire had gone out of control after they were both dead. Not that it really mattered to him. What mattered was that he got the opportunity, while Rafael was out investigating that, to sneak into his office and find the files for the Hale house fire itself.

They didn’t help very much. He had half-hoped that he would have been able to identify the mastermind and then he could figure out what to do about it without Peter being in danger. But really, no investigation had been done. There were no suspects listed, not even any ‘persons of interest’. Nobody had been interviewed besides Laura, who was obviously shocked and traumatized, from the text of the interview.

There was a copy of Meyers’ final report that had listed it as an electrical fire, and that was all. Stiles didn’t know enough about arson to tell whether or not the report was legit, and he doubted Rafael had done more than read the ‘conclusions’ section at the end. However he might figure out why the Hale family had been killed, it wasn’t going to be from this.

The one thing he did spot that puzzled him was that all the bodies – including Peter’s somehow-still-breathing-body – were found in the basement. The house was largely intact, structurally speaking, so how had they all wound up down there? He doubted they all slept in the basement like vampires in their coffins. So why had they been there? If they had been awake, why hadn’t they left the house?

On Thursday, instead of going straight to the hospital after school, he biked out to the old Hale house. It was a longer trek than he had anticipated, so he didn’t have a lot of time to look around. He found that the door opened easily. Many of the windows were broken, probably by vandals in the intervening years. They were hardly shatterproof glass. Even if the doors had somehow been blocked, why hadn’t the family gone out the windows?

The basement stairs creaked uneasily underneath his feet as he went down them. Everything down there was covered in layers of dust and, probably, soot. He pulled his T-shirt up over his mouth and
poked around. The windows were half-size, too small for even a child to squirm through. But in the corner, he found a small door that led into a tunnel.

For some reason, the family hadn’t been able to get out on the first floor. So they had come down here to this tunnel. Stiles explored it cautiously. It led about fifty feet into the woods, and the end had a wooden door that had mostly rotted away.

“Why did they all die in the basement?” Stiles asked, stymied. There seemed to be so many ways that they could have left. Why just stay inside the house and die? Had people been in the woods with weapons, forcing them to stay inside? Even so, if it had been him, he thought he would have chanced being shot at than burning alive. At least being shot would be quick.

None of it made any sense, and he didn’t think he was going to find any answers in the remaining minutes he had, so he rushed to work and changed into his scrubs. He didn’t have time to go say hi to Peter until he was in his room on his usual sheet-changing duty. As soon as he walked in, Peter’s head twisted around and his face changed from its usual neutral placidity to something approaching rage. “You were at the old house,” he said.

The certainty in his voice warned Stiles that trying to lie was pointless, though he couldn’t help but wonder how the hell Peter knew that. “I just went to look around.”

“Why?” Peter was up and out of his chair in moments, and had a hand twisted in the front of Stiles’ shirt, shoving him up against the wall, and he’s strong now, strong in a way that Stiles never would have believed, after spending weeks watching his hands shake as he struggled to lift his silverware. “What were you doing there?”

“Jesus, Peter,” Stiles said. “Let me go.”

“Tell me what you were doing there.”

“Let me go and I will,” Stiles snapped back. Peter stared at him for another moment, and then released him. “I was trying to investigate without having to ask you a lot of questions about memories that you probably don’t have, and if you did, you wouldn’t want.”

Peter’s mouth twisted. “I told you not to investigate. I told you that she’s dangerous.”

“You told me not to try to find her,” Stiles said. “But if there’s a conspiracy threatening your life, we’re going to destroy it root and branch. I want to know that we got everyone. I want – ” His voice choked a little. “I need to know that you’re safe when we’re done with this.”

Peter’s eyes went a little wide with surprise. He took a step back from Stiles, then huffed out a breath and nodded, sinking back into his chair. “What were you looking for?”

“I was trying to figure out why you were all in the basement,” Stiles said. “Why none of you left the house.”

There was a long pause. “The basement?” Peter said, rubbing his hands over his face. “We might have been trying to get out that way. There was sort of a tunnel down there. Talia used it as a wine cellar more than anything.”

“Yeah, but then I don’t know why you couldn’t get out that way,” Stiles said. “Jesus, Peter, there’s so much about this that I’m not seeing. I don’t understand this.”

“You don’t need to,” Peter said. “Not yet.”
“God, you have no idea how fucking frustrating that is,” Stiles said. He shook his head and said, “I have to get back to work.”

“All right,” Peter said. But Stiles left the file for him to look through. Apparently, Peter knew more about arson than he did, because the next afternoon, when Stiles showed up after school, he said, “There’s an inconsistency here that I don’t like.”

“Let’s hear it,” Stiles said, taking out his maths textbook and a notepad. “Why do we have to show our work, anyway? Someday I’m just going to start writing down answers and writing ‘because math’.”

Peter ignored him. “It’s labeled as an electrical fire, yes? Which would make a certain amount of sense. Electrical fires spread quickly and are difficult to put out. But I doubt it was, because when we realized we couldn’t get out of the house, Talia started trying to put it out. She turned on all the showers and sinks and we were funneling what water we could. Useless, of course,” he said briskly, avoiding any emotional response, “but I suppose she figured she would rather do something than sit there and die. In any case, there was water everywhere by the end. One or more of us would have electrocuted ourselves if it had really been an electrical fire.”

Stiles pinched his lower lip, frowning. “But if it wasn’t electrical, why didn’t the water put it out?”

“Oh, well, it did, in some areas,” Peter said with a shrug. “But it was so hot, it evaporated quickly enough that the areas just caught fire again. That’s part of why we went back down to the basement, I think. It was cooler there, and easier to breathe.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “I think. It’s all – somewhat blurry.”

“Well, don’t push it,” Stiles said, as if he knew a lot about repressed and traumatic memories. “But . . . look, uh. It must have gone up fast, right? You guys were awake, and it’s not like you would have just sat there and watched it.”

“Very fast, as I recall,” Peter said.

“Which means accelerants were used,” Stiles said.

“There’s none noted in the report, but I suppose we can’t trust a damned thing it says,” Peter said.

“No, but we can trust Meyers’ internal notes to himself, which I also have.” Stiles set up his laptop and pulled them up. “And he did test for a number of known accelerants. No results. Which sort of makes me think that whoever did this had enough experience with chemistry that they were able to come up with some accelerator that wouldn’t be detected on the standard tests.” He closed the laptop and said, carefully, “You’re the one who knows who was behind this. Do you think she would have been capable of that?”

“Not without help, I don’t think,” Peter said.

“Well, don’t look at me, because I’m not Googling ‘how to commit arson and make it look like an accident’. I’m pretty sure that I’m in enough trouble without winding up on some internal federal database for budding criminals.”

Peter shook his head a little. “There can’t be that many people with enough skill in chemistry to accomplish that. Not in a Podunk town like Beacon Hills. You take chemistry in school, right? Who’s your teacher? Is he smart?”

“Uh, yeah, actually,” Stiles said. “I mean, I loathe him on a personal level, he’s like Satan’s bitchgoblin, but he’s very good at what he does, and I actually have very little trouble picturing him
helping murder a bunch of people.”

“The woman . . .” Peter paused for a few moments. “She’s very manipulative. Devious. She’s smart. He might not have realized . . . or maybe he did. Perhaps I’ll go have a little chat with him. What’s his name?”

“Adrian Harris,” Stiles said.

Rafael caught up with Stiles that Friday night, while Melissa was working a late shift and Scott was out with Allison, Lydia, and Jackson. He had been grudgingly accepted into their clique, even though he was still only mediocre at lacrosse. Stiles sometimes thought that was just because Jackson wanted to get under Allison’s skirt, but the longer he hung out with Allison, the less he worried about that. He was pretty sure that if Jackson made a move on Allison, he would wind up eating his own spleen.

Stiles spent most of the weekend in bed. He told Scott that he had a stomach bug, and retched convincing any time someone tried to get him up. Most of the time, he slept. He had a prescription for Ativan for the panic attacks. They were rare now, but he kept refilling the prescription because he knew he could pop two and sleep for twelve hours, and that was the best way to deal with the aftermath of Rafael McCall.

By Monday, he was up to going to school again, and work, so he did. Harris was still smirking from behind his desk, so Stiles figured that Peter hadn’t talked to him yet. He supposed it was possible that Peter had found out he was innocent and let him live, but he thought the more likely outcome was that Peter hadn’t had the opportunity to sneak out of the hospital. It had to be difficult, and probably depended a lot on who was working.

He went to work, but wound up going home early when Bobby accidentally steered a cart of linens into him and it impacted with the fresh bruises on his back and legs, which led to him spending two full minutes curled up on the hallway floor, trying not to puke. He told Linda he had fallen out of a tree over the weekend, and she sent him home.

Peter saw him the next day and noted quietly, “You’ve been pacing a lot.”

“So what?” Stiles asked.

“Normally you sit down while you do your homework,” he replied.

Stiles put his book down, looked at Peter, and just said, “Please don’t do this today.”

Peter studied him for a long minute and then said, “I need you to get Adrian Harris’ address for me. It isn’t listed, and I can’t tail him home from school because somebody would notice if I was gone at that hour. Follow him after school tomorrow and find out where he lives.”

“I can do better than that and just run his license plate through the DMV if I can get Scott to distract Raf for me,” Stiles said, and Peter nodded.

Distracting Rafael was easy, because Scott got in a huge fight with him. Allison’s aunt Kate was visiting, and apparently she and Allison were great friends, more like sisters, and Victoria had told
Scott to invite his family over for dinner while she was there. Melissa thought that sounded wonderful and said to tell Victoria that they would bring dessert. Rafael promptly refused to go because he thought Chris was an asshole, and when Scott dug his heels in, he decided it was high-time for Scott to ‘grow up, stop mooning around over a pretty girl, and concentrate on his studies’.

It didn’t go over well when Scott pointed out that his English grade had actually gone up since he had started getting tutored by Allison (miraculously), and that all the goals that Melissa had set for his grades after the student-teacher conference had been met. Rafael fell back into ‘you’ll do as I say because I say so’, but he failed to anticipate the world shifting extent of Scott’s love for Allison. Every word Rafael said, Scott just got more stubborn about it. Melissa tried to intervene, things got heated, and Stiles just said, “Give him hell, bro,” and left the house.

It took two minutes at the station to get Harris’ address and jot it on a post-it note. By the time he got home, the argument was over. Rafael had put his foot down: no more Allison. Scott had replied that he would just go behind Rafael’s back and date her anyway. Melissa had told Scott that regardless of what Rafael thought, she would be happy to go to dinner at the Argent house. Rafael had flown into a rage and shouted them both into submission.

Stiles knew how this would resolve from years of experience, and he turned out to be absolutely right. “So this morning Rafael came in with flowers for Melissa and a box of donuts for me and Scott,” he said to Peter that afternoon, rolling his eyes. “Apologizing for losing his temper, saying he was glad that Scott had found such a great girl, et cetera. He always knows when he’s pushed too far. Then he backs down, apologizes, and sits there telling stories about the ‘good old days’, making Melissa all nostalgic for the three weeks of his life that he wasn’t a gigantic douche. Jesus. He’s so fucking textbook about it. Couldn’t he at least be a little more creative?”

Peter just shook his head a little. “Some assholes never change,” he said.

“On the upside, this weekend might actually be awesome,” Stiles said, “because Allison’s mom invited us over for dinner, and Allison’s dad totally hates Rafael and it’s kind of hilarious. And Scott’s all having a freakout because he wants to make a good impression because Allison’s aunt Kate is in town, and apparently she’s more like a sister to Allison and – what?”

Peter had gone tense and rigid while Stiles was speaking. He looked at the window, then at the door that led to the rest of the ward. “I need to get out of here,” he said. “Now. Today.”

“What?” Stiles asked, blinking at him.

“I’m not safe here,” Peter said.

“Peter, what –” Stiles started, but then the obvious answer occurred to him. “That’s the ‘she’, isn’t it. Kate. Allison said she used to live here a few years ago, but moved away. And now she’s come back.”

Peter didn’t bother to argue. “I’m leaving,” he said. “Tonight. I’m going to need your help.”

“Aside from the fact that even if you let the hospital know that you’ve come out of your catatonia, they’re hardly going to discharge you four hours later, where are you going to go?” Stiles asked skeptically. “I can’t exactly bring you back to my place.”

“I’ll have to find somewhere,” Peter said. “I’ll sneak out. Can you pick me up?”

Stiles thought about it. It was a Friday night. He gave himself a minute to consider, then said, “Yeah, I think I can do that. And I think I have a place you can hole up for a little while, too, that nobody
Peter let out a breath, then nodded. “All right,” he said. He looked up at Stiles and said, “I’m not good at relying on other people. You should really take this as a compliment.”

“That’s me, old reliable,” Stiles said, smirking. Peter gave him a withering look. “I’d better get back to work,” Stiles said. “But I’ll check on you when I can, okay?”

“All right,” Peter said again, and Stiles left the room. He tried not to rush through his usual evening work, when all he really wanted to do was drop everything and start investigating Kate Argent. He would have to have a long talk with Peter about that, but there were other things he needed to accomplish first. For starters, he needed to figure out how to pick Peter up, and how he was going to get the things he needed to get him hidden away safely.

When he went on his break, he called his father. They were lucky it was a Friday, or Peter would be stuck hitchhiking. “Hey, uh, hey, Dad, I was wondering if I could ask you for a big favor,” Stiles said. “Can I borrow the Jeep tonight? See, there’s this party that I really want to go to, but it’s on the other side of town, way too far to bike. And Raf, in his infinite douchery, told me I could go if I could find a way to get there. But since I work, anyone else who’s going will have left long before I can go . . .” He continued to spin the tale until his father felt sorry for him and said yes, he could borrow the car.

“I want it back by eleven,” he said.

“Eleven?!” Stiles said. “Come on, Dad, I won’t even get off work until nine.”

“Okay, fine, midnight,” Tom said. “I’ll even come pick you up at work so you don’t have to bike over.”

“You are awesome,” Stiles said. “Okay, gotta go.”

He ran to the hospital’s lobby, where there was an ATM. Melissa had finally gone behind Rafael’s back and gotten Stiles a bank account of his own. His paychecks didn’t go into it, since Rafael had them directly deposited into his own account, but she had started giving him his ‘allowance’ in the form of checks, because she didn’t like the idea of him keeping a stash of cash underneath his mattress. He had told her that he wanted to save up for a new bike, since it was clear he wouldn’t be getting a car any time soon, and put the cash that he had accumulated into the account.

Over the past two months, he had stockpiled about four hundred dollars. He let out a breath. That should be enough to lay in some basic supplies.

He only had one minute of his break left, so he dashed back to the long-term care ward and blitzed through the rest of his work. While Peter was eating his dinner, Stiles did a rough estimate of what clothing size and shoe size he was. He only had soft slippers, and his clothes would be easily recognizable as someone who escaped from a hospital. “I’m going to leave this here,” Stiles said, sliding his jacket into Peter’s closet. “You’re going to have to get out of the room on your own.”

“I’ve done it more than once without getting caught,” Peter reminded him.

“Right,” Stiles said. He hadn’t exactly forgotten about that, but he tried not to think about it as much as possible. “Okay. Last check is at eleven, right?”

Peter nodded. “Pick me up at five past.”

“Will do,” Stiles said. “I’ll be in a Jeep,” he added, and Peter nodded. Stiles gave another brief look
into the room before he left, but Peter was in bed, and pretending to be asleep, so he didn’t say
anything.

As promised, his father was waiting in the parking lot. “You’re the bomb, Dad,” Stiles said, getting
in.

“Well, it’s nice to . . .” Tom’s voice trailed off, like he wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to say. Stiles
wasn’t sure either. ‘To help you out?’ ‘To be part of your life?’ ‘To hear you whining for things a
normal teenaged boy would whine about?’ ‘Mind dropping me back at my place first?’

“No, sure, of course,” Stiles said. It was weird to drive the Jeep, with his father in the passenger seat,
obviously straining not to comment on his driving like any father would. But he was going in that
direction anyway. About ten minutes from his father’s place was an all-night Wal-Mart, and he was
going to need some things.

It took some careful planning and more money than he really wanted to spend, and two trips down a
forest path while laden with bags, but he was back in the parking lot at five minutes past eleven, as
promised. Peter was waiting for him, hidden in the shadows, and when Stiles pulled up, he just
walked over casually and got into the car. “So where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there,” Stiles said. He pointed to the footwell and said, “Shoes. I don’t care
that you were wandering around barefoot before, you should have shoes. It’s really amazing you
didn’t leave blood all over the crime scenes, you know.”

“Mm,” Peter said, and opened the box. The cheap sneakers fit him well enough. Stiles had erred on
the side of too large, and it worked. There’s also a bag from In and Out in the footwell. “Ah, my
cheeseburger,” he said, amused.

“I did say I would get you one,” Stiles said, as Peter tore into it in a distinctly wolfish manner. “Geez,
slow down there.”

Peter shook his head and took another large bite. He was still eating when Stiles pulled up into the
little cul-de-sac where he usually left his bike when he went to his old house. Hopefully nobody will
notice at this time of night. “This way,” he said, as Peter crammed the rest of the burger into his
mouth.

“I don’t like surprises,” Peter told him.

“It won’t be a surprise. We’re going to walk through the woods a few minutes and there’s an
abandoned house you can hide out at for a while,” Stiles said. Peter nodded a little and followed him.
Stiles had a flashlight, but still managed to trip twice. Peter seemed unbothered by the darkness,
catching him both times. He climbed the fence with ease, and then Stiles took out his key and let
them in.

“If it’s an abandoned house, why do you have a key?” Peter asked as they went inside.

“Because I used to live here,” Stiles said. He shined the flashlight around the living room so Peter
could see that it was empty, then turned it off so people on the street wouldn’t see the light. “Ta da.
Come on, this way.” He started up the stairs, feeling his way along in the dark. “My old bedroom is
on the back of the house, so you can have a light on in here without the neighbors getting
suspicious.”

He went into the room and turned on the battery-powered lantern that he had gotten at Wal-Mart, and
took a minute to admire the setup. It was actually pretty cozy. He had gotten an air mattress, a
sleeping bag, and a pillow. A couple pairs of pants, pack of T-shirts, and two sweatshirts, since the house had no heating. There was a collection of toiletries, and then in the corner he had laid in some food, like boxes of crackers or cans of fruit, that wouldn’t need to be cooked or refrigerated. He had even grabbed a handful of cheap books so Peter would have something to read. “Not bad, huh?”

Peter looked at it for a few minutes, then said, “Is the house on the market?”

“Yeah, but, the realtor always texts me before she does a showing,” Stiles said. “See, she was a friend of my mother’s, and she knows that . . . I really miss her. She caught me sneaking in one time but never stopped me. And then after that she always let me know if she was going to show it in case I’m here. Once I left this big project here that I was working on, because Raf had already broken it once, so she knows that . . . anyway. A family lived here for a couple years, actually, but they moved out a while ago and nobody has moved back in. Trust me, I’ll know if anyone’s coming.”

Peter nodded slowly. “No one can see the light from the road?”

“As long as you keep the door to the bedroom shut, no,” Stiles said, “and it’s only the woods on the back. The neighbors might be able to see into the backyard, though, so don’t go out there unless you have to. There’s no electricity, but the water is still turned on, so you can shower and stuff if you don’t mind it being cold.” He grinned as Peter nodded again. “Good, right?”

“It’s perfect,” Peter said. He put a hand on Stiles’ chest and pushed him back against the door, and before Stiles could figure out what was happening, Peter’s mouth was on his. He made a startled little noise, but it was another few moments before Peter pulled away.

“What . . . what are you . . .”

Peter took a step back and his head tilted a little as he regarded Stiles. Then he gave one of those eye rolls. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s examine what’s happening here. You’re trying to ask ‘what are you doing’, but that’s not the question you’re really asking, is it? Because the answer is obvious; I’m kissing you. You’ve wanted me to for weeks, maybe months, and now we’re out of the damned hospital and I finally can. So really you’re asking ‘why are you doing what you’re doing’, but you know the answer to that, too. I’m kissing you because I want to, because I don’t do things I don’t want to do. So in the end, your actual question is ‘why would someone like you want to kiss someone like me’, and I don’t like that question. It’s stupid. Don’t ask it again.”

“Oh,” Stiles said. He blinked a few times. “Oh . . . okay.”

Peter’s mouth closed on his again, and this time, since he was a little less startled, he was able to actually enjoy it. He still felt extremely weird about it – the question Peter won’t let him ask wasn’t going to go anywhere any time soon – but Peter had a point. Peter wouldn’t kiss him if Peter didn’t want to kiss him, and the idea of Peter actually wanting to kiss him emboldened him enough to open his mouth and try to kiss back. It wasn’t like he had any idea what he was doing, but then he felt Peter’s teeth tug at his lower lip and promptly forgot all about being embarrassed or uncertain. He reached up and threaded one hand in Peter’s hair, letting the older man kiss him until he was out of breath.

When he pulled away to gulp for air, Peter chuckled a little and stepped away. “You should get home,” he said. “It’s late. You’re going to be in enough trouble as it is.”

“Worth it,” Stiles panted. “So worth it.” But as he put his hand on the knob of the bedroom’s door, he stopped and said, “What are you going to do about Kate?”

“It’s not what I’m going to do that’s the question, it’s how I’m going to do it,” Peter replied. “We can
“Okay, yeah,” Stiles said. “I, uh, I’ll come over whenever I can get out from underneath Rafael’s nose,” he said, and Peter just nodded. “G’night, then.”

“Good night, Stiles,” Peter said, and it was practically a purr, and Stiles almost fell down the stairs. He felt a gigantic grin blossoming on his face as he jogged back through the forest. The Jeep was right where they left it; nobody had called Neighborhood Watch. He got in and zoomed back to his father’s apartment. It was ten minutes to midnight when he pulled into the parking lot and bounced down to the door.

“Whoa, look at you,” his father said, laughing, when he saw the look on Stiles’ face. “Had a good time, I take it?”

“It was awesome, there was this – ” Stiles almost told him about the kiss, but then at the last minute thought about Rafael, and changed his mind. “It was just a lot of fun. Thanks for letting me borrow the car.”

“Sure, kid,” Tom said, taking the keys back. “Come on, I’m driving you home whether you like it or not. It’s almost midnight.”

“Okay,” Stiles said. “Just – let me out down the street from the house a bit.”

Tom sighed but agreed. Stiles made up some stuff to tell him about the party on the way home, drawing off Scott’s experiences with Allison, so the car ride wasn’t filled with awkward silences. Tom pulled up on the corner by the house and Stiles walked his bike the rest of the way, hands in his pockets, whistling.

Rafael was waiting up, and Melissa was chewing nervously on her thumbnail as Stiles came in. “Where have you been?” he asked.

“I,” Stiles said dramatically, “had a date. And it was awesome. I got kissed. By someone that I like. So let me tell you right now that I really don’t give a flaming fig how pissed you are at me, Uncle Raf. I’m on top of the world right now.”

“Dude, you got kissed?” Scott practically came falling down the stairs. “That was your first kiss, right?”

“It was,” Stiles said. “And it’s just as awesome as you said it was.”

“I know, right?” Scott asked enthusiastically.

Rafael’s jaw tightened. “A date is not an excuse to be out until midnight.”

“Well, no,” Stiles agreed, “but since I decided I would much rather be out with him than here getting yelled at by you, I just sort of overlooked that.”

“Him,” Rafael said.

“Yes, him,” Stiles said. “I had a guy’s tongue in my mouth tonight, Raf, and I loved it.”

“Oh, Stiles,” Melissa said, trying to intervene before he could really get it.

“Furthermore,” Stiles continued, “let me take a moment to explain how little I care that you’re a homophobic prick, because personally I don’t think there’s anything wrong with being gay, and
clearly my boyfriend doesn’t find anything wrong with it, and those are really the only two opinions I care about right now. So you just . . . continue thinking unfavorable things in your corner over there, because I’m going to bed.”

“We’re not done with this,” Rafael said.

“I am,” Stiles replied.

“You don’t get to decide when we’re done.”

“Looks like I just did,” Stiles said, and shouldered past him on his way to the stairs.

Scott scrambled to follow him so they could close the door as soon as they were both inside. It didn’t have a lock, but Stiles shoved a chair beneath the knob so it would at least be difficult for Rafael to get in and kill him. “Oh my God!” he said, as soon as the door was shut. “Tell me everything! Tell me every last detail! Was it that guy from the hospital? Oliver?” He was practically reaching out to shake Stiles by the shoulders.

