Inspired by the TV show of the same name.

This is the story of 9 high school students from around the country, who have been sent to Beacon of Hope, a boarding school for ‘at risk’ teens. They each have a past as well as closely guarded secrets and have all dealt with trauma in one sense or another.

They’ll have to learn to trust and love again in a world that was simply too cruel for their young ages. Luckily for them, John Stilinski started this camp that combines outdoor bonding activities with schooling just for students like them who come from broken homes or got mixed up in illegal activities.
3/20/18 update: Beta read by the wonderful fairyfey, thank you! Check out their Sterek stories (They’re awesome!) on Ao3 and follow them on tumblr @gayglitterbabe

Warning: please refer to tags for warnings! This fic contains lots of triggers!

Notes

Higher Ground AU, no werewolves. Based on the TV Show's concept, and often times directly stealing plot, but absolutely no Higher Ground Characters are used in this fic and you do not need to have watched the 90s show, although you seriously should go YouTube that and enjoy a good cry.

For your reference:

Staff:

John Stilinski- Camp Owner/Head Counselor

Melissa McCall-Teacher/Counselor – main counselor for our group of students

Jordan Parrish-Teacher/Counselor

Chris Argent- Teacher, front office security

Coach Finstock- Teacher/Coach

Students in Melissa’s group:

Juniors:

-Derek Hale- Sent to school by his uncle after the death of most of his family in a fire. His older sister has been trying to win custody of him and bring him home for over a year now.

-Vernon Boyd-became reserved and quiet after his siblings’ death, parents felt the school would be good for him. He is one of Melissa’s longest attendees and is doing well.

-Jackson Whittemore- Adopted. His parents are going through a divorce and he is struggling with not feeling wanted. He is a known drug expert among the students.

-Allison Argent-lives off campus with her father, chose to attend when she turned 16 after her mother passed away. Stating that the school offered lots of benefits and that she shouldn’t have to become a bad kid just to attend. Her father was very hesitant, but she convinced John to talk him into it, stating that it would be humbling to meet kids from across the country who have struggled worse than she has and that she just didn’t fit in at her pricy high school. She is often targeted behind the teachers’ backs as she is a teacher’s daughter and they make fun of her for having a nice life and choosing the ‘reform’ school anyways.

Sophomores:
-Stiles- Habitual runaway, lost his mother at 8, has lived with his step father since. Began running away at 11. After being reported as missing for 4 months straight, and his longest time on the street corners, the courts gave him the option of Beacon of Hope or to return home with his step father on house arrest and he chose the school.

-Lydia Martin- Comes from a prestigious family with a mother that has always put the pressure on her to be perfect. She has dealt with bouts of anorexia and was caught cutting herself.

-Erica Reyes- Involved in gang activity. Her parents chose to send her to Beacon in hopes that it would get her away from her inner city neighborhood full of bad role models. She was flunking out of school.

-Scott- labeled all his life as a problem child by his FBI, no nonsense father, he was sent here as an alternative option to jail by the courts for his third drug offense.

-Isaac Lahey- Shy. Court ordered to attend when he was removed from his single father home when his father was arrested for child abuse. He was physically and verbally abused by his father for two years after his mother past away before his school called CPU to intervene.
It was hot for it being so late in the summer. But the school’s remote mountain location meant it was blessed with longer summers and wetter winters. Either way, it was a great opportunity for Melissa to take her group out for a little hike. The curly haired brunette may have been one of the smallest counselors Beacon of Hope had to offer, but she was also one of the most active; something that was both a complaint and highly sought after in equal measure, depending on the student.

The school she worked for offered year round boarding for its ‘at risk’ teens. It was a label that she despised. All kids struggled, some just more than others, and that was what the school her friend John had built, was for. It was a fantastic facility and could be attributed to saving some of their students’ lives. They had even been praised for it and recognized nationally for their unique and naturalistic approach. But that wasn’t why she quit her job as a nurse and relocated to the middle of nowhere. It wasn’t even for the glorious scenery and endless fresh air, although all of those things were huge bonuses. She simply loved her students.

She had seen so much progress in the little time she’d been with the program. In the two years she was a counselor, who also doubled as a science teacher, she had seen students come and go, healed
and ready to start their journey into adulthood on better footing. She was fortunate to still have one of her first students in her group, however.

Boyd, as he preferred to be called, had been at the school longer than she had, by a few months. His parents sent him here as soon as he was old enough and he was in Melissa’s group for both his freshman and sophomore years. He was tall and quiet but had really began to open up over this last year. He had made remarkable progress in his one on one sessions, talking about his little sister’s fatal accident, even if he was still one of the quieter members in group. It was a drowning that took her life. He was the closest one to her that day at the beach, but despite his best efforts, Boyd couldn’t save her. That guilt nearly destroyed him, but over time he had learned to accept the fact that he had tried his best.

Boyd seemed to really turn around when Derek joined them last year. They clicked right away. Derek was also built just a bit on the larger side, coming from an active lifestyle and looking at receiving a basketball scholarship. The two didn’t talk as much as the others, but could often be seen racing in the lake, as they were constantly competing for faster times. Derek was sent to them several weeks after his family home suffered a severe accident, in which it was almost entirely burnt to the ground. The only survivors were his uncle who sent him here, and older sister, apart from himself. The hazel eyed teen didn’t talk much about his home life or the fire, but he did feel his sister was working hard to earn his custody so she could ‘get him out of here.’

Most of her students have been with her for about as long as Derek. Lydia came from a well-off family. She was a future heiress, but her father didn’t know what to do with her when their maid discovered some of her long sleeve shirts had blood stains. She had resorted to venting her frustration with small jagged cuts on her otherwise flawless arms. Lydia seemingly had everything: good looks with her naturally red hair and green eyes, money, popularity, and she was even considered one of the smartest among her classmates. Her father didn’t understand why she would do that to herself. During her initial physical, a standard for all new students, she was discovered to be underweight, as well. So, in addition to periodical self-harming checks she also had a modified diet for students that suffered from anorexia or bulimia.

Allison was a bubbly young lady who used the school’s owner and operator to manipulate her father into allowing her to attend. As the doe-eyed brunette was usually seen with a smile and a cheerful attitude, she would often be ridiculed by some of the other students who didn’t understand why someone seemingly so normal would choose this school for ‘freaks and the unwanted.’ But the fact was she had recently lost her mother to cancer. She needed to be closer to her father who was a teacher and guard at the school. She was hurting in her own way and never really felt like she fit in anywhere, so making an instant friend in Lydia was a big deal for her, and she could endure a little teasing for it.

The last girl of her group was another of her longer students, Erica. The firecracker blonde was straight from the inner city and had the gang tattoos to prove it. She came from a large family. Her older brother was a rising member and if her parents didn’t intervene, she would be right up there with him. Gang life was difficult for anyone, but it can be incredibly cruel to women. She lost her
virginity at an early age, as way of admission. Drugs and skipping school had also resulted in Erica flunking out of ninth grade, twice. It may have been two years later than expected, but she would finally be starting her sophomore level classes this year.

Joining Erica was another quiet student of hers, Isaac. He was tall, thin and incredibly shy. Even in the one and one sessions when most students opened up, he remained overly polite and silent. But his story was obvious to all as he flinched at the softest of sudden movements.

Scott had only been with Beacon of Hope for four months now, but he was starting to show improvement. His father dropped him off with little more than a warning to shape up or it was boot camp for him. The courts had actually threatened him with juvenile detention, as he was a third-time offender. Initially, he had several weeks’ worth of shuns due to fighting and attempted drug smuggling. But he had always seemed understanding of Isaac and maintained a friendlier façade around him. And now that he was fully sober, that lopsided smile was more of a permanent fixture, as long as the chocolate-eyed teen stayed away from Whittemore.

Jackson was the product of his adoptive parents’ attempt to fix their marriage with a child. It hadn’t worked and the result was a very long and messy divorce in which Jackson’s custody was thrown back and forth, sometimes on a monthly basis. He didn’t shy away from claiming he wasn’t wanted by his real parents nor his fake ones. In group, he would often dole on and on about how his using was a natural byproduct of his environment, failing to take any responsibility, himself. He was quick-witted and sharp tongued and usually found a way to get under everyone’s skin. He also seemed to know everything there ever was about how to get high, especially off everyday items, and that knowledge could earn him top praise in a place like this, full of desperate kids looking for an easy fix to avoid their feelings. Melissa kept a close eye on him.

But today seemed to be one of those rare days when everyone was seemingly getting along as they hiked their way to a secluded lake where the school kept several kayaks. She had spent a great deal of the summer teaching the newer students different techniques and now her group was fairly fast in the water. They seemed to really enjoy it, too. The only complaint was from Erica, who disliked the school’s dress code; one piece swimsuits with a t-shirt and shorts cover-up, unless you were in the water.

The last trip, Erica purposely flipped the kayak she had shared with Melissa in hopes of getting to hike home more scantily dressed. She had eyed Boyd the entire time that she protested having to put her wet clothes back on. But much to both of their dismay, Melissa and Erica arrived back at the school with their wet shirts still clinging to them.

The kids could probably guess where they were going by now, although Melissa often chose to take different paths with different obstacles to keep things interesting. During the school year, they would have several camping trips out here. They were good for bonding, and provided different environments for group, which could get boring and repetitive in the school’s common room. They
also had solo trips to reflect on their personal growth. It was remarkable to see these kids go from not knowing the difference between the types of trees to being able to recognize all of that and then some, as they successfully ‘survived on their own.’ (While being closely monitored by the staff.)

As they rounded the corner, coming across the crystal-clear lake, the teens all scrambled into their usual pairs and made their way to the locked boats.

“Not, today!” Melissa called with a smile on her face. “I want you to partner up with someone you’ve never shared the kayak with before! Group bonding exercise. Switch it up and let’s go!” Several of her students groaned. Melissa only smiled wider.

Stiles sat in the back seat of his step father’s fuel efficient rental car, staring out the window. It had been over a month since the police picked him up for prostitution. It was the only way someone as young as him could make it on their own on the streets. It was the way of the land, so to speak. And at fifteen, it wasn’t even his first offense, in fact, he was practically a seasoned pro.

Stiles had been habitually running away and being dragged back, on and off since he was eleven. Living on the corner was rough, he knew what it felt like to go days without food. He’d been soaked by rainstorms without shelter. He’d been desperate enough to lower his prices or give a blowie for a hot meal or shower. He’d lived with that shame for years, and yet still preferred it to his home life after his mother died. He was only eight when she finally succumbed to Frontotemporal Dementia.

This time, the courts didn’t know what to do with Stiles. While he had tested positive for marijuana, he had never been caught with the harder stuff in his system, although he had openly admitted to being a user. So, calling this his sixth and final opportunity, they gave him the option of attending Beacon of Hope on government funding, or being placed under house arrest, complete with an ankle monitor and all.

He chose the nature school. In all his time on the streets, Stiles had never made it far past Tampa, he had never been outside of the sunshine state, he had never seen a mountain. The appeal to get as far away from his step father’s double wide as possible was strong, how could he refuse? So imagine his confusion when Stiles went home with a secure black band and blinking green light on his ankle anyway.
Apparently it took some time to arrange these things, and Stiles found his pale, mole dotted ass back home, regardless. Well, at least the monster, as he referred to his mother’s poor choice of a second husband, couldn’t take anything else from him; he had stolen his soul along with his innocence years ago. Stiles could survive however long it took for them to figure out the mountain school situation.

It had taken a month and now after an all-expense paid flight and rental, Stiles was finally nearing his freedom. He couldn’t help but feel his face break out into a smile. The action felt so foreign, he couldn’t remember the last time his lips moved in such a manner. Plus, the towering green trees were so different to the palms and oaks he was used to. He doubted he had ever seen anything so full.

“Why are you smiling, boy?” Simon asked with a glance from the rear-view mirror.

Stiles didn’t respond, but couldn’t help but feel like he had lost as he failed to keep his grin in place.

They had spent the majority of this last month barely talking aside from Stiles’ punishments. Dinner and breakfast both in complete silence. Sometimes Stiles thought perhaps he had become invisible. Oh, how he had hoped that he had become invisible, but he was always spotted when the monster wanted him.

“This isn’t some reward,” Simon continued. “This school is for fuck-ups like you, but worse you’re a known whore, you know what they do to whores in jail? You’ll be begging for me to come pick you up before the weeks’ end, wishing you were better to me.”

Stiles’ stomach felt queasy at the suggestion. He placed his head against the cool glass, hoping the action would help steady him.

Simon continued, “What happened to my sweet boy? You were so good to me once. Such a perfect angel when your Mom was sick, didn’t want to upset her - I miss those days, don’t you?”

Stiles had to swallow his vomit. Missed his mother suffering or his own delusion that the monster didn’t mean to hurt him? No. He didn’t miss that. He missed his mother singing off key in the car or taking him to the library where they had a train table and plenty of children to play with. He missed Christmas cookies and visiting his grandmother. He missed his Mom, and the days before she remarried.
After it became clear his passenger was going to continue his silence, Simon, added, “They won’t believe you, you know. You’re a liar, a drug addict, and a whore, they would never believe you. You’ve let so many men in, you would never be able to prove it, and don’t forget I’ll make sure they know your mother knew, she knew and didn’t stop it.”

Stiles didn’t even flinch. He had heard it all before. The monster had nothing to worry about, he was too afraid to say anything back then, and like he said who would believe him now? He tried once. Cried and begged to not go home, even told the agent why. They sent multiple people to visit his house but Simon passed with flying colors. The monster hit him for the first time after that. Stiles had a black eye and busted lip and missed two weeks of school due to ‘pneumonia’. No one suspected a thing. Why would he try that again? At least when he was on the streets, he was getting further and further away.

As he thought, he kept his cheek pressed against the glass and watched as the tree-lined road broke up, revealing a gravel driveway and several log buildings in various sizes. Waiting by the entryway were two men, both dressed similarly in jeans and long sleeve button ups.

Well at least all of Stiles’ over shirts meant that he would be fitting in. Or did they have uniforms like a proper prison here? He figured he would find out soon enough, as one of the men reached over and opened his door for him as if he was taking too long.

“You must be Stiles.” The man said with a kind smile. He was weather worn and tan, clearly a big supporter of the great outdoors here. “I’m John, John Stilinski, but most of us go by first names here. I know you prefer your nickname, do you mind if I call you Stiles?”

Stiles still hadn’t moved. Was this guy for real? He quietly slid to the door and John continued. “Welcome to Beacon of Hope. I’ll assign a student to be your buddy later, and you’ll get a better tour, but the need to knows are: that’s the mess hall, if you’re late, you don’t eat. We all take turns cooking and cleaning, even the staff, if you’re put on shuns that may mean extra duties or it may be a different punishment, it depends on the offense and the sentencer. That’s the boys’ dorms each cabin is a different group. That’s the main office building, we are heading there now. And that’s the commons. All the indoor classrooms are in there.”

“Indoor classrooms?” Stiles couldn’t help interrupting.

John smiled, if possible, even wider. “A lot of the teachers like to bring the classroom outdoors sometimes. It’s not uncommon to spot a class reading at the covered shelter or working on their math homework under the gazebo.”
As they spoke, the older man indicated several buildings and landmarks. Stiles had already forgotten the first ones. He noticed his step father was being led to the main office to fill out paperwork, while Stiles was being shown around the back to the… clinic.

“As a court ordered student, you’ll have to go through a full body search. I’m sorry.” John added hastily, and flashed Stiles a sympathetic look.

He must have seen the panic flicker across Stiles’ face before he was able to carefully school his features once more.

“Standard procedure. I promise you.” John added in a reassuring tone. “You’ll also have to take a drug test. If you’re positive you’ll be kept in supervised isolation during the detox period. We can’t have you mixing with the students, some of which are recovering addicts, you’ll understand.”

“I’m clean.” Stiles assured. It didn’t stop them from entering the otherwise empty room.

“Every staff member is certified in first aid.” The school’s owner answered the unasked question. “It’s necessary for all nature hikes, plus it lowers my insurance costs.” He joked.

Stiles stared at him, blank faced.

“Well, I’m afraid we have to visually watch you undress, to confirm that you aren’t trying to hide anything.” John started to explain. He always had a strong distaste for this part of initiation day, but it was necessary for the safety of his students.

Stiles was visibly shaking. John knew he was a street kid and assumed that meant he was… experienced. But he was clearly terrified of the older man as he started to lift his shirt.

“Whoa. Wait. Would you prefer a female counselor? You seem more than a little uncomfortable.” John suggested as he threw his hands up. “I know it will take some getting used to, but you can tell us anything. If someone’s harmed you against your will, if that’s too much to say and someone is simply making you uncomfortable, you have the right to speak up, tell someone - tell me, okay?”
Stiles wasn’t sure what would come out of his mouth if he opened it, but he doubted it would be words. He stared back at this man who had seemingly guessed his long hidden secret within minutes. He continued to stare, and because he needed a distraction, for both himself and the counselor, he continued to lift his shirt so he was bare chested and still round-eyed.

“Hey, you don’t have to. I was going to assign you to Melissa’s group, she’s almost full. They do a lot of activities, I think you’ll like them.” John tried to reason as Stiles started to slip out of his shoes and unbutton his pants. “She should be returning from a kayaking trip soon, we can wait.”

Stiles dropped his jeans and boxers in the same motion. He was still trembling slightly as he held out his arms and in a voice he was proud remained deep and even, he asked, “Now what?”

John swallowed thickly as he reached for the gloves. “I need to search all of your clothing. We will be doing that to your luggage as well, every seam. It’s amazing how kids sneak their contraband in. I also need to…”

“Just do it,” Stiles found himself saying. “Just— it’s whatever.” And he promptly turned around and assumed the position, as he had done so countless times before, like the little rent boy he knew he was inside.

“No like - you need to reach for your ankles. Yep, good job. Okay, all done. Except…” John amazingly had a key to unlock his ankle monitor. “We’ll be sending that back to the good old folks in Hillsborough county, no need for that here.”

The exam was much faster and less intrusive than Stiles believed possible and John was writing down information on his chart when he turned around.

“You can fill this up while I finish with checking your clothing.” The older man said as he passed Stiles a drug test and pointed to the restroom.

“Aren’t you afraid I’ll fake it?” Stiles asked skeptically.

“I just confirmed that you are hiding nothing on your person, if you fill it with toilet water, I’ll
“know.” John said while still writing his notes.

The amount of writing was alarming.

“What if I drink so much water, my piss is clear?” Stiles cockily asked, reminding himself much more of the street rat he grew into who could handle anything, even an unexpected strip search.

“I’ll know.” John laughed. “Trust me, I’ve seen it all, I’d know.”

Stiles wasn’t sure what he thought about the older man, but as promised his clothes were ready for him once he returned, and while they waited for the results (he was clean!), he stepped up on a scale and recorded his height and weight. Stiles was both skinnier and taller than he remembered. He attempted a peak at John’s notes while he added this information, but the counselor kept the angle just right to block him. Stiles had a feeling he did that on purpose, and as John had said, he had seen it all, so he probably knew exactly how to block the file from view.

As soon as Melissa returned with eight hungry kids behind her, she made her way to the front office to see if her new arrival had made it in yet. She read his file, but knew that there was always a story behind the paperwork. Melissa had never had a repeated runaway herself, but some of the other counselors had, and she knew they could keep you on your toes.

Most students choose not to even attempt running from Beacon of Hope, as it was miles away from even the next closest town, not to mention the local PD were well aware of the school and its students. That fact aside, Stiles was a street kid, he wouldn’t last a night in these woods. Usually that would be enough to make any of them think twice but as he was a known runaway, she just couldn’t be sure. Perhaps Chris would let Allison spend the night in the girl’s dormitories and he’d help stay on watch.

As Melissa entered the main office, she was greeted with a disgruntled and unfamiliar face. She could only assume this was the step father, as strangers were an unusual event here.

“Hello!” Melissa greeted, cheerfully. She was always so pumped after a nice hike.
The other man looked up sharply. Frown set in place.

“Hi,” He bit out.

He was balding and slightly on the heavier side. His scowl gave him an uninterested in social interaction vibe. Oh boy. So often, the parents had a greater effect on their kids than they knew, even if it was unintentional, like in Lydia’s case. Her mother expected perfection and Lydia always faltered when she feared she was delivering anything less. Melissa hoped this standoffish attitude hadn’t rubbed off on her new group member.

The man left without so much as a goodbye, and backed out of the gravel parking lot at an alarming speed.

Chris came out of the office, shaking his head.

“I was just taking care of the paperwork for your new recruit!” He informed the bushy tailed and sun kissed counselor. “Enjoy your hike?”

“Yeah, I did. Was he as rude to you as he was to me?” She asked her colleague.

“Not too bad, definitely have had worse. He actually got upset when I told him this was a year-round facility. As in Stiles couldn’t go home for the holidays or during the summer. It’s actually kind of touching that upset him so much. The court ordered cases can be difficult for everyone involved.”