Stiles was grinning widely now. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, it was.” He didn’t like lying to Scott, and for a minute he came close to telling him who Peter was, but then he remembered that Peter was in real, immediate danger. The kiss had made him forget, for a little while, that the woman who had killed Peter’s family was back in town. Not only that, but she was Allison’s aunt – it would be too easy for Scott to slip up in front of her or even Allison, and give Peter away. He kept things as close to the truth as he could. “Okay, so, his car broke down and he needed a ride. So I asked my dad if I could borrow his car, and he said yes, so – I picked him up and we went out for a burger and then I drove him home. And then he kissed me. And it was amazing. I want to do it again, like, immediately, a lot.”

“I need to meet this guy,” Scott said. “Like, seriously, next time Allison and I go out on a date, you two are coming. That’s non-negotiable.”

“I, uh, I’ll see what I can do,” Stiles said, trying to figure out how he’s going to get out of that. “Geez, I’m wiped, I’ve got to get some sleep.” He ducked out of their room long enough to use the bathroom and brush his teeth. By the time he got back in, Scott was already in bed. Stiles shut out the light and climbed into his bunk. “Hey, uh, can I tell you something?” he said.

Scott hung over the top bunk to look at him in the dim light. “Yeah, you can tell me anything.”

“He, uh . . . he’s older than me,” Stiles said.

“Like in college or something?” Scott said.

“Uh,” Stiles said. He decided to subtract the six years that Peter had been catatonic. Those surely didn’t count, and it was weird enough. “He’s actually twenty-six.”

“Whoa,” Scott said. “Robbing the cradle a little.”

“I still really like him, though,” Stiles said. “He’s really smart, and he doesn’t talk to me like I’m a kid. And he kissed me, I mean, he wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t want to, so . . .”

“I don’t think it’s a big deal,” Scott said. “I mean, you’re smart enough to know whether or not you like a guy. What’s it matter if he’s older than you?”

“Thanks,” Stiles said, relieved. He was going to say something else, but it was swallowed by a gigantic yawn. “Man, I’ve gotta get some sleep,” he said, and Scott laughed at him and a few
minutes later, Stiles was asleep.

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Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This chapter is, erm, not work safe. It's not exactly explicit, but yeah, you probably don't want your boss looking over your shoulder. =D

Also, I'm just gonna make up some stuff about Peter and Laura's relationship that would help explain season one...

Stiles was eating his second bowl of cereal the next morning when the phone rang. Breakfast so far had been silent and uncomfortable. Rafael had decided to clean his gun at the kitchen table. Melissa had made a token protest but hadn’t really argued. While he was doing this, he had a long talk with Stiles about how grounded he is and all the chores that Rafael expected him to do. Stiles replied to everything with a polite nod and the statement, “As long as I’m grounded for being out past my curfew and not for having a boyfriend, okay.”

It was a relief when the phone rang. Melissa grabbed it as both of them looked over. Scott was long gone. He and Allison had a full day planned and he had been up early. Rafael was still glaring at Stiles as Melissa said, “Hello? Oh, hi, Donna! Yes, he’s right here. Hang on.” She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece. “Stiles, it’s for you. Donna at the hospital.”

“Do they need me to pick up a shift or something?” Stiles asked, blinking in feigned confusion as he took the phone. He had known that Peter’s escape was going to cause a huge uproar, but he hadn’t thought that anyone would call him. He had rehearsed the answers to the questions he figured they might ask. In a way he was lucky; doing it over the phone would be even easier. When Melissa just shrugged, he took the phone and said, “Hello?”

“Stiles, it’s Donna.” She sounded stressed. “Listen, I’m sorry to bother you on your day off, but – Peter wasn’t in his room this morning. Peter Hale.”

“Wha – where was he?” Stiles asked, as if he thought Peter might have come out of his catatonia and started roaming the hospital.

“We don’t know, Stiles. We can’t find him.”

“You mean he’s missing?” Stiles asked, letting his voice rise in alarm.

“Well – I wouldn’t go that far yet. He must be in the hospital somewhere. We just – I thought I might call and see if you had any ideas. I mean, you’ve spent so much time with him – ”

“Uh, yeah, well, reading to a guy who’s basically in a coma doesn’t give you a lot of insight into his brain, though,” Stiles said. “Did you send someone to, you know, check his old house? Not that I know how he could have gotten there, but I guess it’s the first place I would look.”

“We were going to – he couldn’t have gotten that far, though,” Donna said. “I mean, he must be somewhere nearby.”
“I’m sorry,” Stiles said. “I don’t know what to say. I don’t really know anything about him that you guys don’t. But, uh, I’ll come help you look, okay? I mean, wherever he is, he must be confused, and, and frightened. And you should call the police, too.”

“I think the hospital was going to, since we couldn’t find him on just a quick sweep,” Donna said. “I can’t make you come in on your day off, though, I mean – ”

“I’m not going to punch in, I just – it’s Peter. Please let me help.”

Donna let out a breath. “Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

“Thanks,” Stiles said, and hung up. Melissa had carefully been hanging on the conversation, so Stiles looked up at her and said, “What do you think could have happened?” He chewed on his lower lip fretfully. “He hasn’t been any further than from his chair to the bathroom in six years, he can’t have just wandered off. Could someone have, have abducted him?”

“Oh, please,” Rafael said, before his cell phone rang.

Melissa squeezed Stiles’ hand and said, “I’m sure he’s fine, wherever he is. He can’t have gone for. He’s almost certainly still in the hospital somewhere. They just need to do a thorough search.”

Stiles nodded and dumped his almost-empty cereal bowl in the sink. He was wondering how he was going to get out of looking for Peter so he could actually go see Peter. Fortunately for him, Rafael solved that problem a minute later when he tucked his phone away and said, “Where do you think you’re going? You’re grounded, remember?”

“But I – ” Stiles protested.

“For Heaven’s sake, Rafael,” Melissa said. “If someone is missing – ”

“Then it’s a matter for the police, which is why I was just called,” Rafael said. “Don’t try to convince me that Stiles actually cares about some guy in a coma.”


“And he just told the nurse everything he knows about the situation. Which means all he would be at the search is in the way.” Rafael turned to Stiles and said, “You’re going to stay here and do the chores we talked about. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Stiles muttered, and then, because he has to, “as long as I’m being punished for breaking curfew, not having a boyfriend.”

Rafael rolled his eyes, grabbed his keys, and left the house without another word. Stiles flipped off the door as it closed behind him. Melissa sighed and rubbed her temples. Then she forced a smile and said, “You know what? I’m going to go take a shower. You should get started on your chores. You absolutely shouldn’t sneak out while I’m in the shower. That would be wrong. People who are not me would be angry with you. Don’t forget that we’re having dinner at the Argents at six.”

“I won’t!” Stiles said, as she headed up the stairs. He waited until he heard the water turn on. Then he dug around in the refrigerator. He constructed two turkey sandwiches, then grabbed two apples, two sodas, and an unopened bag of potato chips. He shoved all of that in his backpack and was out of the house a few minutes later.

Halfway to the house, he forgot about Rafael and the hospital and the logistics long enough to remember that Peter had kissed him the previous day. He nearly crashed his bike. It occurred to him
to wonder if Peter is going kiss him again _today_. And what if he does? And what if he _doesn’t_? What would _that_ mean? Why _had_ Peter kissed him? Apparently he wasn’t supposed to ask that question, but it seemed like a pretty important one to him. He had sort of told Scott that Peter was his boyfriend. Would Peter freak out if he knew that? Would he laugh?

After working himself halfway into a panic attack, he chained his bike to a tree and bolted through the forest. He vaulted the fence and let himself in the back door. “Peter? It’s me!” he called out, and jogged up the stairs. The sun was hitting the back of the house at this time of day, so Peter didn’t have the lantern on and the bedroom door was open. “Hey, I brought some food,” Stiles said, desperately not thinking about Peter kissing him. “And, uh, I know you don’t like Coke but we didn’t have any Pepsi, so I brought a Sprite. Hope that’s okay.”

“That’s fine.” Peter looked up from where he was sitting underneath the window, reading. He had clearly showered, as his hair was damp, and he was clean-shaven and barefoot, dressed in one of the new outfits that Stiles had gotten for him. He accepted the sandwich and the soda. Stiles put the chips and the apples down between them and then sat down on the floor. “How’d it go last night?”

“I’m grounded for two weeks,” Stiles said, and shrugged. “The worst will come later, when Melissa isn’t home. That’s always how it goes. That’s the bitching thing about Raf. He can be patient, when he needs to be.”

“Mm. A trait I can actually admire,” Peter said, taking a large bite of his sandwich. “Bring a pair of scissors with you next time. I need a haircut.”

“Like I know anything about giving a haircut,” Stiles said, but shrugged. “The hospital called. Everyone’s really freaked out by your disappearing act.”

Peter’s mouth pulled into a grimace. “Admittedly, it isn’t how I would have chosen to go about things. I figured I could take care of everything, pretend to come out of my catatonia gradually, let them fuss over me for another month and then get on with my life without the hassle of needing a new identity and not having access to any of my finances.”

“Well, maybe you still can,” Stiles said. “I mean, I think the general assumption everyone’s making is that you _did_ come out of your catatonia, and in your confusion you wandered off. So we could let them ‘find you’ in a week or so, hiding out in the forest or something.”

“I suppose.” Peter took another bite of his sandwich. “It won’t be as easy to get rid of Kate as it was with the others.”

“No, I kind of figured out she was in a different league from the way you freaked out yesterday,” Stiles said. “Jesus, Peter. I’m confused as hell, you know that? And I hate it.”

Peter nodded. He regarded Stiles for a minute before saying, “Fortunately for you, I’ve decided to tell you everything.”

“Oh, really,” Stiles said, amused despite himself. “To what do I owe that honor?”

“Well,” Peter said, gnawing on his sandwich, “it occurred to me that given everything you’ve done, it’s probably the least I can do. So.” He put the sandwich aside and folded his legs underneath himself. Stiles tried not to look at his cute little bare feet. Then he forgot all about Peter’s feet when the man said, “The reason the Hale family was targeted was because we are a family of werewolves.”

“A fam – a what – oh, good joke – ” Stiles got through, before Peter held out one hand and then
suddenly the hand had claws, and then his teeth were lengthening and the shape of his face changed and his hair was longer in places and Stiles started hyperventilating. “Ho . . . holy . . .”

Peter picked his sandwich back up and waited for Stiles to start breathing again.

“Werewolves,” Stiles said. He wrestled with that for a minute while Peter’s features faded back to human. “But hey, it’s not the full moon. So you can shift any time? And you said – werewolves come in families? And what does Kate Argent have anything to do with it? Does she – ”

Peter held one hand up to stop Stiles’ torrent of words. “From the beginning,” he said. He started telling Stiles about werewolves, about the Hale family, about full moons and anchors and controlling the shift. He told Stiles about hunters and wolfsbane and why people thought werewolves could be harmed by silver.

“The night of the fire,” he said, “we all woke up almost immediately. We could smell the smoke. Even if only one of us had woken, we all would have known. We tried to get out, but the doors were barred shut. The windows wouldn’t yield. A mountain ash circle, probably – it’s a mystical thing. There was a tunnel that led out of the basement, so we went down the stairs – but then the tunnel was booby trapped. So we tried to put the fire out. That obviously didn’t work. We tried to figure out how to get through the tunnel, and couldn’t. When we got back to the basement, the door to the rest of the house was blocked by debris. There was nothing we could do except . . . burn.

“I don’t know why I survived. I’ll probably never know. I should have healed, but . . .” Peter gestured to his face and said, “Healing does have some psychogenic components to it. The profound psychological trauma . . . in any case, since I’ve woken up, I’ve actively been suppressing my healing so nobody at the hospital would know. But since I woke, I’ve known that it was only a matter of time before Kate came back.”

“How do you know it was her?” Stiles asked. “I mean, are you sure?”

Peter’s jaw tightened slightly. “About a month before the fire, my nephew Derek started seeing a young woman he called ‘Katie’. None of us made the connection – why would we? But in retrospect, I’m sure that’s who it was.”

“You mean your nephew was in on it?” Stiles asked, his jaw sagging.

“No,” Peter dismissed this with a brief wave of his hand. “He wouldn’t have done anything like that. He manipulated him or tricked him somehow. He was only fifteen, and always a sucker for a pretty face.” He let out a breath. “But Garrison Meyers told me the person who bribed him was a woman, pretty and blonde and scary as hell. That’s Kate Argent to a T. So yes, I’m sure. But she’ll be much more difficult to get to than any of the others. She’s a hunter, she’s thorough and methodical, she’s ruthless, she’s well-armed. I wouldn’t want to take her on directly. Not without help.”

“Well . . . what about your family, then?” Stiles asked. “I mean, you haven’t involved them, but they’re going to find out you’re missing sooner rather than later. The hospital has probably already called Laura.”

“They don’t have a good contact number for her,” Peter said. “That’s why she calls to check in periodically. She knew the danger as well as I did. She knew the fire wasn’t an accident – and if she didn’t, Derek certainly did. She never would have left a piece of information that could lead to her in an easily accessible place like that. But you’re right. Even if they can’t reach her, she’ll call to check in and be told. She’s an alpha now, so . . .”

“So she could be pretty useful, right?” Stiles said. “You said alphas are more powerful.”
“They are. But I don’t want her help.” Peter’s eyes blazed suddenly and his voice grew taut and angry. “She knew the danger. So she left. She took Derek and ran and left me in a hospital to rot. I don’t want her help.”

“Oh . . . okay,” Stiles said. That seemed pretty fair to him. “But . . . you’re not thinking about hurting her, are you? Because it seems pretty stupid to kill your niece while trying to avenge your family’s murder. Even if she did leave you here.”

Peter sighed. “The odds are good that all I would do is get myself killed if I went up against an alpha anyway,” he said. “No. We’ll have to come up with something else.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what,” Stiles said. “I’m actually going to be dining in the lion’s den tonight. The Argents invited us over for dinner. Let me look around, see if I can sneak a look at her stuff, and see what she’s up to.”

For a minute, he thought Peter would shake his head and say it was too dangerous. But then the werewolf nodded and said, “But be careful.”


“I mean it. Don’t take stupid risks. It would be very inconvenient for me if you got yourself killed.”

“Inconvenient?” Stiles asked, arching his eyebrows. “Wow, Peter. You’re such a romantic.”

Stiles didn’t even know what happened after that; Peter moved so quickly that he couldn’t really track it. But the next thing he knew, he was flat on his back on the floor with Peter on top of him, Peter’s mouth pressed against his, Peter’s hand locked around his wrist and his weight pinning him to the floor. “Nnnngghhh,” Stiles gasped out as Peter kissed him, deep and thorough, like he meant to explore every corner of Stiles’ mouth.

“Feeling unappreciated, are we?” Peter asked him, pulling away long enough to nip at Stiles’ ear and elicit another gasp. “We can’t have that.”

“Wow,” Stiles said, as Peter began to mouth at the side of his neck. “No, uh, really, wow. I got . . . I got nothin’ else, I just, oh, keep doing that.”

“But I have so many other things planned for you,” Peter murmured, one hand sliding downward, his thumb rubbing at Stiles’ nipple through the fabric of his T-shirt.

Stiles gulped in air. Then Peter was kissing him again, his weight resting against Stiles’ so the warmth of him soaked through Stiles’ clothes. He shifted slightly and Stiles felt the unmistakable press of Peter’s erection into his hip. “Holy shit,” he gasped out, and Peter actually laughed, bending his head down so his forehead rested against Stiles’ collarbone.

“You’re an imbecile,” he informed Stiles.

“Get real, I’m the smartest person you know, that’s why you like me so much,” Stiles remarked, smirking.

Peter just shook his head, that smile still tugging at the corners of his mouth. Then, much to Stiles’ dismay, he sat back, lifting himself off Stiles.

“What, what, where are you going?” Stiles asked, pushing himself up so he was sitting.

“Well,” Peter said, “it occurred to me that I am still regaining my strength, and I have things I need to
do tonight. If I indulge myself in the extremely vigorous round of sex I’d like to have, I probably won’t be able to move for twenty-four hours afterwards.”

Stiles’ mouth moved for a few moments as he struggled between being insulted that Peter thought killing Harris was more important than having sex, and being excited about how ‘vigorous’ that sex was apparently going to be. The latter won out, by a large margin. “Vigorous, huh?”

“Extremely,” Peter repeated.

Stiles thought about this. “Can’t we just make out for a bit?”

“No,” Peter said. “In fact, you should probably get home before Rafael realizes you’re gone.” He saw Stiles’ face fall and continued, “I’m going to use this time to do something that I haven’t been able to do in years.”


“You will be helping,” Peter said. “Because I’m going to be thinking about you.” He met Stiles’ gaze and held it. “I’m going to be thinking about all the things I’m going to do to you, and the noises you’re going to make that nobody else has ever heard before, how I’m going to mark your skin so everyone knows you belong to me.”

“Oh . . . oh fuck,” Stiles said faintly. He was almost positive for a few moments that he was going to come in his pants just from hearing Peter say that. He swallowed convulsively and said, “That . . . that’s okay then.”

“In fact,” Peter continued, “I think you should do the same.”

Stiles couldn’t resist the opening. “I should go home and think about myself while I jerk off?”

He expected Peter to roll his eyes or make a snarky comment, but Peter just held his gaze again and said, “Yes. Think about all the different things you want me to do to you. Write me a report. Illustrate it, if you can. I would hate to leave you unsatisfied.”

“I’m . . . really not worried about that,” Stiles replied.

Peter smiled in a way that could only be described as predatory. “Me neither.”

“But if you wear yourself out killing a guy tonight, you’ll be too tired to have sex tomorrow, and then it’ll be Monday and I’ll have school and stuff,” Stiles pointed out.

“I’ll try to take it easy,” Peter said.

Stiles leaned into his personal space. “One for the road?” he suggested, and Peter made it a good one.

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Melissa was surprised when Stiles got home, looking up from the pie she was making. “You weren’t gone as long as I thought you would be.”

“Nah, Uncle Raf was like, everywhere I went,” Stiles said, pretending to sound glum. “He would’ve
caught me and I just would’ve gotten in trouble. And he’s right, I mean, it’s not like I can tell them where Peter went. I really don’t have any ideas.”

“They’ll find him, Stiles,” Melissa said, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “I’m sure he couldn’t have gone far.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, wishing that she would stop showing concern so she could go upstairs and jerk off. “Hey, I’m gonna go start on the chores Raf gave me. Do you mind if I play some music?”

“Go right ahead,” Melissa said. Stiles jogged up the stairs and went into his bedroom, putting on a Ramones album before ducking into the bathroom. Cleaning it was one of his chores, so Melissa wouldn’t think it was weird if he was in there for a while. Not that he thought it was going to take him very long. Just the thought of the look on Peter’s face when he had told him to go home and think about what they were going to do gets him hard again.

He leaned against the wall and slid down it so he was sitting, thinking about Peter’s mouth on his, Peter’s hands on him, Peter’s cock pressing against his hip. He could barely manage to get his pants unzipped and reach down to pull himself out. He tilted his head back against the wall, pulling in air in increasingly shaky gasps. The realization that in less than twenty-four hours it would be Peter’s hand on him rather than his own made him let out a little groan. He came harder than he ever had in his life before.

When he got himself back together, he spared a thought to wonder if orgasms were better when someone else gave them to you. Then he managed to get to his feet. His legs were a little shaky, but it passed quickly, and he started channeling all his energy into cleaning the house. The more of his chores he could get done, the less of Rafael’s attention he would get. And Rafael’s attention was something he definitely didn’t want. He didn’t put it past the man to somehow figure out that he was hiding Peter.

When the front door opened at four thirty, he dropped what he was doing and barreled down the stairs. “Any luck, did you find him?” he asked.

Rafael ignored him in favor of turning to Melissa with a smile. “That pie smells great. What time are we leaving?”

“Five forty-five,” Melissa said, and then asked, “Was Peter Hale found?”

“No,” Rafael said, with a shrug that indicated how little he cared. “I left Jenkins and Salcido down at the hospital dealing with it. I wouldn’t want to miss this dinner, after all. I know how important it is to Scott.”

Stiles opened his mouth to make a caustic remark, but remembered at the last minute that he was trying to keep his head down. He turned and walked away, going back up the stairs to get back to the windows he had been cleaning. He heard Melissa say something downstairs about having a little sympathy, and Rafael replying, “Yes, I’m sorry. I’m very sorry. His best friend is a guy in a coma. That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Stiles decided to jerk off again, just out of spite.

At five forty-five, he was presentable enough, and they got in the car and headed over to the Argent house. Scott was already there, of course, having been there most of the day. There was enough chaos surrounding the greetings, Melissa presenting the pie and the bottle of wine, and Rafael and Chris trying to handshake-crush each other into oblivion, that Stiles was able to size Kate up without anybody taking much notice of him. She seemed friendly enough, vivacious and even charming in a
He wasn’t sure how to bring up any sort of sensitive topic so he could watch her reaction, but in the end it came up completely organically, without him having to say a word. Chris asked Rafael what he had been up to, and Rafael mentioned that a patient had gone missing from the hospital. “So far it’s a complete mystery,” he said. “Guy who’s been catatonic for six years just up and vanishes.”

Scott looked over at Stiles and said, “Whoa, what? Is that – the guy that you help take care of in the long-term ward? That you read to sometimes?”

“Yeah, not that it ever made much difference,” Stiles said. “But I figured, why suffer through Faulkner alone?”

Several of the adults laughed at that. But Kate’s face was a study of concern. “That wouldn’t happen to be Peter Hale who went missing, would it?”

Stiles looked at her and feigned surprise. “How’d you know?”

“Oh, I was friends with his family back when I lived here,” Kate said. “It was really terrible, what happened to them.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, trying not to stare at her, almost unable to believe the depths of her cavalier attitude.

“He just got up and walked out?” Chris asked, his voice carefully measured.

Rafael gave a little shrug. “Happened in the middle of the night, nobody saw him go. So I guess it’s possible someone walked off with him. There wasn’t any sign of a struggle, and the nurses said he was still capable of responding to basic commands. He can’t have gone far, though. I mean, he’d been in a chair or a bed for six years.”

“Wasn’t he badly injured in the fire?” Allison asked, a little uncertain.

“Well, the injuries really healed years ago,” Stiles told her. “The doctors thought his catatonia was more psychological than because of brain damage or anything like that. So I guess it’s possible if he woke up, that he might have been confused and just wandered off, but if that were the case, you’d think they would have found him right now.” He put a convincing wobble in his voice. “I don’t know why anyone would want to hurt him.”

“I’m sure he’s fine, Stiles,” Melissa said.

“What are the odds, though?” Scott asked, his forehead wrinkling. “I mean, that his family was all killed in a fire and now he’s gone missing?”

“The fire was an accident,” Rafael said firmly.

“Not everybody thought so,” Stiles said. He flicked a gaze at Kate and saw just the tiniest twitch of her lips. A smile. She was smiling.

“Conspiracy theories,” Rafael said, dismissing this with a wave of his hand. He forced a smile and said to the adults at the table, “My sons fancy themselves quite the detectives.”

“Well, you must be very proud that they want to follow in your footsteps,” Chris replied.

“Oh, I am,” Rafael said, with that same thin smile.
Melissa changed the subject before Chris and Rafael could start hosing down the table with testosterone, and the rest of the meal was fairly boring. Stiles excused himself to use the bathroom while everyone was talking about lacrosse. He snuck into the guest room and found a terrifying arsenal in Kate’s luggage. He took photos of it carefully, replaced everything where it had come from, and was back at the table before anybody missed him.

They ate pie and generally had a good time, but just as they were about to leave, Kate came down the stairs and said, “You know, someone was going through my things.” She was looking straight at Stiles as she said it. “I’m positive that I left my suitcase zipped, but when I went up there just now, it was unzipped.”

Stiles wasn’t sure what to say to that, because his comeback of, ‘well, I’m equally positive that I zipped it back up after my snooping’ probably wasn’t going to get him anywhere. But before Stiles could say anything, Rafael folded his arms over his chest and said, “Just what are you insinuating?”

“I’m actually not insinuating,” Kate said, with that charmingly cold smile, “I’m actually stating that I think one of your boys was going through my things. But if they weren’t, I’m sure they won’t mind emptying their pockets for me. Right, boys?”

“That would actually be illegal,” Stiles said. “The fourth amendment protects us from search and seizure – ”

“Well, the fourth amendment isn’t going to protect you from me,” Kate said, smiling brightly at him.

“Kate, I’m not sure if – ” Chris began, looking a little uneasily between his sister and the sheriff.

“Hey, if they’re not lying, they’ve got nothing to hide,” Kate said.

“Okay, uh, can we all take a deep breath here?” Allison interrupted. “They didn’t go through your things, Aunt Kate. I did.” And with that, she withdrew a condom from her pocket and held it on display.

Stiles would have given a finger to have a video camera to record the expressions on the faces in the room. Allison’s triumphant ‘yeah suck it’ look, Scott’s ‘I will gladly let you suck anything you want’ look of awe and excitement and terror all wrapped up in one. Chris’ slightly agape jar that seemed to be saying ‘no not my baby princess’, Melissa biting her lip trying not to smile, Rafael’s eyes going wide and then narrow and then staring at Scott like he’s not sure if he should be congratulating his son or lecturing him. Kate, for her part, looks surprised and then vaguely impressed.

Then Chris was shoving the McCall family out the door, saying it was great to have them, they’ll do this again sometime, and slamming the door between Allison and Scott before they could even say good night.

“Wow,” Stiles said, as soon as they were in the car.

“Holy shit,” Scott agreed.

“Scott, I hope I don’t have to tell you that you’re too young to be having sex,” Rafael said, as he pulled the car out onto the road.

Melissa choked back a laugh and said, “Rafael, I hope you’re not so naïve as to think that if Allison offers, Scott’s going to say no.” She sighed. “But you use that condom, young man. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Scott said.
They had just pulled into the driveway when Rafael’s cell phone rang. He parked and picked it up. “McCall,” he said. There was a pause, then, “Yeah. On my way.” He hung up and said, “Everyone out. I have to go.”

“What happened?” Melissa asked.

“I’ll tell you when I know,” Rafael said. The three of them left the car and he pulled back out, flipping the sirens on as he cruised away. Melissa shook her head a little and ushered the two boys inside. Stiles stared after Rafael’s lights, thinking of how he knew exactly where Rafael was going, who had been killed, and why. He wished that Peter had a phone so he could call and make sure that he was okay.

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Stiles didn’t ask anything about the murder the next day. He didn’t want to give Rafael any reason to be pissed off at him at the moment. He read about it in the online edition of the newspaper instead. Adrian Harris, 34, a chemistry teacher at Beacon Hills High, was found dead in his house. Foul play was obviously suspected from the state of the body.

The newspaper mentioned that it was similar to the ‘animal attacks’ from the last few months, but said it was the first of such attacks that had occurred inside a residence. Other than that, it didn’t try to connect the dots. Stiles went back to work on his chores without saying anything to Rafael about it. He knew that Rafael would have to leave soon, to get back to the investigation, and that he would have a chance to sneak out.

He was surprised when his phone chirped and he looked down to see a text from his father. ‘Did you tell Rafael your theory about the murders like you promised?’

Stiles chewed on his lower lip while he considered this question. He didn’t want to lie to his father, but he also didn’t want his father calling Rafael to share the theory himself. Finally, he went for a middle ground. ‘I don’t think he took it seriously.’ This was somewhat true. He was certain that if he had presented the theory directly to Rafael, he wouldn’t have done so.

There was a long pause. Stiles didn’t imagine his father was very good at texting. ‘How about now that Peter Hale has disappeared?’

Stiles sighed. He presumed that it had been in the news and his father had read about it. His father wasn’t stupid, and the connection was obvious. ‘IDK. Raf gets mad when I try to do his job for him.’

To that, his father didn’t reply. Stiles hoped that meant that he was going to drop it. With a sigh, he tucked his phone away and finished vacuuming the stairs and polishing the banisters. Then he said, “Melissa, can I go out for a while? My chores are all done.”

“You’re grounded,” she called back.

“Yep,” he said.

“Be back by four,” she replied.

“I love you!” he shouted, and ducked out of the house.

When he finally got to the old Stilinski house, he heard water running upstairs. He padded up anyway, calling out, “Peter? I’m here!” He figured that the werewolf – given their apparent superior hearing – would be able to hear him even in the shower. Then he sat down with his notes and the bag from the bakery and set down the bag of books he had brought.
He had gotten so engrossed in his notes that he didn’t even really notice when the water turned off, but he looked up when he heard the bathroom door open and shut. Peter stood in the doorway to the bedroom, wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. His hair was still damp, and Stiles could see a few beads of water glistening on his neck. But that wasn’t what drew his attention. It wasn’t even Peter’s half-nakedness that drew his attention. It was the scars.

Stiles had never seen Peter in anything less than a long-sleeved shirt and pants. He had seen the way the scars came down the side of his neck and disappeared underneath his clothes, seen the way they peeked out from the cuff of his shirt and onto the back of his hand. In no way did it prepare him for the reality of Peter with his shirt off. The disfigured, almost melted looking skin came down his neck and spread across his chest and abdomen in a diagonal, covering only his right shoulder but stretching almost all the way across his stomach. The scars dipped underneath the towel and disappeared from sight. His right arm was completely covered in them. It hardly looked like something that could be on a living person’s body.

Peter just stood there in the doorway, silent, waiting, while Stiles took it in. And Stiles knew that this had nothing to do with sex, that this was about trust, and that in that moment Peter was braced for rejection, waiting to see the revulsion in Stiles’ face. It was strange to think of from a man that he had shaved and fed and read to while catatonic, but in this moment, Peter was at his most vulnerable.

Stiles put down his book and walked over. He put his fingers on Peter’s shoulder and let them trail over the scars. Then he leaned in and followed them with his mouth. He didn’t know what he was doing, really, but just wanted to make Peter feel like this was okay. That he was okay. Peter’s hand came up and his fingers tangled in Stiles’ hair, cradling his head in a way that was almost protective, and Stiles knew that he had done the right thing.

“How did it go last night?” Peter asked, breaking the silence.

Stiles pulled away, his cheeks flushed pink. “Okay. I took some pictures of her stuff. We can . . . talk about that in a little while. I want to show you something.”

A faint frown crossed Peter’s face, but then he nodded acquiescence. That surprised Stiles a little; he had been half sure that Peter was going to insist on hearing about Kate right away. Peter might have his own priorities, but he was also patient, and Stiles guessed he was also curious about what the teenager was about to say. He gripped the hem of his T-shirt, knuckles turning white. “Promise not to freak out, though.”

“I never ‘freak out,’” Peter replied.

Stiles swallowed convulsively. “I mean, just . . . don’t do anything rash, like . . . don’t go kill someone or something.”

Now Peter frowned, clearly wondering what Stiles was talking about. Then he raised his right hand and said, “I solemnly swear that whatever you show me will not cause me to kill anyone I wasn’t already planning to kill anyway.”

“Okay.” Stiles let out a breath, then pulled his T-shirt over his head and turned so he wasn’t facing Peter. He felt like there were snakes squirming around in his stomach, he was so nervous. He flinched a little when Peter reached out, fingers delicately tracing over one of Stiles’ own scars. There were only a handful of them, about a dozen. Rafael was always careful like that, but sometimes he slipped up. Stiles’ flinch turned into a shudder as Peter echoed his gesture of a few minutes previous, leaning in and pressing his lips against a narrow scar on Stiles’ shoulder blade.

“What made these?” he murmured.
“He usually uses his belt, but . . .” Stiles said, “sometimes when he’s really mad he uses this – it’s like a metal yardstick. That’s what leaves scars a lot of the time.”

Peter ran his fingers along another scar on Stiles’ lower back. “Some of these are old.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said.

Peter didn’t say anything else. Instead he leaned in closer, one hand coming around to splay against the flat of Stiles’ stomach. Stiles felt his breathing hitch in his throat, despite his best efforts to keep it even. Peter mouthed at the back of his neck, fastened his teeth in Stiles’ shoulder. “Turn around,” he murmured into Stiles’ skin, and Stiles did. Peter slowly backed him against the wall, kissing him over and over again, one finger hooking in Stiles’ belt loop and keeping their bodies pulled together.

Stiles was tentative at first, one hand brushing over the scarred skin on Peter’s back, but Peter made a noise that sounded encouraging, so he let his hands wander. He had the strange feeling that Peter wanted to be touched, maybe even needed to be touched after so long alone. Then Peter’s hips ground against his and Stiles forgot all about deep psychological sentiment in a rush of hormones and instinct. He whimpered when Peter bit down on his lip, and his knees started to feel a little weak. Peter never stopped moving, pressing his body against Stiles’, the firmness of his thigh right where Stiles needed it.

Finally, he pulled away from the kiss long enough to gasp out, “I don’t think – I can stay upright – much longer.”

“I will take that as the compliment you undoubtedly intend it to be,” Peter said, smirking. “But I don’t want to break the air mattress, so – ”

There was a pause while he released Stiles, and the teenager made a formless little noise of protest. Then Peter had him around the waist and tugged him down onto a blanket he had spread on the floor. Stiles wound up on his back while Peter did wonderful, amazing things to him, licking and nipping the sensitive skin of his chest and abdomen. He stared at the ceiling and let the world fuzz out completely, one hand tangling in Peter’s hair and the other making a fist in the blanket.

Peter kissed him again while he undid his belt, then the button and zipper of Stiles’ jeans, and then kept kissing him as he shoved Stiles’ pants and underwear down far enough to free him from the fabric. Stiles groaned into it as Peter took his cock in his hand, tight, quick strokes that didn’t have any right to feel so good. He broke away for air and mouthed wetly at Peter’s throat. Peter jerked away, and for a moment his hand got uncomfortably tight.

“What, I – fuck,” Stiles panted. He remembered back when he had been shaving Peter, how much the man hated to have his neck touched. His eyes went a little wide. “That – that’s a wolf thing, isn’t it.”

Peter nodded a little. “Yes, it is.”

Stiles stared up at him for a minute before deliberately turning his head to one side, baring his throat to the older man. Peter growled, low and hungry, and then nuzzled his face right into it, biting gently at Stiles’ neck. It was never quite enough to break the skin, but Stiles knew it would leave some impressive marks. Which was one hundred percent okay with him, and he didn’t care what anyone else thought about it.

Peter gradually pulled away from Stiles’ offered throat and kissed him again. He took Stiles’ hand in his and lifted it to make Stiles touch the scarred side of his face, his chin, and then let Stiles trail his fingers down his throat. Stiles lingered on Peter’s pulse, feeling the warmth, the *life* in him. Then
Peter took him in hand again and he had to let go of Peter’s neck and squeeze down on his shoulder. “Fuck,” he bit out.

“Like this?” Peter murmured against his mouth.

“Ah,” Stiles said, letting his head thump backwards. “Just a little – a little tighter if you – oh God, yeah, that, that’s good – ”

He couldn’t do anything anymore except shudder and writhe in Peter’s grip, he couldn’t even kiss because he was gasping for breath, so he just let Peter bury his face in the crook of his shoulder again, and then Peter bit down on his ear and he came so hard that he swore he saw actual stars.

He lay on the floor, sprawled out and panting and feeling incredibly warm and a little tingly, not even caring that Peter was – well, actually he did care, he cared a lot, because Peter was just rubbing up against him and the towel was long gone. He watched, almost spellbound, as Peter thrust against the groove of his hip, and he thought about trying to help but by the time he could move, it was over. Peter grunted and his body shuddered once more against Stiles’, and then he let out a long sigh and just gracelessly collapsed on top of the teenager.

A few minutes passed before Stiles said, “We should do that again. Like, a lot.”

“Oh, to be sixteen,” Peter said, laughing quietly. But then he leaned over and kissed Stiles on the mouth. “I’m not sure I’ll be up to it for a few days. But,” he added, smirking, “I will be looking forward to when I am. Next time I think I’m going to suck you until you beg for me.”

“Aaaaaaand I’m hard again,” Stiles announced.

“We can’t have that, now can we,” Peter murmured, and pounced.

He did have Stiles begging by the end, drawing out into a deliciously lengthy process from which Stiles wasn’t sure he would ever recover. It took quite a while for him to recover his wits, whereupon he rolled onto his side so he could see Peter. His face was resting in the blankets, the unscarred side, so only the scarred side was visible. Stiles reached out and rubbed his thumb against Peter’s cheekbone. “Can’t you heal these?” he asked.

Peter shrugged a little. “Someday, perhaps. But if I have any hope of regaining my former life, it wouldn’t be prudent to do it yet. What about you? Would you make yours go away, if you could?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles said. “I don’t think so. It’s like . . . they’d still be there on the inside, you know?”

Peter nodded. “I know.” He reached out and gently ran his fingers over one of the more prominent scars on Stiles’ back. “Why were you so reluctant to show me these?” he asked.

Stiles shrugged. “Who’d want to?”

“Don’t try to lie to me. You know better than that.” Peter shook his head. “Reluctant is the wrong word. You were truly afraid of how I would react. Why?”

Stiles opened his mouth to tell Peter that it was none of his business, that despite everything, there were still some doors that Stiles wasn’t willing to open. But then his voice faltered, and all he managed was, “Because of my dad.”

Peter was quiet for a long minute after that. Then he sat up, pulling the blankets to pool in his lap, and leaned against the wall. “You know that you’ve never actually told me the story of how you
wound up living with the McCall family? I confess I’ve been curious. Did you tell me while I wasn’t listening?"

“No,” Stiles said. “Even then, I . . . couldn’t.” He didn’t sit up, didn’t want to look at Peter. Instead he rolled onto his stomach, folding his hands underneath his chin, and stared at the wall like it was something fascinating. “When my mom died . . . things were really hard for my dad. I mean, he loved her like crazy. And part of it is, well . . . I look a lot like my mom. So it was hard for my dad to be around me. Partly because I looked like her. And partly because he felt bad that I had been with her when she died, and he hadn’t been.”

Stiles let out a slow breath, gradually reconciling himself to the fact that he was going to tell Peter this whole sordid tale, which he had never told anyone else. Only Rafael knew all the details. Even Scott had never heard it all. “I was only eight, but, I tried to be there for him, you know? I did what I could. I was all kinds of fucked up myself, but I thought . . . like, if I could keep my grades up and get dinner on the table and do the laundry like Mom did, maybe . . .”

“Maybe he would come back to you,” Peter finished quietly.

Stiles nodded and rubbed a hand over his face. “And he started drinking. I didn’t even really . . . I didn’t see why it was a bad thing, you know? I mean, I was eight. It seemed to help him fall asleep at night. But then sometimes it made him upset, or he would get short-tempered. So I just tried harder to be all the things my mom had been. But I couldn’t pull it off. I had to call Melissa for help a few times, like, when I put too much detergent in the washing machine, or when I burned dinner.

“After the third time I nearly destroyed the house, Melissa and Raf sat down with my dad and told him that they thought maybe I should come stay with them for a while. Just a few weeks, maybe a month or two. So I could have someone to help me get through my grief, because channeling it into becoming the next Martha Stewart wasn’t helping anybody. I mean, by that point I was a fucking wreck. I was crying at Scott’s house after school every day because I didn’t understand why what I was doing wasn’t helping. I kept thinking that if I was better at it . . . it sounds stupid, right? Like, I burned a casserole so my dad couldn’t stop drinking his grief away . . . but I was eight fucking years old. It made sense to an eight year old.

“My dad was kind of reluctant but he wanted what was best for me, he really did. So he said okay. He promised to stop drinking and get his act cleaned up and he’d come over for dinner three times a week and . . . he made me all these promises. And maybe he even kept some of them, but . . . he didn’t stop drinking. Because now on top of everything else, people had taken his son away, had told him that he wasn’t good enough for me, and that . . . that opened this wound inside him that I don’t think ever really healed.”

Stiles was quiet for a minute. He rolled onto his back and took a quick glance at Peter before continuing. “It’s funny, but, I don’t even remember the reason Raf hit me that day. Raf and I had always rubbed each other the wrong way. I mean, I was a smartass, and back then I was still young enough that it was cute ninety percent of the time, but Raf didn’t think it was cute. And he was an overbearing asshole and I didn’t like the way he made Scott feel bad if he wasn’t perfect at something, and he had all these rules that my mom and dad had never had, about how long baths could be and how many lima beans I had to eat if I wanted dessert and . . . and he talked shit about my dad, and that really bothered me. I mean, he made it sound like my dad was weak, and . . . anyway, I cracked wise to him one day when I’d been there about a month, and he hauled off and smacked me. It wasn’t hard enough to bruise, but it left one hell of a red mark, like, my whole cheek was crimson.

“And I . . . went crying to my dad. I told him that I wanted to come live with him again, that I hated
Uncle Raf and I just wanted things to be the way they were. That’s . . . that’s all I wanted. That’s how it should have gone, how it would have gone if the world was fair at all, but my dad . . .” Stiles’ voice dropped. He sat up and pulled his knees up to his chest. “He was drunk when I got there, and I didn’t realize, so when I spilled the beans, he just flipped his shit. He tossed me in the car and drove back to Raf’s and he just . . . Raf opened the front door and my dad dragged him outside and started to beat the living hell out of him. Melissa tried to separate them but couldn’t, and a neighbor came over to try to help, and then someone called the cops, and . . .

“My dad got arrested by his own fucking deputy, as if the whole thing wasn’t humiliating enough. And you’d think, well, surely they would cut him some slack, right? I mean, yeah, he was in the wrong, but he was protecting his child, shouldn’t that count for something . . .? And some of the guys down at the station didn’t really want to charge him, but Raf . . . Raf got together with the DA, Jackson Whittemore’s dad, and they pressed like every single applicable charge. Public intoxication, disturbing the peace, assault with intent to commit bodily harm, DUI, I mean, if it was even remotely relevant, they charged him with it. But even then, you’d think . . .”

Stiles’ shoulders were heaving as he struggled to remain in control. “But he didn’t get slack, he didn’t get a fucking ounce of slack, because he was so God damned drunk that day that he barely remembered what happened. He knew Raf had upset me but he didn’t remember why he’d gotten so angry. Nobody had seen Raf hit me, and so when they asked me . . . oh, Jesus, this is hard . . . Raf cornered me before they could talk to me, and he told me that if I told anyone what had really happened, he would make sure my dad never got out of jail, and that I would never be able to visit him. He told me I would never see my dad again.” Stiles was crying now, despite his best efforts, but he ignored the tears, letting them drip off the end of his chin. “So I lied. I got up in front of the fucking judge and I lied to my dad’s face about what had happened and he went to jail and I got stuck with Rafael because I guess that’s no less than what I deserved after I betrayed my own father like that and I . . .”

“Shh, shh,” Peter said, reaching over, drawing Stiles against him. Stiles let out a shuddering sob into Peter’s shoulder. He was a little surprised when Peter’s arms came up around him, holding him tightly, but he was falling apart too fast to care. He had never admitted that to anyone, not to Scott or Melissa or even his own father. To this day, he had no idea what his father believed about what had happened. He didn’t know if his father remembered why he had gotten so angry or not. All he knew was that when his father had gotten out of jail, Stiles had asked to go live with him, and his father had refused.

It took a long time for him to calm down. Finally, he pulled away and wiped his hand over the back of his eyes. “Thanks,” he said, voice hoarse. Peter went over to the things Stiles had brought him and took out a bottle of water. Stiles accepted it and took little sips until his hands stopped shaking.

Peter regarded him for a few moments. “Well,” he finally said, “now that I’ve heard the story, I can say with one hundred percent certainty that you should stop letting Rafael beat you as a way to punish yourself.”

Stiles scowled at him. “I don’t let Rafael – ”

“Yes, you do,” Peter said dismissively. “Hell, you actively taunt him into it. Every time it looks like Scott might get so much as a slap on the wrist, you fling yourself underneath the bus because you’re so convinced that you deserve to be abused. It’s idiotic.”

“Look, asshole – ”

Peter grabbed him by the chin and turned him around so Stiles had to meet his gaze. “What happened to your father was not your fault.”
“Yes, it was, I – ”

“You were a *child*. You did exactly what you should have done. Someone hurt you and you went to tell an adult that you trusted so they could help you. And your father screwed up.”

“My dad – ”

“Your dad *screwed up,*” Peter said flatly. “Does he have some excuses for what he did? Sure. He was obviously emotionally distressed, and I can hardly blame him for wanting to beat the crap out of Rafael McCall. But if he had been sober, if he had been thinking, he would have realized that all he was going to do was screw the both of you over. He was the adult in the situation. You relied on him, and he blew it.”

“Then why does he hate me?” Stiles blurted out.

At this, Peter frowned. “I almost dread to ask this, but why are you so convinced that he does?”

“When he got out of jail – two years ago, he – I asked if I could come back and live with him. He had a, a job and an apartment, he had been sober for six months out of jail, and I thought – but he said no. He wouldn’t let me.”

Peter sighed. “I can assure you it’s not because he hates you. No, your father undoubtedly blames himself for what happened just as much as you blame yourself. And if he knew what you were thinking and what you’ve put yourself through, he would kick himself in the ass about a hundred times over. Your father knows he screwed up. He knows he let you down. And he’s ashamed. He doesn’t want you around because that reminds him of how much he failed you. He’s convinced himself that you’re better off without him.”

“That’s stupid,” Stiles said.

“Yes, well, emotional intelligence doesn’t seem to run very strongly in your family, now does it.”

Stiles let out a huff. “You don’t have to be such an asshole about it,” he muttered, and Peter gave a remorseless shrug. After a few moments, Stiles ventured a look up. “You don’t think he’s angry?”

“I doubt it,” Peter said. “And if we’re going to be reasonable about this, you probably did the right thing when you lied.”


“Think about it. Rafael was clearly on a vendetta against your father. He was going to get what he wanted one way or another. You said nobody else witnessed the abuse and it didn’t leave any marks. So what would an adult find more likely? That a grown man, a respected member of the community, slapped around an eight year old when no one was looking, an eight year that he had voluntarily taken in just a month previous? Or that a child would lie and say he had to cover for his real father, who had just done something remarkably stupid and landed himself in the hot seat?”

Stiles blinked. “I – I guess I never thought about it that way.”

“Of course you didn’t. You were a child. All you knew was that an adult with power was threatening to hurt someone you cared about. Regardless of the outcome, you were trying to protect your father, and I’m quite sure that he wouldn’t hate you for that.”

“Yeah, I – I guess.” Stiles swallowed hard and wiped a hand over his eyes again. “I’m kind of a mess, huh?”
“You could benefit from some therapy,” Peter said, “and it probably wouldn’t hurt if Rafael got drop-kicked off a cliff. But who am I to talk? I’m living in an abandoned house, dependent on a sixteen-year-old for news of the outside world, while I kill off the people who killed my family. So we’re all works in progress, hm?”

Stiles laughed at that. He couldn’t help it. “That’s one way to look at it.”

“Come on, now.” Peter leaned in and kissed him on the mouth. “Tell me how things went last night.”

~ ~ ~
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I remember when I first started this fic and it seemed really dark and then season 3B of Teen Wolf came along and now I'm emotionally compromised and my tumblr dash is 18 pages of Stiles crying and suddenly this fic seemed positively light and fluffy...

It only took Stiles a few minutes to sum up what had happened at the Argent house the night before. Then he pulled out his laptop so he could show Peter the pictures. He leafed through them, studying each one intently, while Stiles got dressed. Peter didn’t seem to notice his own nudity. Stiles glanced in the mirror in the bathroom and took a look at the marks Peter had left down his throat.

“Raf’s gonna flip,” he announced, somewhat cheerfully, when he went back into the bedroom.

“Mm,” Peter said, not really listening. “Well, she certainly came loaded for wolf. I don’t like how suspicious she seemed of you, though.”

“Not thrilled with it, either,” Stiles said. “But I’m safe from hunters, right? Being human and all.”

“Two of my nephews were human,” Peter said. “They died in the fire all the same.” He closed the laptop and looked up. “I’m going to need to think carefully about how to handle this. Coming at her head-on is a guaranteed disaster. She’s ready for me.”

“We could lure her into a trap,” Stiles suggested, trying to ignore the fact that he was now actively helping Peter plan a murder. “Oh, did you learn anything from Harris?”

Peter shrugged a little. “Enough to confirm that Kate was definitely behind it. Apparently she got him drunk and conned some chemistry magic out of him.”

“So . . . he didn’t know what she was going to do with it?” Stiles asked.

“Presumably not. Does it matter?” Peter seemed to see what he was getting at, because he looked over at Stiles, showing teeth. “My family is no less dead for his ignorance.”

“No, I guess not,” Stiles said. He checked his watch. “Fuck, I gotta go if I want to get home before Raf does.”

“Like he won’t realize that you left without permission.” Peter reached out and touched the marks on Stiles’ neck. “You didn’t do those to yourself,” he added, sounding satisfied with himself.

“Believe it or not, I do own a turtleneck,” Stiles said, “and now would be a really bad time for Raf to beat me ‘til I’m black and blue. I don’t want to spend the next three days in bed while you’re here on your own. So I’ll just have to put up with his bullshit.” He toed his shoes back on and stood up. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to come see you tomorrow. I’m going to go straight to the hospital after school so I can ‘check on the search’. The more worried I look, the less likely it is that someone will realize I’m helping you. And after work I’ll need to head straight home for a few days, until Raf has cooled down.”