“Yeah…” Melissa agreed half-heartedly, still staring at the dust that had been kicked up from the man that had breezed out of there without a last goodbye to his son.

“Oh perfect, you’re back!” John said as he came into the office. “You ready to meet the new guy? I just showed him around the kitchen. He’s on dietary restriction – underweight. Did his step father leave already?”

“Kid’s under weight? That’s got to be tough for a guy. Lydia gets enough hazing as it is, everyone calling her twig or bones. Do you think it’s intentional or a result of living on the streets?” Melissa asked, concerned.
“He seemed to eat without hesitation, a lot of the newbies dislike our balanced meal plans too, but he seemed eager.” John assured her, “I’m glad I caught you, both of you actually. I’m pretty sure he had a rough experience, probably recently, on the streets. It’s tough when you’re selling yourself, but rape is still a possibility. He was so hesitant for the cavity search. I was professional, offered to wait until a female counselor was available. I was going to let him wait for you since you’ll be doing his one-on-ones with him, actually.”

“You think so?” Melissa shook her head. “It’ll be tough for him to open up about it if he kept it quiet this past month, since he’s been home. I’m afraid he’ll have that mindset now where he can just keep his mouth shut and it will go away, but really it’ll eat him up inside.”

John nodded. “You’ve been doing this too long to have that kind of insight and foresight— you need a vacation?” He half joked. “I can’t have you burning out on me.”

The truth was, John knew better than most what it was like to constantly take on their wards’ pain. It was difficult to function sometimes, knowing what they knew about the beasts that haunt their teens’ eyes.

Melissa shrugged off the suggestion. She honestly couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

“That un-cracked egg aside, I think you’re going to like him. He’s pretty quiet, but sometimes he lets something slip past and it’s usually pretty funny - he’s a sarcastic one!” John added.

“Did you want to double check the paperwork? I know we break even when the states backing their board, I don’t want anything to slip through the cracks.” Chris asked John, tilting his head towards the desk.

“Yeah, what was the step father like?” John asked as he followed the other man into the office.

Melissa headed out to the mess hall. She would have usually taken a quick shower, but she didn’t want to leave her new student alone for long. Hopefully her group would already be there so that they could make introductions and she would be able to assign a buddy for him.
Stiles couldn’t believe the size of the place. He was sure he was going to get lost, plus he really didn’t know what to do aside from eat his dinner. They had put him on a special diet with extra protein because of his weight. He hadn’t thought that he was that skinny. He actually like the way he looked.

He was all lean muscle, maybe a bit too pale, but his hair was thick and often did what it wanted to, resulting in it looking like he had spent hours messing it up in the mirror. His eyes were plain and brown, but plenty of johns commented about him staring up at them while he was on his knees. They seemed to like that. He always felt adequate, at the very least. But, never lacking… maybe he was too skinny…

He sat there and made sure to fit every last bit of his dinner into his mouth, even though he felt full after only a couple of bites. His meal was chicken, vegetables and a dinner roll, and because he needed the extra portion, his came with an incredibly bland oatmeal, too. He wished he had saved that for last, because forcing the chicken down his throat afterwards was becoming troublesome.

A curly haired woman came bouncing over to him. It must’ve been Melissa. John had warned him that she was full of energy. After seeing her incredible stride for such a small stature, he had to agree. Stiles concentrated on forcing his mouthful of chicken to go down his reluctant throat. He didn’t want to embarrass himself in front of his new counselor.

“Hi, you must be Stiles!” She said with a large grin.

Stiles stupidly bobbed his head as he swallowed.

“I’m Melissa. Glad to see you’re enjoying the food, I can’t say that many people agree, myself included.”

Stiles pushed his tray away but reached for his roll and napkin. Melissa noticed the action and informed the teen that he wasn’t supposed to take food from the hall. They kept a compost with the leftovers. Stiles cheekily asked if he could walk around with it as long as he was still in the mess hall, Melissa agreed. She spotted her teens making their way to their usual table.
It wasn’t necessary for the groups to stick together. While they did share a counselor, and had scheduled activities to be completed together, they were essentially free in all of their spare time and classes, which were typically arranged by age and grade, although underclassmen could be bumped up, if it was more suitable to their level. That was why Allison and Lydia shared so many of their classes even though the redhead was a year younger. But most of the kids became good friends and bonded over similar experiences, that they were often seen huddled in their usual cliques.

She placed a tentative hand on Stiles’ shoulder to steer him towards the table. Melissa mostly did this to test his reaction. Fortunately, he seemed comfortable. It was probably, as John had feared, an issue with adult men. She wondered how long it would take for him to confess his traumas.

The teens all stopped their chatter immediately upon seeing their teacher and group leader.

Stiles found himself facing a table full of people his own age, each of which, Melissa quickly named.

“Oh, and what brings you here amongst us common folk? Come to sample our gruel?” Erica asked Melissa while eyeing Stiles appreciatively.

“You know we eat the same thing.” Melissa dismissed the feisty remark and introduced everyone to Stiles as well.

“Ah, but you forget,” Scott piped up. “You had me on office duty for like a month, I know about the secret fridge John has back there full of candy bars and sodas!”

“Soda!” Jackson’s eyes lit up. “What I wouldn’t do for a little caffeine.”

“Have to stay in shape if you ever want to get on our level!” Boyd teased.

The man did have nice biceps, but Stiles found himself unable to look away from the guy next to him with dark hair and the faintest traces of a beard. He sucked in his over fed gut, subconsciously,
and wished he wasn’t stupidly holding bread in a napkin.

As if he projected his insecurities, Jackson eyed him with a smirk. “Hoping that little old role will put some meat on your bones, new guy? I think he may be smaller than you, twig.” He added to Lydia who looked even more affronted than Stiles by the remark.

“Leave him alone.” Allison rolled her eyes.

Stiles recognized her friendly demeanor and appreciated it. He awkwardly sat down in the empty space to her right. Melissa looked relieved that he had taken the initiative.

“Well, I’ll leave you guys be. Get to know each other, don’t forget you have group tonight in the commons, and, uh, Scott you’ve never been a buddy before, right? Why don’t you be Stiles’ first week partner and help him out. I know you still have half a month until school, but make sure he knows his way around by then!” The counselor said in a manner that suggested this would be a huge delight.

Scott gave his most mocking of salutes in lieu of a response. To Stiles’ horror this was satisfactory for Melissa and she left him there as everyone just stared at him. He had never felt more like he was being thrown to the wolves.

Several things became apparent right away. Both Isaac and Scott had a thing for Allison. Personally, he felt Isaac had more of a chance as his quiet demeanor seemed to mesh better with her sweet smile and straight forth personality. But Scott had that look, that ‘I’m totally in love with her and she doesn’t even notice’ dewy-eyed stare.

It was also apparent that Boyd and Erica were a couple, or as much of a couple as you could be in a school where the three big rules were no violence, no drugs or alcohol, and no sex. But they were definitely, subtly holding hands underneath the table, beneath the gaze of the teachers.

Lastly, he knew that Jackson was head over heels in love with Lydia. The asshole, Stiles had already declared him to be one within minutes of meeting him, would make fun of everyone at the table, but oddly enough his nickname, twig, for Lydia seemed to go over just fine with the red head, and Stiles suspected she liked the reference to her small stature. The problem was Lydia had goo-goo eyes for one of the guys at the table, but it wasn’t Jackson, she was staring at Derek.

Who, Stiles thought, was probably the quietest of the bunch. He was also the most gorgeous in his
book, not that anyone had asked him. And maybe it was him projecting again, but he couldn’t help but feel a bit of a cold undertone from Lydia. Could she really tell he had the hots for her eye candy? Stiles avoided looking at the hazel-eyed, chiseled god for the rest of their dinner. It was a difficult feat.

Luckily he had his bread to pick at.

“So, Stiles.” Lydia said once their conversation lulled and it became obvious they had a newcomer impeding on their turf again. “What grade will you be entering?”

“I’m not sure.” Stiles admitted and this received him several confused looks, so he continued. “I uh, kind of missed the end of school last year and about a month in the middle and a big chunk in the beginning. I’m sure if there were like end of year exams, I would have failed them.” he explained.

“I never went to school either.” Erica shrugged as if it didn’t matter. “You affiliated?” She questioned with a challenging brow raise.

“Uh…” Stiles wasn’t sure what she meant.

Erica pushed up her shirt sleeve to show off her ink. Oh, she was a gang member! She kept going, pulling up her shirt to show off a complicated side piece and continued to raise her shirt further until a teacher, Coach Finstock, called from across the room that if he saw any more of her skin she would have shuns for a week.

“Anyway, it continues across my chest,” she said nonchalantly and waved off the teacher in a dismissive manner.

Boyd gave Stiles a threatening look, as if he dared Stiles to suggest he see it fully later.

“Do you have a tattoo?” Allison asked, “I’ve always wanted one, but my dad said I have to wait until I’m eighteen.” She huffed annoyed.

“I do actually.” Stiles found himself admitting. And then internally kicking himself at his stupidity.
“Where?” Jackson asked, doubtful.

“I’m sure he does if he says he does.” Scott said out of annoyance from their table’s bully.

“I do, it’s on my back.” Stiles reluctantly turned around, allowing Allison to peak down the back of his shirt.

“It’s a bar code!” She laughed. “Why?”

“Oh!” Erica sucked in a deep breath as she figured it out. It would only take until they got their hands on a computer for the rest of them to know the meaning behind his former pimp claiming him in such a manner.

“Tell us!” Scott pleaded, desperate for the gossip, “What does it mean?”

“I’m a sci-fi nerd.” Stiles lied easily enough. It was what he usually told his Johns that didn’t recognize it as the phone number it was.

Erica didn’t give him away and he decided he liked her, too.

“So, like, how will you know what grade you’re in then, if you didn’t finish school?” Lydia asked, annoyed.

“John said I could take a placement test and they would put me in the right classes from there.” Stiles told them, a little thankful for the change in subject.

That response didn’t seem to please the thin girl as she quickly explained they did that with her once it became apparent she was too smart for her classes.

“I’m with Allison and Derek, even though I’m the same age as you, but don’t worry, Erica’s still in freshman classes.”

“No, I’m not!” Erica protested, “I’m totally a sophomore now!” She winked at Stiles.
“And I’m definitely in your class too and so is Boyd.” Jackson said to Lydia, a little hurt.

Fortunately, the rest of dinner continued with their bickering and nothing more was expected of Stiles until it was time to go and Derek nudged him and told him to eat more than just his bread next time.

Stiles didn’t think anyone noticed.

Scott gave him the quickest possible tour of the grounds, pointed to the largest building and told him to meet in there at seven. Stiles felt it was impossible to know the time without a cellphone, a trait he knew well from his nights spent on the streets, but he assumed he had at least an hour based on the sun setting, although he wasn’t sure how it varied in the mountains.

He just hoped he had enough time to find his dorm, so he could change out of the clothes that he had been wearing all day.

He didn’t.

Before he knew it Allison, Isaac, and Scott were all jogging up to him.

“You’re late!”

Group turned out to be exactly what it sounded like. They all sat in a circle of squishy armchairs in the open common room. Occasionally, other students filed past. But Stiles figured it was an unspoken rule to be quiet and courteous while other teams were using the room.

Melissa greeted her students nicely and chose to overlook their tardiness. Allison bid everyone adieu as she actually wasn’t a part of the group therapy sessions, and was merely just a student because her father worked there.
Scott and Isaac both looked longingly out the door.

“So, Stiles, would you care to kick this off? Anything you’d like to share? How are you feeling? How are you getting along with everyone?” Melissa asked.

“Oh,” Stiles blushed at being called out. “I’m fine. Everyone is treating me - fine.” He added, lamely.

“Anything else?” She asked, knowing that he wouldn’t be sharing much this early on.

Stiles simply shook his head.

“Okay, well that’s alright.” She told him, causing Stiles to raise his eyebrows in disbelief. “There are certain privileges that can be reached by being a productive member in group and group activities. I want you to know that things such as your media room time or even visits back home are all earned this way.”

Stiles thought to himself that she just sealed his fate; he would be the most silent person in group, ever. And that was saying something as the circle included Derek, Isaac, and Boyd.

Surprisingly, everyone else did have things to say.

Lydia talked on and on about her father’s big company downsizing and how even though it was saving them money in the long run, she felt so guilty that people would be losing their jobs. She also announced that her horoscope said that changes in her life would bring about a negative impact for all. She looked pointedly at Stiles.

Isaac talked about his fears and he expressed, very vocally, that he was not okay with people hitting him, even playfully.

Scott apologized and admitted he really wanted a cigarette.

Jackson explained that sometimes he acted out more when he saw that it riled someone up and confessed he wasn’t sure why. Melissa latched on to that concept and the two talked about it for
twenty minutes straight.

Erica talked about her family, especially her little sisters, and complained about missing them. She had lost her phone call privileges the week prior.

Boyd was actually concerned about life after Beacon of Hope. He talked about his nerves associated with placing college applications and his fear of failure.

Derek told the group that he spoke to his sister for the first time in a month and that things were looking positive for his adoption with her. Jackson butted in and told the other teen that he would turn eighteen by the time that took place.

Melissa asked Stiles if he had changed his mind and if he would like to share more now that he had seen how easy it was for the others.

Stiles smiled and said, “Nope!”

Melissa sighed. He would be a tough egg to crack alright.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

3/20/18 update: Officially beta read by the fantastic fairyfey, they did a wonderful job! Check them out on Ao3 and on tumblr @gayglitterbabe

Episode 2

Stiles woke to the sound of birds chirping and soft laughter floating in through the dormitory’s window. Once he was up, he couldn’t avoid the bright light shining in or the incredibly clean air. He took several deep breaths and smiled. Never would he had imagined that he would end up in a place like this.

“Time to get up!” Scott called as he threw open the door. “You missed morning chores, so um, you have to report to the office after breakfast for a consequence.” He shrugged.

“Morning chores?” Stiles asked as he continued to lay there. It was so nice a minute ago.

“Yeah, our teams on breakfast duty this week.” Scott said pointing to the chart next to the door. “It all rotates. Got to check the chart! I told you that, right?

“Did you?” Stiles questioned as he reluctantly got up. His sleeping pants hung low and his hair was a mess.

“I don’t know man!” Scott admitted with a pat on the smaller teen’s shoulder. “But you better hurry, breakfast ends in five minutes.”

Stiles took off at a jog, pajamas and all. He heard several bouts of laughter trailing behind him.
Chris was talking with a middle-aged man in khakis. They were sharing ideas while hunched over a map together.

Sitting on the steps and looking bored, was a little girl with creative braids swirling around her head and coming together in matching pigtail pom-poms. She offered Stiles a grin, but as he had just scarfed down his breakfast and hastily got dressed for the day, he really wasn’t in the mood to return it.

“Stiles!” Chris called. “This is Dr. Deaton and his daughter, Gracie. He’s the town’s best vet.” He informed the student.

“I’m the town’s only vet!” Deaton offered with a friendly smile.

“Small town,” Chris agreed.

“I’m just taking my little girl here for a nice fishing trip, and I wanted to stop in and get the expert’s opinions on where the best location would be.” Deaton continued, even though Stiles was less than interested.

“Like I said, at that spot there, the water is really calm but the fish still bite!” Chris said. “Good luck!”

Deaton scooped his daughter onto his shoulders and they headed off to their pickup to retrieve their fishing gear. Stiles watched them go until Chris cleared his throat as he held the office door open.

As soon as he entered the older man got up and crossed the room to shut the door. He leaned casually against the desk, somewhere between sitting and standing.

Stiles gulped and stood awkwardly, waiting to be asked to sit.

“We didn’t get a chance to properly meet. I’m Chris, Allison’s dad. I will also be your English
teacher.” The man looked stern but spoke in a friendly enough tone. “I was told you missed breakfast duty?”

Stiles wasn’t sure if he was asking or telling, so he remained quiet.

“Hm. Well, here’s the deal: fulfilling our responsibilities is important around here, if you thought you’d get away with slacking off, you were mistaken.” The man paused for dramatic effect.

Stiles had half a mind to roll his eyes. But instead he tentatively took a seat and looked up, waiting to be told off for taking the initiative.

“If I hear about you missing anymore shifts, you’ll be on bathroom duty in addition to your assigned tasks for the remainder of the month, but as this is your first offense, and you are new, I’m going to let you off with a warning.” He finished with a smile.

Stiles wasn’t sure if he had to agree or if he would be excused, so the two just sat there for a full minute in silence.

“O-okay.” Stiles croaked out as he stood up to leave, still unsure if he was out of line in doing so.

“Ahh! He speaks!” Chris playfully teased. “I was going to have to hound Melissa, she always seems to get the quiet ones.”

Stiles was actually quite a chatterbox at times. On the streets, his mouth had gotten him into and out of trouble, probably in equal measure. But usually if his mouth was opened, it was insults he was spewing, and he was trying to not fuck this up. So he had bit his tongue quite a lot, since his arrival.

“I don’t want to see you back in this office, though, I’m serious about that.” Chris added as he opened the door and let the teen out.

“That’s it?” Stiles blurted out before he could stop himself.

“Yeah, kid, that’s it.” Chris’ smile turned into more of a smirk. “But, I’m pretty sure Melissa’s
pack is meeting out at the ropes course, and John is joining you guys today. You better run, don’t want to be late!” He added.

“Oh, can you point me in the right direction?” Stiles asked, reluctantly.

He was late, or at the very least, the last to arrive.

“Did you make it to breakfast in time?” Melissa greeted him, concerned.

“Don’t need you passing out while you’re up there, skelator!” Jackson interrupted and pointed to an intricate series of rope bridges and ladders that connected several of the towering trees.

“Ah, don’t look so scared, new guy!” Scott teased. “You get to use the zip line to come down! It’s fun!”

“You were totally a chicken last time!” Derek said as he playfully shoulder checked Scott. “You’ve done the course once and now you’re an expert?”

Stiles admired the confident way the bigger teen held himself. He was in his element, ready to go. As was Boyd. He had a feeling the two competed for best times, probably in everything they did. Next to them Isaac was visibly shaking, right down to the tips of his golden curls.

“You okay, man?” Stiles asked. The kid almost looked green with fear.

“You got this! Right buddy!” Scott saw the scared look on Isaac’s face.

It was funny, because even though they were both competing for the same girl, Scott seemed to have a soft spot for the jumpy teen. This brought Allison’s attention to them, and while Boyd was getting suited up in a harness with John, she joined Scott in cheering Isaac up.

Erica sat unusually quiet and as far away from the group of people as possible without actually leaving the clearing.
Boyd was ready. Derek didn’t even wait to be told before he fiddled with his watch and yelled go. Boyd was fast. He hulled his heavy and muscle lined body up the rope ladder with ease. Stiles had never done anything like this, so he paid attention to the details and couldn’t help but join in the cheering. John looked up and gave him a quick thumbs up. The older man was so sly, Stiles was sure no one else saw the action.

An odd feeling overtook Stiles and warmth filled his stomach. He realized, perhaps too late, that it was pride. No amount of praise in the back of a car or hotel room could make him feel this way, so he cheered louder.

And then, Derek stopped looking at his friend who was practically jogging across the last bridge, to give Stiles a strange look. The smaller teen couldn’t place it. Was Boyd his friend so Stiles shouldn’t cheer so loudly? Was he annoyed that Stiles was there? Either way the warmth drained from him with that one glance and Stiles quickly ceased his clapping, right as Boyd came gliding back down to them. Derek clicked something on his watch and said he could do this, he would beat the other man’s time, no problem.

“It’s not a competition!” Melissa shouted out to the group as Boyd wiggled free from the harness.

She started helping Derek get it on and double checked all the latches as a safety precaution.

Boyd in his adrenaline rush, pushed past the group to Erica, who was isolated and sitting on a stump. He swooped down and gave her a long and passionate kiss. Scott and Jackson started cat calling. John was quick to remind them that was inappropriate touching and to knock it off. Erica whirled away so fast, you might have thought that she wasn’t enjoying it.

“No shuns for me! That was all him!” She pointed a finger and Boyd’s face fell, because she was absolutely serious.

“Did you even watch me or were you too busy staring at the ground all alone, moping?” He spat at her, all joviality from his recent feat gone.

Erica didn’t respond but crossed to the other side of the group to put as much space as possible between them. Lydia informed everyone who wasn’t there last time, which really was just Stiles, that Erica didn’t do the course. In fact, she always opted out of it, and had to take a consequence for doing so.
“So?” Stiles quickly and loudly defended her, while Derek started his climb.

Since Boyd was too busy staring at his girlfriend, John offered to keep time for him.

“She’s a city girl, probably never had so much as a treehouse, it’s okay that she’s afraid of heights.” Stiles continued.