Peter nodded. “The sooner the better,” he said. “I want to get this taken care of.”
“There you go being all romantic again,” Stiles said, and laughed. “Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Melissa took one look at Stiles when he got home and said, “Oh, Stiles,” and rubbed a hand over her face. “Why don’t I just get you a T-shirt that says ‘I went out even though I was grounded’?”

“Sorry?” Stiles said, trying not to smile. “I’ll just, uh, go hide in my room.”

“Yes,” Melissa said. “Do that.” She paused. “Give me your laptop. I’m punishing you.”

“Aw, man,” Stiles whined, but handed it over. He went up to his room and flopped on his bed with a book. When Rafael got home about an hour later, he stuck his head out of his room long enough to hear Melissa explain that she had sent Stiles to his room without his computer because she caught him trying to sneak out. Rafael said something uncomplimentary, but Stiles didn’t care.

Scott got home just in time for dinner, so he didn’t see Stiles until afterwards, when he brought him up a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a glass of water. “Dude,” he said, as soon as he got a look at Stiles. “I thought Mom punished you for trying to sneak out.”

“You know she won’t tell Raf that I was out making out with my boyfriend,” Stiles said, accepting the sandwich. “He’d skin me.” He immediately redirected by saying, “How’s Allison?”

“Also grounded,” Scott said, grinning. “We just went out walking on the preserve for a bit because she didn’t want to chance anyone seeing her in town and telling her folks so they would realize she had snuck out.”

Stiles exchanged a fist bump with Scott. “Raf say anything about the latest murder?”

“A bit,” Scott said, sobering up and sitting down. “Harris, man. I mean, it’s not like we loved him, but it’s weird that it’s someone we knew.”

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed. He thought to himself that it would be even weirder when it was Allison’s aunt, but he supposed that was a problem for another day. He had never told Scott his theory about it relating back to the Hale house fire, because he didn’t want anyone making the connection between the murders and Peter.

That was dashed to hell a few moments later when Scott said, “Well, to make things even weirder, Dad thinks it might relate back to Peter Hale having disappeared.”

“No way,” Stiles said, trying to cover his panic with a different kind of surprise.

“Yeah,” Scott said. “I guess someone called the police and left an anonymous tip that that the first guy who was killed investigated the Hale house fire, and the other people who have been killed might have been involved, like it was arson.”

Stiles swallowed thickly. “What did . . . what did Raf think of that?”

“Oh, he’s all pissed because you know he doesn’t think the Hale house fire was arson,” Scott said, which made Stiles feel a little better. “Plus he’s still trying to insist that these were animal attacks. I guess some hunter killed a cougar in the woods outside town last night that they think might have
been rabid, so of course he’s all over that.”

“Maybe that’s all it is,” Stiles said.

Scott frowned. “A cougar didn’t walk off with Peter Hale.”

“No, I guess not,” Stiles agreed. He didn’t know what else to say. He was sure that it was his father who had called in the anonymous tip, having guessed correctly that Stiles had never really told Rafael or any law enforcement officer about his theory. He wanted to be mad, but he wasn’t, not really. His dad was still a cop at heart. No amount of jail time or years working in private security was going to change that.

There was a pause while Scott paced around the room. Then he stopped and said, “What’s with you all of a sudden? I thought for sure you’d be all over this. Like an actual lead, a possible connection, something we could look into. I thought you might even say you were the one who called in the tip, so you could get Rafael to pull files and stuff that we didn’t have yet.”

“Oh,” Stiles said, and fumbled for a convenient excuse. “I just, uh, it’s kind of – ”

Scott chewed on his lower lip. “How long has Peter been talking to you?”

Stiles gaped at him for a minute, then looked away. Scott wasn’t stupid, though. He was just as smart as Stiles, in his own way. He was just smart about different things. Scott was smart about people, and he knew Stiles better than anybody. Stiles thought about all the promises he had made Peter, but they had never covered what to do if someone else figured it out. “A . . . a while now.”

“And this older boyfriend of yours . . .”

Stiles nodded silently.

Scott processed all that for a minute. “So you helped him sneak out and hid him somewhere, right?” he asked, and Stiles nodded again. “Because someone is going around killing anyone who knows anything about the Hale house fire, and you were worried he would be next.”

Stiles breathed a silent breath of relief that Scott had come to the wrong conclusion. “Yeah. As soon as he heard about the murders . . . we started planning to get him out of there. But he made me promise not to tell. He’s worried that if someone found out . . .”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Scott said, nodding. “A catatonic guy is no threat, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So then . . . we need the files on the Hale house fire.”

“There aren’t any. Nobody investigated shit.” Stiles pushed a hand through his hair. “Rafael didn’t believe it was arson, so there wasn’t an investigation, and now there’s nothing we can do.”

“And Peter doesn’t have any idea about who set it?” Scott asked, and Stiles shrugged. “So what are we going to do?”

Stiles thought fast and was able to come up with at least a semi-plausible answer. “I’m helping Peter make some arrangements to, you know, get him out of town. To a safe place. Then we’ll just have to hope that the murderer is caught, I guess.”

“Anything I can do?” Scott asked.
“Just keep quiet,” Stiles said. “I mean, it’d be a disaster if anyone found out. I’m sure I broke at least three laws for helping Peter sneak out of the hospital and I’m sure I’d be fired, let alone what Raf would do if he found out. And if whoever’s behind the murders finds out that Peter’s talking and aware of the danger . . . it’d just be bad.”

Scott nodded and mimed zipping his mouth closed. Then he said, “So . . . you really like him, huh?”

Stiles turned pink despite himself. “Yeah, I . . . I do.”

“Cool.” Scott flopped onto his bed. “If you need me to cover for you with Dad, just let me know.”

“Thanks, bro.”

School the next day was interesting. Everyone was buzzing about Harris’ murder, and different theories. Nobody was shedding any tears, but there was a general aura of fear. Nobody could ignore that there was a serial killer on the loose, no matter how much Rafael wanted them to. Theories ranged from reasonable to ridiculous, but none of them came close to the truth.

Stiles went straight to the hospital after school and grilled Donna incessantly about the search for Peter, which of course had had no results. He worked hard and ignored the worried glances everyone was giving him, and then hurried home and got in just in time. He was wearing a turtleneck. By the next day, the bruises had faded enough that he could cover them with makeup.

Tuesday was a carbon copy of Monday. On Wednesday, he went by the mall and picked up a pre-paid cell phone for Peter. He didn’t like the other man being stuck in the house with no way to call for help if he needed it, and he didn’t like not being able to get in touch with him. Work was the same as always. “No news,” Donna said, as soon as she saw him. Stiles was going a little crazy because it seemed like something should be happening.

He wanted to talk to Peter about it, but didn’t get the chance. When he went by on Thursday after school to give him the phone, Peter accepted it with thanks, then pinned Stiles to the wall and ground their bodies together until Stiles was whimpering and pleading. He barely had enough time to restore feeling to his legs before he had to leave to get to work.

He didn’t really have much reason to go into Peter’s room at work anymore, but Donna asked him to change the sheets. Normally it was done every other day; apparently it had been neglected for some time. Stiles went in with the bundle and slowly stripped off the dirty sheets. He picked up the picture of Peter’s family and wondered if he could get away with stealing it. He was sure Peter would want to have it.

A few moments later, he was startled out of his reverie when someone abruptly asked, “What are you doing in here?”

Stiles looked up to see a young man, a few years older than him, dressed in a black leather jacket and jeans. He had black hair and stubble on his face. “Uh, I work here,” Stiles said. “What are you doing in here?”

“I’m looking for my uncle,” the man said.

Stiles felt his jaw start to sag, but he tried to play it cool. “Uh . . . are you maybe in the wrong room?”

Before the glower could turn into an outright scowl, a woman came through the door. She looked a few years older, and there was a strong family resemblance. But unlike her brother, she smiled and said, “You must be Stiles. The nurse said you had been spending a lot of time with Peter. I’m Laura,
and this is Derek.”

“Nice to, uh, nice to meet you,” Stiles said. “I guess the hospital finally got in touch with you?”

Laura nodded. “I called to check on him, and, well . . .” She gave Stiles a serious look. “Stiles, it’s very important that we find my uncle right away.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “I agree. You should probably talk to Sheriff McCall – ”

“I have,” Laura said. “The police are doing everything they can. But the truth is, I don’t think my uncle will be very easily found. I think I’m going to need help if I’m going to find him.”

Stiles said nothing.

“See, the thing is, Stiles,” Laura said, “the nurse told me that you would come in here and read to him, do your homework in here just so he had some company. But that’s not really what was happening, was it? Because I admit I don’t know a lot of sixteen year old boys, but that just strikes me as unlikely. Which means he was talking to you. I think you know where he is.”

“Hey, you know what, fuck you,” Stiles said. “For your information, I did a fuck of a lot of trig and chemistry sitting here and telling Peter about my life, and I read him half of Beneath the Wheel and all of Intruder in the Dust, and I did it because you two were too busy to visit him. Your own God damned uncle, laying here all by himself for years, and you’re trying to tell me that I’m the one who wasn’t willing to spend time with him? Even if I did know where Peter had gone, I’m sure as hell not going to tell you, because as far as I can see, you don’t give half a damn about him.”

Laura winced a little. “I didn’t mean it that – ”

“I don’t care what you meant. I care about what you said and what you did. I want to find Peter more than anyone else in this room, I’m pretty fucking sure of that, but no, I don’t know how he got out of the hospital or where he went. So just . . . go talk to somebody who gives a shit about your plight. I have work to do.”

He grabbed the wad of dirty sheets and left the room in a rush. He hadn’t gotten more than two steps before Derek grabbed his arm. “I can smell him on you,” he said in a low voice.

“Personal space, dude,” Stiles said, yanking his arm back. “Keep your nose and your opinions to yourself.”

Derek let him go and said nothing. Stiles went back to his chores and tried to ignore the way his hands were shaking. On his break, he went to the bathroom and took out his phone. He checked in all the stalls before dialing. Peter picked up on the first ring. “Don’t use this phone as an excuse to call me all the time,” he greeted Stiles. “You could be overheard.”

“Wow, you’re welcome,” Stiles said, feeling aggrieved. “Your niece and nephew are here.”

Peter made a tongue click of annoyance. “Figured they would show up eventually.”

“Derek said he could smell you on me,” Stiles said. “And if that has anything to do with the making out we did earlier, I don’t want to know about it. They know I know where you are, or at least suspect. They’re gonna follow me, Peter. What should I do?”

“Lead them here,” Peter said. “I’ll deal with it.”

Stiles breathed out a sigh of relief. That, he could handle. “Okay. I’ll see you around nine thirty.”
He hung up and went back to work. Laura caught up to him as he was bringing a load of sheets down to the laundry. “Look, I’m sorry about earlier,” she said. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m frustrated, and I’m worried, and frankly the local law doesn’t seem like it’s going to be a lot of help.” She waited until Stiles had dropped off the laundry and turned to face her. “Stiles, my uncle is sick. He could be in danger. He needs help. Please.”

Since they weren’t going to let it go, and obviously already knew or at least thought they knew he was helping Peter, Stiles just shook his head. “Peter doesn’t want your help. It’s too little, too late. Now back off. That local sheriff you’re so unimpressed with is my adopted father, and he really won’t be happy if I call to report that you were harassing me.”

Laura gave him a long look, then turned and walked away without a word. Stiles sighed and got back to work. He punched out at nine on the dot and left the hospital. He even checked over his shoulder a few times. He was sure that Laura and Derek were following him, but he didn’t see them. He took the long way to the old house like he was trying to shake them, then jogged through the woods and over the fence.

“Peter, it’s me,” he called out as he went inside. Peter was waiting in the living room, in the dark. “I don’t know if they followed me. I didn’t see anything.”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Peter said. He leaned in and kissed Stiles on the mouth. Stiles melted into it, his hands gripping down on Peter’s shoulders tightly. This went on for several minutes before Peter pulled away. “They’re here.”

“Well, it was a nice way to pass the time,” Stiles panted.

Peter chuckled a little. He opened the back door and said to the empty air, “Come in, Laura, Derek. I’ve missed you.”

Two figures emerged from the shadows. Derek was scowling. Laura looked neutral. But she walked up to Peter and put her arms around his shoulders, hugging him. “I’m glad you’re safe,” she said.

“Likewise, my darling niece,” Peter said. He stood back to let them in. “We can’t turn on a light. I’m sorry if that bothers you. But I don’t want to risk anyone on the street realizing that someone is living here.”

“We can see just fine,” Derek said in a low growl.

“I was talking to Stiles,” Peter said, amused. “I’m well aware that you two can see fine in the dark, as can I.”

“My eyes are adjusting,” Stiles said, which was true. Right now the three werewolves were only dim shapes, but he was starting to be able to make out some detail. “It’s fine.”

Peter gave a nod. “Laura,” he said, “say what you came to say.”

Laura let out a breath. “I wanted to make sure that you were all right.”

“I am,” Peter said. “In fact, I’m better than I’ve been in a long time.”

“You’re hiding in an abandoned house without electricity.”

“Yes,” Peter said, “and I find that infinitely better than living in a hospital ward being spoon fed mashed squash and spending the days with nothing but a picture of my family for company.”
Laura’s jaw tightened a little. “You know why we had to leave.”

“Yes, I do,” Peter said. “You were in danger. I would have dragged you down. Fine. I accept that. I accept your decision. But I won’t forgive you for it, all the same. I don’t want your help and I don’t want your pity.”

There was a long silence. “Are you the one killing people?” Laura asked.

“Yes,” Peter said. “And there’s only one to go. And then I’ll be safe. You wouldn’t protect me. You culled me from the pack like a weak antelope. So I’ll take care of myself, and you have no right to challenge me on that.”

“I should call the police on you,” Laura said. “You’re a murderer.”

“I’m killing the people who killed our family. Your parents, your little sister. Don’t tell me that you’ve never thought about revenge. Call the police if you like. It won’t make any difference to me. I’ll be gone before they get here.”

“Peter . . .” Laura’s voice trembled slightly. “If you had called me – if I had known you were awake –”

“But you didn’t know,” Peter said, “because you weren’t here. I have all the help I need, Laura.”

Laura’s head turned towards Stiles. “A human child. It’s a little ironic, don’t you think?”

“Probably not,” Stiles interjected. “Most people use the word ‘ironic’ incorrectly, and I don’t actually see how it would apply here.”

He couldn’t see in the dark, but he was pretty sure that the look Peter was giving him was amused. But then Laura said quietly, “He’s just using you, Stiles. I don’t know what he’s said to you, what he’s promised you. I know what he’s been doing with you – that’s pretty obvious. But you can’t trust him, Stiles. He’s a manipulator. He flatters people, he uses them – it’s what he does. He’ll bleed you dry, take everything you can give, and then cast you aside.”

Stiles felt Peter go still next to him. He didn’t wait to hear what the other man had to say. Rage was boiling up in his throat, and he couldn’t contain it. “He manipulates people, huh? Is it anything like what you’re trying to do to me right now? Convince me that he doesn’t care about me so I’ll help you instead of him? You know what? He told me right up front that nothing was more important to him than this. He never fucking lied to me. I help him because I care about him. Maybe he cares about me too. That would be awesome. But don’t talk to me like I’m fucking stupid.”

Peter put a hand on Stiles’ shoulder and pulled him back. “Get out of here, Laura. Nobody wants you here. I don’t think I’m strong enough to kill you, but what I need to do would be a hell of a lot easier if I were an alpha – so leave before I change my mind and decide to give it a try.”

There was a growl to their right – Derek, who had been so quiet that they had practically forgotten he was there. “Don’t threaten her.”

“You should leave too, Derek,” Peter said, “before your ex-girlfriend realizes you’re in town.”

Derek’s intake of breath is short, sharp, painful. “You –”

“Of course I know about that, Derek,” Peter said. “I know you didn’t realize who she was. I know that she used you, the exact same way that your sister is currently accusing me of using Stiles. You should forgive yourself, Derek. I know that your parents would forgive you, too.”
Derek made a small noise in the back of his throat, then pushed his way out of the house. Laura pushed her hair out of her face. “Thank you for that,” she said.

“I didn’t do it for you,” Peter said. “Get out.”

Laura nodded once, then turned and followed her brother. She closed the door after herself. Peter and Stiles stood in silence for a minute. Then Peter said, “I am using you, you know.”

“Duh,” Stiles replied.

Peter laughed. “But I do like you, too.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I know I say "this is my favorite chapter" a lot, but this, this is totally my favorite chapter. For now. ^_^

Going into the weekend, Stiles wasn’t sure what to expect. He had gotten home so late on Thursday that Rafael’s temper wasn’t going to hold much longer. He and Peter had sat for a long time after Derek and Laura’s departure, talking about different plans. They needed some way to get an advantage over Kate, a way to lure her into a situation that would favor Peter, or a way to take her down a few pegs. So far, they hadn’t come up with anything.

“We need an ally,” Stiles said. “I mean, right now it’s just you and her. We need someone who can help.” He chewed on his lower lip. “Maybe you could teach me how to fight.”

“No offense, Stiles, but you fell over trying to make coffee earlier,” Peter said. “I don’t see that plan having a lot of luck. Do you know anything about guns?”

“Sorry,” Stiles said, shaking his head. “Rafael never wanted to teach me or Scott how to shoot.”

“Mm. He continues to be a problem.” Peter shook his head. “You’re right. But there’s nobody else. And what worries me is that it won’t be just me and Kate. We’ve also got Chris Argent to deal with. I don’t think he was involved in the fire – the Argents have a code, you know, and he seems to follow it – but I also doubt he’ll just let me murder his sister.”

“What code?” Stiles asked.

“Something French. We hunt those who hunt us.” Peter rolled his eyes. “A touch melodramatic for my taste. In practical terms, it means that they don’t kill werewolves who haven’t done something to deserve it. Which of course I have, at this point.”

Stiles rubbed a hand over the back of his head. “But the Hale family hadn’t, so why did Kate go after you?”

“She seems to be a garden variety psychopath, from what I’ve learned of her,” Peter said, with a shrug. “We could get her somewhere specific – that would actually be rather easy, I think. The question is how we would get the upper hand over her once we got there.”

They continued to debate it for a while. Stiles had a tendency to suggest convoluted plots from different murder mysteries he had read, which both amused Peter and annoyed him by turns. They bickered and argued and occasionally made out for a while. He didn’t get home until past midnight. Rafael had already gone to bed. He had left a note on Stiles’ bed that said, ‘wake me when you get home. NO EXCEPTIONS.’

Stiles did the sensible thing and crawled into bed and went right to sleep. So it was safe to say that Rafael was furious with him when he got up in the morning. “You’re already grounded,” he said, as Stiles ate cereal. “What am I supposed to do with you?”
Stiles knew better than to answer that question.

Rafael shook his head a little and then held out his hand. “Phone,” he said. Stiles sighed and handed it over. “I know that you need your laptop to do your schoolwork, so while you are doing schoolwork, you can have it, and you’ll sit down here where Melissa or I can keep an eye on you. The rest of the weekend, you will spend in your room.”

“Fine,” Stiles said.

“And I’m going to pick you up from work tonight. Be out at the front at nine o’clock sharp.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s see who you’ve been talking to,” Rafael said, and Stiles froze in his seat as Rafael pulled up his call history. There was only the one phone call to Peter in it, but it was the most recent. He hadn’t called anybody, though he had texted back and forth with Scott, since his call from the hospital bathroom. “Hm. A number not assigned to anyone in your history. Might this be your mysterious boyfriend?”

“Raf, don’t –” Stiles said, but Rafael had already hit send and then put the call on speaker. It rang several times, and Stiles prayed that it would go to voicemail.

Then Peter picked up, sounding half-awake and grumpy. “This had better be important.”

“Oh, I can assure you that it is,” Rafael said, and Stiles could practically see Peter sitting up as he realized it wasn’t Stiles on the other end. “This is Sheriff Rafael McCall. To whom am I speaking?”

“You are speaking to someone who is not interested in speaking to you,” Peter replied. “Is Stiles there, by chance?”

“He’s here,” Rafael said, “but he’ll stay quiet if he knows what’s good for him. Now, again, to whom am I speaking?”

There was a click. Peter had hung up.

“Not a chatty fellow, I see,” Rafael said, putting the phone away. “That’s fine. I’ll find out who he is.”

“Okay, Uncle Raf,” Stiles said, dumping his cereal bowl in the sink. “I’m going to school.”

“Wait for me,” Scott said, as he came pounding down the stairs. A minute later, they were both on their bikes, heading to school. Stiles pulled to a halt at a corner. Confused, Scott followed suit.

“Lemme borrow your phone,” Stiles said, holding out his hand. Scott gave it to him without complaint or question, and Stiles dialed Peter’s number. It rang once, and then there was a click to indicate it had been picked up, but silence. Peter wasn’t saying anything. “It’s me, I’m alone,” Stiles said, since he didn’t want Peter to know what Scott had figured out. “Jesus, I’m sorry, Raf just took my phone and pulled up my call history. Listen, take that phone and dump it in the sink. Don’t just turn it off, dismantle it, crush everything that looks crushable.”

“All right,” Peter said, his voice quiet.

“Raf’s picking me up from work today so I won’t be able to come over,” Stiles added. “I’ll see you soon though, okay?”
“That’s fine,” Peter said.

Stiles hesitated, his throat aching. “Are you mad?”

“I’m . . . concerned,” Peter said. “But I’m not angry. We’ll talk about it later. I may not be here. If he’s able to trace the phone, or even logically deduce who and where I am. But don’t worry. If I leave here, I’ll find you. That’s a promise.”

“Okay.” That was enough for Stiles. He let out a sigh and hung up, then handed the phone back to Scott. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Scott said.

Given the givens, Stiles wasn’t really in the mood for school. He did his best to pay attention, but his mind was running around in circles. Peter obviously wasn’t happy, and he didn’t know what he could do about it. There had to be some way he could keep Peter safe from Kate. There had to be some way he could help. But the more he thought about it, the less he came up with.

Work was particularly bad because Peter had now been missing a week, and everyone was having a complete freak-out about it. A lot of questions were being asked of the night staff about how he could have gotten out without being seen. One of the nurses had been put on suspension. Dr. Parvathala, the neurologist who had seen Peter in the past, came down to talk to Stiles and gave him a few suspicious looks, like he thought Stiles might have been involved somehow.

Given all of that, Stiles nearly had a heart attack when he walked into the break room and Derek Hale was there. “Jesus, you’re such a creeper!” he said, and the other man glowered at him. “What do you want? You should be gone by now.”

Derek hesitated. Then he held out what looked like a business card. Stiles frowned, but let Derek slap it into his palm. It was for a local restaurant, a punch card, but on the back, there was a phone number written down. The area code wasn’t familiar. “For Peter,” Derek said. “Just . . . in case he needs anything. Will you give it to him?”

Stiles considered for a moment, then nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “Okay.”

Derek pushed past him and out of the room without a word of thanks. Stiles let him go, and slid the card into the pocket of his scrubs. He found the difference between Laura and Derek fascinating. On the surface, Derek was the angry, scowling one, and Laura was more reasonable and empathetic. But it was Derek who was willing to actually give them a way to track them down, who said ‘in case he needs anything’ without making demands. Stiles wondered if that had anything to do with what Peter had said to him at the house, or if Derek would have offered this regardless.

The rest of his shift was hard manual labor that took his mind off things. Rafael, as promised, was waiting to pick him up. The drive home was in complete silence. When they reached the house, Rafael pulled into the garage and said, “From now on, either Melissa or I will pick you up every night. Now go to your room.”

“Yes, sir,” Stiles said quietly, and went inside. Scott was in their room, listening to music, and they chatted for a while about inconsequential things before going to bed.

The weekend looked like it was going to stretch out into eternity. Rafael was hovering, and Stiles tried to be on his best behavior. It was difficult, when all he wanted was to sneak out and see Peter, for a variety of reasons.

Allison and Kate came over for lunch on Sunday afternoon, which really annoyed Rafael, as he
hated Kate for accusing Scott and Stiles of going through her things. Kate apologized for it right off, though, saying she had overreacted, which helped thaw things out slightly. Stiles was allowed at the table, but kept quiet.

“After this, we should go out for some mini-golf or something,” Allison suggested.

“Sounds good to me,” Stiles said, smiling at her.

“We can double date,” Kate said, and winked at Stiles. Stiles thought back to Derek’s stricken expression when Peter had mentioned his ‘ex-girlfriend’, and felt his skin crawl.

“I’m grounded,” he said, and for the first time since it had happened, he felt relieved.

“Oh?” Kate arched an eyebrow at him. “Were you a naughty boy?”

“His manners need some work,” Rafael interjected, and said underneath his breath, “along with some others at this table.”

Kate just laughed. Allison hastened to intervene, “Anyway, Kate, you’re not his type. He’s got a secret boyfriend. It’s very mysterious.”

“Very,” Rafael said sourly.

“Ooh, a secret affair, suddenly you’re ten times more interesting,” Kate said. “Why is it a secret?”

“Because Raf’s a bigot,” Stiles said complacently.

Allison cleared her throat. “Seriously, all we know about this guy is that he met him working at the hospital and he’s a few years older. He won’t tell us anything else because he’s a huge spoilsport.” She stuck her tongue out at Stiles.

“How . . . interesting,” Kate said, giving Stiles a look that made him want to hold very still and hope she stopped noticing he was there. “Well, it’s too bad that you can’t join us, Stiles. I’d like to get to know you better.”

After she had left with Allison and Scott, Melissa frowned and said, “Was she . . . flirting with you?”

“I’m really not sure,” Stiles said, but the answer was yes, of course she was. Because Kate had learned that she could use her pretty face and gorgeous body to manipulate young men, and she had clearly figured out there was more to Stiles than he was saying. Rafael just shook his head and went about his business. Stiles helped Melissa clean up in the kitchen while he tried to figure out what to do about this. He wasn’t sure how much Kate suspected, but even a little was too much. If she followed him to Peter, it would be a disaster.

Not that it mattered, since he wouldn’t be going to go see Peter any time soon. Rafael not only picked him up after work, but he had called the hospital and asked if Stiles could start at three, rather than at four, so he no longer had time to go anywhere after school. He couldn’t even call Peter and tell him that, since he didn’t have a phone anymore.

He thought about sending Scott with a message, but he was pretty sure that Peter would flip his shit if he found out that Stiles had told anybody about what was going on. Besides, Scott was too close to Kate. If he let something slip, they would be in hot water, fast.

When Rafael picked him up on Thursday night, the car was practically icy in its silence. Stiles didn’t say anything either, since he never saw the point in engaging with Rafael unless it was absolutely
necessary. Since giving him the silent treatment was fairly common, he didn’t worry until they pulled into the driveway. Rafael parked the car, turned it off, and then hit the locks. “So,” he said, “you’ve been holding out on me.”

“Uh . . . you do realize I can unlock the doors with this little button over here, right?” Stiles asked, pretending that his stomach wasn’t trying to crawl out through his mouth.

“Child safety locks,” Rafael said, and pressed a button. “We’re going to have a talk, and I don’t want anyone else privy to it.” He reached around the seat and pulled out a folder full of papers. Stiles recognized it instantly as the investigation he had done of the murders and of the Hale house fire. His heart rocketed into his throat. “You went through my stuff?” he asked.

“Of course I went through your stuff,” Rafael said. “You’ve been telling lies and keeping secrets. How the hell else was I supposed to find out what you were up to?” He shook the folder in Stiles’ face. “Imagine my surprise to find that Encyclopedia Brown was trying to do my job for me again.”

“Somebody has to,” Stiles snapped.

“But lo and behold,” Rafael said, “it seems that you figured out there was a connection to the Hale house fire long before I did. These files that you’ve printed out, from Meyers’ internal notes. The date of the print-out is from before that anonymous tip was left. I can’t imagine that has anything to do with the comatose guy you hang out with who has suddenly gone missing.”

Stiles swallowed. “Okay, yeah,” he said. “Hanging around Peter made me think a lot about the fire, so I did some research, and realized it was connected to the murders. So what?”

“Do you think I don’t see what’s happening here?” Rafael asked, his voice soft, quiet. “You’re always trying to undermine me. You think if you can solve this, you would make me look bad. And I’m guessing I know who you would give the credit to. These files have your father’s fingerprints on them as well as yours.”

“I – I just asked him to look them over, I didn’t – it’s not about – ”

“DON’T LIE TO ME,” Rafael shouted, sudden and right in Stiles’ face. Stiles flinched back involuntarily. “I know what you’re doing. Do I need to remind you what will happen to your father if you push me? Do you want me to run him all the way out of town this time?”

Stiles felt his stomach churn. “Let me out,” he whispered.

“Don’t you tell me what to do, you little prick – ”

“Let me out or I’m going to puke all over your dashboard, I swear to God,” Stiles said, in growing desperation. He felt dizzy, light-headed. He saw the grimace on Rafael’s face, and then the man hit the locks. Stiles bolted out of the car and went to his knees in the damp grass, trying not to retch. Only a few moments had gone by before Rafael grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet, dragging him into the garage.

“It wasn’t like that, I swear,” Stiles said. “My dad didn’t have anything to do with it. I just wanted to figure out what was going on.”

“Well, your dad has something to do with it now,” Rafael said, and flung Stiles up against the workbench in the garage. “Turn around.”

“Come on, Uncle Raf, please, it wasn’t – ”
“The more you talk, the worse it’s going to get,” Rafael said, as he set down the car keys on the workbench and shrugged out of his jacket.

Frustrated beyond belief, half out of his mind with fear and rage, Stiles blurted out, “God, why are you such a dick?”

Pain flashed across his face, and the next thing he knew, he was on his knees in the garage, spitting blood onto the concrete. It was rare for Rafael to hit him like that. He had to be provoked past the point of reason before he would. He didn’t like to leave marks that other people could see. Stiles managed to clear his vision just in time to see Rafael starting toward him and grabbing a wrench off the work table. He shuffled backwards on his ass, feet kicking at the concrete to propel himself backwards. “Okay, Stiles,” Rafael growled. “You asked for it. And now you’re going to get it.”

Stiles managed to scramble to his feet. The world looped around him dizzily for a moment before he got his bearings. Then he just charged forward. It was a move that Rafael didn’t expect. He swung the wrench and it clipped Stiles’ shoulder painfully, but Stiles grabbed the car keys from where they were sitting on the bench and bolted out of the garage.

“Get back here!” Rafael bellowed, as Stiles dove into the car and slammed his hand down on the lock. He jammed the key in and turned the car on, backing out without bothering to put on his seatbelt or check for traffic. The car wavered drunkenly on the road before he managed to steady himself and slam on the accelerator, racing down the street.

He drove for about five minutes before he got himself together enough to actually think, and by then he was halfway to the old Stilinski house. He pulled over and left the car in an empty parking lot. Hopefully it would be a while before anyone found it, and he hadn’t gotten close enough that Rafael would figure out where he was heading. He walked with his head down and his hands in his pockets. His shoulder ached fiercely now, and he knew that his face was swollen. He ran his tongue over his lip and found that the corner of it was split.

It took almost half an hour to get to the house, and he let himself in through the back like usual. But rather than announcing himself and making Peter come downstairs, he just headed up. Peter would know it was him, by his scent and by his heartbeat, and the werewolf was already looking up when he came into the bedroom and shut the door behind himself.

“Ouch,” he said mildly, as Stiles half-collapsed to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

“It’s not that bad,” Stiles said, his voice thin and reedy.

“Do you think I can’t smell your lies by now? Let me see.” Peter reached out and tilted Stiles’ face so it was in the light. Then his hand ventured onto Stiles’ shoulder, and the teenager, humiliatedly, whimpered. He saw Peter’s face go cold and blank like a mask set in stone as he eased Stiles’ shirt down so he could see the huge bruise that was forming there. Then, strangely, black lines started to snake up Peter’s veins, and the pain faded. Stiles let out a gasping sob of relief. “What happened?” Peter asked, his voice a little too quiet, dangerous.

“Raf went through my stuff, found the files I had pulled,” Stiles said dully. “He’s convinced that I want to show him up, undermine his authority, and that I’m going to get my dad to call him out on his incompetence. Like my dad would be stupid enough to do that.”

“He found all the files?”

Stiles nodded and wiped a hand over his eyes. “There was nothing about Kate in them, or about you
being the one killing people. There was enough to connect the murders to the Hale house fire, but he already knew that. But now he knows I figured it out first.”

“Mm hm,” Peter said. His face was remote, closed off. He ran his hand down Stiles’ bruised face. “This isn’t that bad, but your shoulder – he couldn’t have done that with his fists. I’m surprised your collarbone isn’t broken. What was it?”

“A wrench,” Stiles said.

“And he stopped before beating you senseless because . . .”

“Because I grabbed the keys and stole his car. Don’t worry, though, I didn’t park it anywhere near here.”

“That isn’t why I’m worried. He’s too close. He knows too much. He isn’t a bad cop, your uncle, just a lazy one who likes to file things so he doesn’t have unsolved murders hanging around in his case files. They make him look bad. But now he’s realized that he has to solve this, if he doesn’t want to be thrown out of office for incompetence. And this . . .” Peter’s fingers lingered on Stiles’ shoulder. “If you hadn’t run, he could have killed you tonight.”

Stiles looked away. “He doesn’t usually lose control like that. This whole thing must be stressing him out.”

“Yes, and at least part of that is because he knows that you’re involved, but you’re refusing to tell him how. Sooner or later, he’s going to beat it out of you.”

“I won’t tell him,” Stiles said fiercely. “I’ll never tell him about you.”

“Oh, Stiles,” Peter said, with a sigh. “Everyone has their breaking point. But I do appreciate the gesture.”

They sat in silence for a few moments.

“Stiles,” Peter finally said, “you need to understand that I’m going to kill him.”

Stiles looked away.

“It’s not because of what he did to you tonight – although that is part of it. It’s for a variety of reasons. To be honest, I’ve been considering it from the beginning, because from what I can tell, he knew damned well it was arson and chose not to investigate because he knew he couldn’t solve it and didn’t want the bad press. That . . . angers me. Because my family didn’t get justice. But I thought to myself, that wasn’t enough reason to kill him. He was your father, at least in part, and I know what it’s like to lose family. But this is too much. He’s gone too far, he’s too close, and I’m not going to let him hurt you again.”

Stiles swallowed and managed, raggedly, “I know.”

“I also want you to know that I’m not asking for your permission,” Peter said. “This isn’t on your head. This is my decision, and you can’t stop me or change my mind. I don’t want your opinion because you’re emotionally compromised. You think you deserve the abuse, and even if you gave me permission, you would feel guilty about it later. This is me, and only me, and it has very little to do with you. Do you understand that?”

Stiles nodded. “I understand.”
“Good. Come here.”

Stiles crawled into Peter’s lap, pressing his uninjured cheek into the older man’s shoulder. “Will you do . . . just one thing for me?” he asked, and waited for Peter’s questioning noise, since he couldn’t see his face. “Please make sure that . . . that my dad has an alibi. I don’t want . . . I don’t want him to get in trouble. Please.”

“Okay,” Peter said. “I can do it while he’s at work. He works nights, right?”

“Yeah, but . . .” Stiles pulled away. “He’s a security officer and a lot of the time he’s alone or unsupervised, in a little booth. Work isn’t good enough. He can’t . . . he might not have anyone to vouch for him there.”

“What do you propose, then?”

Stiles wiped his hand over his eyes again. “He has AA meetings on Sunday, in the afternoon. Could you do it then?”

Peter thought about it. “I’ll plan to do it then. If Rafael gets too close in the meantime, it might change. I won’t make you any promises, Stiles.”

“That’s fine,” Stiles said. “Just try. That’s enough.”

“I have a condition of my own, if you want me to wait,” Peter said. “You’re not going back there.”

Stiles looked away. “I can’t stay here. I mean, I have school and work and I just . . . I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Yes, you do,” Peter said. “And you’re going to go there straightaway when you leave here. I’ll walk with you, if you want.”

Stiles shook his head. “It’s the first place Raf will look.”

“I know. And I don’t care.” Peter took Stiles’ chin in his hand. “It’s time for your father to protect you, instead of vice versa. You have to have a little faith in him, Stiles. You have to trust that he can handle this now, that he can help you.”

“I know, but . . .” Stiles swallowed hard. “But I don’t.”

“You should,” Peter said. “I think he’ll surprise you.”

Stiles let out a breath. “Do I have a choice?”

“No, not really.” Peter got to his feet and put on his shoes. “Come on. I’ll walk you.”

Stiles sighed and wobbled to his feet. His shoulder didn’t hurt anymore, but he wasn’t sure his arm was moving quite the way it should. He finally said, “You shouldn’t leave. It might not be safe. We don’t know that I’m not being watched. I’ll just . . . I’ll go on my own.”

“Will you?” Peter asked.

“I promise,” Stiles said with a nod.

“All right, then,” Peter said. He leaned in and kissed Stiles on the forehead, then on the mouth. “I’ll be seeing you soon, I hope.”
Stiles nodded. He didn’t feel the normal flutter at Peter’s touch. He didn’t really feel anything. He just felt numb. He went down the stairs and out the back door, locking it behind him, and through the woods. It was too late to walk all the way to his father’s. He went to the nearest bus stop and got on.

Fortunately, he made it without attracting any attention or being accosted. But once he was standing on his father’s doorstep, he found it impossible to knock. He remembered the last time he had come to his father with a bruised face, so vividly. The thought of what might happen made him want to throw up.

He was just about to turn around when the door opened and he stood there face-to-face with his father. “Stiles,” he said, clearly surprised, and then he saw the bruises. His eyes went marginally wide. “I was just about to leave for work. What are you doing here?”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles whispered. “I can’t go home and I didn’t know what else to do.”

There was a moment of silence while Stiles watched his father’s jaw twitch, watched him struggle for self-control. Then he stood back to let Stiles in. “Give me just a sec,” he said, and took his phone out of his pocket. “Hey, Chuck,” he said, a few moments later. “Look, I’m really sorry, I can’t make it in tonight. I’m pretty sick, I was hoping it would pass but I . . . okay. Yeah, thanks. I should be fine to get back to work on Sunday night. I’ll call you if . . . yep. All right. Thanks again.”

He hung up, then steered Stiles into one of the kitchen chairs. He got a washcloth and wrapped it around some ice, then handed it to Stiles. “What happened?” he asked, sitting down across from Stiles.

“Raf found out that I had been investigating the murders,” Stiles said, and his father winced. “He thought that you and I were trying to show him up. He got so mad. He doesn’t usually do . . . this. I mean, he doesn’t like to leave marks. I mean . . . oh fuck,” he blurted out, seeing the way his father’s face was starting to contort with rage. “Please don’t, don’t do anything stupid, Dad, I don’t want – I can’t – please don’t – ”

“Stiles, I’m fine,” Tom said evenly. “Keep going. He got mad and . . .”

“I called him a dick and he hit me.” Stiles wiped away a few stray tears. “We were in the garage. He . . . he picked up a wrench. I grabbed his keys and ran away. He . . . he hit me in the shoulder. I don’t think it’s broken.” He eased the collar of his shirt down so his father could see the huge black and blue mark that was spreading there.

“Jesus,” his father said, leaning in to examine it. Stiles managed not to wince as he prodded at it gingerly, but the pain was starting to come back. Whatever Peter had done was wearing off.

“I can’t go back there,” Stiles said. “He – I stole his fucking car. He’s going to be livid. Please let me stay here. Even if it’s just for a little while. I just – I thought for a really long time that I, that I couldn’t tell you, because of what had happened, and I don’t want you to get in trouble, but Dad, I need help, I don’t know what to do. I’m so tired of letting him hurt me. I thought I deserved it, maybe I do deserve it, but I’m so tired of hurting. I, I don’t need you to explain or apologize or anything, I just need you to be my dad again. Please let me stay.”

“Jesus, kid,” Tom said again, pulling Stiles against him in an embrace. He hugged him tightly, one fist clenching down in the back of Stiles’ shirt. “God, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry for everything. Of course you can stay here.”

Stiles shuddered out a little sob and then just relaxed into his father’s arms. Tom held him, rocking him back and forth, for a long time. Eventually, he calmed down enough that Tom managed to usher

They spent a few minutes moving his arm around and eventually his father decided that they didn’t have to go to the hospital, which was a huge relief. “It’s late,” Tom said. “Why don’t you get some rest? We can talk about the rest of this in the morning.”

Stiles nodded a little, then blurted out, “Wait. I have to tell you something. I have a boyfriend.”

“Okay,” Tom said, and waited for more. When there wasn’t more, he said, “Oh, is that it?”

“Yeah. I mean. Raf said – ”

“You know what, I think we should have a rule that the words ‘Raf said’ should never be spoken in this house,” Tom said, and Stiles managed a shaky smile. “So. You have a boyfriend. Tell me about him.”

“I . . . I met him at the hospital. He’s a few years older than me, but he doesn’t treat me like a kid. He helped me with some of my homework. He hates Faulkner and he loves cheeseburgers. And he . . . he convinced me to come here tonight. To . . . to ask for your help.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy,” Tom said. “Go on, lie down. We’ll get it all worked out. Okay?”

“Okay.” Stiles lay down on the sofa obediently. His father came out of the bedroom with a blanket a minute later and covered him up. He nestled down into it. He was sure he wouldn’t sleep, but the emotional and physical exhaustion from the evening took over quickly.

He wasn’t sure what time he woke up, but he could hear his father talking. “Hey, Mel, it’s me . . . yeah, he’s here. Yeah. . . . around nine thirty or so. No, I don’t give a rat’s ass what Rafael thinks about it. First thing tomorrow, I’m calling my lawyer and we’re having some new custody papers drawn up. And you can tell Rafael that unless he wants to explain the bruises on Stiles’ face and shoulder, he’ll shut the hell up and let it go. . . . no, Mel, I don’t care that he’ll be pissed. This is my son and by God I’m going to fight for him this time, like I should have from the beginning. . . . yeah. Okay. I know. I’m going to keep him home from school tomorrow. His shoulder seems to be hurting him pretty bad even though he won’t admit it. Yeah, I’ll call you. Okay. Bye.”

Stiles listened while his father moved around the kitchen for a little while longer, and eventually he drifted off to sleep.

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Wow, I kept thinking of things to add to this chapter and it got really long. ^_^;;

*ahems* on that note this chapter is somewhat NSFW

When Stiles woke the next morning, he felt okay, a little stiff and sore for having slept on the couch, but otherwise all right. But when he got up and reached for the door to the bathroom, his shoulder began to scream in protest. “Ow, ow, motherfucker ow,” he blurted out.

Tom poked his head out of the bathroom. “Let me get you some painkillers,” he said. “Then I’ll make you some breakfast.”

Stiles nodded obediently and grit his teeth through doing his business in the bathroom. When he came back out, his father gave him two extra-strength Tylenol and a glass of water. He downed them and then looked at the clock. It was about half past eight, so still early. Tom gave him a mug of coffee and sat him down while he made some eggs. “Melissa is going to call the school and tell them that you’ll be absent,” he said, “and get you the night off from work as well.”

“I don’t want to miss work,” Stiles said.

“I notice you don’t protest missing school,” Tom said, amused. “It’s a basic precaution, Stiles. Until the official custody change, we don’t want you anywhere that Rafael can easily get his hands on you.”

Stiles looked away. “He’s going to be mad at Melissa,” he said. “He’ll – he’ll be mean to her.”

“Melissa can take care of herself,” Tom said, “and it isn’t your job to protect everyone else that Rafael hurts. Which apparently, I should have told you a long time ago.”

Stiles studied his mug of coffee like it held the secrets of the universe, and said nothing.

Tom shoved the eggs around in the pan. “Now you’ll have to forgive me for being kind of old and forgetful, but this rings a bell for me. You showing up on my doorstep after Rafael hit you. For a long time, I had sort of blocked that out of my mind. But it happened, didn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” Stiles said to his mug.

Tom nodded a little. “So what did Rafael threaten you with?” When he saw Stiles look up, startled, he said, “C’mon, kid, I know you wouldn’t have lied about it otherwise. What did he say to you?”

Stiles swallowed and said, “He told me that – if I told, he’d make sure you went to jail for life. That I would never get to visit and I’d never see you again. Dad, I – I’m sorry, I – ”

“Stop right there,” Tom said, pointing at him with a spatula. “This wasn’t your fault, and you shouldn’t be apologizing.” He watched as Stiles stayed huddled in a little ball in his chair. “I’m
gonna have to tell you that about ten times a day for the next year and a half, huh,” he said. “Okay. I can do that. I screwed up, Stiles. Kids think that their parents are infallible, but we’re human just like everyone else. I messed up, and you suffered for it, a lot. And yeah, for a long time I didn’t want you to come live with me because I thought – I wasn’t what was best for you. But then last night while you were asleep it occurred to me that my job is to be what’s best for you. No matter what I have to do to accomplish that. So from now on, that’s the way it’s going to be. We clear on that?”

Stiles looked up and managed a hesitant smile. “Yeah, okay. But Rafael said – wow, we really are going to have to outlaw that phrase – anyway, he said that if I came to live with you, he would charge you with sheltering a runaway and stuff. I’m surprised he hasn’t already been here, trying to break down the door.”

“Rafael knows he doesn’t dare try that with your face looking like that,” Tom said, but shook his head. “I’m not gonna lie to you, Stiles. This might not be easy. Rafael will try to say I’m not a fit parent. He’ll try to say that you’re too much of a juvenile delinquent for me to manage. It’s going to take some time to get it all sorted out, and I’m going to need you to be strong for me, okay? Don’t listen to his threats. We’ll get this put right.”

Under normal circumstances, Stiles didn’t know if he would be able to agree to that. But knowing what he knew about Peter, he managed a nod. How much trouble could Rafael cause in two or three days? He didn’t want to know, so he didn’t ask. It was strange to think of Rafael only having a few days left to live. He felt like he should do something, tell somebody. People talked about what they would do if they knew they only had a little time left. What would Rafael do? Would he be a kinder person? Would he be even worse? Would he apologize to Stiles, or Scott and Melissa? Would he tell Melissa he loved her?

But he knew he couldn’t say anything, and it wasn’t only because he didn’t want Peter in trouble. It was because, despite his father’s comforting words, he knew that Rafael was going to give them hell about this. Rafael being dead meant his father would be safe. Stiles needed that more than anything else in the world.

So the gut-wrenching moment passed, and he started to eat his eggs. “So... what are we going to do, then? Today, I mean. Since I don’t have to go to school.”

“Well, I don’t want you doing much of anything until your shoulder feels better,” his father said. “How about we watch some movies?”

Stiles perked up. “Yeah, we should have a Marvel movie marathon. I can show you Iron Man and Captain America and everything.”

“Okay. And – we haven’t talked in a while. You should tell me about school, and work, and your boyfriend and everything.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “Okay.”

“At the moment,” his father said, “this is actually my bedtime. So let me catch a few hours of shut eye and then we’ll put the movies on.”

As it turned out, Tom’s sleep schedule was pretty much ‘the hours that Stiles would be at school’, which worked out because that meant nobody would have to sleep on the sofa on a long-term basis. They could just share the bedroom, since they would be sleeping at different hours. It was going to be strange, Stiles knew that, but they would adjust.

His father didn’t have Netflix and he refused to let Stiles go online and pirate anything, and to be fair
he didn’t want to watch movies on his father’s ancient computer anyway. His laptop was still at the McCall house, along with his phone, and of course everything else he owned, and he had no idea how he was going to get it. Miraculously, there was still an open video rental store in Beacon Hills, so Tom ran down to get some movies. He even bought popcorn.

There was a knock on the door at a few minutes past four. “That’s probably Rafael or one of his minions,” Tom said, lifting himself off the sofa with a grunt. “You stay here,” he said, and went over to the door. Then he swung it open. “Oh, hey, Scott.”

“Hi, is – is Stiles – hey!” Scott had spotted Stiles on the sofa. “Can I come in? I brought your laptop and stuff.”

“You’re the best,” Stiles said, getting up off the sofa. When he had been sitting, his profile was to Scott, and when he turned, the bruises become visible.

“Holy shit, dude, did . . .” Scott trailed off and he didn’t finish asking his question. He knew that Rafael was the one who had hit Stiles, so there was no point in asking. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said. “I think I really am.”

Scott rubbed a hand over the back of his hair. “Oh, uh . . . here.” He thrust Stiles’ computer bag at him. “I put in a few of your books and some clothes and your toothbrush and stuff. I couldn’t get to your phone. Dad’s keeping it. So, uh, Mom says you’re going to stay here for a while or maybe longer than a while.”

“Yeah,” Stiles said.

“I’m glad,” Scott said. “I mean, not that I wanted you to go, it’s just, I know that you missed your dad and I know that – don’t think I’m stupid, you know, I always knew about the way you distracted Dad when he was pissed at me so he’d take it out on you instead. I just didn’t know how to stop you.”

“I don’t think you could have,” Stiles said. “I’m pretty fucked up, you know that?”

“Swear jar,” Tom put in.

Stiles fished a quarter out of his wallet and flipped it to his father. “Anyway, don’t feel guilty or anything stupid like that. I did it because I wanted to. And even if I live here – we’ll always be brothers, you and me, right?”