“I’m not afraid of anything!” Erica shrieked, giving Stiles an evil-eyed stare this time.

“Sure you’re not, you just refuse to walk near the cliff’s edge on mountain hikes or avoid doing things like this, for fun!” Jackson said, doubtful.

“I’M. NOT. AFRAID!” Erica shouted each word, causing Derek to miss a step and break his rhythm.

Stiles told Jackson to back off, and the two quickly started a yelling match that was broken up with Melissa and John’s assistance. This meant that Derek came flying down the zip line unbeknownst to all and John missed the opportunity to stop his watch for an accurate time.

Derek rolled his eyes at Jackson and Stiles and grumbled that he needed a better group.

“Okay, none of that talk here, we support one another. Allison, you’re up next.” Melissa called over everyone.

Tempers started to deflate as they all joined in the clapping and cheering for the fairly fast brunette. Stiles paid even closer attention to when he was supposed to switch clasps, so he would avoid getting tangled in the line once it was his turn.

Somewhere in-between the cheering for Allison, Erica disappeared.

“Want me to go after her?” Melissa asked John.
“No, fears can be difficult to overcome, especially if you can’t admit to them. Let her blow off some steam.” John replied, loud enough so the others would drop it, too.

It didn’t work. As a hesitant Isaac was getting his harness on and asking Melissa for pointers, Lydia loudly started her debate again.

“Who didn’t have a tree house? Or a playground in their back yard? She’s just doing it for attention!” The redhead sneered.

“I didn’t! She probably grew up in an apartment. It’s not her fault! It’s okay to be afraid of heights.” Stiles quickly defended.

“I have an apartment too, off fifth avenue! And we have a park and playground in the middle!” Lydia pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow. The effect was more comical than she intended.

“Most people aren’t rolling in money like you!” Stiles retorted.

“Well I’m sure she had to use the stairs, then, probably didn’t have an elevator!”

“She doesn’t have to overcome her fear of heights, it’s fine. Just let her be!” Stiles sighed.

He wasn’t sure why, but the way Lydia had implied she was better than Erica or even himself because she had money or luxuries, such as a yard with a playground, really irked him. This caught John’s attention, who frowned at him.

Stiles paled. He was right to defend Erica, wasn’t he? Especially when she wasn’t even there to do it herself.

Isaac was ready for the course now and everyone stopped their bickering to support him as he too was obviously terrified.

Isaac was much slower than even Allison, who took her time before stepping off of each bridge. He lost his footing once too, but smiled brightly down at everyone when he was able to successfully pull himself back up. He made it to the end, grabbed the zip line handle, closed his
eyes, and fell.

“That was amazing! I’m so glad I didn’t chicken out again!” He said to everyone.

“You did great, man! Okay me next!” Scott held out grabby hands for the harness.

“Looks like Erica is the only one missing out on her phone privileges this week.” Lydia announced to the group. “Unless you’re too afraid, too!” She added to Stiles.

He didn’t get a chance to respond, because Boyd practically shouted to Melissa and John, “You can’t take phone privileges from her! She already missed her sister’s birthday last week, please don’t!”

All his animosity with his girlfriend from earlier was long since forgotten. Scott was ready to go, but waited for his counselor’s full attention.

“Don’t worry Boyd. She has a different consequence coming. But that is between her, John and myself!” She reassured the larger teen before telling Scott he could start.

John looked pensive for a moment before he said he would like to talk to Erica and Stiles after the ropes course, that he had something else in mind now. Melissa agreed. Stiles flailed, dramatically. He was going to do the exercise, why was he getting punished?

Scott was pretty fast. John told him he would have to compete with Boyd for the best time, next time. This earned a few protests from Derek that it wasn’t fair that his time was ruined. He didn’t look at Stiles directly, but he still felt the sting of those words.

It was down to just Jackson, Lydia and Stiles now. The other two were whispering and laughing, so Stiles stepped up.

“Are you ready?” John asked, pleased to see that the new guy had volunteered and wasn’t forced to try the course.

“I am!” Stiles tried for confidence, but he was pretty sure his face betrayed him.
Derek actually offered some pointers about how to make the transitions and where there were good resting places. He even went so far as to recommend the view from the top of the tallest platform.

Stiles was betrayed by his face again as he felt his cheeks reddening and his heart pick up at the intimate way Derek spoke to just him. Luckily, Lydia let out a delicate giggle at that moment, which surely meant she didn’t see his and Derek’s exchange.

Pushing all of those thoughts aside, Stiles stepped up to the base of the first ladder and started to climb. It was almost liberating. As he climbed higher, he felt the weight of the world melt away from his shoulders. All of his problems and deep, dark secrets were left behind and replaced by the tops of the trees and an amazingly refreshing breeze. He loved it.

And then he came to the first rope bridge and looked down. Oh boy! It was a lot farther down from this angle than it had seemed from the ground. He felt the enormity of the situation all at once. He was there in the woods so far from everything and everyone who had ever hurt him. He could do this! He placed a tentative foot on the bridge and heard the cries of his teammates from below.

“Good job, Stiles!”

“Keep going!”

“Don’t look down, that always gets me!”

“You got this, man!”

The last one was Scott, and Stiles pictured the teen’s lopsided grin as he placed his next foot on the bridge and was no longer standing on the firm and solid platform. Well, only one way to go from there, as Stiles had no idea how to turn around without getting tangled. He crossed the bridge.

And the next one and the one after that, all with out hesitation. Stiles climbed the rope ladder that led to the tallest and furthest tree from the group. And even though their voices had all faded significantly as he got further away, he still heard Derek’s booming one.

“Don’t forget to enjoy the view!”
Stiles took a moment and looked around. He could see the tops of the log cabins that made up Beacon of Hope. He saw a winding river that connected the School’s lake with other nearby sources of water. He saw trees that were, if possible, even taller than the one he currently stood on. He saw ridges, cliffs and trails and even mountain peaks. It was wonderful.

As much as he wanted to stay up there all day, Stiles was actually really looking forward to trying the zip line, so he continued.

When he landed on the ground, it was to a crowd of people congratulating him on a job well done. Stiles was beaming. Even Jackson admitted he didn’t think he had it in him and that he was impressed. Lydia didn’t say anything and that was good enough for Stiles.

Jackson went next, and probably beat Stiles’ time as he didn’t stop and sight see. But Lydia stumbled her way through the course and took her time double checking everything. Isaac was probably the only person who took any longer than she did, the thought brought a smile to Stiles’ lips.

“Can I go again?” Derek asked as John announced they were done.

“In life, sometimes you don’t get a second chance, even if it wasn’t your fault it didn’t go right the first time.” John replied, ominously.

“Well, how about in the forest? Can I have a second chance when the opportunity presents itself as available and right in front of me?” Derek asked again.

“I have to go back to my office, I’m afraid, but…” John looked at Melissa.

“You can have a second run if you spot me! I want a go too - it’s been awhile.” The counselor retorted, shocking them all. Melissa was pretty active so it shouldn’t have been a surprise.

“Not fair! If Derek gets a second try, so do I!” Boyd protested.

“I kind of want to see if I can improve my time, too.” Scott timidly admitted.
“Okay, okay, one more go for the three of you.” Melissa agreed. “But, you have to get in line after me!” She added with a grin as she stepped into the harness and suited herself up pretty efficiently.

“You’re coming with me.” John said to Stiles.

“Still?” Stiles protested. “But I completed the course!”

“You did. You did a great job, too. But I want a word with both you and Erica.” The older man replied.

What could Stiles say?

Erica, as it turned out, knew the drill. If you skipped a scheduled group activity, you reported to the administration building for a consequence. She was sitting at the steps and didn’t seem surprised to see John heading that way with Stiles trailing behind.

“You didn’t do it either?” The blond asked as the pair joined her.

Stiles shook his head. “No, I did, but…”

He didn’t know why he was included in this.

They both followed John inside to his office. Stiles saw the mini fridge in the corner. Scott had been right.

“Erica,” The counselor started. “This was the third time you’ve skipped the rope bridge challenge. You also won’t participate in the cliff exercises, or the rope ladder on the trail.”

Erica nodded.

“While I don’t want to force you into doing something you don’t want to do, and I would never expect you to leave this place a seasoned mountain climber, completing your solo trek and reaching Triskelion Point are both requirements for graduation. You’ll need these basic skills for
“I doubt I’ll graduate then.” Erica mumbled.

“Do you expect to stay here forever?” John asked.

“No!” Erica was quick to protest. “I have a family!” Instead of referring to her actual family, as Stiles assumed, she held up her arm, showing off her brand, as she continued, “My boys need me!”

John sighed. “And what of your future? What is after that? You go home, continue where you left off, where do you see yourself in say, three years?”

“Hopefully by then we’re all that’s left and I’ll be running the streets of East St. Louis.” Erica grinned at the prospect.

“All that’s left? There is what, six competing crews in your neighborhood? Where will all those people go?” John asked with a frown.

“We’ll take ‘em out.” Erica said, proudly. She held her head high for emphasis.

Stiles was surprised, and at the same time wasn’t, by her answer.

“You’ll take ‘em out.” John repeated. “You’ll kill them?” He asked.

Stiles eyes bulged at his frankness.

Erica fumbled. “I can protect myself.” She defended.

“I’m sure you can.” John agreed. “But, are you really capable of hurting others? People, just like you and me?”
“They aren’t though!” She protested. “They’re the enemy!”

“I’m not a member of your gang, does that make me your enemy?” John asked.

“No! Of course not.” Erica was quick to agree.

“But what if I joined your rivals? What if Stiles here, did?” John continued to probe. “What then?”

Stiles sighed at being brought into the argument.

Erica remained silent. After a pause, she asked in a defeated tone, “What’s my punishment?”

“Hm. Well, I want you both to wright me a paper. Two thousand words minimum.” The counselor leaned back in his chair.

“Why do I have to?” Stiles asked, outraged.

“The topic is,” John continued, as if he wasn’t interrupted, “My Fears and How To Overcome Them.”

Stiles mouth hung open. Erica actually laughed.

“You already know my fear and you know I can’t overcome it!” She pointed out.

“But you can!” John disagreed. “I’m sure there is a situation where you would climb that mountain, face that fear and conquer it.”

Erica shook her head.

“I want three examples.” John informed them.
“Why do I have to do this too?” Stiles asked, truly angry for being included in this punishment, now.

“I’m going to use the paper to gage your writing skill. Consider it a part of your placement test.” John told the disgruntled teen.

“Can I have a different topic?” Stiles suggested.

John smiled. “No. I think this one will be good for you as well.”

An hour later, Stiles and Erica sat under the gazebo. Erica was scribbling away, no doubt defending her stance and coming up with examples of why she would never climb the metaphorical mountain. Stiles stared at a blank piece of paper.

They were interrupted when a sweaty and over excited Scott came noisily in, stomping his feet on the gazebo floor, trying to get their attention.

“You should really try it next time!” He told Erica. “It’s so much fun!”

“What’s your punishment?” Jackson asked as he, too, joined them.

“We have to write a paper.” Stiles told them.

“We?” Derek asked with a furrowed brow as he and Boyd made their way over. The others must have left the rope course earlier.

“John wants to use it to gage my writing level, I guess,” Stiles told them.

Jackson peered at his blank paper. “Doesn’t look like it’s very high? You do know how to write don’t you?”
Stiles sighed.

Erica scrambled to block her chicken scrawl from view.

“What’s the topic?” Boyd asked, shyly. He was trying to break the ice between himself and Erica. She put down her notebook and leaned into him. Apparently, all was forgotten and forgiven.

“My fears and how to over come them,” Erica told him, sadly.

“What, no fears?” Scott teased Stiles as he looked at his blank paper.

“Just not sure how to over come the one that comes to mind,” Stiles mumbled. “I could sure use a cigarette.”

“I’m working on it!” Scott said, brightly. “Trying to smuggle some in with the pantry delivery.” He said with a wistful look.

“How are you going to do that?” Jackson asked, doubtful. “I can’t see the guy doing anything for you - unless he’s gay!” He smirked.

“He’s actually really nice. I’m trying to work him into a friendship!” Scott informed them all.

“People don’t do something for nothing, you’ll have to offer him something. What do you have to offer him?” Jackson completed the image with an obscene gesture. “You should have come to me. I hooked Danny up with those shrooms I found just last week! No need to resort to such drastic measures to get your fix.”

Stiles felt increasingly uncomfortable.

And it must have shown because Jackson turned to him. “You said you were picked up after running away and living on the streets for a couple of months, I’m sure you’re no stranger to these types of exchanges!” The graphic gesture was over-the-top, now.
Stiles paled. He had never settled for so less as a couple of smokes, but still, should he admit to being paid for sex? Jackson took his silence as victory and kept going.

“You did, didn’t you?” Jackson accused. “You’re a little twink, aren’t you? That’s why you’re so damn skinny!”

Stiles snapped. He wasn’t sure what it was in him that gave him the courage to do what he did next, but he just felt he had to put Jackson in his place. He slid off his bench onto his knees and scooted towards the blond, who was still laughing uncontrollably. Derek and Scott wore similar expressions of disbelief at the action. Jackson stopped laughing abruptly and looked a little frightened at the small teen that now knelt at his feet.

“Is this what you think I did for a smoke when I was homeless?” Stiles said in a sultry voice looking up at his tormentor, while fluttering his eyelashes. “Do you think this is what I was reduced to?” He asked again, boldly fondling the older teen’s upper thigh in a way he knew men liked.

Stiles bent his back just enough so that his face lined up perfectly with Jackson’s pants’ bulge and he tilted his head at the completely freaked out person above. “Do you like me down here?” He asked, making sure his warm breath was felt.

Jackson wiggled free from the touch and backed away, looking horrified. He huffed and left, presumably to take care of his growing erection.

Stiles laughed. “He’ll probably think he’s gay now.”

No one joined him. He looked up and saw matching looks of shock on Scott, Boyd, and Derek’s faces. Erica looked more sympathetic and understanding.

“It was a joke, you guys got that, right?” Stiles attempted to explain himself.

Erica offered him a knowing smile as she nodded. “He will definitely be questioning his sexuality, now!”

Scott visibly relaxed with that statement. “What does that say about Lydia?”
“I don’t know, probably that he likes his partners small, no matter who they are.” Boyd added, still a tad unnerved.

Stiles knew that any man, gay or straight or in between, would show some interest at the inappropriate way he touched Jackson. To be honest, Stiles would be offended if he didn’t. But apparently that knowledge was learned with experience and his group mates weren’t aware of it yet.

Derek raised an eyebrow at Boyd’s statement. “What does that say about him, then?”

“Anything to make himself appear larger.” Stiles added, catching on.

They all shared a laugh at Jackson’s expense. It was that noise that caught Allison and Lydia’s attention as they strolled past.

“Oh, what are you boys laughing about?” Lydia asked as she unhooked her arm with Allison and wrapped it around Derek’s bicep instead.

Erica pointedly cleared her throat.

“It was nothing,” Scott said more to Allison. “Just Stiles being immature.”

“What?!” Stiles balked.

“Stiles was just telling us about his time on the streets!” Erica said lightly with a wink in Stiles direction.

Lydia frowned. “I don’t see what the big deal is. He wasn’t wanted at home or whatever and chose to leave? Anyone can do that, I think it’s harder to stay and face your issues head on?”

“Like you did?” Scott asked while mimicking slicing his wrist.
Allison shook her head and he quickly stopped.

Lydia sighed dramatically and leaned into Derek, “I messed up, that’s why I’m here.”

“Yeah, and you’re still messing up every time you run into the bathroom after lunch!” Erica accused.

“I’m planning my sweet sixteen, even from up here! Have to fit into my dress!” The redhead responded quickly.

The focus was off of Stiles, now, so he didn’t even bother defending himself.

Scott chuckled. “I guess you can say I messed up, that’s why I was sent here. Got busted dealing in school, again. My dad had to miss a pretty important meeting to come pick me up for that one.” He smirked at the thought. “He’s like the lead on some new campaign to get controlled substances out of high school, and here I am, slinging the stuff right under his nose. He couldn’t wait to get rid of me up here.” He shook his head.

“You all know my mom is terrified I’m going to follow in my brother’s footsteps. He’s actually serving a six-month sentence in state, right now.” Erica piped up.

Boyd sighed. “During my last one on one, Melissa asked if I felt I was ready to place my flag on Triskelion Point yet. You know I did my solo in the spring. I can go home after that - go to a real high school.” He admitted, softly.

“What!? You can’t leave me!” Erica protested.

“I don’t even know what to put on my flag yet, I mean, yeah, I get it, there was nothing I could have done to save my sister. My parents, don’t blame me, I get all of that, but like, how do I represent that growth.”

“So, you can leave here? If you do everything they tell you?” Stiles asked. He wasn’t sure how that information made him feel. “I figured I was stuck here till I turned eighteen.”
“Some students are,” Allison volunteered. “Some don’t have a home to go back to. Isaac is a ward of the state now, after they arrested his dad. Plus, I’m probably not going anywhere, since my dad works here and I live just down the road.”

“I shouldn’t even be here!” Derek complained. “My stupid uncle didn’t know what to do with me, so he placed me up here, but my sister’s going to get me out. This is ruining my chances for a scholarship, no scout is going to come up here.”

Lydia agreed quickly. Stiles looked away. He shouldn’t be crushing on Lydia’s flirting partner, especially because it sounded like Derek wasn’t even going to be around for much longer.

“I don’t know, man.” Scott said. “Have you like, even talked about the fire? That was really traumatic and you mentioned it in group, like, once.”

“Shut up, Scott!” Derek roared. Surprising them all, but none more so than Lydia who stumbled back as he jerked his arm free to storm off.

He didn’t make it very far when an emergency alarm erupted across the campus. Everyone stilled.

“What is that?” Stiles shouted over the noise.

Scott looked at him with large confused eyes.

Erica had her hands over her ears.

“Come on.” Boyd told them all. “Emergency. We have to report to Melissa.”

Each group met with their counselor at their designated location. It took a while, and if it was a drill, they surely would have failed, but eventually all the teens made it where they were supposed to be. And the beeping finally ceased. Thank goodness Boyd had known where to go, because none of her other students seemed to.
“Okay.” Melissa called once her radio beeped indicating they were cleared to explain. “We have a real situation here; a little girl is missing.” The group looked at each other, confused. She continued, “She went fishing with her father this morning. He took a short nap while they were waiting for the line to bite and when he woke up she was gone.”

Stiles snorted causing both Lydia and Allison to give him an irritated look.

“Here is her picture. She’s been missing for approximately an hour.” Melissa kept on going as she passed around her cell phone with the vet’s Facebook page pulled up.

That was very daring of her, because half the teens here would kill for a phone of their own.

“We’re going to circle the mountain. Mine and Parrish’s group have the north side. Let’s split up for more coverage. If you do find her, blow into the whistle, but even if you don’t, we are meeting with John in approximately two hours at the ridge. Allison, your dad is heading off the efforts on the south and eastern sides, if you’d like, you can join him?” She asked.

“No, I’m good here. Actually, my dad has taught me some decent tracking skills, I might be able to help!” The brunette offered enthusiastically.

“Okay, let’s split in to teams, I’ll take the boys.” Melissa started to say, but looked at the uneven numbers.

She couldn’t trust Jackson to keep on task and wanted to supervise him, but she didn’t feel it was fair to send the three girls off by themselves, either. Allison was trustworthy enough, and honestly Lydia and Erica could manage their own as long as there was no climbing involved. But a fourth or even fifth set of eyes would be better for their task.

She couldn’t send Boyd, because he was not allowed to be left unsupervised with Erica as the two were known to be dating. Melissa wasn’t sure if Lydia was dating Derek or just always trailing behind him, but she didn’t want to risk it. She thought that it would probably be safe enough to send Scott and Isaac as Allison was told specifically by her dad that she was too young to date, but what would Chris do if he found out about that later? That left Stiles.

She was a little uncomfortable asking the kid to go off on his own on his second day at Beacon of Hope, but he was the better option. Allison must have noticed her hesitation because she piped up
and said that the girls could handle themselves.

Lydia gave Stiles a death glare before flicking her eyes to Derek; a warning to stay away?

“Stiles,” Melissa called. “You go with the girls.”

“Ha!” Jackson didn’t miss a beat. “You’re with the girls, twink!”

Melissa scolded him before making sure everyone knew what to do and they went in their separate directions.

Allison started to explain how to track deer or other wildlife while hunting.

As soon as they were out of ear shot, Lydia rounded on Stiles.

“You stay away from Derek! He doesn’t like you!” She singsonged.

Stiles didn’t have it in him to argue, choosing instead to ask if this type of thing happened often.

“First time I’ve ever gone looking for someone. A little girl no less, I bet she’s scared,” Erica offered.

“There’s probably a reason she ran away. Her dad seemed creepy to me, too friendly,” Stiles muttered.