“Right,” Scott said, and gave him a bear hug. Stiles grit his teeth against the pain in his shoulder.

“Have you got a hot date or do you want to come watch the last hour of Captain America with us?” Stiles asked.

“Oh, man, Captain America all the way,” Scott said, flopping onto the sofa with them.

They ordered Chinese food and then watched Iron Man, and then Scott went home. Stiles and his father played Scrabble while Stiles told him about the classes he was taking. They had just finished a game when there was a knock on the door. When Tom opened it, Rafael was standing there with his arms folded over his chest. “Tom,” he said, with a nod.

“Rafael,” Tom replied. “How can I help you?”

“Well, I told my wife that I would give things twenty-four hours to cool down.” He glanced at his
watch. “Stiles left my house twenty-four hours ago, so now it’s time for him to come home.”

“He is home,” Tom said.

Rafael sighed. “Do we have to do this, Tom? I got a call from your lawyer. Do you really want to drag it all out into light? Your alcoholism, your jail time? Stiles comes home with me, we put it all behind us.”

“Stiles isn’t going anywhere with you,” Tom said. “And if you want to drag things out, how about the assault charges that you’re going to be facing, if you push this?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Rafael said. “You’re the one with a history of violence. I could arrest you and say you gave him those bruises, and everyone would believe me.”

“Not after I got up on the stand and told everyone how full of shit you are,” Stiles said, stepping forward to peek over his father’s shoulder. “Jesus, Raf, why? You don’t even like me. Just – just let me go. Let me come live with my dad where I won’t bother you anymore. Won’t we all be happier that way?”

“What makes you think I want you to be happy?” Rafael said. “Now get over here. We’re going home. We’ll talk about this later.”

“He’s not going anywhere with you,” Tom repeated, more forcefully. “And if you step foot inside, I will call the police and have you arrested for trespassing and assault.”

Rafael shook his head and gave them both that bright, contemptuous smile. “Stiles, it’s cute that you think you’ve grown a backbone, but I know that you won’t really say anything about what happened yesterday. You know what will happen if you do.”

Stiles swallowed hard and forced himself to remember that none of this mattered. Peter would take care of everything. “I’m not afraid of you anymore,” he whispered.

“Oh, please,” Rafael said. Then he nodded and took a step back. “Okay. You want to play hardball? We can play hardball. You have twenty-four hours to come home. Otherwise, I’m going to bring you in for questioning about the murders. I’ll see you in the interrogation room.”

“You can’t,” Tom said.

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do.”

“No, actually, you can’t,” Tom said. “You can’t interrogate any of your immediate family in connection with a major crime. It’s against policy and most likely against the law. You would have to let Tara do the interrogation. And I’m pretty sure that Tara would some questions about why you thought he was involved. She’d probably have some questions about those bruises, too.”

Rafael’s eyes narrowed. “Okay, Tom. But this isn’t over.”

“No, it isn’t,” Tom said, and shut the door in his face. Then he turned to Stiles, who was trembling, and put a hand on his shoulder. “Hey. You okay?”

Stiles nodded, then shook his head. “I don’t – I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Tom said. “Come on. Let’s sit down for a bit. You’re going to be okay, Stiles. I’m going to make sure of it.”
When Stiles woke the next day, his shoulder still ached like a son of a bitch. After some consideration, his father decided that he wanted to take him to the hospital to have it looked at. Rafael obviously wasn’t going to let things go, so they needed to document the injuries in any case. “Can’t we wait until tomorrow when Melissa’s working?” Stiles whined. “It’s her monthly Sunday shift tomorrow.”

“We don’t want Melissa examining you,” Tom pointed out. “We need an unbiased party. Now, come on.”

Stiles sighed and allowed his father to drag him to the hospital. They poked and prodded and did an x-ray. It confirmed Peter’s suspicion that the collarbone wasn’t broken. “Just some bad bruising,” the doctor said, and wrote Stiles a prescription for some painkillers. “How’d it happen?”

“I, uh, I fell,” Stiles said. “Onto a wrench. That someone else was swinging at me.”

The doctor frowned. “You know I need to report that, right?”

Stiles gave a little shrug. “You do what you’ve gotta do, doc. My lips are sealed.”

With a sigh, the doctor took some photos and said, “How about I document it as ‘patient reported a fall but injuries are inconsistent with a fall’?”

“That works for me,” Stiles said. “If it helps at all, I uh, I’m not really around the person who was wielding said wrench.”

The doctor gave him a suspicious look, then shook his head and said, “I’ve worked with Melissa McCall long enough to know why you aren’t saying anything, and long enough to know there’s no point in reporting this. So just . . . here’s your prescription, don’t do any heavy lifting for at least a week.”

“Okay,” Stiles said, and accepted the prescription. He rejoined his father in the hospital waiting room. They went to fill the prescription and then his father suggested they go out to a baseball game. “You’re going to spoil the shit out of me to make up for the past few years, aren’t you.”

“Probably for at least a little while,” Tom admitted.

“Awesome,” Stiles said, and Tom shook his head, amused. They went to the baseball game and then to the grocery store. Stiles wasn’t going to need more clothes for a few days, since Scott had brought him some, so Tom decided to worry about that later. Melissa might bring more of his things, if she was able to do it without Rafael catching on.

Stiles cooked them dinner and then they watched Thor, and then his father made him go to bed. Stiles slept restlessly at first, then took one of the painkillers, which knocked him out. When his father went to bed the next morning, he said, “Don’t answer the door or the phone. Wake me if anyone gets insistent. And don’t leave the apartment.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Stiles said, and flopped on the sofa. He had his laptop, and Scott had brought him his makeup work, so he started doing his homework. He was edgy and distracted, wondering what Peter was doing, what preparations he did. During the entire endeavor, Stiles had stayed as uninformed as
possible about what Peter was actually doing. He didn’t want the details. He hoped the fact that Rafael was going to be killed during the day wouldn’t rouse suspicion. Everyone else had been killed at night, except the two thugs in the woods, whose time of death was difficult to determine because of the fire they had started.

Tom got out of bed around two PM, made himself some toast for breakfast and then hesitated uncomfortably. “I have, uh, a meeting to go to, so . . .”

“AA, right?” Stiles said, and his father nodded. “Can I . . . can I come?” He saw Tom start to hesitate and said, “I want to, if it’s okay with you. I want to . . . to see how it works.”

Tom sighed. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “If you’re sure.”

“Just don’t embarrass me by telling baby stories,” Stiles said, and his father laughed at him. They got in the car about fifteen minutes later and drove to a church on the edge of town. Tom clearly knew several of the people there; he greeted them with hugs or handshakes and introduced Stiles to his sponsor, a middle-aged black woman with a contagious smile.

Stiles was so nervous that he could barely sit still, thinking of what was happening outside the church. At one point, his father reached over and squeezed his hand. Then he got up to speak. Stiles took advantage of the moment to dive into his bag and pull out one of his Ativan. That staved off the panic attack that he felt coming on. Meanwhile, his father said, “I’m Tom, and I’ve been sober for over three years.” There was some quiet applause. “And today I just want to thank everyone here for their support over the years, because I know I couldn’t have done it without you. I’m finally getting things in my life put back to rights, and because of you guys, I know that I’ll be strong enough to keep it together.”

He sat back down and squeezed Stiles’ hand again. Stiles managed a nervous smile in return. After the meeting was over, they hung around for about ten minutes, drinking coffee. “You okay?” Tom asked, as they left the meeting. “You seem a little nervous.”

“Yeah, I just – I can’t stop thinking about Raf,” Stiles said, which was true enough on the surface. “You have to work tonight. What should I do if he shows up while you’re gone?”

“Just keep the doors locked, don’t listen to anything he says, and if he tries to break in, call 911 and call me.”

Stiles let out a breath and nodded, wondering if Rafael was already dead. He should have been. It should have been over. Peter knew the hours of the AA meeting. But there was no way to know. They didn’t have a police scanner to listen to, and it might not make the news until the evening. If he logged onto the internet, there might be a breaking news story. But he found that he didn’t want to do that. What would he say if he found it? No, he would wait until someone delivered the news. He just hoped that Peter was all right. He wanted to see him more than anything.

“What do you want to do for dinner?” Tom asked, breaking him out of his reverie. “I bought some steaks at the grocery yesterday. Sound good?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Stiles said.

“I miss being able to grill,” his father continued, “but a broiler works okay.” He continued to talk about some neighbor who had nearly set the building on fire by trying to grill on their back porch, while Stiles zoned out, letting the Ativan continue to mellow him out. They got home and he sat down with the rest of his homework, and still nothing. Tom worked on the steaks while Stiles chopped vegetables for a salad and they planned their schedule the next morning. Tom wanted to
drive Stiles to school, both because of Rafael and because of the neighborhood in general. But he
didn’t get home from work until seven fifteen, and that was twenty minutes after Stiles would need to
leave to get to school on time.

“You may just have to be late,” Tom said. “Or maybe Melissa could pick you up,” he added, and
Stiles wanted to scream because none of it mattered, Rafael was dead, Rafael should be dead, and
tomorrow morning was going to be worlds different from anything they planned.

He nearly fell out of his chair when there was a hurried knocking at their door. “What now,” Tom
said with a sigh, getting up and going over to answer it. He pulled it open and blinked in surprise.
“Melissa, what –”

“Oh, thank God you’re home, you –” Melissa’s voice hitched. “Rafael’s been killed.”

“What?” Tom asked, clearly startled. Stiles got out of his chair so fast that he knocked it over. He
saw Scott standing behind Melissa, a little pale and clearly in shock. “What, when? How?”

“The – those ‘animal attacks’,,” Melissa said, with a touch of hysterical laughter. “He kept saying –
maybe if he had investigated properly –”

“Slow down, Jesus Christ,” Tom said, ushering her and Scott inside. “Do you know what
happened?”

“Not – not really. Just that – he got a call about a disturbance in one of those abandoned warehouses
downtown. Someone reported hearing screaming or something. He went down and – nobody saw
anything. He radioed in when he got there to say that he was going to wait for backup before going
in. But when the backup got there, he was already –” Melissa swayed on her feet. Tom put her in a
chair. “Oh God, Tom, please, please tell me that you somewhere safe when it happened –”

“Safe, safe how,” Tom said, but then he got it. “Oh. Uh. What time was it?”

“About – somewhere between three fifteen and three thirty,” Melissa said. “They even – they called
paramedics and everything but, but the body was just a mess, it was all torn apart and – and my God,
what kind of a person does it make me that a police officer came to my door to tell me that my
husband was dead and my actual first thought was ‘oh God, I hope Tom has an alibi’?”

Tom pulled her into a hug. “It’s fine, Mel, it’s fine. I was at AA. Stiles was with me. At least twenty
people will be able to say I was there.”

Stiles finally pulled himself together enough to look at Scott. He cleared his throat and said, “I – I’m
really sorry, man.”

“I’m not,” Scott bit out. “I’m glad he’s dead. He – he was awful. He . . .” Scott’s face screwed up in
an obvious effort not to cry. “I hope he . . .” But he couldn’t finish the sentence. Stiles gave up and
hugged him, as hard as he could. Scott clung to him, shoulders shaking.

There was another knock on the door. It actually sounded polite. Tom squeezed Melissa’s shoulder
and then went to answer it. It was one of Rafael’s deputies, a middle-aged man named Zach
Reynolds. “Hey, Zach,” Tom said.

Reynolds nodded at him, and his gaze landed on Melissa. “You heard about Sheriff McCall?” he
asked, and Tom nodded. Reynolds let out a breath. “Would you mind coming down to the station
with me, Tom?”

“I’d rather stay here with Melissa, if that’s okay,” Tom said, “but if you want me to come, I will.”
Reynolds hesitated, then said, “Yeah, okay,” and stepped inside. “It’s just a formality,” he added. “I mean, given . . . what’s been going on lately, and the similarity of the . . .” His gaze darted to Melissa. “Of the crime scene,” he finally said. “So, you know, I’ll only have a few questions. Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re just doing your job. You want some coffee?” Tom asked, and Reynolds nodded. Tom got them both a mug.

“You and Sheriff McCall were involved in some legal issues, correct?” Reynolds asked.

“Yes, I was trying to get custody of Stiles back from him,” Tom said.

Reynolds asked a few more questions while Stiles fidgeted, and Melissa sat at the table, occasionally wiping her eyes. Then it came down to it. “Where were you between three and four today?”

“I was at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at St. Timothy’s on State street,” Tom said. “Stiles was with me.”

Reynolds nodded, and he looked a little relieved that Tom had an alibi. “Anyone besides Stiles who can vouch for you?”

“I’ll give you the phone number for my sponsor and the group’s coordinator,” Tom said, pulling out his phone. “They were both there.”

He gave the numbers to Reynolds, who jotted them down in his little notebook. Then he thanked Tom and said he would be in touch before leaving. Tom closed the door behind him and let out a little sigh of relief. “Jesus,” he said. “Melissa, I’m so sorry.”

Melissa wiped her eyes again. “Scott’s right, it doesn’t make any sense to be upset,” she said. “At least four mornings a week, I would wake up wondering why I hadn’t kicked his ass to the curb. If he had packed up his bags and left, I wouldn’t have shed a tear. But this . . .”

“Why would the murderer go after Dad?” Scott asked. His eyes were red-rimmed, but he was in control. “I thought that it was whoever started the Hale house fire killing off his accomplices.”

“He must have figured something out,” Stiles said, his voice sounding hollow. “Gotten too close somehow.”

Tom nodded wearily. “Mel, what – whatever you need, we’re here for you. What do you want to do? Is there anyone you want to call? Or want me to call?”

Melissa shook her head and said in a dry voice, “Tara said she was going to call his father. I’m sure he’ll fly down tomorrow. But . . . it’s a Sunday evening. I’ll need to talk to, to his lawyer and everyone tomorrow, but . . . there’s nothing to do tonight.”

Stiles fidgeted and wondered what people were supposed to do after a loved one (or at least a family member) was killed. They couldn’t just sit there and stare at each other all evening. “Maybe we should just . . . watch a movie or something.”

“Yes,” Scott said, glancing up. “I don’t want to just sit around and think about it.”

Melissa swallowed. “I want to watch some, some ridiculous romantic comedy,” she said. Nobody had to ask why. It was common knowledge that Rafael thought romantic comedies were stupid. Tom owned exactly one romantic comedy – When Harry Met Sally – but Melissa proclaimed that it would do. The four of them settled on the sofa. Melissa curled up with her head on Tom’s shoulder. Scott wiped his eyes occasionally but didn’t talk much. Stiles didn’t say anything either. He just hoped that
in time, the remaining McCall would be happier without Rafael.

When the first movie was over, they watched a second, and then started a third. Nobody knew what to say or what else to do. Scott started to yawn less than ten minutes in, and Melissa told the boys to go to bed. After some discussion, they agreed to share Tom’s bed, since there was room for two and nobody wanted to sleep on the floor. Stiles lay in the dark and tried to ignore Scott’s sniffling and quiet little sobs, tried to ignore the pain and the guilt that overwhelmed him. It would be okay. It would be. He just had to give Scott some time, that was all.

He reminded himself that this had been Peter’s decision, not his. That he wouldn’t have been able to stop Peter, even if he had wanted to. His role in helping Peter’s overall recovery aside, Rafael’s death wasn’t on his head.

Which was all well and good logistically, but didn’t really help as he lay there and listened to his brother cry. He reached out blindly and grabbed Scott by the forearm, giving it a reassuring squeeze. Scott sniffled a few more times but eventually drifted off. Stiles couldn’t sleep, though. He could hear Melissa talking quietly out in the living room. His guilt drove him out of bed to listen at the door. If Melissa was going to be destroyed by this, he needed to know.

“I just, all these years, I was so afraid – no matter what I did, he would take it out on you, on the kids – like that time I packed all our stuff when Stiles and Scott were eleven and – and he came home and found the suitcases and said he would make sure he got custody of them taken from me, that he had friends in high places – or the time just after you got out of jail and I was trying to convince him to let Stiles spend the weekends with you and he told your parole officer you had violated your parole by going to the liquor store – Jesus.” Melissa’s voice chokes. “I was so afraid for you, for the kids, and I never knew what to do. I shouldn’t be glad he’s dead, I know that, but God, I’m so glad you’re safe. Having to look the other way, pretend I didn’t see – God, Tom, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know he was hurting Stiles like that. I can’t believe Stiles hid that from me, but – you should hate me. I should have been the one protecting him. You left him to me and I – God, I just didn’t know what to do and then Rafael – no matter what I tried, he always just – ”

“C’mon, Mel, you know I don’t hate you,” Tom said gently. “Don’t blame yourself for what Rafael did, okay? I know that you did the best you could.”

Melissa choked out an agreement that didn’t sound at all convinced. Stiles leaned against the door and felt a sneaking sense of relief. He had done the right thing. He hadn’t known about what had happened when his father had gotten out of jail, but at the same time it didn’t surprise him. He was intensely, painfully glad that his father didn’t blame Melissa for what had happened. She had been a victim just like him. Hopefully now she could begin to heal, too.

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The next morning, Melissa told Scott that he could stay home from school if he wanted, but he said he would rather go. Stiles felt the same. So did Melissa, for that matter, who said she was going to go home and shower and then head to work.

“Scott, you can come back here after school if you want,” Tom told him.

Scott tried to smile and said, “I’ll probably go back to Allison’s.” He looked at his mom and added, “If that’s okay.”
Melissa nodded. “That’s fine, Scott. And we’ll sleep at home tonight. I’ve got a neck ache from that sofa. But Tom, you’re welcome to come over.”

“I’ll be working,” Tom said, “but I’ll stop by for dinner, okay?”

“Okay,” Melissa said, and squeezed his hand.

“I have to work, too,” Stiles said. He hesitated. “Can I . . . go see my boyfriend after work? I’ll be home by eleven, I promise.”

Melissa pursed her lips and said, “Okay, for tonight. But I don’t want you out late on school nights.”

“Okay,” Stiles said. He found it somewhat amusing that Melissa was now just re-assuming her role as his parent, like everyone was just taking it for granted that Tom was going to move in with the Mc Calls and they would be one happy family and all custody issues would be moot. “Uh, if I can get my hours changed back so I start at four, I usually see him between school and work.” He blushed a little. “I mean, that’s what I’ve been doing.”

Somewhat amused, Melissa said, “Well, talk to Beth today.”

Tom frowned a little. “You know, those hours you’re working are pretty lengthy for a teenager. You’ve been keeping your grades up okay?”

“Yeah,” Stiles said, “but I have to admit I wouldn’t mind cutting back. I don’t get as much sleep as I’d like.”

“Lord, we’re going to have to figure out Rafael’s bank accounts, what a mess,” Melissa said with a sigh. Then she shook her head. “You two, get to school. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay.” Scott gave his mother a hug, and they left the apartment building together.

“You wanna talk?” Stiles asked.

Scott shook his head. “Nah.”

“Okay,” Stiles said, and they walked in silence.

At lunch, Stiles realized he couldn’t wait until after work to see Peter. He was too edgy. He wanted to see him now. So he called the hospital and asked for Beth. “Remember how my hours got changed from three to eight because, uh, my uncle was kind of being a pain in the neck about things?” he asked. “Can I go back to four to nine? It really works better for me.”

“Frankly it works better for me, too,” Beth said, which made sense, given that they didn’t usually finish getting the residents into bed until eight thirty or so. So they agreed that was fine, and Stiles got an extra hour between school and work. Scott had lacrosse practice, and after that he was going out with Allison. She seemed to have found exactly the right amount of sympathy for Scott’s taste, so Stiles left them to it and ran to Peter’s as fast as he could.

He still had to go around and let himself in the back, but he shouted, “Peter, it’s me,” as soon as he entered, and jogged up the stairs. Peter was just getting to his feet as Stiles came into the bedroom, and Stiles surprised both of them by actually throwing himself at the other man. Peter gave a snort of laughter and took two steps back to compensate as Stiles wrapped his legs around Peter’s midsection.

“Hello to you too,” Peter said.
“Shut up and kiss me, asshole,” Stiles said.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Peter said, but did it anyway. His hands went up underneath Stiles’ shirt and pushed it over his head without ceremony, and the next thing he knew, Peter had him pinned to the wall. His feet were still off the floor, ankles now hooked behind Peter’s back, and Peter was having no trouble supporting his weight completely.

“Ahhhhh, fffffuck,” Stiles gasped out, as Peter just ground him into the wall as hard as he could. He tilted his head back and whimpered as Peter bit down on his throat, not quite hard enough to bruise. “We forgot about my pants.”

“I forgot nothing,” Peter said, just grinding against him harder. “You’d have come already if you weren’t wearing your jeans.”

“P-Probably true,” Stiles moaned. He was already close to the edge, and every time Peter pushed him back against the wall, he got closer. He could feel the hard bulge of Peter’s cock right against his, and that was enough to make his vision gray out as he gulped for air and twisted his fingers in Peter’s hair. “Not gonna last very long anyway,” he panted out.

“S’all right,” Peter replied, as one hand got the zipper of Stiles’ pants down and then worked its way underneath Stiles’ underwear to take him in hand. Stiles’ head fell back against the wall with a thump and he gave one long groan as his whole body shuddered against Peter’s. “It’s all right, go ahead,” Peter told him, and that was all Stiles needed to hear, tugging harder on Peter’s hair as he came. Peter let out a little grunt and continued to hold his weight off the floor while he thrust against him. Stiles regained enough of his wits to say, “You don’t wanna come in your pants, let me . . .” and unhook his ankles. He slid gracelessly to the floor, and Peter went with him, lowering himself down so he wound up on his back with Stiles between his legs, mouthing at his cock through his jeans. He pushed Stiles’ face away long enough to undo the fly of his pants.

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” Stiles told him cheerfully, licking his way down Peter’s cock and enjoying the muted little growls that he made. “Doesn’t seem too difficult, though,” he added, swirling his tongue around the head and gaining another muffled curse. “That’s good, huh?” he said, and did it again. He saw Peter’s claws dig into the wooden floor and went to town, or at least did his best. He couldn’t go down anywhere near as far as Peter did to him when their roles were reversed, but Peter didn’t seem to be in the mood to complain.

Stiles was concentrating so hard on what he was doing that he was startled when Peter pushed him away, his voice rough as he said, “Back off a bit unless you want me to come in your mouth.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Stiles said, letting Peter push him away.

“You’d choke, you’re not ready,” Peter said, and grunted as Stiles started jerking him off again. “Don’t worry, though, we can practice until – fuck, Stiles,” he snarled between gritted teeth, and then his claws dug into the floor again as he came.

Stiles grinned a little, pulled back for a moment, and then sprawled out on the floor next to Peter. “Yeah, you can teach me all about sex, I’m a quick study.”

“That you are,” Peter said, his breath still coming in rapid, uneven bursts.

They lay there in silence for several long minutes. Then Stiles stirred a little and leaned over to kiss Peter on the mouth. “Thanks,” he said.

“For the orgasm or for killing your uncle?” Peter asked.

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“For the orgasm or for killing your uncle?” Peter asked.
“Why not both?” Stiles asked, and sat up, pulling one knee to his chest and looping an arm around it. “I think . . . I know Scott and Melissa are really shaken up, but I think they’ll be okay. I mean, I know there’s a part of them that’s glad. And that’s hard to deal with, in its own way, but . . . I think we’ll get through it, and maybe make a family out of it.”

“Well, from everything you’ve told me, if your father and Melissa aren’t in bed together by the end of the week, there’s something seriously wrong with both of them,” Peter said, and laughed when Stiles grimaced. “Yes, adults do have sex, as just proven.”

“I try not to think of you as being in the same age group as my father, thanks,” Stiles said, making a face at him. “I mean, you’re thirty-two, right? But we shouldn’t count those years in your sort-of coma, so that makes you twenty-six, which is . . . ten years older than me, but twenty years younger than my dad, so you’re closer to my age than my dad’s. So there.”

“I consider myself vanquished,” Peter said, an amused smirk playing at the corner of his mouth.

Stiles fidgeted. “But uh, seriously . . . I know I’m not supposed to ask this question, but . . . I’m still kind of confounded by the fact that you’re attracted to me.”

Peter tilted his head to one side. “You underestimate yourself, as usual. I don’t know if I can fuck self-esteem into you, but I can think of worse ways to pass the time.”

“Wow,” Stiles said. “Just, wow.” He shook his head, trying not to laugh, as he got to his feet. “I need to head to work, but I have my dad’s permission to come over for a while afterwards, as long as I’m home by eleven.” He saw Peter arch an eyebrow at him and added hastily, “Not here. I mean, he doesn’t know about you. But I told him I have a boyfriend. Of course, that in and of itself is gonna be a problem, he’s going to want to meet you eventually, and . . . a father who cares might be just as much of a problem as a father who snoops. But, uh, about Rafael . . . you were right, you know. He wouldn’t get it out of me eventually. I mean, beating me senseless wouldn’t have done it, but . . . he knew how to press my buttons, and like you said, everyone has a breaking point. Which . . .”

Stiles’ voice trailed off. Peter sat up, hearing the spike in his heartbeat. “What is it?” he asked.

“I think . . . I may know how to get the upper hand over Kate,” Stiles said. “Maybe instead of us baiting her, we should let her bait you.”

Peter did up his pants and reached for a can of soda. “How so?”

“Look, Kate is already suspicious of me,” Stiles said. “She’s a damn sight smarter than Raf. As soon as she heard that I had been spending time with you in the hospital, she gave me this look like she thought I was involved in your disappearance. And when she heard I had a ‘secret, older boyfriend’. . .”

“She put two and two together,” Peter said, nodding. “And Raf’s death will make her even more suspicious, because if she listened to Allison at all, she had to know that Rafael was abusive.”

“And she’ll think that you killed him for me, or because of me, or whatever,” Stiles said. “If I make even one more slip around her, I think she’ll make a move.” He chewed on his lower lip. “We’re going to need to get you a phone. And you’ll need a laptop, but you can borrow mine. She’ll take me to some isolated spot to try to get answers out of me, you can come save me, ta da, fucking success!”

“She won’t dare bring Chris in on it,” Peter mused, mulling it over, “because he would never approve of using a human boy to get information, even if he’s complicit. Even so. I’d be walking onto her turf. She’d have the home advantage. It would be risky.”
“Well . . . I think I can get you some help.” Stiles reached into his bag and pulled out a restaurant punch card with a phone number on it. “Derek gave this to me. Don’t make that face! All he said was *if* you needed something, to give him a call. He didn’t push or make demands. But I think he’ll come, if you call.”

“I’ll think about it,” Peter said. He gave Stiles a long, considering look. “Do you understand what you’re volunteering for? Kate Argent is dangerous. She’ll hurt you. Not just a little, but a lot. Depending on what time of day she makes a move, you could be in her hands for hours before I realize that you’re gone and I need to come find you.”

“I can hold out,” Stiles said. “As long as I know you’re coming, I can.”

“Maybe,” Peter said. “Let me think about it. Get to work. We’ll talk about it more when you get back.”

“Okay,” Stiles said. “But this is going to work.” He gave Peter a thumbs-up. “I can feel it.”

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Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

This chapter gets a warning for some non-graphic torturing and such.

Melissa’s work schedule had always been somewhat variable, due to her profession, and the next several days were a crazy mess of lawyers and police officers and formalities. Tara was acting as sheriff until such time as an election could be held. The funeral had to be arranged. Melissa was trying to work out how much of the money in Rafael’s bank account was actually Scott’s or Stiles’, but in the end it didn’t matter. Rafael, in one last grand moment of dickery, hadn’t left anything to them.

“Normally when people leave their entire fortune to charity, it’s considered a good thing,” Stiles said to the ceiling of his father’s apartment.

Melissa wiped her eyes and tried not to betray how upset she was. “At least the house belonged to my mother so he couldn’t . . . and I have money, I mean, thank God we didn’t have a joint account . . .”

“We could challenge it,” Tom said. “I’m sure any reasonable judge would believe that you and the kids deserve something.”

Melissa shook her head. “No. Let him . . . he’s dead. He can’t . . . I don’t want to put any of us through that.”

“All right,” Tom said quietly.

Rafael’s will, as much as it pissed Stiles off, had a valuable effect on Melissa and Scott. It seemed to break them out of their guilt about being happy that Rafael was gone. “God, he was such a douche,” Scott said, throwing lacrosse balls at a stop sign on the corner. “What kind of loser cuts his own wife and kids out of his will?”

So Rafael’s final act to screw his family had the opposite result as he had obviously intended. Instead of leaving them devastated, it freed them to realize they didn’t need to be devastated. Stiles was pretty happy about the way that had turned out. They sat through the funeral in dry-eyed silence. In fact, nobody shed a tear. Rafael hadn’t been a popular guy.

Stiles was still living at his father’s apartment, at least for the moment. One night after he had gone to bed, he had heard his father on the phone with Melissa about their living arrangements. “I just think it’s too soon, especially for Scott. Rafael was his father, it’s not like . . . yeah, I know you have a guest room, but how stupid do you think our kids are? . . . no, Mel, I know. I want this too. But I want it to be right, to make a family that’s happy, so let’s not rush it. I don’t want Scott to feel like I’m trying to replace his dad, or resent me for . . . yeah. Well, he’s pretty mature, that’s true. Let’s just take it slow and . . . okay. Yeah. I love you, too.”

In the long run, Stiles was pretty sure that things were going to be okay, and that ‘the long run’
would probably only be a couple weeks. Scott himself said three days after the funeral, “You and your dad should just come live at the house,” so he clearly wasn’t feeling really horrified by the possibility.

“You know that my dad and your mom totally have a thing, right?” Stiles asked.

“Totally,” Scott agreed. “And somehow they still think we don’t know.”

Stiles shook his head. “Adults,” he said, and Scott laughed.

Tom insisted that Stiles tell Tara everything he had put together about the murders, and Stiles reluctantly did so with the knowledge that they would be over soon. Of course, that wouldn’t happen until he was able to spend some quality time with Kate Argent. As usual, his work schedule was making things difficult for him. But Scott was spending just as much time attached to Allison’s hip as usual, so after work on Friday, when he went back to the McCall house, Allison and Kate were both there. His father had the night off and had picked Stiles up from work, and Melissa was home as well, so they decided to have a late-night snack.

Stiles got the feeling that neither Melissa nor his father were particularly fond of Kate. He knew that Tom was a good judge of character, and they both seemed a little confused by the way that Kate was staying in town for so long, for no particular reason that anybody could ascertain.

This time, Kate brought the topic of the murders up herself. It was natural enough, she just asked if there had been any new leads. Melissa told her that they thought it might have something to do with the Hale house fire, but that nobody was really sure yet.

“It must have something to do with Peter Hale’s disappearance, then, right?” Kate asked. “Do you think he realized he was in danger?”

“I don’t see how,” Melissa said. “He didn’t seem to really comprehend what people said to him, so even if someone had told him about the murders . . .”

“What about you, Stiles?” Kate asked, smiling at him. “Did you maybe mention it?”

“I dunno, I guess I might have,” Stiles said evasively. “But even if I had, Peter wouldn’t – Peter couldn’t have done anything,” he corrected. Kate gave him a little smile and he quickly looked away. She let the subject drop after that, and Stiles was almost positive that was because her mind was made up about him. Now all they had to do was wait for her to make her move.

Stiles had left his laptop at Peter’s and told him to use it sparingly, since the battery couldn’t be recharged at the Stilinski house. He also got him a new burner phone. “I won’t be able to text you from school without getting in trouble,” he said, “but Kate wouldn’t bug me at school, I don’t think. So I’ll text you when I get to school, when I leave school, when I get to work, and when I get home from work. If you don’t hear from me, it’s time to leap into action. Then you can use the laptop to track down my phone using the GPS.”

“I’m not much of one for leaping,” Peter remarked, and Stiles rolled his eyes, “but yes, all right.”

“That way, unless she actually breaks into my house in the middle of the night, she won’t have me that long before you come swooping to my rescue,” Stiles said, and Peter nodded. At school, he was just careful never to be alone. It wasn’t difficult. It was the waiting that was hard. Having the sword of Damocles hanging over his head was strangely exhausting.

Fortunately, Kate didn’t leave him waiting very long. And the plan she executed was, in the end, exactly the way Stiles would have done it himself. He left school at two fifteen like usual and started
the walk to work. He had stopped biking, for the time being, because it left him vulnerable. And on that Tuesday, Kate pulled up next to him in her sporty little red car. “Hey, need a ride?”

“I don’t know, Dad said I’m not supposed to get into cars with strangers,” Stiles joked.

“I’m not a stranger,” Kate replied, laughing, and Stiles got into her passenger seat. “You heading for work at the hospital?”

“Yes,” Stiles said. “Thanks. My bike has a flat and I haven’t had a chance to get a new tire for it yet.”

“So you know, I was thinking,” Kate said, “about this whole murder mystery that we’ve got going on here.”

“Okay . . .” Stiles said, trying to make believe that he was nervous.

“And I thought, everyone seems to be working under the impression that whoever was behind the Hale house fire is killing off the accomplices, right?” Kate said. “But what if it’s more simple than that? What if someone who was hurt in that fire is out for revenge?”

“Like . . . who?” Stiles asked, playing dumb.

“Like, I don’t know, Peter Hale?” Kate asked.

“Uh . . . Peter’s basically in a coma, I mean . . .”

“Come on, Stiles, who do you think you’re fooling?” Kate asked, and Stiles noticed that they weren’t driving towards the hospital. They were heading out of town now, onto the old country roads. He took a breath and tried to force himself to remain calm. It was all according to plan. “Tell you what, kiddo. I’ll give you one chance to come clean with me. Otherwise, things are gonna get messy.”

“I, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Stiles said, his voice wavering convincingly. It was vital that Kate not realize that she was the one being baited.

“Well, that’s a shame,” Kate said, and Stiles flinched involuntarily as she pressed a black, plastic object into his side. There was a bright flash of pain, and then nothing.

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Stiles woke abruptly when someone tossed a glass full of cold water in his face. Someone was, of course, Kate. He shook himself a little and tried to regain his bearings. “Jesus fuck,” he mumbled, looking around. He was underground, wherever he was, and the walls were dark and charred and – of course. “Seriously?” he asked Kate.

Kate shrugged. “I used what was available,” she said. She was standing next to a table on which she had dumped Stiles’ backpack along with some of her own things. Stiles saw a variety of items that made his blood run cold – a car battery, pliers, even a hacksaw. But Kate didn’t go for any of those. Instead, she picked up a crossbow that was sitting by the end of the table.

Stiles took another moment to sort himself out. He was chained up with his arms above his head, but
his feet were on the floor, so there wasn’t any danger of suffocation. He pulled at the chains, but unsurprisingly, wasn’t able to get them to budge an inch. He was also shirtless, for reasons that he decided were better not thought about. “W-What do you want?” he asked.

“There you go playing dumb again,” Kate said, shaking her head. “The thing is, I think you’re not dumb. I think you know exactly where Peter is, and you might have even known that he was the one killing people.”

“Peter? K-Killing people? No, Peter would never – ”

“Nope, not buying it,” Kate said. “How long did it take you to come up with the idea of asking him to kill the sheriff for you? Not that I blame you, really. Man, that guy was a jerk. I don’t think I could have lived with him as long as you did.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Stiles protested weakly.

“Aw, did he kill him to protect you?” Kate cooed, and then laughed at him. “Maybe you are stupid if you think that Peter Hale actually gives a shit about you. You do realize that he’s a complete psycho, right?”

“Wow, uhm, pot meets kettle much?” Stiles replied, unable to help it.

Kate just laughed again. “You’d never understand why I do what I do,” she said. “But come on, Stiles. It doesn’t have to be this way. Just tell me where to find him, I’ll let you go, and you can live a long, healthy life.”

Stiles’ jaw firmed up. “I’m not telling you anything.”

“Okay, cool,” Kate said, and raised the crossbow. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a chance to practice with this,” she said. “I wonder if my aim is still any good?”

She fired without another word. Her aim was either lousy or perfect, because it sailed right past Stiles, grazing his upper arm in a hot flash of pain.

“Y-You can do what you want with me,” Stiles said, with fake bravado. “I won’t tell you anything.”

All he had to do was stall. When he didn’t text Peter to let him know that he had gotten to work all right, Peter would come for him. That was all there was to it. He just had to hold on, and he had said as much to Peter. Torture was different when you didn’t know whether or not it would ever stop. But he could endure a lot if he knew it would only be for a little while.

“You think you can handle this, huh?” Kate asked. “That’s cute, kiddo. But a few scars from your abusive stepfather isn’t going to help prepare you for me.” She readied the crossbow again. “Last chance before I start doing some permanent damage.”

Stiles grit his teeth and said, “Go to hell.”

Kate pulled the trigger and the bolt flew. It landed right in the meaty part of his thigh, and the pain knocked the breath out of him. “Why are you protecting him, anyway?” Kate asked. “From what I remember of him, he’s kind of an asshole. What are you getting out of it?”

“He gives great blowjobs,” Stiles said through his clenched jaw.

Kate laughed and started reloading the crossbow. “Well, you would know better than me.” She lifted the crossbow and said, “Hm, do you think I can get it right in your kneecap?” she asked, and let it fly
again. It struck him about an inch and a half above the knee. “So close!” She began to reload again. “I can seriously do this all day, Stiles.”

“I’m not going to tell you anything,” he wheezed.

“Well, the thing is, you will,” Kate said. “Whether it’s in ten minutes or ten hours, I don’t know, but eventually, you will tell me everything you know. Wouldn’t it be easier just to save yourself some pain, give me something to go on, and drop it?”

“I won’t,” Stiles said.

Kate rolled her eyes, walked over, and grabbed the part of the bolt that was sticking out of Stiles’ thigh. She gave it a solid twist, and Stiles screamed. “C’mon, kiddo, you’re just drawing out the inevitable,” she said, twisting it back the other way. “Don’t make me cripple you. Because I will. I really will. I won’t even lose any sleep over it.”

“I don’t know where he’s staying,” Stiles sobbed. “I just helped him sneak out of the hospital, that’s all.”

“And he gives you blowjobs on the street? Nah, I don’t think so,” Kate said. She stepped back and prepped another bolt.

“That, that was a joke, for fuck’s sake, Kate, please –”

“Aww, no begging, sweetie,” Kate said. “That won’t change anything, and it makes me all uncomfortable.” She aimed lower this time and the bolt just barely grazed his calf. “Damn! I really need to get back into shape with this thing. I prefer guns if we’re going to be honest. We should be honest with each other, right, Stiles? I mean, I don’t know about you but I have the feeling we’re going to be great friends.”

Stiles choked out, “Kate, I don’t know where he’s staying, I swear.”

“Uh huh.” Kate slowly, laboriously, put another bolt in the crossbow. “What do you know?”

“I snuck him out of the hospital. I picked him up in my dad’s Jeep and dropped him off in the woods. I think he’s been staying there. Maybe he has an, an underground network of caves, I don’t know. Sometimes between work and school I would go see him, tell him what was going on with the case, help him figure out who, who else had helped you burn the house down. I, I have his phone number, I can give it to you –”

“Hmmm . . . nope, still don’t believe you,” Kate said cheerfully, and pulled the trigger. This time the bolt did land squarely in his knee. “Yes!” she cheered, but Stiles couldn’t really hear her over the sound of his own screaming.

Kate gave him a few minutes to recover from that. When he managed to start piecing himself back together, she was standing behind him, fingers tracing over some of the scars Rafael had left on him over the years. “You think you’re really tough,” she said, “and I’ll grant you, you’re better than a lot of the pansies I’ve worked with over the years. But I’ve got all day, Stiles. I’ve got days. You’re going to tell me eventually.”

“Please,” Stiles whispered. “Please stop.”

She grabbed the bolt in his knee and twisted. He screamed again. “I thought I told you, no begging,” she said.
“His number is in my phone,” Stiles said, choking back tears. “Please. Please just take it and let me go. It’s all I have. I can’t give you anything else.”

“What the hell is going on here?” a new voice interjected, and Stiles looked up to see a rather blurry Chris Argent standing in the basement doorway. He was blurry, Stiles realized, because he was crying. He tried to shake the tears away and focus, which was difficult when his leg felt like it was on fire.

“Oh, hey, Chris,” Kate said, her voice somewhat surprised. “What are you doing in this neck of the woods?”

Chris’ jaw tightened. “Scott was over at our house after school. He texted Stiles but didn’t get a reply. He was worried, and I thought . . . I knew that you suspected him, but Jesus Christ, Kate. He’s a human boy. What the hell are you doing?”

“Look, he’s been hiding Peter Hale. He’s got to know where he is.” Kate shrugged. “If he had just told me, I wouldn’t have laid a finger on him.”

“I told her what I know,” Stiles sobbed. It was only half-faked. Chris’ entrance was completely unexpected, and how it skewed things would depend a lot on whose side he took in this little moral dilemma. “I told her I helped him escape, that I could give her his phone number. I don’t know where he’s staying but she won’t believe me. Please, Mr. Argent. Please help me. Please make her stop.”

“I told you no begging,” Kate said, and gave the bolt another twist. To Chris, she added, “He’s been crying like a little girl for the past half hour.”

“Jesus, Kate,” Chris said. “This is . . . you can’t do this. You can’t just torture a child, even if he is complicit. That’s not how we do things.”

“Well, it may be how you do things,” Kate said, rolling her eyes, “but then again, you haven’t managed to catch Peter yet either.”

Chris shook his head and walked over to Stiles. Stiles flinched away involuntarily. “Easy, Stiles, easy,” he said, reaching for a set of keys on the table. “I’m going to get you down. Careful not to put any weight on that leg.”

Kate made a disgusted noise in the back of her throat. “Are you kidding me, Chris? Fifteen more minutes and I’ll have him spilling the beans.”

Stiles gave a little whimper. “Relax, I won’t let her hurt you,” Chris said, getting an arm around Stiles’ waist to support him and using the other to undo the chains and ease his arms down to his sides. Stiles knew that technically, this was a bad thing. If Chris actually got him out of there, Kate might leave before Peter got there, and the whole thing would have been for nothing. But at the same time, he couldn’t protest the idea of Kate not continuing to torture him.

Fortunately for Stiles, before Chris could do much more than help him lean against the table, before Kate could say more than, “God, Chris, you’re such a bleeding heart, no wonder Dad – ” a figure appeared in the doorway. Chris had his gun drawn and pointed as Derek walked in. “Oh, hey, sweetie!” Kate said, a broad smile crossing her face. “Damn, look who’s all grown up! Now I’d be willing to have my way with you because I actually want to, not, you know, because you were telling me about this cool secret tunnel your house had.”

Derek’s face twisted in agony. Chris’ eyes went wide, and then Stiles saw an expression that was
more like sorrow than anything else cross his face. He didn’t look at Kate as he spoke to Derek.
“What are you doing here?”

“You know why I’m here,” Derek said.

Chris nodded slowly, and holstered his gun. Then he got an arm around Stiles again, to help him hobble out of the room.

“Chris, what are you doing?” Kate asked.

“I can’t help you, Kate,” Chris said. “Not given what you’ve done. And even if I could . . . I wouldn’t.”

Kate gave an incredulous snort. “Fine. I don’t need you to save me from him, anyway.”

Derek snarled at her and lunged forward. Kate didn’t miss a beat. She had a gun in her hand and swung it around without hesitation. Derek dove to the side to avoid the shots, and Kate just turned with him and continued firing. But when Derek moved too far, and Kate continued to turn, for the briefest of instants her back was to the door. And that was when Peter showed up. He leapt onto her, and the gun went skittering away.

She moved with the blow, even not having expected it, twisting her body around so Peter couldn’t get a grip on her. He went over her shoulder and fell to one side. Then Derek dove onto Kate’s legs, taking them out from underneath her. She tumbled, and she did it well, but against two stronger, faster opponents, there was only so much she could do. Stiles saw Chris grimace in pain when she let out a little cry, but then he just turned away. Slowly, carefully, he picked up her discarded gun and set it on the table, like having something to do would keep him from noticing what was about to happen.

Somehow, and Stiles couldn’t really track how it happened, Peter wound up on his feet with Kate’s back pressed into his chest, his hand around her throat. Her feet kicked uselessly, but she couldn’t get an inch of leverage. For the first time since coming in, Peter actually stopped and looked at Stiles. He frowned slightly when he saw the bolts still sticking out of his leg. “That wasn’t very nice,” he said, voice frighteningly gentle. “Apologize to Stiles for hurting him.”

Kate swallowed. Stiles could see her throat move. “I’m sorry,” she said, in a hoarse voice, but then she regained some composure and said, “but you don’t dare kill me if you actually care about him, because otherwise you’ll never be able to figure out what poison I use on my bolts before he drops dead . . .”

The silence that followed this remark seemed very loud to Stiles. He looked at Peter and saw the werewolf’s face twist, eyes glittering with rage. His hand tightened around Kate’s throat. Stiles felt strangely calm, like the world around him was moving very slowly. He saw the way Peter hesitated, and suddenly felt like he understood everything. Peter was going to kill Kate. There wouldn’t be any stopping him. He had lived for it, and he himself had said to Stiles that there was nothing more important to him. And Stiles had never had any illusions otherwise.

But there was that moment. That brief hesitation, where some part of Peter came to terms with the fact that he didn’t want to do it if Stiles was going to die because of it.

That moment was enough for Stiles.

And in the heartbeat that followed, he came to another conclusion, which was that he was really sick of people using him to hurt the people he cared about. Rafael had done it for years, hurting him to
hurt Scott, or to hurt Tom, and he had threatened Tom to hurt Stiles, because caring about other people was dangerous and heartbreaking. Peter was going to tear out Kate’s throat but there would always be a part of him that regretted the fact that Stiles had died because of his actions. Stiles knew what it was like to live with guilt that festered inside you; he knew that guilt was the worst poison of all.

So he picked up Kate’s discarded gun, pressed the muzzle into Kate’s temple, and pulled the trigger.

He did it so suddenly that nobody saw it coming. The gun kicked up a little. It was the first time he had ever fired one. But from point blank range, it didn’t matter. He saw Peter wince away from the loud noise. Kate’s blood and brains went all over the far wall and then her body slumped to the ground, out of Peter’s grasp. Chris swore softly, but otherwise said nothing.

Peter half-turned so he was facing Stiles, his face that blank, impassive mask, the thousand-yard stare from the hospital that Stiles had grown so used to. “Why did you do that?” he asked.

“Because I don’t want to die,” Stiles said, tears starting again despite his best effort. “But more than that, I didn’t want her to use me to hurt you.”

Peter let out a breath. “All right, Stiles, all right,” he said, taking the gun from Stiles’ shaking hands.

“I know you wanted to kill her more than anything,” Stiles said, his voice trembling. “Please don’t be mad.”

“She’s dead,” Peter said, stepping over her body. “That’s what matters.”

Stiles realized that his entire body was shaking. “I’m cold,” he said. “And I – I hurt.” He looked over at Peter and said, “Can I be done for a little while?”

“Yes, Stiles,” Peter said. “You’ve done enough for now.”

Stiles leaned his head against Peter’s shoulder, closed his eyes, and passed out still standing.

~ ~ ~ ~
Stiles woke up off and on over the next – he had no idea how long it was, really, hours? Days? – to hear voices around him. Sometimes Melissa’s soothing tones, sometimes his father, gruff and upset, sometimes Scott, high-pitched with worry. He opened his eyes once or twice but never when anyone was looking, and never for very long. Then he allowed himself to sink back down into unconsciousness. He wanted to stay there as long as he could. Being awake only brought him more pain. He felt like his entire leg was burning from the inside out. His heart beat strangely in his chest and his whole body ached.

Sometimes he would be awake for a while, but he didn’t let anyone see. If the doctors noticed a change in his vitals, they didn’t try to snap him out of it. And sometimes he would see strange visions. Rafael hovered over him, broad hands locked around his throat, and Stiles flailed and screamed and then suddenly it was Peter instead, the burn scars crawling across his entire face until his flesh began to rot away. “I wanted to kill her, I needed to do it with my own hands, how dare you take that from me?” he snarled, and Stiles sobbed and scrambled to get away from him.

Gradually, the visions went away, but Stiles stayed huddled down deep inside himself, waiting for some sign that they weren’t coming back, that it was safe for him to emerge again. Time passed without meaning, nurses came and went, and Stiles stared out the window and the words of those around him went over his head without meaning.

Until he heard something that struck him, touched something inside that caught his attention, and the world started to coalesce around him. It was a voice, quiet and even and without much emotion. A voice that spoke words he had never heard before, but somehow understood.

“Sin and love and fear are just sounds that people who never sinned nor loved nor feared have for what they never had and cannot have until they forget the words.”

Stiles licked his lips and rasped out, “That doesn’t even make sense.”

Peter looked up and snapped the book shut, a slight smile touching his face. “It’s Faulkner. Of course it doesn’t make sense.”

Stiles took a moment to try to regain his bearings, looking around. Peter was sitting in the chair beside his hospital bed, wearing a baseball cap to help hide his face. It was so mundane that it looked ridiculous on him. He hadn’t shaved for a while, and was sporting some impressive stubble. Stiles swallowed and said, “Nice hat.”

“Very funny,” Peter said. “I’m still officially missing in action, so I have to be careful when I come to visit. Are you thirsty?”