“How can you say that?” Lydia asked. “He is the nicest guy ever! Came up here and saved that deer last year.”
“I’m just saying…” Stiles replied.

“Just saying what?” Lydia shrieked.

“Guys!” Allison interrupted them. “I was trying to teach you how to spot deer tracks.”

Stiles rolled his eyes causing Lydia to shove him. She was easily the smallest of the group but she still managed to move Stiles back several feet and he tripped, landing sprawled out on the forest floor. That was sure to leave a bruise.

Allison leaned down to offer him a hand up but, Lydia blocked her.

“He was being mean.” She told her friend. “We have to find the girl.”

“You were both being mean!” Erica informed them all. “Let’s keep going.”

Stiles stood up, gingerly rubbing the back of his thigh.

Over an hour later, Stiles and Lydia were still bickering. Both barely even looked for the girl. Erica would periodically call Gracie’s name and Allison kept up her hunt. One time, when Erica was being particularly vocal, Allison accused her of disturbing the wildlife before she remembered they were looking for a little girl and not dinner.

“This is pointless.” Stiles complained. “Why are we wasting our time looking for this kid, isn’t there professionals or something they can call?”

“Wouldn’t you want everyone looking for you, if you were lost?” Lydia asked Stiles, incredulously.

Stiles huffed. “No! I wish I had just wandered off into the woods to never return when I was seven, like this stupid girl!”
Lydia looked horrified. “How could you say such a thing?!”

“Easily,” Stiles fired back. “I just did!”

“She’s alone and scared!” Lydia tried to reason with him again. “Her dad is probably so worried!”

Stiles threw his hands up. “He wasn’t so worried when he decided to lose her! I doubt he even cares, just has to put an act on.”

“Stiles!” Lydia stopped dead. “Just because you have horrible parents, doesn’t mean the rest of us do!”

“My Mom was awesome!” Stiles saw red. “She was great! Perfect! Way better than yours, who apparently only calls to make sure you’re still top of the class and haven’t put on too much weight!”

“What would you know about it, you’ve literally been here a day!” Lydia spat back.

“Guys!” Allison tried to calm them down again.

“The kid is better off,” Stiles mumbled as he sat on a log. “I’m taking a break.”

That seemed to be the first thing Lydia agreed with him on when she plopped down on the other side and propped up her feet. Allison sighed and joined them.

“I’m going ahead.” Erica announced as she looked at the pathetic search party she was assigned. “We have…” she checked her watch. “Twenty minutes until we meet up with the others, don’t be too far behind.”

“Do you all have a watch?” Stiles grumbled. “Is that like dress code? I need a phone to tell the time. I’m going to be late to everything.”
“I do have my phone, but I don’t bring it on campus. It’s the rules.” Allison brightly stated and held up a black sporty band on her wrist.

“Why don’t you have a watch?” Lydia sat up straighter to ask.

“Never did.” Stiles shrugged.

Lydia glanced down at her Tiffany & Co teal watch guiltily. “There is a main clock in the hall and commons, and in the office buildings and in the classrooms.”

“I get it,” Stiles snapped.

“I don’t think we have one in our dorm. I haven’t been in the boys’ much, not allowed technically, but I’m sure you can ask Melissa to put one in.” Lydia replied, not rising to meet Stiles’ temper. “We all use our watches for an alarm, so, I don’t know, maybe Scott can like, wake you up in the morning, so you’re not late again.”

Stiles gave her a searching look. Lydia was being genuine. He nodded, indicating that he would talk to Scott.

“Good. Are you two friends now?” Allison huffed. “Can we keep going?”

“Oh no!” Stiles replied. “My feet are killing me!”

“Yes, I’m not moving for another ten minutes, at least!” Lydia agreed.

Allison rolled her eyes at the two of them.
Erica’s head hurt from all of her companions’ arguing. She was hungry as they had all missed lunch for the search. She was also tired, annoyed, and frankly, she just wanted to sit down and finish her stupid essay and be done with the day.

She sort of understood Stiles’ point, if the little girl didn’t go and get herself lost, she could be back in her dorm, full, and significantly less sweaty.

That’s when she heard it. Someone was crying, not terribly loud, but sniveling all the same. Erica ran towards the sound, heart pounding, because she just knew that had to be the little girl.

She broke into a clearing and could tell the crying sound was near, but she still didn’t see the girl.

“Gracie!” She called for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

“H-here, up here!” A terrified squeak replied.

Erica looked up. The little girl was clinging to the side of a cliff, desperately. She had branches sticking out of her hair and leaves clung to her dress. She looked like she had been missing for days, not hours. But most of all, she was so small.

Erica wanted to vomit. How did she get up there? Why was she up there? Why did Erica have to be the one who found her?

“Okay! Okay, just don’t move!” She called pointlessly to the little girl who had probably been stuck there, not moving this entire time.

Erica blew her whistle. She called for Allison, Stiles, and Lydia. No one came. She desperately tried Melissa’s name and even John’s. No answer.

“Help!” The little girl called. “I’m slipping!”

Erica freaked out a bit. “Okay, don’t do that. Just, stay right there.”
She blew her whistle again. “Anyone? Literally, anyone else?” Erica called.

The little girl cried harder.

Erica had to psych herself out. She could do this! Tentatively, Erica approached the rocks and looked up. Gracie was only about twenty-five feet from the ground. She would do it, Erica would make the climb to rescue her.

“Okay!” Erica called out.

She placed a foot on the closest hole and then she took her other foot and tested her weight on the rock she chose. It didn’t crumble at the pressure so she put her full weight on it and moved her first foot just a little bit higher.

Erica took a deep breath. She was fully off the ground, now, she just had to keep going.

It went painstakingly slow, but Erica made her way to the top. She looked into Gracie’s large chocolate brown eyes, and saw that the girl was shaking. She realized that she, herself, no longer was.

“Okay!” Erica said. “I’m here, I’m up here. How are we going to get down?”

She said it more to herself, but Gracie took the initiative and flung herself on to Erica’s back. Erica’s scream included a string of profanity that Gracie was sure to never forget. But the blonde teen managed to adjust herself quickly enough to account for the extra weight.

She took a deep breath and looked down for a foot hole. She didn’t dare take her eyes away from the rock wall, not wanting to see the ground below.

One step at a time, she made her way back onto the glorious earth. And then made a silent vow to never leave it again.

Her watch told her that if she hustled, she would meet the group on time. Gracie stayed put on her back, and the two took off.
Erica heard the crowd of disappointed people before she saw them. Everyone was there, even Lydia, Stiles, and Allison. The three of whom looked like they were being told off by Melissa, probably for losing Erica.

She let Gracie slide down her back.

“Daddy!” The little girl called when she saw the vet. “Daddy!”

“Oh thank god!” Deaton exclaimed. “Gracie! You saved her!” He scooped his little girl up into her arms. “You saved her! Thank you!” He said again to a blushing Erica who was not accustomed to everyone’s attention being on her.

“Looks like you did well!” John greeted his student and pointed to her scraped up elbow. As he had spent most of his life running around these woods, he recognized the rock injury for what it was. “So, who won? You or the mountain?” He asked her as he threw an arm over her shoulder.

Erica smiled.

Everyone gathered around the reunited family, congratulating Erica on finding and rescuing Gracie. It was quite a joyous scene.

Except.

Stiles sat away from the celebration, still nursing his bruised thigh. He couldn’t help but roll his eyes at how ridiculous everyone was acting. Erica had returned a lost girl to her father. There were so many other kids out there that were still lost or worse. He didn’t understand why saving this one kid was so great.

He couldn’t take it. Seeing the way the little girl’s face lit up every time her father leaned in for another hug. He had to look away. He honestly wanted to leave, but he didn’t really know his way
back to campus yet. So he sat there with his hands balled up in his pockets, and waited while everyone else was having the time of their life.

As a reward, John let his students have a barbecue. There was a roaring fire, and it mixed with the summer air nicely. The food was great, Stiles didn’t mind finishing his plate of homemade potato salad and chicken.

Melissa even turned up an hour later with enough ice cream for everyone. She was loudly telling the other teachers that she wiped out the entire town’s supplies. Erica was continuously being congratulated, and John had even told her she could change the subject of her essay to ‘How She Overcame Her Fear’.

Erica grumbled that she shouldn’t even have to write it, but John didn’t agree. Stiles’ subject didn’t change, which was a shame because he still had a blank page.

The celebration continued all evening, but curfew remained in place at nine, and nothing, not even the miracle of finding Gracie alive, was going to extend that.

Later that night when the moon was high in the sky and Stiles was sure his dorm mates were all asleep, he snuck out. The grounds looked bigger, somehow, in the dark. Maybe it was the long shadows cast across the yard, or perhaps because no one was walking around. Either way, the vastness was somehow both inviting and daunting at the same time. He wanted nothing more than to be swallowed up by this place, to become so ingrained in the wooden halls and forest classrooms that he could never get out. He was also terrified at the prospect. These people were strange. They smiled too much, they laughed too much and worst of all, they shared too much. Was there a place for the real him here?

Somehow, he didn’t think so.

Stiles found himself sitting on the dock by the lake before he even knew where he was going. He had brought his blank essay with him. His fear. Only one came to mind, and it definitely didn’t have a place here.

He thought about his mother. What would she think of him, now? What would she say if he told her his biggest fear was her husband. What advice would she tell him to conquer that fear?
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

4/3/18 Update: Beta Read by fairyfey, many thanks for all your hard work! Check them out on tumblr @gayglitterbabe

Update 5/11/18: John’s son now has a name thanks to Keely McDonald! His name is Brandon and there is some backstory for him in Ch. 6 comments!

Episode 3

John found himself in his office crunching the numbers for the tenth time that morning. He couldn’t make the budget fit. Somewhere in the last month they had hit that tipping point; the number of government funded students exceeded the private tuition. How could he have allowed this to happen?

Chris had volunteered to assist in the financial department last year. It was actually a task formerly held by his wife, but as her health declined, John stepped up and eventually so did Chris. Over time he saw the profit margin decrease further and further. But this month, they were officially operating in the red.

One month wouldn’t break them. They did have a sizable savings for emergency repairs and other necessities, after all. And, he was sure paying his staff fit in that category. But he didn’t like the number he was seeing when he checked how many months this could continue without a solution.

Perhaps he could have Coach Finstock take a look. The man did double as their economics teacher after all. With classes starting back up last week, however, he wasn’t sure if he could afford to pay the man to serve as teacher, coach, and financial overseer. He’d have to ask him.

John shuffled through his papers to see the man’s class schedule. He had Stiles in class right now, and that was perfect, because John had yet to put the newer student on shuns for his blatant disregard to fulfill an assigned task. He was also due for a solo session as he was about to hit his thirty-day mark since joining Beacon of Hope.
John glanced down at his numbers again. Stiles was the student that threw them off. His gut clenched, because he knew the kid had his demons. He saw it in his eyes. He suspected a recent traumatic experience when he first arrived. But, the teen wasn’t opening up about it during group, and while he talked a little about his time on the streets during the one and ones, especially with Melissa, it was really just scratching the surface. As with most of his kids, the true issues lay buried beneath.

Some of the more senior students worked in the office, for experience, and sometimes students were assigned office duties as a consequence. He wasn’t surprised to see Jackson polishing the furniture when he looked up. The boy could be incredibly disruptive during class if he was bored, which happened more often than not.

John quickly wrote a note for Finstock and called Jackson over to retrieve it.

“You have less than five minutes until class lets out, how fast can you run, Mr. Whittemore?” John asked cockily.

Jackson broke out in to a smile. “Challenge accepted! Where to?”

“Give this to Coach and you’re free to go after, but uh, no more talking during lessons unless called upon, okay?” John knew what a feat that would be.

Jackson’s file said he had an attention deficit disorder, and he was heavily medicated for it during his youth. Since coming here and clearing his system of all the drugs he was taking prescribed and otherwise, he has seemed to have a much easier time staying on task. He was doing better in school too; the big exception was in classes he shared with Lydia. Jackson liked the limelight, and if she was nearby, he would do just about anything to maintain it. This time it had been mimicking Melissa. After several rounds of explaining mitosis with an echo, Jackson found himself being asked to assist the office staff for the remainder of the class. He had a counseling session with his irritated teacher that evening, so it was really poor timing all around.

The snarky teen took off at a jog.

Stiles sat in class with a quiet Isaac, frustrated Scott, and a very confused Erica. He had been
fortunate enough to be placed in some of the Juniors’ classes with the others. He wasn’t sure where his inappropriate essay would land him, so sharing English with the older students, namely Derek, was a pleasant surprise. Economics, however, was completely new to him and he found himself with the other sophomores listening to the most eccentric teachers, ever.

Coach, as most people called him, was one of those teachers that preferred to give examples. Except his examples were often over the top and unrealistic. No business owner should go into business only selling lacrosse equipment. Stiles paid attention regardless. He had no clue what the future held for him, but he was sure it would involve paying for stuff. So, somewhere in the lesson of throwing quarters into a cup, he was bound to retain something.

Risk verses reward. There was a lot to be said about that concept, and as a runaway who knew how to stretch a dollar, he was very interested in learning about making his money work for him. Coach Finstock had said that over the next month, they would invest fake money into an imaginary stock market, using the real numbers. So they were given several newspapers to comb through and asked to break off into pairs and pick a company to back by the end of the lesson. They would follow that company’s progress over the next week and could choose to continue with it, or sell out and invest in a different one next class. At the end of the month the group with the most fake money would win a prize.

Scott looked apologetically towards Stiles as he passed by his table to sit with Isaac. Erica wasn’t following along with the lesson anymore and missed the students breaking off into pairs completely. In the end, she was the only one left without a partner, besides Stiles.

He grabbed a paper and joined her.

“I don’t know what we are supposed to be doing.” She admitted, looking at their excited classmates.

“We just have to choose a company from this list that we think will do well.” Stiles told her, looking at the NYSE page. It was intimidating.

Erica scanned the list quickly and told Stiles to choose.

Stiles protested and she looked again. “I can’t read these - what the hell is DIS? Dis what?” She asked, frustrated.
Stiles took the paper from her and read again, and using a reference chart, he told her it was Disney’s stock.

“Okay, great, let’s go with that. Have you ever been to Disney?” She asked.

“Yeah, actually. My Mom took me once, just after she remarried and right before we found out she was sick. It was great - I met Donald Duck.” Stiles admitted, freely.

Erica stared up at him. “Your Mom really was awesome, huh?” She questioned.

“Yeah, the best.” Stiles agreed.

Unfortunately, that was when Jackson came striding in amongst the pairs of students to deliver a note to Coach Finstock.

“Hey, twink!” He greeted lowly as he passed by.

Erica rolled her eyes.

“Stiles!” Finstock called just a moment later. “You’re coming with me after class.”

Several students teasingly said, ‘ooohhhed’ in perfect unison.

“Man, what did you do?” Erica asked, with genuine concern.

“I have no idea,” Stiles admitted.

“So, Disney?” She questioned.

“Yeah, sounds fun.” He replied, sarcastically, earning an eye roll from his classmate.
Coach led Stiles to the main office where John was waiting for them both.

“I hope this is about the boys’ basketball team getting to play with the local schools - they’re good enough.” Coach Finstock started as soon as he was within hearing range. “We could certainly host a cross country match out here, too. My team competes in the yearly marathon, but they are worthy of taking on kids their own age. They are talented, and we promised Hale last year we would look into it.”

John nodded along. “The school board is still a little hesitant. Most of the parents are financial backers of Devenford Prep. That school holds a lot of records, and I’m sure that’s what it comes down to, they’re afraid of the competition. But they are arguing against the safety of their students in the presence of ours.” He glanced at Stiles and then showed the older man into his office. “Give me just a minute, kiddo.” He added, indicating a seat Stiles could take while he waited.

Stiles cringed at the nickname. It didn’t go unnoticed.

Shutting the door did little to block out the adult’s conversation and Stiles heard everything.

“It’s not fair to the kids, they have to earn their way onto my teams with decent grades and heavy group participation. What are we teaching them if they work for it and it amounts to nothing?” Coach protested, loudly.

It was easy for Stiles to imagine how his hair would wobble with each shake of his head.

“I know, I know, I agree.” John said, attempting to placate him. “We teach our kids if they work hard they can achieve their dreams and yet the world is constantly knocking them down without even giving them a chance.”

“Those parents are pathetic!” Finstock roared. “No backbone.”

“I agree, completely, I really do.” John assured, obviously trying to keep the hot-tempered man on task, “But I actually asked you in here today for a different reason. Since Victoria passed away, I’ve been keeping the books, I was hoping you could double check some calculations for me?”
Stiles was bored before the senior counselor finished his sentence. It was quiet for some time.

“These are all correct.” Coach said at long last. “I’m still getting my paycheck, right? Because honestly, the gruel you feed us here is bad enough.”

“You’ll be paid, don’t worry. I need to know where I’m supposed to correct this mistake. Where did it go south?” John asked concerned.

A moment later Finstock replied, “Here, he threw you off.” There was a small pause in which Stiles was sure they were looking at a roster. “I’d suggest no more state funded students until you have at least three tuition based ones, or raise your cost on the current ones. You could always go after the government for more per student, they haven’t accounted for inflation in years.”

“I know. I’d like to draft a letter. I started toying with that idea, but I don’t want them to feel we can’t handle the charges, it’s usually between us and juvey.” John said, seriously.

“Any kid close to leaving?” Coach asked hopeful, “I mean this one is quiet, sure, but he seems to be respectful enough, is that why you called him here too?”

Stiles instantly became alert.

“No, there is more to his story than he’s sharing, I know it.” John admitted with a sigh. “Sometimes the ones with the thickest walls have the most to hide. I’m just not sure if we’re equipped to help, he’s so unwilling to open up, but I’ll crack away at that wall, one layer at a time.”

Stiles sighed, heavily. Why couldn’t this guy let his truths stay buried behind that concrete?

“Ah, nothing a couple of suicide drills couldn’t fix, I always say.” Coach added, lightly.

“And, that is why you stick to the court and classroom!” John laughed. “Look, I’d hate to impede you further, but do you mind taking over finances, maybe until I can find someone else willing to work for gruel.”
Finstock laughed as well and agreed.

He opened the door. “Seriously, we need to prove to Devenford Prep our teams can cut it, too.”

“I’m working on it.” John tried to sound hopeful.

Coach looked curiously at Stiles before heading off to his lunch.

“Thanks for waiting.” John began, motioning for Stiles to join him. “Two things: You’ve been here exactly thirty days on Thursday, so I’d like to have a chat with you, but also, we’ve yet to discuss your essay.”

The older man looked amused, but that didn’t prevent Stiles from dreading the backlash of that particular decision.

As usual, Stiles remained quiet. Still unsure of his place in these situations.

“So, thirty days,” John repeated. “That’s a big deal. How do you feel you’ve come in that time frame?”

Stiles instantly felt guilty. He hadn’t improved at all. Was that an issue? “Um, I like my classes.” He replied, lamely.

John’s eyebrows shot up. “Do you now? That might be a first.”

“No, not really,” Stiles admitted.

John huffed out a laugh. “Well, that’s honesty. So, do you mind if I point out strides I’ve seen you make?”

Stiles nodded, because really what other choice did he have? He expected the counselor to pull out a piece of paper and read from some prepared notes, giving him something scripted from a psychology book, so it was surprising when the older man leaned in earnestly to continue.
“You’ve raised up against several challenges I’ve thrown your way. You conquered the ropes course on your second day, learned to properly scale a cliff, even if it was a small one and went kayaking for the first time.” Stiles attempted to interrupt, but John silenced him as he continued. “I didn’t say you were perfect at it, but you did give it a try without hesitation. You’ve completed several day hikes and even successfully put together your tent for the overnight on your first try. That’s a feat most here cannot claim. School just started, and so far, you are doing very well.” He continued. “But, most of all, it’s been thirty or twenty-seven days, if we’re getting technical, and you haven’t tried to run away once.”

Stiles was all ready to protest his kayaking skills or even the fact that he was doing well in class, because he did have a tendency to argue and get sidetracked sometimes, but that last sentence threw him off. Of course he wouldn’t run from here, where would he go? As they told him on day one this place was miles from civilization, and it was safe here. He was safe here.

“Any particular reason? Usually habitual runaways try again, they might have a significant other they want to get back to, or a close circle of friends and daring lifestyle they are unwilling to give up. Where did you go when you left home?”

That was probably the most pressing John had ever been with him. And maybe he was simply caught off guard enough and that’s was why Stiles answered as honestly as he did. Or perhaps, because he now had that lingering feeling that he wasn’t doing enough to show that he wanted to be here.

“I never had a destination, mostly avoiding the last place I was at, as I was arrested there, you know? But when I was fourteen I kind of got mixed up with this one guy. He had a couple of us reporting to hotel rooms, it was great, you know, because we were given a place to stay when we weren’t working, and I was on the younger side, so most people ignored me. I would have gone back there, but when I was busted so was everyone else and uh, not everyone made it out I guess,” Stiles rambled, rolling his eyes at himself. “Sorry, I didn’t…”

“Don’t apologize.” John quickly assured. “I want you to share these things.”

Stiles blushed slightly, anyway.

“I know your chosen profession, you were so young when you first ran away, …thirteen?” John said at the same time Stiles spoke.
“Eleven.” Stiles’ eyes bulged as he realized he had admitted to something that wasn’t in his file.

“Oh. Oh, okay, sorry, I’ll update that. So, mind telling me what you were thinking that first time?” John wasn’t used to faltering, but eleven years old and on the streets? He was so young! Taught the wrong way of doing things, right from the get go.

“Yes.” Stiles said simply.

“Yes, what?” John pressed, but he recognized that the easiness of the conversation had passed.

“I mind.” Stiles replied calmly. “It doesn’t matter does it? I was caught less than a month in, that first time and I didn’t know what I was doing back then, spent two weeks starving, really.”

“And do you know what you are doing now?” John asked.

Stiles smirked and cocked his head to the side. “Yeah, I do, I’m actually quite good, know my audience - know exactly what to say.”

John grimaced, this kid didn’t even look fifteen he was so small. His audience shouldn’t have existed. “If you could leave here, is that what you’d do?”

Stiles thought his response would have thrown the other man enough. He was disappointed that the conversation was continuing. “Well, I guess I would right now, people don’t hire kids for much else. But if I have a high school diploma, I could, I don’t know, get a real job maybe.”

“Is that something you want?” John asked. “A diploma? A real job?”
Stiles shrugged. “You do give those out here, right? This is an actual school even if we’re all freaks?”

“Yes, Stiles, it is a real school. Although no one here is a freak. Everyone has hardships, we are just here to help you guys get back on track.”

Stiles raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

“What is your biggest hardship?” John continued.

Stiles instantly thought about his mother leaving him. It had been really hard to watch her memories deteriorate. In the end, she didn’t even recognize him and thought her current husband was her ex. She yelled sometimes, too. Tried to attack him once. Stiles was in tears and back then Simon was too. They had that in common. He started sleeping in Stiles’ room because his mom would flip out when she woke up next to a stranger.

“It’s okay if you’re not ready to share them yet.” John said, interrupting Stiles’ thoughts. “The streets can be harsh, we know that.”

Stiles looked up with round honey colored eyes that were on the brink of tears. “Yeah,” he agreed halfheartedly.

“Okay, so thirty days usually means an extended call home, you can even skype. But you seem to constantly be losing your media privileges, so I guess it would be your first call home.” John continued with a knowing smile. “For a student that hasn’t caused much trouble, you do seem to lose your privileges quite a lot.”

Stiles didn’t have a reasonable response.

“Don’t you miss the internet? Most kids go through withdrawals!” The counselor tried to joke.

Stiles did. He used to get buried in learning about different things, one page leading to another. He did have friends, too. Some were street kids that were barely online, but also others from his old school. He noticed they hung out with him less and less as he pulled further away. He wasn’t even
allowed at Joe’s house anymore, since he was arrested. But they still messaged sometimes on Twitter.

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed, reluctantly.

“Tonight’s group is mandatory, so maybe you will get your first taste of the freedom in the media room, soon. And, your call with your step dad, you can take in any of our offices, if you like. I’ll sit in if you want or wait outside, just let me know.” John continued.

Stiles felt numb just hearing his counselor refer to the monster. He managed a weak nod.

“Now, that essay you wrote.” Stiles looked up and was relieved to see the other man was smiling as he continued. “How did you manage four pages on the history of circumcision without google?”

Punishment turned out to be chopping wood that evening after dinner. Not too bad, and at least he didn’t have to write about his fears, he thought happily as he made his way to the mess hall for a late lunch. Luckily, they were still serving it, and his group were all there at their usual table.

“Thought you skipped to keep up your bone-like appearance?” Scott asked as Stiles sat down on his open side.

The two had really started to get along, now that the other teen was given permission to wake him up with a pillow to his face every morning. It beat being late.

“One month session with John.” Stiles replied and everyone nodded knowingly.

“So, Erica was just telling us you guys went with Disney on the stock exchange. We chose Lydia’s father’s company. Her and Derek won last year with that one.” Isaac uncharacteristically started a conversation.

“Oh?” Stiles said. “Well, good luck then, what did you guys win?” He asked Derek as he and Lydia barely talked.
Stiles had tried to back off, let the redhead enjoy her time fawning over the slightly stubbly teen, but the spoiled princess wasn’t having it. She would constantly make snide remarks when no one else was around to hear, and looked confused and offended when Stiles was cold towards her in front of the others. Stiles really wasn’t one to back down, but Lydia wasn’t either and she was so accustomed to getting what she wanted. It made Stiles’ blood boil just thinking about it.

Derek smiled. “I actually had a visit from Laura. It was the last time I saw her, since she didn’t get to come for parents’ weekend, so it was really cool.” He gave Lydia a genuine side hug. The two didn’t let go afterwards, either.

“I got to go home, because my parents couldn’t make it here. It was great. They usually let us have a yearly visit home for good behavior, but this was an extra one.” She said as she tentatively let her hand fall next to Derek’s.

Stiles watched closely, to see if it became handholding or not.

Isaac shifted uncomfortably, obviously he wouldn’t have family to see, if he and Scott won. Stiles couldn’t help but think he would flat out deny such a prize, himself. His teammate had other ideas, however.

“Ohhh!” Erica shrieked happily, “Please, we have to win now! I haven’t seen my family in forever!”

Stiles didn’t open his mouth, afraid he would disagree.

“Your parents came last spring, though, didn’t they?” Scott asked. It was well known across campus that his dad didn’t show for the occasion.

“Yes, but everyone else!” Erica said brushing off the others. “My abuela and my sisters!”

“How many little Reyes’ are there running around, anyway?” Jackson asked. He was unusually somber, but that was probably due to how close his crush was sitting with someone else.

“There’s six of us total. My brother, me, and four little sisters.” Erica replied.
Boyd, who was talking with Allison about a history project they were doing together, stopped to look at his girlfriend.

“Do you like having a large family?” He asked. “It was just my sister and myself, now it’s just me.” he added under his breath.

“I do!” She leaned in closer to her boyfriend. “Sure, we fight like crazy - Elena gave me a black eye with a hair brush once - but nothing beats a full house on Christmas morning.” She looked wistful.

“What about you, newbie? Any siblings you never mention when you refuse to talk in group?” Scott asked, nudging Stiles.

Stiles shook his head honestly, “I kind of wish I had an older brother or sister, somewhere else to go would have been nice.” Stiles thought about what the monster might have done to his hypothetical brother, and then shook his head. “Maybe not.”

“We had a big family too.” Derek said to no one in particular. “My uncle shipped me off here, almost right away. It would be odd to see the house without everyone in it.”

Abruptly, Derek stood up and walked away without an explanation.

Lydia jumped up soon after, giving Stiles a death glare, before she trailed after.

“He doesn’t talk about his family much.” Boyd told Stiles, unnecessarily.

“So, are they like, official?” Stiles couldn’t help but ask as his eyes trailed after Lydia.

Possibly because he misinterpreted his intentions behind the question, or maybe because he just couldn’t help but rebound to his usual bully-like self, Jackson wasted no time resuming his usual torment. “Twink, what do you care? You’re gay right, or does that not matter when you’re on the receiving end?” He grinned at his insult.
Stiles had had it. The pressures of keeping his secret while appearing interested in bettering himself. The worry over this pending call to the monster. The fact that his economics’ partner was suddenly very determined to win a visit with her family. On top of that he just wasn’t going to take any crap from this loud mouth about his sexual orientation.

“Fuck you, Jackson,” Stiles said in a low voice, jaw set.

“Those are some challenging words, faggot.” Jackson said through clenched teeth. He stood, towering threateningly over the smaller teen.

Stiles wasn’t backing down. He stood too, and was relieved to realize that despite his slighter stature, he was almost as tall as the older student.

“Hey,” Scott said quickly trying to pull their attention.

“What?” Jackson snapped.

“Teachers. Calm it, you two.” Allison said in a hushed whisper.

Her father and Melissa both made their way through the hall, attracted by the commotion.

“Problem, gentlemen?” Melissa asked in her knowing tone.

“No.” Stiles was quick to deny. “I was just leaving.”

“Sorry, kiddo, but you’re on calorie intake restrictions, you need to eat more than that.” Melissa really did look apologetic as she glanced at Jackson’s plate. “But you’re finished, Mr. Whittemore, and are due for a one and one. I’m free now, if you’d like? We can discuss appropriate ways of expressing our anger. And inappropriate word choices.”

Jackson looked murderous as he followed after their counselor.

Chris shot his daughter a questionable look before he left them to finish their lunch.
Allison looked at her remaining classmates. “So, that was intense. Word of advice, back off of Lydia, it will keep Jacks away too.” She told Stiles, before standing and slinging a backpack over her shoulder.

Isaac and Scott joined her. That left Stiles with Erica and Boyd, but the two were now so wrapped up in their own heated whispers that the remainder of lunch was spent in silence for the disgruntled teen.

Melissa and Jackson did several anger exercises. While the teen was disruptive in class and often in group meetings too, he was incredibly open during counseling sessions. He admitted that he was confused by Stiles and perhaps even a little jealous. He flat out refused to apologize, however. But at least he was talking.

Jackson was assigned to room restriction for the remainder of the day, the only exception was class and that evening’s group session which John had plans of joining.

The evening was warm, so when Derek and Lydia finally met the others in the commons, John decided to move everyone outside to the fire pit. He lit it enthusiastically, earning several giggles from his students. He also grabbed a large stick from the pile before it went up in flames and held it protectively in front of himself as he waited for Melissa’s students to quiet down.

Stiles watched the fire burn. At least his hard work chopping wood was being put to good use.

“Tonight,” John started off. “We’re going to entertain a classic; one word responses this first round, only the person with the stick can talk, and then pass it along, everyone participates.”

“Ready.” Melissa smiled from her spot on the opposite side of the meek flames.
John held the stick up as he waited for Lydia to finish her excited whisper in Derek’s ear. “I feel,” He took a deep breath, “overwhelmed.”

His response earned him several curious glances. But he passed the stick to Scott who was at his right.

“I feel insignificant,” Scott replied before poking Isaac in the back of his head.

“I feel better,” Isaac smiled.

“I feel wronged,” Jackson said with a glance at Stiles, indicating his earlier beef was yet to be forgotten.

“I feel intrigued,” Melissa announced as she glanced around the circle.

“I feel tired,” Erica admitted.

“I feel happy,” Boyd told his girlfriend, more than anyone else.

“I feel annoyed,” Derek grumbled.

“I feel blessed!” Lydia said in a sweet voice. She wasn’t even rude when she passed the stick to Stiles.

“I feel…” Stiles thought about it. Used, seemed appropriate. So did, angry, scared, worried and cautious. “Insulted.” He decided that was safe enough to go with.

“Very good,” John replied as he took the stick back. “This time I want three words each, ready? I want - to help you.”
Scott eagerly took the stick. This continued for several rounds until they had gathered multiple bits of information from everyone.

Derek wanted to go home. Isaac needed to focus on his grades. Jackson was afraid of change. Boyd loved chocolate and Erica. Lydia was looking forward to her birthday. And Stiles was ready for the exercise to be over.

Which he was granted, as that was the last round. John let several of his kids slide when they added an extra word or gave unsatisfactory responses, because the exercise was more focused on the spontaneity of their minds more than anything else. And everyone had shared, which was great.

Melissa congratulated Stiles on having earned his media rights for the rest of the week and they finished early which meant they all had an hour until lights out, except for Jackson who had to report back to his dormitory cabin.

“So,” Melissa said as she circled around the fire pit to sit next to John once all the students had vanished like they often did when they were freed. “You’re feeling overwhelmed? Care to elaborate?” She asked in her counseling voice.

John laughed. “Oh, you caught that, did you?”

“I’m pretty sure it was intended for me. What’s up?” She probed again.

John sighed, heavily. “Financial issues. This school is my everything my life’s savings. It’s all here, in these very grounds, and I messed up. To be honest, I haven’t wanted a drink this badly in years.”

Melissa looked concerned. She had known John since their college days. He had married young and she went off to a different city and became a nurse. They lost touch over the years, but she knew his first marriage had ended in divorce, he drank, and his son, Brandon, preferred the harder stuff. After one close call too many, his son died. It was ruled an accidental overdose, but she knows her friend wondered if Brandon did it on purpose. ‘Is it ever an accident? When drugs are involved?’ He had asked her. He hit the bottle hard, after that. Got lost in the amber liquid. One day he came out of a three-day bender with no clue where he was.
He had called Melissa for a ride and vowed to never touch the stuff again. To the best of her knowledge he hadn’t. It wasn’t easy, there were meetings, and close calls. But eventually, he sold his home and bought the mostly abandoned land up in the mountains and the rest was history. Now, ten years later, Beacon of Hope was highly successful, or so she had thought.

She stared at John, seriously. “Do you need me to intervene? Should you stay at my place for a while? Or I can stay with you, if that’s easier?” Melissa volunteered.

“No, no. You’re just a cabin over and I promise I’ll come knocking if the cravings get that far,” He assured her. “It’s just we’re operating at a loss, it’s frustrating, every student deserves to be here. I can’t send him home.”

“Send who home?” Melissa asked in a small voice.

“Stiles. He um - you know we don’t make any profit on the government funded students,” John said with a shake of his head. “There is something more to him, something going on. Did you know he first hit the streets when he was eleven? I thought thirteen was bad. He acts like prostitution at such a young age is no big deal.

“It’s rough no matter how old,” Melissa agreed.

“He seems so jaded, like it doesn’t even affect him, but what’s he hiding then?” John frowned.

“He talked to you today.” Melissa said with a small smile. “And he participated in group. That’s something, he’s still new.”

“Yeah, and unless I fix the financial issues, he won’t be around long enough to be considered anything else.” John muttered.

“No!” Melissa protested. “No, he actually seems to like it here, and honestly I can’t say that about his home, if he is constantly running from it.”

John nodded. “I know. Although, he doesn’t act like a typical abuse case; doesn’t flinch like Isaac.”
“Isaac was definitely one of our more severe cases. You saw the photos of the freezer his father locked him in,” Melissa said with disgust. “I can’t believe that man is eligible for parole in twenty years. Stiles could be more mental, there are different forms of abuse. He was so thin, and his step dad looked like he ate well. Maybe he was really controlling.”

“It’s possible,” John agreed. “He certainly isn’t opening up about it.”

“He might feel loyalty, as he is his only remaining parent,” Melissa added. “I think a bigger question is how we are going to pay the bills.”

John shook his head. “I wish I knew.”

Looking for a brighter topic, Melissa asked how it had gone meeting with the school board. John’s face twisted further and her heart sank. How could they deny their students competing sports? The kids would be supervised and at Beacon of Hope, they would have to earn their way onto the team with more than just skill alone. It was a great opportunity and a reward for the students who earned it, to have it taken away before they were given a chance was just cruel.

“Well, that’s two pressing matters then, can we come up with a solution for both?” She asked, once again in her teacher’s voice.

“Finstock really wants to do more than just the yearly marathon with his cross-country team.” John thought out loud.

“We certainly have the space to host a high school meet here.” Melissa said looking around. “And we have the basketball court and stadium seating. The students can build more, if that’s a requirement.”

“No, you’re right. We qualify on both aspects. If we could get our foot in the door with these sports, we could expand over time and offer more here. I’d like to do a swim team, but we only have the lake,”

John admitted.
“For now!” Melissa said with optimism.

“I can’t even afford to pay the staff as it is, we can’t afford a pool - you wouldn’t be willing to take a pay cut?” John teased.

“Honestly, if it meant keeping Stiles, I would.”

“I was kidding! I barely pay you enough as it is.” John quickly protested.

“What if we hosted a marathon?” Melissa started to say. “We can open it to professionals and charge an entry fee. But offer to host the local schools for free as a show of good will. Coach could show off his team, he will love that!”

John looked thoughtful. “That’s not a bad idea. But we can double the efforts as a fundraiser, ask for donations, get sponsorships? We have the facilities for a triathlon. I’ll look into that and see which event makes more money.”

“Why stop at one? We can host both and make a big weekend of it,” Melissa suggested.

John smiled. “I’ll have the lawyers approve it!”

Melissa smiled even wider. “This is great, my group will enter the triathlon!”


“It sounds like a good bonding exercise to me, a real opportunity for some of them. With the exception of Derek and maybe Boyd, I doubt the rest have ever known what it was like to be on a team, to win at something!” Melissa had a glow in her eyes. “Stiles and Jackson have been at each other’s throats lately, this could be good for them.”

John agreed.

“So, drinking crises adverted?” Melissa questioned.
“Yeah, I think so!” John nodded.

Stiles was the last to return to his dorm an hour later. He usually was, if he was off by himself. He heard Scott talking loudly from their restroom about securing the cigarettes in the next shipment. That was something to look forward to, at least. That was if his group mate could learn to keep his voice down.

Stiles threw open the cabin door and it was lucky that he was rather good at ducking because Jackson had aimed a fist where his head was formerly located.

“Stay away from my girl!” The older teen said in a dangerous voice.

“What girl?” Stiles spat back. “She’s with Derek! And isn’t that a bit contradicting, calling me homophobic slurs and accusing me of stealing your girl all in the same day?”

It looked like it took the other boy a second to figure out what Stiles had just said.

“Leave me out of this!” Derek grunted from under his covers. He had a small light on and was reading. It looked like it wasn’t even a school book, but rather recreational.

“Derek has a girlfriend back home!” Jackson shouted, ignoring the other’s request. “Lydia knows that!”

“I haven’t heard from Kate since I’ve been here. Not once. You know they monitor our social media. I’m pretty sure my uncle had her on some sort of list or something, but either way, I think we’re over,” Derek said, annoyed.

This was news to Stiles. What was Lydia to Derek then? Just a close friend?
“You’re dead, small fry!” Jackson continued, still completely ignoring everyone else as he stared threateningly at Stiles. “There is something in the way you talk to her, trying to get her riled up! I’m sick of it! And I’m the one on room restriction? Oh no, you’re dead!” He repeated the threat.

It seemed Jackson’s time to himself to reflect was wasted on this imaginary feud. Stiles had had enough though. If it was a fight Jackson wanted, it was a fight he would get. Whittemore may be bigger and decently built, but he forgot Stiles was a street kid; he knew how to take a punch and in time he learned how to throw ‘em too.

“You know what!” Stiles exploded gathering the rest of the boys’ attention. “You name the place! Anywhere, anytime!”

Jackson looked taken aback. He clearly wasn’t expecting that answer. He hesitated before he said, “The lake. Tomorrow, after our final lesson. The south side is covered by trees.”

Stiles boldly shoulder checked Jackson as he passed him on his way to his bed. “Don’t be late.” He muttered before heading to bed without so much as brushing his teeth.

He laid there awake for hours, wondering if this fight was worth it. What would happen to him, if they were caught? Maybe his one month call home would get cancelled.

The campus was alight with news of the pending fight before breakfast the next day. Stiles could thank Scott for that. You’d think the teen was selling tickets, he was promoting the fight so heavily. Lydia seemed to know without being told that she was somewhat the reason behind Jackson taking on the new kid. She was relishing in the limelight.

Stiles was nervous. Scott and Isaac took him aside after lunch to discuss strategy. He thought he heard the curly hair teen mention having money riding on the outcome.

“You don’t have to win, you just have to last longer than ten minutes!” Scott reminded him cheerfully.

Stiles was sure the teachers knew by the glances he felt he was getting. So it was surprising when
he arrived at the lakeside to a smaller group than he expected. It was mostly his team, even Allison, who had tried to talk him out of it, and several other students. One of whom was Jackson’s best friend at Beacon of Hope and also gay.

Danny told Stiles he had better land a good one for his friend dropping the F bomb the other day. It took Stiles a minute to even realize what he was talking about. Jackson’s face reddened at being called out and by his best friend, no less. Lydia twisted it all around so it sounded like it was Stiles’ fault to begin with.

Stiles sat there. Waiting for all these other people to decide on his innocence status while staring at the gorgeous-looking lake. The water sparkled in the sunlight and was quite clear for several feet.

“Fuck this.” Stiles shouted over the arguing teens who now no longer included Jackson.

He walked up to the lakes edge and took his sock and shoe off to tentatively feel the temperature. It was just as warm as it looked. He playfully kicked some water in Jackson’s direction splattering his jeans. The flicker of emotions across his face was priceless. But as Jackson decided what to do, Stiles took his shirt and jeans off, revealing his thin frame. He smirked at Jackson before diving in.