“Yeah.” Stiles nodded. Peter helped him sit up a little and held a small cup of water to his lips, and
he sipped at it gingerly. “How long was I out?”

“What . . . four days, maybe five,” Peter said. “Though it depends on your definition of ‘out’. You had bad hallucinations, disorientation, and then some . . . what’s the medical term for it? Oh yes. Catatonia.”

“You think you’re really funny, don’t you,” Stiles said, taking another sip.

Peter gave a little shrug and a smirk. “The majority of it was from the wolfsbane Kate tips her bolts in. I have no idea why she thought we wouldn’t figure that out. It was the first thing Chris thought of, something that hunters commonly use, and something that would have prevented us from turning you to help heal your injuries. So. It took about two days to get that all through your system. After which you didn’t seem to want to return to us. I can understand your reluctance. You did have a rough day.”

“God,” Stiles said. “My dad – ”

“Has been upset,” Peter agreed with a nod. “I’ve barely managed to come see you at all, he’s left your bedside so infrequently. The neurologist – I don’t recall his name, long and difficult to pronounce, starts with P – said that he was fairly sure your catatonia was psychological, not neurological, and was in fact inspired by yours truly. That you had witnessed it and then, when you needed a psychological ‘safe space’, you did the same. And that you would come back to us when you were ready. Although they were preparing to move you to the long-term ward soon. I wonder if they would have given you my room.”

“I think your room is being preserved as some sort of crime scene,” Stiles looked around for a clock. “What time is it?”

“About five AM. Your father’s nocturnal tendencies have made this very difficult for me. There’s only a brief period of time after he leaves but before the morning shift comes in.” Peter shook his head a little. “But I was hoping you would wake while I was here, so I could talk to you before anyone asked you any questions.”

Stiles gave a little nod. “Yeah . . . things didn’t go as planned, huh.”

Peter shook his head. “The highlights. I wasn’t there. Neither was Derek. Kate was a disturbed young woman with a history of mental illness who had gotten fixated on the delusion that the Hale family was full of werewolves. Thus her burning the house down with us inside. Her burning the house down with us inside. Recently she went off her medication and became obsessed with the idea that we would come after her and that her accomplices would betray her, so she came back here to ‘cover her tracks’ and kill anyone who had helped. I’m still missing. You don’t know how I knew I was in danger, why I left, or where I went. Maybe my niece and nephew were involved, who knows, feel free not to speculate. But Kate knew that you had befriended me in the hospital, inasmuch as it would have been possible, and became convinced that you knew where I was. She abducted you and tortured you. Chris found you after Scott became concerned that you weren’t answering his texts. He fought with his sister, she pulled a gun on him, and he fired in self-defense. Chris killed Kate. Not you. Is all that perfectly clear?”

“Yes,” Stiles said.

“Good. Say it back to me.”

Stiles nodded a little and repeated the gist of it back to Peter. By the end, his voice was hoarse and he was drooping from exhaustion.
“Good,” Peter repeated. He glanced at the clock and then slid the book he had been reading into his jacket pocket. “I’d better go.”

“Will I – will I see you again?” Stiles blurted out.

Peter arched an eyebrow at him. “I don’t want to come out of hiding right now because I think it would be a tad coincidental if I did that on the same day you woke up, but in two or three days I plan on being ‘found’ wandering somewhere. I’d really prefer to keep my real identity if possible, and now that Kate’s dead there’s no danger in it. So yes, you’ll see me again in a few days. I imagine one of the orderlies from the long-term care ward will come tell you that I’ve been found safe.”

“Okay.” Stiles let his head fall back against the pillows. “Are you mad at me?” he asked.

“You know, it’s a curious thing,” Peter said. “If you had asked me a week ago, would I be angry if someone killed Kate before I could do it myself, I would have said yes. But given how it happened . . . I find I’m not angry, even though a part of me thinks I should be.” He shook his head. “Get some rest,” he said, and was gone without another word.

Stiles let his eyes drift closed. He wasn’t sure whether or not he fell asleep, but he at least dozed, because when he heard his father come in, he snapped back to full awareness. Tom was talking with one of the nurses in weary tones. All of Stiles’ thoughts about doing this gradually to avoid rousing suspicion vanished in a blur of childish need for his father. “Dad!” he blurted out, sitting bolt upright.

“Whoa!” Tom said, clearly startled, but then he skidded into the chair next to Stiles’ bed. “Whoa, hey, it’s me, you’re okay.”

“Daddy, I had this horrible dream,” Stiles said, staring at him with wide eyes. It was only partially untrue. What had happened with Kate felt more like a nightmare than anything else, fuzzy from pain and fear. “I went . . . uh . . . where . . . where are we? Is it . . . was it . . .”

“Easy now, easy,” his father said, rubbing a hand over his hair and down the back of his neck. “You’re in the hospital, but you’re going to be okay. You’re going to be fine.” His voice choked up a little. The nurse was attempting to get between the two of them, to check Stiles’ vitals, and Tom glared at her. “What do you remember?”

“I . . . I remember . . . I was walking to work. Kate offered to give me a ride, so I . . . Jesus, was it really not a dream?” Stiles’ voice started to rise in pitch. He looked down at where his leg was covered, and he yanked back the blankets to look at what seemed like miles of bandages. “Oh, Jesus.”

“Stiles, you’re okay,” Tom reiterated. “Just take it slow. Breathe. We don’t even have to talk about this right now.”

“She – she kept asking me where Peter was,” Stiles said. “I kept telling her I didn’t know, but she wouldn’t believe me.”

Tom squeezed his hands. “Kate was – ” His voice trembled slightly. “Kate was a very sick person, Stiles, but you don’t have to be afraid. She’s not going to hurt you again.”

“Okay.” Stiles let Tom ease him back against the pillows. Then two different doctors came in and one of them started asking questions. He clung to his father’s hands and answered what he could. He didn’t know the date, though he was able to accurately give the date he had encountered Kate on. Everything else, he got correct, except for some falsely vague memories of what had happened with Kate and Chris. Tom held his hand tightly and texted with his other.
“So . . . what’s wrong with my leg?” Stiles finally asked, when one of the doctors looked at it and made some ominous noises.

Tom winced a little and looked over at the doctor, who answered calmly. “Most of the bolts just caused muscle damage, but the one that hit you right in the knee fractured your patella and caused some damage to your ligaments. They didn’t want to do any sort of surgery while they were still worried about . . . neurological injury, but now that you’re awake, they’ll probably want to proceed with that. The orthopedist, Dr. Demko, is going to be in this afternoon.”

Stiles nodded. “No more lacrosse for me, huh?”

“Not for at least four to six months,” the doctor said. It looked like he might say more, but he was interrupted as Scott and Melissa rushed in, clearly summoned by Tom’s texts.

“Dude, Allison is freaking,” Scott told him, as soon as the emotional reunion was over. “She really wanted to come see you but she was afraid you’d hate her or something.”

“What, like I’d hate Allison because her aunt had schizophrenia or something?” Stiles asked. “That’s bullshit, tell her to come see me. I think I’m gonna be here a while.”

“That’s what I already told her, but I’ll tell her again,” Scott said.

“I feel so bad for Chris,” Melissa said quietly, sitting down in one of the chairs. “Having to kill his own sister, that’s just . . . really horrible.”

Stiles looked away. “I don’t really remember that,” he said. “I mean, everything after she started filling my leg with crossbow bolts is pretty fuzzy.”

Tom grimaced and hugged him a little tighter. Scott, always one to see the bright side, said, “But dude, now you’re going to get one of those cards that says you’re allowed to set off metal detectors. Think of the possibilities!”

“Oh, Scott,” Melissa said, but Stiles was laughing, and it was just what he needed. Even when the orthopedist came in and told them about the severity of the injuries, what the different ligaments were for, how they would have to screw his knee back together, four to six weeks in a brace, tons of physical therapy, and even then no guarantees, he still couldn’t bring himself to be sad.

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Two days later, Stiles was recovering from the knee surgery when Donna from the long-term care ward rushed in. She had been to visit him before, along with Linda and Bobby, but she was clearly in a rush. “Stiles! Guess what!”

“Oh, was that lottery ticket a winner?” Stiles asked her.

“Actually I think this was an even longer shot – Peter’s been found!”

Stiles struggled into a sitting position. “Is he okay?”

“He seems to be.” Donna shook her head. “Dannest thing. Apparently he wandered into the police station this morning and said he couldn’t find his house, that he had gone to where it used to
be but it wasn’t there anymore. Like he didn’t remember the fire or any of the intervening time at all. He doesn’t seem to have any idea where he’s been the past few weeks.”

“But he’s talking and everything?” Stiles asked, hoping that his surprise is coming off as realistic.

“Yes, at least some,” Donna said. “He’s a little quiet and he seems somewhat confused. We tried to call his niece but her number is disconnected again, but hopefully she’ll get in touch with us soon.”

“Did he – ask about me?” Stiles asked.

“Well, no, honey,” Donna said, then hastily added, “But I’m sure he’d love to see you, so come visit later, okay?”

Stiles nodded. “I will, as soon as I can.”

He was only allowed up for short periods of time, but after suitable amounts of pestering, the doctors agreed to put him in a wheelchair and let his father take him down to the long-term ward. Stiles was greeted by practically every employee there, and then his father wheeled him into Peter’s room.

Peter was back in the loose-fitting garments the hospital provided, sitting in his usual chair and staring out the window. The déjà vu was practically overpowering. For a few moments it really seemed like it had all been some sort of crazy dream. He shook himself out of it and said, “Hey, uh, hey Peter. It’s me, Stiles. Do you remember?”

Peter turned slowly and blinked at him, the vagueness in his gaze retreating. He frowned slightly and then said, “I . . . know your voice.”

“Yeah, I used to, uh, used to read to you sometimes,” Stiles said. “Sorry that I wasn’t here when you got back to help you get cleaned up. I know that Bobby has – ”

“Ham hands,” they finished together. Bobby laughed and Donna burst into tears.

“Stiles, you said,” Peter said.

Stiles nodded. “I, uh, look, the book I was in the middle of is still here. How would you like it if I read to you for a little while?”

Peter’s face creased in a slight smile. “That would be nice, I think.”

Stiles picked up the book. Tom began ushering the others out of the room, saying, “Let’s give them a little privacy. I’ll be back in ten minutes, Stiles.”

“Okay, Dad,” Stiles said. He opened the book up to the last place he had been and began to read. He did that for several minutes before putting it down and looking up at Peter, who was still wearing that same amused smile. “Everyone bought it, huh?”

“With varying levels of skepticism,” Peter said. “I think some people are still convinced that I was faking the whole time, but they can’t prove anything and in the long run it really doesn’t matter. What about you? I never did get much detail on your actual injuries. I couldn’t exactly ask, and your doctor’s handwriting was terrible, of course.”

“Kate fucked up my leg but good,” Stiles said. “I had knee surgery yesterday. Six weeks in a brace, months of physical therapy, but . . . even then there’s no guarantee I’ll ever walk normally again.”

Peter’s face closed off some. But he didn’t apologize or offer condolences. “I did warn you that there
was a strong possibility she might damage you permanently.”

“That you did,” Stiles said. He shrugged. “I’m not . . . I’m not upset, Peter. Maybe I should be, but I’m not. I’ll deal with it.”

Peter nodded a little. “When do you get out of the hospital?”

“Tomorrow morning, probably. But you won’t see me back here unless I come to visit. I went ahead and quit the job. I mean, I wouldn’t be able to do it for weeks or months, so I cleared out to let them hire somebody new. In all honesty, it’ll be a relief to have some free time again and not have to crunch to get my school work done.”

“Mm. I’d believe it. I – ” Peter’s head tilted to one side. Then he shook his head slightly and pointed at Stiles’ book. Stiles began to read again without missing a beat. A few moments later, his father appeared in the doorway. He didn’t interrupt them, but just stood there for a few more minutes, watching.

Finally, he said, “C’mon, Stiles, let’s get you back to your room. It’s almost time for your dinner, anyway.”

“Mm, green Jell-O,” Stiles said, smiling a little. “Enjoy yours too, Peter.”

“Thank you for visiting,” Peter said. “It was nice to see you.”

Stiles waved and then his father wheeled him back to his own room in the hospital. One of the orderlies came in and helped him get settled back into bed. It wasn’t until after she was gone that Tom rubbed a hand over his face and said, “So, I’ve been thinking.”

“A dangerous pastime,” Stiles said.

His father gave him an unamused look. “Well, it just seems pretty unlikely to me that Peter managed to sneak out of the hospital, avoid being found for several weeks, and then he just happened to turn back up after Kate Argent was dead so he could finish his recovery in the hospital. Can’t argue with it, though. I mean, that’s what happened, those are the facts. But unlikely as it might be, I think it would have been downright impossible to do without any sort of help.”

Stiles chewed on the straw in the drink that the orderly had brought him. “Does seem pretty far-fetched,” he said.

“Yes,” Tom agreed. “Then it occurred to me, the night that Peter vanished from the hospital – didn’t you borrow my car that night? Despite having never asked to do that before or since?”

“Was it that same night?” Stiles asked, unconvincingly.

“I do believe it was. And you know what else is weird? This boyfriend that you’ve been spending so much time with, he hasn’t come to visit you once. You said he worked at the hospital. He’s gotta know you’re here, right?”

“Er . . .” Stiles said.

“Stiles,” his father said, almost gently. “You . . . Kate Argent tortured you to find out where Peter was. And you told her you didn’t know. But you did know, didn’t you. You just . . . wouldn’t give him up.”

Stiles looked away. There was no way he was about to tell his father about the crazy scheme, and to
be fair, if it hadn’t been a scheme, he wouldn’t have done anything differently. So he just nodded a little and continued to focus on his drink.

“You . . .” Tom seemed to be at a loss for words for a few moments. “That must make you the bravest person I know. I’m so proud of you.” He reached out and wrapped Stiles in an embrace. Stiles was a little startled, but certainly glad that he wasn’t about to be yelled at, and then he nestled into it, relaxing. After a minute, his father let him go. “And now you’re going to tell me the whole damned story.”

Stiles sighed. “I didn’t . . . I told the truth whenever I could. But when Peter started talking again, he made me promise not to tell. It’s not like he was faking it all these years. But when he heard me talk about the murders, about the Argents . . . I guess it woke him back up.” Stiles wasn’t about to tell his father that Peter had been the murderer. Kate was dead; she could take the blame. Nobody ever needed to know differently. “Dad, he was really scared. He would never admit it, because he’s kind of an egotistical jerk in a lot of ways, but he was frightened. He thought that if anyone knew he was talking, Kate would find out and come kill him, too. So I . . .”

“You snuck him out,” Tom surmised.

“I helped him hide in the old house, where we used to live. The realtor is Sasha Castillo. She was a friend of mom’s, you remember her? She let me keep a key because . . . I just liked to go there sometimes. Nobody thought to look for him there. I bought him some clothes and some food with the money I’d saved up from working at the hospital.”

“Jesus, kid,” Tom said. “You should have told somebody.”

“Who? Uncle Raf? He was already furious at me for . . . well, for existing, but even more so for having a boyfriend. Peter didn’t trust the cops. Raf didn’t investigate the fire and Peter knew it. Hell, Raf didn’t even want to investigate the murders, he kept trying to write them off as animal attacks. Peter didn’t trust anyone. After Raf was killed, we talked about him going to Tara, but . . . then Kate happened first.”

Tom sighed. “Well . . . I’m proud of you for protecting him, even if I’m not one hundred percent sure that I approve of your methods. He’s a little old for you, though. And by ‘a little’ I mean ‘he’s much too old for you but I’m trying not to sound judgmental’.”

“I know,” Stiles said, “but he doesn’t treat me like a kid. And . . . he helped me a lot, Dad. I don’t think I ever would have . . . been able to make things right with you if it weren’t for him. I was convinced that everything was my fault and you probably hated me, and he made me see how stupid and unfair I was being. Both to you and to myself.”

“Well,” Tom said, “I guess I’ll think about that. But . . . about Rafael . . .”

“What about him?” Stiles asked, trying not to cringe. He knew that his father was smart enough to put some of the pieces together, if he chose to. He knew that his father had to at least know it was possible that Peter had been behind the murders, and even that it was possible that Peter had killed Kate and Chris was covering for him. He knew that Rafael’s death, timed as it was, just when he was threatening Tom Stilinski, would make him suspicious.

There was a long pause. Then Tom shook his head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

“Uh . . . okay.” Stiles decided to let it go. If his father wasn’t going to ask, he wasn’t going to volunteer any information. He finished his drink, tossed the cup towards the trash, and missed by several feet. “You’re going to come live at the McCall house now, right?”
“Son, that’s not set in stone . . .”

“I want you to. Scott wants you to.” Stiles lay back against the pillows. “Do you love Melissa?”

“Yes,” his father said. “I do, very much. She . . . really helped me get back on my feet, after I got out
of prison and was trying to rebuild a life. I wasn’t . . . I didn’t think I deserved to be in touch with
you, and she always knew when to tell me how you were doing and when to back off and let it go. If
it hadn’t been for her, I probably would have completely self-destructed. But I can’t just . . . her
husband just died. I have to respect that.”

“Okay,” Stiles said, a little dubious. “But if she’s okay with, and we’re okay with it, then . . . maybe
this is just about you thinking you don’t deserve this, too.”

Tom looked up, a little surprised. Then a mirthless little smile touched his lips. “You might be right
about that, kiddo. I’ll think about that, too.”

“Good,” Stiles said.

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Stiles didn’t see Peter for several weeks after that. Once he was discharged from the hospital, visiting
became difficult. He had schoolwork to catch up on, a new family to adjust to, physical therapy
sessions to attend. He knew that Peter would be in the hospital for a while, as the doctors did tests
and he regained his ability to live on his own.

There were legal issues to deal with as well – bank accounts and insurance and property. Laura and
Derek came back to help him deal with it. From what Tom told Stiles, Peter was accepting their help
somewhat begrudgingly. Laura didn’t seem any happier to be back, and they only stayed a few days.

It wasn’t that Stiles forgot about Peter; he just had a lot of things on his plate. So he found himself
inexplicably surprised when he looked up from his homework at a knock on his door and Peter
walked in. He looked different in a lot of ways. He had gotten that haircut that he wanted, and grown
a small goatee. He was dressed casually in a V-neck T-shirt and jeans. Stiles twisted in his chair and
practically fell out of it. “Hey!”

“Hello again.” Peter pulled the other desk chair in the room out and sat down, setting it down
backwards so he could straddle it, a move that wasn’t good for Stiles’ libido. “How’s the leg?”

“Uh, it hurts sometimes, but you know. Time will tell. Why are you over there instead of over here
kissing me?”

Peter quirked an amused eyebrow at him. “Your parents are home. Let’s not get carried away.
Besides, we need to talk.”

“Oh, geez,” Stiles said, feeling his stomach do a back flip. “Just spit it out.”

Peter nodded a little. “I’m leaving for a while.”


“Ostensibly, I’m going to Germany,” Peter said, “to a highly recommended plastic surgery clinic
which specializes in reconstructive surgery for burn scars.”

“So you can finally heal them, huh?” Stiles said, and Peter nodded. “Okay, but . . . why?”

“There are several reasons,” Peter said. “First off, I don’t dare stay. Kate didn’t follow the Argent code, and there are plenty of other hunters who don’t either. Chris thinks it would be better if I got out of dodge for a while, or else I’ll bring a lot of nasty people down on Beacon Hills. I’d prefer not to be here for that. Secondly, to be honest, I’d just like to walk the world for a while after being pent up for so long.”


“I’ve been talking to your father,” Peter said.

“Okay, no good conversation ever had that phrase in it,” Stiles said, wincing.

Peter considered him for a long minute. “I used you, Stiles. And I’m not sorry. I would do it again.”

“Yes, and if anything, that made it worse. If you had been an unwitting pawn, the blame would have been entirely mine. But the fact that you allowed me to use you means that there’s probably something very wrong with you. Which isn’t exactly news.”


“You are also very young,” Peter pointed out. “Now, personally, I think that you’re mature enough to know what you want. But you’re not mature enough to know what’s good for you. Which I suppose is a level of enlightenment that most people never really attain. But you know, you really should hate me. I let you get captured and tortured by Kate, so I could get revenge. You might be crippled because of me.”

“I knew what could happen.” Stiles shook his head. “I’m not going to deny I’ve got some issues, but I think you kind of underestimate how much you actually helped me. I mean, you helped me make things right with my dad. You didn’t have to do that. You could have used my lack of self-esteem against me, but instead you helped me build it back up.”

“Well,” Peter said, “you were never any fun when you were moping.”

Stiles smirked despite himself. “I’m serious, though. This . . . this family. It’s worth a hell of a lot more to me than a kneecap. Or a leg, or two legs. I don’t want you to go.”

“But I have to, Stiles, and not only because of you.” Peter gave a little shrug. “Like I said, I spoke with your father. We came to an agreement. I’m going to take off for a while, to keep you safe and, frankly, keep myself safe. While I’m gone, you get to concentrate on your school work, on making this family that you’ve built work. You get some therapy – you need a lot of therapy.”

“This pep talk leaves something to be desired,” Stiles grumbled.

“And then when I come back, then you can decide if you still want anything to do with me.”

“Can’t I just decide that now?”

Peter gave him a look. “Not according to your father.”

Stiles sighed. “If you have to go, then . . . okay. I mean, I don’t want you to take any risks now that
you’re finally safe from Kate. But don’t expect me to change my mind."

“I don’t. You’re the most stubborn person I’ve ever met. But I want you to take this seriously. Go out, have fun, be a kid again. Date some girls, some boys, some of each. Be normal for a little while. I think, if nothing else, that you deserve it.”

“Well, that I won’t argue with,” Stiles said. “But I still think that you’re a contradiction. I mean, you talk about how you’re using me, but then you leave me and tell me it’s for my own good. If you were as selfish as you thought, you’d just stay and keep using me.”

“Ah, but this is for my benefit, too.” Peter gave him a toothy smile. “Because if I kept using you in your present state . . . eventually I would use you up. Like Laura said. I would bleed you dry. And then I would be deprived of your company, and that, that would be a terrible tragedy.”

Stiles balled up a piece of paper and threw it at Peter. “Peter Hale, master of the complisult.”

“The . . . what?”

“Something that’s both a compliment and an insult,” Stiles said. “It’s a portmanteau. Pay attention.”

“Of course it is,” Peter said. He stood up and put the chair back by the desk. “Your father didn’t seem too surprised when I knocked on the door. How much has he figured out?”

“That you were talking to me in the hospital, that I helped you sneak out, that I knew where you were and refused to tell Kate, rather than simply not being able to tell her.”

“Nothing else?” Peter asked.

Stiles let out a breath. “I think . . . there’s a part of him that suspects you were the one killing people. And maybe that you killed Rafael for my sake, or even because I asked you to, because he was threatening my dad. For a minute I thought he would ask, but then it was like . . . he made a conscious decision that if that was what had happened, he was happier not knowing about it.”

“A very sensible man, your father. At least now that he’s gotten his head on straight.”

“Yeah.” Stiles watched Peter as he pushed the chair back into place. “Can I write to you?” he asked.

“Sure. I have e-mail now. Derek set it up for me.”

“Will you write back?”

“If you write something worth replying to,” Peter said.

Stiles couldn’t help but smile. “It’ll be just like the old days. I babble and you stare out a window and don’t bother saying anything back.”

“Most likely, yes,” Peter agreed.

“You are going to come over here and kiss me before you go, right?” Stiles said. “Because if I twist my knee trying to grab you before you can make it out the door, my dad will be very upset with you. And so will I. Since, you know, I’m a cripple now. Because of you.”

“Shut up,” Peter said, and laughed against Stiles’ lips before moving into a deeper kiss. He put his hand against Stiles’ cheek and then pulled away. Then he turned and left without saying goodbye. Stiles watched the door for a minute before shaking his head and going back to his school work.
Only a few minutes later, Tom walked in. “Dinner’s ready,” he said, and extended a hand to help Stiles up. Stiles made a little ‘oof’ noise as his father pulled him to his feet. He was getting practiced at hobbling up and down the stairs with Scott or Tom’s shoulder to lean on. Tom helped him down to the kitchen and sat him down at the table.

Peter’s departure had clearly been a family topic long before Stiles had ever heard about it, because Scott gave him an anxious look and said, “Dude, you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m all right,” Stiles said. “I’m concocting a plan to become ten times more awesome while Peter’s gone so when he comes back, he’ll really regret ditching me for a year.”

“Awesome,” Scott said, and held his hand out for a fist bump. Stiles returned it, and Melissa laughed and started passing around the dish of lasagna. Tom looked at his son and shook his head, but he was smiling, and Stiles grinned back.

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