Jackson looked stunned. But Derek was quick to run past, jumping into the water in a similar state of undress. Boyd soon followed, tugging at a more reluctant Erica. Soon all of the students were in the water aside from Lydia and Jackson.

“You coming in, twig?” Jackson called playfully as he too, took his shirt off.

He might not be as well rounded in the shoulders as Boyd or Derek, but his stomach was just as nicely carved. Lydia eyed it appreciatively.

“Not today.” The redhead said with a sigh as she sat down watching her fellow classmates laughing and splashing in the water.

“Why not?” Jackson asked, leaning in close to her space.
“I don’t look good wet - my hair,” Lydia attempted.

“You’re beautiful and you know it.” Jackson told her sincerely.

Lydia blushed and smiled. “No. Not today.”

“You coming?” Allison called from the water.

She was one of the few girls that decided to go into the lake in her bra and underwear. Her father was sure to freak out when he heard about it. She leaned on Isaac as the water was too deep for her to stand.

Jackson looked back at Lydia one more time. “You sure?”

“Have fun, Jacks!” She encouraged, “I’ll be right up here.”

Jackson dove in impressively and immediately swam out to Stiles who was horsing around with Scott and Danny.

“Hey,” Jackson called as he came nearer. “Look, I’m sorry. I uh, said some shit I shouldn’t have.”

“I guess I’m sorry too,” Stiles said. This was more fun than he had had in a long time, and he didn’t want it to end because of his stubbornness.

“For what?” Jackson asked with a knowing smirk.
“I don’t know.” Stiles admitted. “I guess for lying just now.”

Jackson faked as if he was going to dive on top of him, but Stiles was actually pretty dexterous in the water and dodged, again.

“Damn, don’t you ever stay still?” Jackson grumbled. “You’re like a pale little fish!”

Stiles laughed, openly. Accidentally taking a little water and coughing.

Derek was there a second later, causing Boyd to complain about him ruining their race.

“Are you okay?” Derek asked unnecessarily, startling the smaller teen.

“Fine. I’m fine.” Stiles was sure his face was as red as a tomato.

Derek didn’t let go for an entire minute, just staring into Stiles’ large eyes, searching to make sure the other wasn’t lying.

Erica came floating over with another girl from Danny’s group. She cleared her throat finally causing the two boys to look away. “How about a race between all the guys?” She suggested.

John saw Melissa running around the campus, looking thoroughly panicked.

“Mel! Melissa! Everything okay?” John called as he jogged up to match the other counselor’s pace.

“I haven’t seen a single one of my students since class let out,” She admitted. “They are up to something, I heard there was going to be a fight.”
John was formerly amused as he jogged up, but that quickly morphed into concern. “The lake, I heard the students talking about meeting down there.”

The two teachers ran in that direction but they needn’t’ve worried. At least two dozen students were splashing in the water in various stages of undress, while Lydia sat by herself basking in the early fall’s heat. Melissa immediately started marching up to the shoreline with every intention of placing all the students on shuns for the week.

John reached out a hand and stilled her.

“What are you doing?” Melissa asked, indignantly.

“They’re having fun, don’t spoil it yet.” John replied as he crossed his arms and watched his students laugh as they raced each other in the water.

“They’re in the lake, unsupervised.” Melissa retorted. “They need structure and rules.”

“Yes, but even our kids need a little fun and spontaneity in their lives, too.” John reminded her.

“How are you so calm about this?” Melissa asked, still unsure.

“The way I see it, they get another ten minutes of their fun, and I get twenty or so extra sets of hands around here. Clearing out the room to host this marathon should be no problem with all the consequences they’re about to be assigned!”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

4/3/18 Update: Beta by fairyfey (tumblr: gayglitterbay)

Episode 4

Derek felt the soft brush of red hair against his face as he reclined on a thicket of grass and waited for Melissa to arrive. Lydia, of course, sat comfortably in front of him between his legs, and as she talked animatedly with Allison, her hair tickled his skin. Usually he hated it, the unwarranted sensation, but she wore him down with her insistence on being in his personal space.

It was very much like his last girlfriend, Kate. She was beautiful, too. Her locks were golden rather than strawberry colored, but the overconfidence from both women were just the same. Except, it wasn’t. Derek knew Kate truly loved herself as much as she loved him, whereas in Lydia’s case, the girl was full of self-doubt. She wouldn’t admit it, but it was there in her eyes and hesitancy. That was a large reason behind Derek’s acceptance of her pushy ways.

If he denied her, what would she do? Would she resort to cutting again? He had seen how her green eyes had welled up as she admitted her faults in group. He couldn’t let himself hurt her, if there was even a remote chance that she would relapse. As he thought about it, it was a lot more like his relationship with Kate than he initially considered. She had worn him down over time too.

Kate was different, though, special. She walked into class on the first day of his freshman year, demanding attention from her students without even opening her mouth. It was in her stride and sharp eyes. The class quieted, instantly. Derek couldn’t help but stare.

It was Kate’s first class too, as a teacher, but unlike her nervous freshman, she didn’t show it. Derek instantly admired that, although he was certain he never told her. Kate knew, regardless. She knew everything. Mere months into her becoming his favorite teacher, things took a turn, he would argue, for the better.

She held him up after class one day, told him in a more private tone than her usual briskness that she couldn’t believe he was only in ninth grade. Derek beamed back. It continued like that for a
while; just small inappropriate comments, mostly from her when no one was around to see it. That was until after the holidays.

Derek had tried out for basketball and was thrilled to be the only freshman on the varsity team. His parents were incredibly proud, too. Everyone in his family was committed to attending his first game. Kate was there as well. Derek glanced occasionally in her direction and gave her the biggest smile after sinking a three pointer.

His uncle, Peter, had offered to take the family out to celebrate his first victory. But when Derek exited the changing room it was to an empty hall, except for Kate who leaned against a locker in her fitted jeans and school pride shirt pulled tight to accentuate her curves. She looked more like a student than teacher at that moment. Derek sprinted up to her and asked if she saw him make that final basket. She smiled wide and nodded.

Derek turned to leave, knowing that he was keeping his family waiting, but she leaned forward and placed a hand on his bicep to still him. He hesitated. Kate leaned in closer - she liked to press upon his personal space.

“You did great!” She whispered as they were too close to speak louder. “You’re going to be a star one day.”

Derek blushed at the praise. Kate allowed herself to trace the teen’s reddening cheek, fondly. Derek stilled. If he was honest with himself, he knew that Kate occupied his fantasies often, but to have her, a teacher, so close in an abandoned school hall, his jerk-off sessions would be taken to a whole new level.

She leaned in further and placed a kiss where her thumb had been on the apple of his cheek. Derek suddenly wished he had used mouthwash in his after-game shower, as some of the older boys would do before meeting their girlfriends.

Kate didn’t wait for Derek to take action. She moved down and captured his inexperienced lips in a kiss. It was experimental; Derek had never done anything like this and Kate surely knew that as she molded him into a better position for the interaction. She gently pried his mouth apart with her tongue. Derek felt it, the sensation of someone invading his body, for the first time. Kate’s long hair brushed against his face as she pulled away.

He was speechless. Kate smirked.

“Our secret.” She had said in a low voice before walking away, making sure her hips captured the younger man’s attention.

Peter came around the corner just moments after asking Derek what was taking so long. Derek placed a hand to his cheek where her hair had been and failed to answer.
“Derek!” Lydia said in a tone that suggested she had called his name several times.

“Yo, earth to Derek!” Scott added with a playful shoulder shove.

Derek moved his hand up to where Lydia’s hair had brushed up against his skin when she turned around and faced him as he stared at the rest of the group who were all looking at him with concern.

“We were asking you what you thought Melissa was planning, having us meet out here so early on a Saturday morning.” Boyd said in a worried tone.

“We’re not due for an overnight hike or anything, and frankly I’m exhausted. John had us fixing the fence all afternoon, yesterday,” Erica added.

That was true. All of the students who were busted last week for having an unauthorized swim had spent their free time fixing the grounds up one way or another. The school looked quite nice, but their shoulders ached from the free manual labor.

“I asked you here to train you guys!” Melissa announced.

She had clearly been going for a morning jog and was slightly out of breath. She eyed Lydia’s close proximity to Derek until the redhead scooted further away from the bigger teen’s lap, before she continued. “We’re hosting a marathon! And you guys are competing as triathletes.” She held her hands out in a manner that suggested this was the best news ever.

The students disagreed. And Isaac looked downright fearful.

“I’m doing the run with the cross-country team though, right?” Derek asked.

His teammates were counting on him. He wasn’t particularly a big fan of running in nature, but it was a way for him to stay competitive in the basketball off-season. Boyd and even Jackson, ran with them sometimes too, even if the latter didn’t compete in the marathon last January.

“Actually, I’ve talked with Coach and he’s okay with you helping your group mates out in the triathlon instead. The track team is taking on the marathon and he’s recruiting his basketball guys to participate as well. Parrish’s group is doing the 5k! Of course, other students are welcomed to join in if they like, but I thought the triathlon would be good for you guys. It’s a five-mile hike, three-mile kayaking trip, and three-mile bike ride. As you all have improved so much in the kayaks over the summer, I thought it would be a great way to highlight those skills! All of Beacon of Hope
If Melissa thought that speech was going to be enough motivation, she was wrong. Isaac didn’t look any less frightened and Stiles stared uncomfortably. Allison and Lydia smiled however, and that was a start.

“But my team!” Derek protested, looking around at Boyd for support. “They need us!”

“Your group will need you more!” Melissa replied, calmly. “I was actually hoping you and Boyd would be co-captains. You could lead them, lend them your strength and support!” She added brightly.

Boyd started to nod along but Derek whirled around at his friends. “No!” He disagreed. “They can’t win! I want to do the marathon!”

Lydia’s smile fell.

Privately, Stiles agreed. He hadn’t ridden a bike in years and only Isaac was worse at kayaking than he was.

“Well, Captain, that is why we are here, to train!” Melissa didn’t seem phased at all over her students’ negative responses.

“Allison agreed. “We can practice biking over debris back at the school tonight, too! When is the triathlon?”

“Two weeks!” Melissa informed them. “Would you guys like to vote for a captain? Or keep it as Boyd and Derek?” She asked given the latter student a concerned look.

“Let’s vote!” Jackson quickly shouted. “I nominate myself!”

Boyd won, easily. Lydia was the only one who voted for Derek. Jackson voted for himself. Surprisingly Allison received two votes, but Boyd was the clear winner and accepted graciously.

“Let’s start with the boating. Isaac, Stiles, I really want you to pay attention to my technique.” He led the group to their usual spot. Derek trailed further behind, feeling like he had no control, again.
Kayaking was a lot less fun for Stiles when his classmates were constantly pointing out what he was doing wrong. In the end, though, he did notice a significant improvement...in Isaac. Allison insisted that the time it took for him to cross the lake was better too. But the lake was maybe a quarter of a mile, and he would have to do three times that the Saturday after next, and that was after a bike ride through the mountains.

But all of that was pushed from his mind when the group of exhausted teens returned to campus for lunch and Erica excitedly announced they had an hour in the media room after. It would be Stiles’ second time and he found that he was happily looking forward to getting lost in his Google search again. Plus, he messaged a few of his old friends and was curious to see if any of them had gotten back with him yet.

Lunch was quiet as most of his group were tired and sore and no one wanted to bring up the glaring, broody, elephant in the room. Needless to say, Stiles wasn’t surprised when he noticed the absence of Derek as Melissa’s kids talked excitedly about updating their Facebook pages and other social media affairs soon after. Lydia was right, Derek didn’t like Stiles; at least not like Stiles liked him anyway, and his crush was just that, a crush. It would pass. So, it really wasn’t any of his concern where the older teen went, anyway.

Stiles checked his various inboxes and wasn’t surprised by the lack of messages. Twitter proved fruitful, however, as his old friend, Joe, had responded to his direct message. Joe, like everyone else from his school back in Tampa, had no idea what had happened to Stiles, and assumed he had ran away for good this last time. Stiles found that he really didn’t care what the majority of them thought, but was glad that Joe would tell his former inner circle that he was doing okay and living the life of a wild mountain man now.

Stiles thought to himself that he would have to ask Melissa for an updated photo for his profile. His hair was much longer and the greenery provided a better picture than the blunt he was holding in his current one.

Joe also told Stiles that he had seen his step dad recently, and thought it was strange that Simon hadn’t told him that Stiles was doing okay. Apparently, Simon had taken a liking to Joe’s mother, and had even cried over Stiles’ latest disappearance on her shoulder. This was all news to Stiles who instantly felt like a bucket of cold water was dropped on his head.

He sat there and reread the message seven more times, trying to read between the lines, but Joe was annoyingly blunt. What was the monster’s true intentions? In all the years since Stiles’ mother had passed, he had never shown any interest in dating. He didn’t need to, Stiles was conveniently there and more than capable of satisfying any sexual needs. He wasn’t half bad at the cooking and cleaning thing either. But Stiles wasn’t there anymore and probably, hopefully, would never spend another night under the same roof as that bastard again. Was he simply trying to move on to a target that was closer to his age, female, and willing?
It struck him then, how odd that was to consider. Simon had been the monster of his nightmares for years, but his mother had chosen him, dated him and loved him, even. Joe’s mom might do the same. Joe was a tough guy, and smart, he doubted Simon would even consider him. He liked the easily manipulated weak victims, such as himself. Should Stiles just let this go? What could he do about it from up here anyway? What was he expecting Simon to do in his absence?

Then he remembered something that made that cold-water sensation freeze over and he struggled to breathe. Stiles had already been on the outs and labeled a habitual runaway drug addict by Joe’s mother when she became pregnant with his little brother. The young boy was probably about four or so now, Stiles had met him once at the park. Was that Simon’s true intention?

Stiles felt sick as he struggled for air. Isaac seemed to notice and gave him a concerned look which Stiles meant to wave off, letting the teen know he was fine but his attempted breathing became increasingly more difficult and he inadvertently brought more attention to himself.

Scott was out of his chair and across the room in a flash. Stiles panicked and hit the power strip, causing his computer and several others to go black. This caused a couple of people to groan and send him threatening looks. But at least no one would read his DM.

That thought alone was enough for him to start to function properly, with Scott’s help he found the correct breathing rhythm again. He also found clarity. He did still have that extended call he could make in the privacy of the front office. Maybe it was time to cash in. Stiles just needed to find the proper wording to make his threat clear.

Scott relaxed somewhat. Stiles was definitely okay but he still gave him an odd look. Stiles excused himself, it was probably a record having a student leave the media room so soon, but he needed time to think about the call home before he made it.

He ran into Coach and Derek who were in a heated argument in the field that separated the commons’ building from his dorm cabin.

“Why can’t you tell Melissa that you need me?” Derek asked, but it seemed more like a demand.

In the short while that Stiles had known the older teen, he hadn’t really thought too much about his personality aside from him being quiet and slightly mysterious. He realized that Derek wasn’t used to not getting his way. He may not have seemed as spoiled as Princess Lydia, but he certainly was well off, well-loved by deceased parents, and accustomed to the Burger King slogan way of life.

“De-rek.” Coach Finstock emphasized both syllables in his name. “No. I’m sorry, but the team is doing just fine, and it’s more important for the school to have a good showing all around. Some of the local schools are going to be there too, and we want to show them that our students are willing to compete on multiple levels. Your group needs you to lead them to victory.” The Coach’s speech was motivational and entirely not the response Derek wanted.
The teen gave up, looking wholly defeated.

Stiles tried to move past unnoticed but Derek saw him and took the time to loudly comment on how pathetic some of his group were; mentioning how slow Stiles was in the kayak. Coach seemed to think that was an opportunity for Derek to become the teacher, but Stiles sped up feeling the sting of that particular blow.

He wasn’t the one forcing Derek to be with the losers, after all.

After dinner, Boyd had them all mounting beat up old bikes. The school’s set were a little rusty, out dated and several needed air in their tires. John came around and announced that a company that had put on similar events were helping out with the charity and would be providing better equipment on the actual day. Stiles thought that the state of the bikes they were riding on had nothing to do with how awful they were at the task.

Scott had never ridden a bike before. He admitted sheepishly that his father had bought him one for Christmas when he was seven or eight but the man never had time to teach him, and the thing was still sitting untouched in their attic. Erica had ridden her older brother’s bike and wasn’t used to the proportions and kept trying to stand when she didn’t have to because she fit just fine on the seat. Stiles was right to be worried about this task. Despite the old adage, it was not like riding a bike, getting back on the thing after so many years without one. He felt like a wobbly new born calf for the first half an hour before he was successfully joining the others who were doing slow circles around Scott’s private lessons.

As soon as Melissa left them on their own, Derek abandoned them too. The moral blow wasn’t necessary, they knew they sucked.

Boyd tried to be positive regardless. “Guys! You did better than you think, really!” He said as they tiredly made their way back to their dorms for the night. “We’ll keep practicing and you’ll continue to improve. Trust me!”

No one voiced any agreement. Derek wasn’t in the cabin when the rest of the boys returned and Stiles was so exhausted he wasn’t awake when he finally showed after hours.

Melissa watched her group improve tenfold within minutes of practicing their biking by riding
around the school grounds. She was thrilled for them. Once her kids completed this triathlon, they would realize how much their hard work paid off. And Boyd had really stepped up in the leadership category. She was quite proud.

Boyd didn’t know it yet, but his parents were actually going to be attending the event. They were good people, who were naturally concerned for their son after the loss of their daughter. Boyd had improved so much in his time here, he had been practically mute when they first met. But they missed their kid. Last parents’ weekend, Boyd was boasting about completing his solo and being close to graduating out of the Beacon of Hope program. His mother in particular, had thought that might mean she would bring her son home in the fall for the start of his junior year. So they were coming up to talk to him about the prospect of him returning with them.

John thought it would be nice for the parents to see the school host their charity marathon. Melissa just hoped that if Boyd did choose to leave, that he would do so for himself and wouldn’t just be appeasing his parent’s wishes. She had given him the opportunity to trek to Mount Triskelion over the summer and he had denied it, saying he wasn’t ready.

She left the students to go talk to John about Boyd’s possible early release and missed when Derek promptly abandoned the group afterwards.

Melissa was surprised to see Stiles hovering around the office so early the next day, Sunday morning. He was pacing and muttering to himself. She didn’t want to spook him.

“Stiles!” She called as she approached. He stopped mid stride, if his face wasn’t paler than usual, she would have thought it was comical.

“I, uh, wanted to use my call - extended call - for Simon,” The teen said in a forced casual tone.

Melissa tried to rack her brain. Did this weekend hold any particular significance for Stiles or his stepfather? She didn’t think so.

“Sure,” Melissa agreed. “It will be later in the day back in Florida because of the time difference, so I suppose it’s not too early for him. Let me check his file and see what time frames he wrote down. We try not to call outside of those because we don’t want to spook the parents, make them think there is an emergency.”

Stiles didn’t respond and just looked at her imploringly with his round eyes.

Melissa internally sighed. This student was so closed off.
Simon’s available time frame was all day. So Stiles made his call in the front office and Melissa gave him the illusion of privacy by stepping into John’s.

Stiles fiddled with the old fashion phone cord nervously while he waited for Simon to answer. He didn’t even think about the possibility that his step dad wouldn’t pick up. What if he was ignored? What if he was at Joe’s house right now with his phone set to do not disturb?

The monster picked up on the third ring.

“Hello?” Simon said slowly.

“IT-it’s me,” Stiles responded, dumbly.

“Finally calling to come home, hey?” Simon asked. “Took a bit longer than I suspected, but you always come back after you leave.” He added smugly.

Stiles never returned by his own choice. Never.

“No, I ah, I get a call with you for being here for over a month.”

“Oh, how nice they are at your prison school.”

“Listen!” Stiles boldly demanded. He didn’t have time to do the back and forth with Simon, not today. Not ever. “I uh, we’re allowed media time sometimes and I spoke with Joe, my old friend and—”

“Oh. Good. He told you we met, shared a few meals?” Simon cut him off. Stiles could hear the grin in his voice. “His mother has been really supportive. It’s difficult, losing your son, too, as I have.”

“I’m not…” Stiles was quick to refute, but he stopped himself from going further. Simon had all the pull, he had to play his hand wisely. “Just leave that family alone.”

“Oh!” Simon asked. “And why should I?”

“You—” This is what Stiles had practice in his head. “I will.” He said firmly glancing at the
cracked office door that housed Melissa. “You know I will— do what I should.” He added cryptically.

“Is that a threat, boy?” Simon understood regardless of the lack of words.

“It is.” Stiles insisted.

“Hm. There is really nothing preventing me from doing as I wish with you so far away. You wouldn’t know if I spent dinner over there last night or not, for example.” Simon teased. He always enjoyed having the upper hand.

“What. Do. You. Want?” Stiles had to ground out each word. It was almost painful pleading for anything from the monster.

“Oh, I think we both know the answer to that,” Simon said airily.

“Any-anything, just…” Stiles gulped and looked at the door again. He couldn’t lose focus.

“Your friend’s mom is a nurse at my doctor’s office. She’s concerned about my heart and eating habits. She will be joining me for dinner on Thursday.” Simon allowed himself to admit, knowing the fact would make his step son squirm.

It did. Stiles blew into the phone annoyed. “You can’t cancel?” He asked while already knowing the answer.

“I won’t,” Simon said greedily. “But, I will make you a deal.”

Stiles held his breath knowing that whatever was said next would be unpleasant.

“I’ll admit I’m worried about you up there, all of those therapy sessions - are you holding your tongue?” Simon actually sounded a little concerned, finally.

“It’s just counseling and they think I’m quiet.”

“Good. Good, keep it that way.” The monster replied quickly. “You keep our secret and I’ll contain myself.”

“No more visits with Joe’s mom?” Stiles asked.

“No. No, we’ll still go out on Thursday, but I’ll make sure all late-night activities take place at my
house.” Simon amended.

It was Stiles’ Mom’s house. But what choice did he have? He couldn’t do much arguing from the top of the mountain he was on, and the monster always, always, did what he wanted anyway.

He realized he was nodding into the receiver so he quickly cleared his throat and mumbled his agreement.

“Good!” Simon said cheerfully. “Keep your mouth shut, boy. All the trouble you cause! You’re really not worth the hassle.”

“Uh, yeah, bye, I guess.” Stiles really just wanted off the phone so he could return to bed until breakfast, now.

Simon hung up.

He wasn’t sure if that conversation left him feeling better or worse about the whole situation, but he’d have to keep his media rights so he could keep an eye on the monster from Joe, at the very least.

Melissa had tried not to listen too much to her student talking in the other room, but she was also there to monitor the interaction. It didn’t seem like a particularly happy conversation. But at the same time, Stiles wasn’t getting violent as some of the parental abuse cases would. Scott yelled at his father for an hour during his first call home. This was just a conversation lacking emotion of any kind.

Stiles seemed concerned about his stepdad dating. It had been years since his mother had died, but maybe in all that time he had yet to move on. And he seemed really worried about his friend’s house. Maybe it was a former friend and he didn’t want their parents to become more? Her brain came up with a million reasons for the concern, but each less likely than the last. Maybe she could get him to talk about his friends in their next one on one.

The phone call ended quicker than expected with Stiles sounding disappointed. Melissa rounded the corner to ask if he wanted to talk about it, but the teen was already gone.
Melissa’s group of students spent their Sunday afternoon biking along the easier trails that were closer to the campus. It didn’t go without complaints, and Derek was still reluctant to help Boyd. Slowly but surely the less experienced students were making improvements.

Lydia did well on the straight paths although she would purposely slow down to a snails’ pace for the turns. Allison was steadier and usually right behind Boyd, who led the pack. Isaac and Scott, who had improved greatly since first learning to ride, battled it out for who would get behind Allison, but the competition between the two ensured they kept a decent pace. The next position was between Lydia, Jackson and Stiles, but the three weren’t as competitive so much so as had different strengths that meant Lydia would overtake the boys whenever the ground was even enough. Jackson passed the other two on the snap turns that he barely broke for, and Stiles did his best to maintain a steady speed throughout, which gave him the advantage in the long run. Erica took her time after them. Derek trailed behind with Melissa, but he looked thoroughly bored.

He also wasn’t in the mood to talk about it.

That meant that when they stopped for a break and snack two hours into their trip, he sat a bit further from the rest of the group and Lydia spent her time listening to Jackson attempt to scare the group as he talked about one of his close calls mixing meds. Lydia laughed loudly and Derek quirked up but didn’t comment.

His behavior was very concerning for Melissa. She observed the rest of the group. Erica sat far too close to Boyd, but she was proud of her team captain and let it slide this time. Isaac and Stiles were chatting away. Well, Stiles was talking and Isaac was listening. It must have been about kayaking techniques because Allison butted in and corrected something the newer student had said.

“That’s not what the book said to do— you want to skim the top of the water with half the paddle for maximum speed.” Stiles told her.

Isn’t that something. He took the time to read how to improve for the triathlon. Her kids really were going all out for this, and working together too!

“Yes, but not in the choppy water!” Allison protested. “Dip it further to get a better hold over the waves.”

“Trust her, she’s like an arrow in the water!” Scott agreed.

“Keep your elbows up, too, like this.” She continued to tell Isaac and came around behind him to get him in the proper position.

Scott mimicked her actions on a less cooperative Stiles. Somehow the two ended up sprawled out on the ground half wrestling and laughing. Scott won.
“Don’t exhaust yourselves!” Boyd warned. “We still have to bike all the way back!”

“Yeah, wouldn’t want you guys wimping out!” Another voice called as seven boys took off their helmets and crossed into the clearing. Each one was pulling along their own, rather new looking, top-of-the-line mountain bike.

“We’re Devenford Prep. Local high school. You guys training for the triathlon too?” The obvious leader said as they pushed their bikes nearer. His hair was sweaty and sticking up in every direction from the helmet he had just pulled off of it, but he looked friendly enough.

Which was more than could be said for the younger looking kid that made up the rear. His hair was longer and slicked back from perspiration. He eyed the older bikes with distaste and doubt.

Boyd stood up to greet them. “We’re hosting it actually, I’m Boyd, team captain for Beacon of Hope.”

All seven of the intruders shifted their feet to a more guarded stance. It was the younger one who broke the awkward silence.

“I didn’t think they let you all out. Aren’t you like criminals and murderers or something?” He asked with narrowed eyes.

It was Jackson who jumped up first, although Scott and Erica were both right behind him.

“It’s not prison, it’s a school!” Lydia said shamefully, from her spot on the floor. She hugged her knees in close.

“What’s it to you anyway?” Jackson asked as he closed the distance. Six of the boys stepped back, but the young one that spoke boldly stayed in place.

“Just my dad says all you rejects can’t be trusted in society so they stick you up on the mountain top.” He replied while puffing up his chest.

Before Scott could land a punch or Jackson could shove the kid into his place, their leader stepped up. “Quiet Liam!” He said, warningly. “I doubt coach Ito will be happy to hear about you starting a fight with the delinquent kids!”

“Satomi’s your coach?” Melissa asked as she stood from the ground.

It was funny how quickly the Davenford Prep guys jumped to attention once they realized they were in the presence of an adult.
“Ye-yeah, she’s our track coach. I’m Brett. Captain.” He looked nervous.

“Well, Captain Brett,” Melissa started. “I used to go running with your Coach when I first moved up here a couple of years ago. She hurt her knee and I hadn’t seen her at the trail since. Tell her Melissa McCall sends her regards. And also, these kids aren’t criminals or delinquents. They’re teenagers same as you.” The last part she said directly to Liam. “Maybe you could mention that to your parents. We have a pretty decent cross-country team and they want to play you all, if you’re not too afraid, that is!”

Liam looked ready for the challenge. “We’re not afraid!” He replied, proudly. “You guys play lacrosse?” He added with a raise of his chin.

“Basketball,” Derek announced from his corner. It was the first he had spoken since they stopped.

“We’ll play you guys anywhere, anytime!” Liam responded boldly. “Our Basketball team is undefeated!”

“You on it?” Jackson asked, doubtfully.

“Freshman, but I plan on trying out.”

“Maybe we’ll make a lacrosse team then, meet you on the field instead,” Scott challenged.

“How about we start with the charity triathlon next weekend, and you guys can boast to your parents how much fun you had at our mountain school!” Melissa suggested. “Tell them you’re not afraid of the added competition and have them appeal to the school board on our behalf!”

Brett looked thoughtful. “Tell you what, Mrs…?”

“Melissa,” The counselor supplied, helpfully.

“Well Mrs. Melissa,” Brett continued. “Let’s make a wager, if your team can hang with us, put up a decent time next Saturday, we’ll make sure they appeal the school board’s ruling.”

“How can you guarantee that?” Allison asked, shocked.

“Easy. My dad’s the president of the board.” Brett told them all.

“Deal!” Boyd stepped forward to shake on it.
“Tell Satomi I said hi!” Melissa called as she signaled for her students to continue onward.

Brett nodded.

As soon as they were out of ear shot of the Davenford school, Derek turned to the rest of the group. “How could you make a deal like that?” He grumbled. “We suck! We’re never going to win! I won’t be able to play basketball competitively and scouts aren’t going to come up here to watch a stupid scrimmage!” He was practically roaring by the end of the sentence.

“Derek!” Melissa called in a warning tone. “Everyone has improved a lot in just two days, imagine how much better we all will be by the triathlon! There will be no negative talk here, understood?”

There was no talk at all on the trip back. The tension was palpable.

Boyd’s parents were invited by John to come see his son lead his team. It wasn’t a surprise, per say, as they had talked about coming up in the beginning of the school year, but it was clever timing on John’s part for everything to align properly.

He knew the Boyd’s were hoping to take their son home with them. They had talked about it last parents’ weekend. And in truth, Vernon Boyd had come a long way. But he was given ample opportunity to design his flag for Triskelion Point and the student was still hesitant. He wasn’t ready, even if his parents were.

They were set to arrive on Saturday morning and as usual, they were early. With most of the students and staff designated to host the day’s events or were participating in them themselves, the front office was surprisingly empty when his parents got there.

“Over here!” John called as he jogged up. He was helping set up the marathon’s drink stations with some of the more senior students. They had little over three hours until the events would kick off, and students and adults alike would be racing and competing all over the mountain side.

Adding the 5k was great for drawing in the local casual runners, whereas the marathon and triathlon had people flying in just to participate. On the financial side of things, they were looking great. His small team of lawyers predicted a decent payoff, and possibly even some TV coverage of the day’s events. He needed to make sure everything would run smoothly. So of course, the Boyd’s were early.
“Hope I didn’t keep you waiting for long!” John said as he got closer, “I was just—”

“It’s okay! It’s okay!” Mrs. Boyd assured. “We know we’re early, breakfast isn’t until nine, but I was just hoping we could catch up with Vernon prior to his big race.” She flashed a genuine smile.

John escorted them over to the boy’s dormitory cabins and pointed out which one hosted Melissa’s students. They had visited enough that they probably could have found the place on their own, but it made it less awkward if they woke everyone up, to have the head counselor do it.

The problem was, Boyd wasn’t in his bed. Everyone else was, and they were not happy with the early hour and immediate questioning they were receiving. John radioed Melissa who was really concerned and denied having asked anything of Boyd before the triathlon. She told John to check on Erica, see if she knew where her boyfriend was. He was so embarrassed. To lose a student, in front of their parents, no less.

So, with more than a little panic in his step, John jogged across the yard to the girl’s dorms. He found Erica, alright. She was half naked and wrapped around a sleeping Boyd.

“Office!” John shouted waking up Lydia and Allison too. Chris’s daughter had spent the night as she often did on weekends.

Erica grumbled and rolled over, but Boyd jumped up and guiltily looked around for his sleep pants as he was only in his boxers.

“Vernon!” His mother shrieked.

“What kind of a school do you run here?!” Mr. Boyd asked with a furrowed brow.

Needless to say, Erica, John, and all of the Boyd’s spent their morning sorting everything out in the office.

His parents wanted him removed from the school immediately. Erica’s, who were called by a rather upset Melissa, had similar feelings. How could the staff be so negligent to allow two students to practically sleep together right under their nose? Oh the backlash, and on this day of all things.
Erica had to take a pregnancy test and was given a full exam by Melissa, while Boyd was given time to talk with his parents in John’s office privately. Meanwhile the rest of their group mates were exchanging rumors in the cafeteria while eating breakfast, and not even knowing if they were still going to be competing later that day.

Melissa and a disgruntled looking Erica came in the hall when there were only fifteen minutes left of the morning meal.

Their counselor did not look pleased. Erica sat down quietly on Lydia’s other side.

“I’m sure you all know what activities your captain and teammate got up to last night.” The curly haired counselor started. “And you know the rules. Shuns. Two weeks. No activities aside from school, no group, monitored by a staff at all times, and plenty of consequences.”

Everyone nodded.

“Boyd will not be able to lead you guys today and neither one of them can participate.” She continued. “Honestly, there is a good chance that his parents are going to take him home,” she added, sadly.

“What!?” Erica couldn’t help but protest. “No - you can’t!”

“His mom caught him in bed with another student! Beacon of Hope is supposed to be safe for you guys; a sanctuary. A place where you don’t have to deal with the pressures of the real world until you learn to do it properly! What you two did wasn’t safe and it showed a lack of respect for us and our rules. Imagine John taking your parents, any of your parents up to your cabin to wake you and you’re not there. I’m sure the Boyd’s have no trust in us now.”

“You’d have to get my dad to visit, first,” Scott muttered.

“That’s why he did it though!” Erica pouted. “He doesn’t want to go home, so he was acting up. I know it, and I already told you, we didn’t do anything!”

“You weren’t dressed that way!” Melissa pointed out. “It’s protocol, if we find students in compromising positions, we need to take precautions for your wellbeing.” She felt like she was defending the reasoning behind the pregnancy test, again. Erica wasn’t happy when she was told she was taking another one in two weeks.

“He didn’t want to go home!” Erica said again, this time with tears forming in her eyes.

“It’s not up to us, anymore,” Melissa sighed.
Erica placed her head in her hands on the table, and silently cried.

“So, here’s the deal,” Melissa said, her voice softening. “They can’t compete, so we need a new captain.” Her eyes landed on Derek’s.

“No!” Derek said angrily.

“Honestly Melissa, we don’t want him as our captain!” Scott said while folding his arms.

“Yeah, he’s too good to be on our team anyways!” Jackson added.

No one jumped to defend Derek, not even Lydia.

“In life, sometimes you have to work with those you’d rather not,” Melissa explained. “He’s captain, and you guys have to make him feel like a real part of the team.” She turned to Derek. “And you have to lead them! Help them! You guys can do it, your whole school is behind you!”

The starting line was packed with participants, their fans anxiously waiting. Beacon of Hope had a tent set up next to the other local high schools, including Davenford Prep. The visiting students looked curiously at the mountain school’s attendees. Brett took the initiative to break the awkward silence.

“Good luck, guys!” He said with a smirk. “You’re gonna need it.” He added in a lower voice so Melissa and Satomi wouldn’t here.

“It’s our turf, you so sure we will need it?” Jackson asked as cocky as ever.

Liam nodded at the group of teens. “Where’s the rest of your team?”

Everyone shifted. “Just us,” Derek said as he stepped up.

He wasn’t pleased about being thrown in as captain of his untalented classmates. They were sure to lose. He wouldn’t get to play basketball competitively, he would be stuck at this school until he graduated and if he was lucky, he’d find a university that would let him play pick up. It would probably be a local community college - would a university even accept transcripts from this
alternative school?

He looked at his group who all looked expectantly back at him.

Annoyed that she wasn’t chosen to step in for Boyd, Allison flung her dark hair back into a messy ponytail and hissed. “Why don’t you try to encourage everyone, we’re up next.”

Derek didn’t need her reminder.

“Guys!” Derek started as he looked around. He wasn’t meant to lead and he didn’t like having the position thrown on him. The ragtag group of teens peered back at him, waiting. Lydia didn’t quite meet his eyes. “Just don’t mess this up. Try and keep up, okay?”

“Some speech!” Scott muttered to Stiles, shaking his head.

Isaac looked afraid of the stretch of bikes their teachers were moving over to the starting line.

Allison gritted her teeth. Jackson whispered something to Lydia, causing her to giggle again. Derek was surprised the action didn’t stir any jealousy in him. He found he didn’t care at all when the redhead’s hand lingered on Jackson’s forearm a bit longer than necessary as they mounted their bikes, either.

“Remember, it’s just three miles, we did four last weekend, just keep up!” Derek said over his shoulder as he took the lead position for himself.

“Beacon Hope ready?” An official looking man with a clipboard asked.

Derek nodded.

“It’s Beacon of Hope,” Allison corrected, rolling her eyes. She indicated Scott who wasn’t on his bike. “And not yet.”

Scott was glaring at Liam and had missed their call.

Derek whipped around to see who wasn’t in position yet and huffed, annoyed, when he saw Scott belatedly join them.

“Ready?” The official asked.

Derek looked at his team. “Isaac. Where’s your helmet?”
The curly hair teen had to jog back to their tent amid a crowd of laughter from the neighboring schools’ teens to retrieve it. The official checked his watch.

“Ready now?” He asked for a third time as Isaac returned.

Derek nodded. There was a beep of an air horn and the teens were off. Derek pulled out of the mulch covered starting zone with a record speed. The rest of his group did not. But regardless, off they went.

The first leg of the race went decently enough. Fortunately for Lydia, the path was made up of mostly straight-aways, although one section in particular was rather hilly. Stiles actually hit a dirt patch at a dangerous speed, in an attempt to keep up with Derek and came crashing down. Derek was pretty sure he bent the front wheel of his bike on the impact, but he didn’t say anything; didn’t want to hold them up.

Stiles would have to just pump harder and faster to not fall behind.

Derek pulled ahead of his group, sensing that the end was near. He could hopefully check them in at the kayak station and get his team off to a fast start in the water portion of the day.

Unfortunately, the officials waiting for him at the river side wouldn’t allow him to start until the rest of his team arrived. Derek looked down the quarter mile stretch of dirt. No one else was in sight yet. He paced nervously until a cloud of dirt kicked up, indicating the rest of his team was arriving.

Impatiently, Derek tapped the check-in desk until the final member of his team crossed the line.

Isaac let his bike fall to the floor. He was huffing and out of breath. Lydia fixed her hair and damped her neck with a towel one of the officials had offered them. Scott and Jackson were attempting to drink a gallon of water each. Allison held her arms above her head and shook out her limbs, preparing for the next task. Stiles sat on a log and rubbed his thighs. That last mile with the bent spoke had to have been difficult for his small frame.

“Come on guys, you already held us up!” Derek shouted. “We have to keep going!”

“Give is a minute!” Jackson demanded right back.

Lydia nodded and agreed, but didn’t have the breath to say so yet. Most of the rest of them ignored Derek’s order.

Allison went around and made sure Stiles and Isaac got some water too.
“You guys ready?” She asked, genuinely concerned.

Ten minutes later, they were finally loading into their individual boats. Derek was beyond annoyed. How could they possibly take so long? He was surprised Davenford Prep hadn’t caught up with them yet.

“Remember,” Allison shouted to the others. “Elbows up, nice fluent strokes!”

The horn beeps again and they continued on their journey toward the finish line. Derek thought this portion would be the most painful, but he was impressed with his stragglers’ ability to keep up. Allison counted out loud occasionally to help everyone keep rhythm. It was something Boyd had started last week. Derek saw the tents at the shore just a bit further away. He ordered them to pick up pace and started on a left right mantra that was about twice as fast as Allison’s counts.

They pulled into the shore line out of breath and arms shaking. They all completely ignored Derek when he told them to leave the drink station and line up.

Everyone took a second helping of the provided water and stretched out their limbs prior to making their way over to their impatient captain’s side. The final horn beeped however and the group of teens took off at a light jog into the woods. The trail they were supposed to follow was highlighted with yellow flags. It was narrow at some parts and provided both on and off path routes, meaning they had to watch their steps.

Ten minutes in and Derek was frustrated with his team. Lydia refused to move faster than a quick paced walk, and Isaac was altering between falling behind and catching up in equal measure. The rest of them looked about ready to keel over at any minute. And no one was able to talk or laugh as they usually did when the hiked through this forest. Derek turned around to yell at them to keep up again when he finally saw what he was dreading. A group of athletic looking teens were joking in unison just behind his snails’ pace of a group.

Davenford Prep were about to pass them.

“Don’t tell me you guys are gassing out?” Brett called from his spot in the front.

“Wouldn’t dream of it!” Jackson managed to respond but the effort made it look like he might pass out.

Liam smiled as he jogged past them. He turned around and still maintained his pace. “Did I tell you I’m a freshman?” He asked. “How does it feel to be lapped by someone younger?”

Derek grounded his teeth together. He wanted to punch the kid so badly.
The prep school students furthered their lead on the next curve and were out of sight just as quickly as they came.

“Come on guys!” Derek snapped. “Are you going to let them win?”

“Yeah.” Scott stopped completely. “Yeah, we are. Who’s with me?”

Stiles, Isaac, and Lydia all halted behind the crooked jawed teen.

“Guys?” Allison questioned. “Need a break?”

“Yeah - a permanent one.” Lydia replied sarcastically, earning a high five from Jackson who turned around to join them.

Derek now had a couple of yards of a lead on everyone else. “That’s it then?” He called back. “Just going to give up, let them win?”

“We need a break!” Lydia snapped back. Her eyes flashed dangerously in Derek’s direction.

“Fine then, I’ll beat them. I’ll show them we can do it!” Derek responded. If he thought his classmates would protest or argue and try to catch up he was mistaken. Derek picked up his pace and left everyone else behind. Lydia and her brazen ways, Kate and her insistence. He left it all behind and he ran.

Stiles watched Derek leave them. As team captain, he carried their emergency radio on his hip, but that wasn’t the only thing he watched disappear around the corner. Track shorts suited the older teen just fine.

“Okay guys. We’ll rest for fifteen and continue.” Allison clapped her hands together. “Sound good with everyone?” She checked.

If they weren’t so busy breathing deeply and catching their breaths they would have responded.

Twenty minutes later they were back at it, albeit at a much slower and more manageable pace this
time. Lydia talked merrily about her birthday dress. She had asked her dad to order a few just in case the yellow one didn’t look right with her complexion.

Erica told them all excitedly that she and Stiles were currently in the lead in the stock market project in Finstock’s class. He had extended the dates as the gains weren’t as drastic as last years. He wanted them to have a good feel for the ups and downs, and understand that nothing was a guarantee. Scott was disappointed that he had actually lost money under Lydia’s dad’s company.

Jackson called Derek every swear word imaginable and reminisced about how great it was to be so high you simply ‘didn’t give a fuck about anything, even egotistical jerks’.

Allison tried to maintain her positive attitude. She encouraged everyone to keep moving, even if it was a walk.

“Hands above your heads, it will help you focus on breathing. Keep it up!” She said to everyone, looking behind her to make sure everyone was able to stay close.

She didn’t see it. A large root stuck out of the ground at a dangerous height. She tripped, landing hard on the earth below. She caught herself with her hands in the dirt before she face planted, but that did nothing to prevent the snap of her ankle.

Stiles glanced up at that cracking noise with concern. Allison was a tough girl but she had instant tears forming in her eyes. She tried desperately to hold them back and failed. Scott was at her side right away and Isaac was just a moment behind.

“You’ll have to elevate it.” The latter said as he bent down. The two boys worked together to get Allison in a more comfortable position on the right of the pathway. Lydia plopped down next to her friend and squeezed her hand.

“Oh my god! Oh my god! What do we do?” She asked in a panicked fashion.


Everyone quieted down. They could all imagine who did the breaking in that case, Isaac had some pretty sad stories.

Jackson stood off to one side and looked just as helpless as Stiles felt. But Scott suggested that the root that had done the tripping was a good resource to keep her foot off the ground and even ordered the others to look for some sturdy branches to use as a makeshift splint.

They did, and using shoelaces Scott did the best he could to set it. Allison’s ankle was twice the size it should have been, however, and she needed real medical attention.
Jackson did his best to turn Allison’s tears into laughter and the results had everyone in a lighter mood.

“He took the radio.” Stiles told the group once the initial panic had settled. “Derek, when he left us.” He added as everyone looked confused.

Allison nodded as if she too had thought of that. “It’s okay. The next team should be running along soon. Do you guys know who was supposed to start after Devenford?”

No one was paying attention to the roster, so they weren’t entirely sure.

Derek caught up with and passed the challenging high school students almost right away once he had gone off on his own. It was so much easier without his group holding him back. The startled teens had called after him about where his classmates were, but Derek didn’t have time to answer. He passed them and just kept going, the remaining three miles and all the way to the finish line, without stopping once. Man did his team hold him back.

Erica, Boyd, his parents, Melissa, and John were all at the finish line. All of their faces lit up when they spotted Derek coming down the dirt path. They all fell when it dawned on them that he was alone.

Irritated that Derek had such a lead on the rest, Boyd pushed forward and angrily asked where everyone else was.

“I don’t know.” Derek admitted between breaths. “Back there. But I did it, I beat the Devenford guys! Their time’s not in yet, but I have a feeling— I’m going to be faster!”

“Faster?” Erica questioned. “Doesn’t matter if the rest of our team doesn’t finish?”

Melissa smiled despite her annoyance with her replacement captain. She was happy to see being kicked off the race didn’t lessen Erica or Boyd’s inclusion on the team.

“They’re right.” She told Derek with a frown. “Beacon’s time continues until the last member of your team finishes!”

John shook his head. “You left them? How far back are they? You have the radio, Derek! How could you? What if…”
As if on cue, Melissa’s radio buzzed to life. It was the hired medics informing her that there was an incident reported from a passing team. One of her students was hurt. They didn’t have more information for her. Melissa uncharacteristically swore under her breath. Derek began to sweat for a whole new reason. Was it Isaac? Or Stiles!? What had happened?

Melissa excused herself as she hopped on the medic’s gulf cart to go find her student.

“Great!” John shouted. He was clearly already in a bad mood. It probably had something to do with the Boyds’ who seemed insistent on accompanying him. Or maybe it was Boyd’s side they refused to leave as he too approached Derek.

“You just had to leave them!” Boyd yelled. “We practiced for this, they trained so hard, they needed this, to accomplish something! And you just had to take it away! Rip it out from under their feet, couldn’t let them finish, huh?”

Derek stared at his friend who had never talked to him quite like that. He was legitimately pissed. Derek felt his cheeks redden at being called out by his peer, but the humiliation didn’t stop there.

“These students,” John started to say but shook his head, again. “They’ve never had the opportunities you had. They don’t know what it feels like to win at something, their whole life has been one big race they couldn’t finish. This was their chance, to rise above, as captain you should have been there, motivating them across the finish line.”

“I didn’t ask for this!” Derek lost his cool and yelled back. “I didn’t want to run the triathlon with them! I didn’t want to be their leader!”

“But you had the experience to help them and they are your team, whether you like it or not, Derek!” John huffed out. “I know you don’t think you belong here, but this place, those kids, they needed you! And you need them, too! A lot of things happened back home that you don’t like to talk about and we respect your decision, I’m letting you take your time, talk about the tragedy when you’re ready, but your teammates, classmates, group mates, friends, whatever you want to call them, they are here for you too, when you’re ready. We all are. But that goes both ways.”

“I don’t need any of you!” Derek shouted back. “I won! On my own, and as soon as my sister gets custody of me, I’m out of here!”

“Good job. You did it, you won.” John threw his hands up. “Does it feel like a victory? Do you even know who is hurt? And let’s say Laura comes and picks you up tomorrow, what then? She lost her family too. Are you guys just never going to talk about it? Ever? What about the holidays, hm? What then?”

The conversation was turning into something not intended for the public setting, so John backed down. “You won, Derek, but what good is that without your team?”
Derek went quiet as he always did when his family was mentioned. His heart physically ached just thinking about them and the fire that had taken their life while he was at basketball practice. How could John mention that here?

Just then the Devenford guys trailed in one after another.

Brett smirked at Derek. “You know you lost, right? Your teams not here.”

Yes. That was just pointed out to him several times.

“Losers and delinquents,” Liam huffed as he walked past. “Knew you guys couldn’t pull it off. Wonder how long it’s going to take for the rest of them to show? And on their home turf.”

Derek vowed to himself to land a good shoulder check on the younger kid if he ever had the opportunity to face him in basketball. But he had a good point; if one of them was injured, they wouldn’t even finish. His team really couldn’t handle the triathlon and they had made it so far, too.

Derek didn’t wait to ask permission or try and mend his relationship with Boyd, he took off at a jog back down the way he came. If he was really fast he might even catch his team before the medics carted them away.

“Do you feel that way, son?” Boyd’s mother asked him once her son’s attention was back on her and her husband. They were going to head home that evening, the three of them.

“What way, Mom?” He asked.

“Like we are ripping this out from under your feet? Not letting you finish?” She replied.

Boyd shrugged. “A little, I guess.”

His father clasped him on his shoulders. “You were so quiet after and we were worried. Worried we lost you too. But now, I feel like we have the old Vernon back.”

“I never left,” Boyd said, eventually. “You don’t talk about it, ever - Alicia.” He said boldly.
Both of his parents flinched at hearing their deceased daughter’s name.

“How am I supposed to be okay with it, if you aren’t?” He asked them. “She drowned, right next to me.”

“We don’t blame you, honey,” His mother insisted quickly.

“Blame me for what?” Boyd asked, defensively. “You won’t even acknowledge what happened, that I was there and she died in my arms because I failed her!”

“No, that’s not true…”

“It is though! This is what I mean; it happened and I was there, and you guys pretend like it didn’t!” Boyd raised his voice a little, causing John to insist they head back to the school grounds where they could use his office to talk some more. Erica was near tears watching her boyfriend leave, probably wondering if that would be the last time she would see him.

Derek doubled back twice as fast as he did the first time, passing two more confused looking teams of high school students as he went.

He heard them before he found them. They were laughing.

His team sat in a circle with Allison in the middle and her poorly bandaged foot was propped up on a small bolder. They were sitting just slightly out of the way. Every single one of them looked defeated.

“What are you all laughing at?” Derek asked as he approached out of breath.

“You, actually,” Scott retorted with a challenging eyebrow raise.

Derek just nodded. “Okay, fair enough. I deserve that, I was a jerk.”

“Was?” Allison questioned.

“I’m sorry,” Derek tried lamely.
The sound of branches crunching signified that Melissa and the medic were nearby. The counselor jumped out of the moving gulf cart she was so worried.

Allison assured her she would be okay and explained how she stupidly had tripped.

“Okay. Well, let’s get you all out of here,” Melissa said to her students. Her heart went out to them, they had trained every day for the past two weeks for this event.

“Allison across that line,” He suggested.

Stiles dropped his mouth open in disbelief. Surely there was no point now, they had already proven Devenford Prep right? They were outcasts, not worthy of their competition.

Allison looked around at everyone. No one smiled anymore.

“Guys,” Derek continued. “No one thinks you can do it; everyone outside of this school doubts us. If we don’t finish, we’re proving them right. We’ll be written off before we’re even given a shot.”

“How much further?” Jackson asked, interested.

“What does it matter?” Isaac inquired, instead. “We already lost to Devenford.”

“Yeah, you’re right they did finish already,” Derek agreed. “But right now, we haven’t even lost yet. We have to cross that line for that to happen. Right now, if we don’t continue, we’re nothing – quitters - might as well have stayed in bed this morning because we have nothing to show for the day.”

“We?” Stiles asked. He flinched as he stood up to join Jackson.

“Yeah, we - we’re a team, right?” Derek tried to joke but no one responded.

Melissa turned to the medic. “Can you take a look at Allison’s ankle?”

The volunteer commented on the quality of Scott’s splint, but re-wrapped it with proper gauze. He said she would be okay if she stayed off of it for a bit longer without having it seen to by a proper doctor.

“Well, what do you say guys?” Allison asked the group. “Who’s carrying me first?”
Derek held her the entire way back. He was out of breath and his back ached, but it was worth it when the group of mismatched teens walked across the finish line over an hour later. Every single one of them had a smile back in place as they graciously accepted the worst time of the day.

Allison’s father whisked her off to the closest hospital immediately after.

Brett took Derek aside and complimented him on going back for his team. It wasn’t said with disrespect, either.

Erica greeted them all happily enough and told them sadly that this might be Boyd’s last evening.

“I wouldn’t worry so much just yet,” John told the group. “His parents love him and want what’s best for him, and I have a feeling that Boyd has the toolset, now, to express what he needs. But, either way let’s get back and tell him the good news?”

“Good news?” Jackson asked, incredulously.

“Well you guys set a pretty low score, so you’ll probably be able to beat it no problem next year,” John joked. “Especially if you keep up this daily practice schedule of yours!”

“Oh no!” Stiles protested. “No way! I’m not going near a bike again, like ever! That last mile was hell, and then kayaking after? Just, no.”

“Your front tire rim was messed up,” Derek admitted once the group had stopped laughing at Stiles’ proclamation. “You bent it on a hill.”

Stiles stared at the older teen with his mouth open.

“Sorry,” Derek offered, although it wasn’t enough, and he knew it.

Boyd was waiting at the office for his group without his parents. They had to leave to catch their flight on time, and Boyd wasn’t going with them. They had had a long discussion and agreed that he needed more time, that he needed to place his flag along with the other graduates and earn his way from here. And if he was still too lost to even make his flag, then he wasn’t ready.

Erica was thrilled.
Allison showed up halfway through dinner accompanied by Melissa, John, and her dad. She had a cast and crutches, but also a grin.

“Thank you,” She said as she approached. “For carrying me.”

Derek didn’t think the gratitude was warranted, given his earlier behavior.

“A few things,” John said as he grew nearer. “Firstly, we made more profit than expected. Today’s event was a huge success. Thank you, guys, for being a part of that.”

They all chuckled.

“And secondly,” He continued. “The school board contacted us today. They were impressed with our grounds, students, and staff - we will be allowed to compete in this upcoming basketball season as a trial run and if it goes well, we can do cross country and track and field next year, as their season is already underway this one.”

“What about lacrosse?” Scott asked. He shared a look with Jackson. They had a certain freshman’s grin they would like to wipe permanently from their face.

“You interested in playing?” Chris asked, contemplative.

“We can talk with Coach, and see. It shouldn’t be too difficult to mark out a field with all of our open space.” Melissa suggested. Her eyes twitched in Derek’s and Boyd’s direction. They hadn’t forgotten that their would be punishments, she hoped.

“Lastly,” John interrupted. “Derek can I have a word?”

Derek stood up and followed the older man out of the mess hall.

“You did step up and help your team, today, but you also failed them first and I can’t ignore that fact.” John looked terribly saddened by what he was about to say. “You seemed to have a difficult time being a part of a team, so I spoke with Coach and you’re off the team. No basketball, maybe by the end of the year you can earn your way back on it, but for now, you’re starting over from day one. I’m truly sorry, it kills me because you were a large reason for us to push the school board to allow us to play the other high schools.” John reached out to place a comforting hand on Derek’s shoulder.

The teen dodged.
Derek couldn’t believe what he was just told. He felt the air leave his lungs and couldn’t bring himself to replenish it. After everything, and really, he only had himself to blame, but still.

John returned to the cafeteria, but Derek just couldn’t follow. He stood there for a long time, feeling numb.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

beta read by fairyfey on 4/30/18

Now, this chapter... is tough.

Warning: Suicide talk although no one dies. Honestly this fic is so full of triggers that I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone. I like to think this and all of the dangerous topics discussed are done so tastefully but if it isn’t, if I pushed the limit of acceptability too far, please feel free to let me know in the comments.

And while this chapter goes to dark places it also brings us a new student who will certainly lighten the mood in future chapters... Anyone who watched Higher Ground, can you imagine a Bubbly Kira that’s based off of Daisy??

Episode 5

It was the busiest Sunday, admin wise, that Melissa had ever seen. Apparently, John was putting that newfound money of his to work. She had already assisted Parrish with checking in two new students that morning and before she could even sit down to rest, another three cars pulled into their graveled parking lot.

Melissa glanced at the staff that were available. Chris was still in the office with the mother of their latest student, while John was showing the other set of parents the grounds already, and Parrish had just made his escape with his new students from that morning. That left just Harris, Marin, and herself for adults working the front office. Marin was a counselor for the all girls group, most of her students were seniors and she was expecting to get another one that afternoon. Melissa was supposed to be adding a female student to her own team, as well. But who did the other car belong to?

She glanced at Harris and Marin with a questionable expression. Apparently neither one of them knew who else was being admitted that day, either. Four was already a record high.
The first car was a beat up old sedan. A flustered looking woman exited the driver side and went around to open the backseat for her daughter. A small girl with rainbow colored hair grumbled as she exited.

“I can’t believe you put the child safety locks on!” She hissed at her mom, “You’re unbelievable!”

Before Melissa could greet them, however, the second car opened. This one housed a business woman and her daughter. The two avoided looking at each other at all costs. Melissa assumed that it had been a very quiet car ride. The last car rudely drove past the two sets of mother and daughter pairs to make their own parking spot in the grass next to the office. A couple exited the car, leaving their son sitting in the back.

“Who do we have to talk to, to send our son to this boarding school?” The man practically shouted.

Marin’s eyebrows raised as she whispered to Melissa that she would take the girls to be checked in. Harris merely shrugged but opened the office door for the two patiently waiting mothers.

Melissa set her face to a beaming smile as she rounded on the unexpected arrival. “Welcome to Beacon of Hope!”

Stiles was the last to arrive for breakfast. Scott had failed to wake him, again, but as the group was on common room pick up in the afternoons, he didn’t miss a chore this time. It was still annoying though.

Everyone had been a bit grumpier than usual lately. Lydia had been caught by Isaac making out with Jackson. Isaac told Scott and apparently Allison already knew, but aside from her, Scott didn’t tell anyone. But somehow Derek found out and now everyone else was to blame. Stiles assumed he was on that list of perpetrators too. It didn’t help matters that Allison still wasn’t cleared by the doctors to participate in group activities and aside from the classroom, they had barely seen the brunette much over the past week. Derek was heavily at fault for this, as he had abandoned them during the race, and anyone who wasn’t angry with him for it was ‘in the wrong’ according to Scott. Frankly, the drama was becoming too much.
Stiles plopped his tray down at the table without so much as a greeting to his fellow students.

“Congratulations!” Isaac said in lieu of a more typical ‘good morning’.

“What?” Stiles asked, confused.

“You and Erica - you officially won the economics project!” Isaac told him as he shoved a copy of the Sunday paper across the table.

“How? Where did you get this?” Stiles questioned.

“I couldn’t wait ‘til class tomorrow to find out!” Erica told him, excitedly. “If my whole family can’t visit me here, I’m totally asking for a trip home!”

“Did you steal this from coach?” Stiles asked.

“No, silly. I asked John. It’s not like we’re not allowed to read the newspaper, even if most of the kids here probably don’t understand how to read the thing.”

This was coming from the girl who Stiles had spent thirty minutes explaining how to use the index to find the stock exchange page several weeks ago.

“I still don’t know how you beat us, man!” Scott confessed. “Lydia! Your family’s company was supposed to be the real deal!”

The red head frowned but failed to comment. Jackson glared at Scott on her behalf.

“Will your dad come here?” Boyd asked Stiles, generally curious.

“I-I don’t know? And, he’s my stepdad,” Stiles answered honestly. He suddenly didn’t feel very hungry and pushed his tray away.
Derek noticed, of course, and pointed out that he was still required to eat breakfast. How annoying. Stiles thought about taking his tray to an empty table.

“So,” Scott leaned in to whisper. It was pointless as the only teacher in the entire mess hall was Coach Finstock at that moment. “I did it. A full carton, two hundred cigarettes, who’s in?”

“What!” Erica squealed, excitedly. “I can’t believe that worked?”

“I had to pay double,” Scott grumbled. “But it was worth it!”

“What do you want for a pack?” Stiles asked, skeptically. It had been awhile, but just the thought of his step dad visiting made him long for something, anything, to take the edge off.

“Your first smoke is on me,” Scott informed them all. “After that, find someone on campus willing to pay a high amount for a pack and I’ll cut you a deal. Honestly, it will be a month until I can replenish these ones, so I need to make that money back by then, and you know not smoke them all in the process.”

Stiles was impressed with the amount of thought Scott put into his ‘project’. But then again, Scott was busted for dealing in his old school.

Derek shook his head. Boyd told them all that he didn’t smoke either, to which Erica looked up at him in surprise. Jackson opened his mouth, clearly ready to write them off too, but Lydia beat him to it.

“I hear smoking helps you loose weight, is that true?” She asked, nervously.

“I think so,” Scott replied with a grin. “Want to buy a pack? For you, only twenty bucks…”

Lydia looked like she was considering it.

“I-I’ll try it,” Isaac timidly admitted.
“When and where?” Erica asked, still over eagerly.

“Firewood shed, as soon as Stiles finishes his breakfast.” Scott informed them with a pointed look at Stiles.

Derek initially had no intention on being near his groupmates while they so blatantly broke the school rules, but…Stiles was going, Lydia and Isaac were apparently trying a smoke for the first time, and in some older brother sort of way he just felt he should be there to yell at them all once they start coughing.

Scott was beyond stupid for sneaking the contraband on campus, and maybe Derek could talk him into turning it over to John. And if doing so earned him some favor towards making it back on the basketball team, then so be it.

Overall, he felt confident as he joined the others out by the stacks of lumber. His smile fell when he looked at just how crowded the office was in the distance. There were already two cars parked and several more pulling in. Scott noticed the incoming vehicles as well.

“As promised, Scott did indeed have an entire carton of cigarettes. He passed them out amongst the group, even going so far as to offer one to Boyd and Derek again. Jackson caved and took one as soon as Lydia did. She held the loose on her open palm and was clearly unaware of what to do with it. Unlike Stiles, who’s own cig was already rolling around between his lips as he poked at it with his tongue while waiting for a light. Isaac held his between his fingers, trying to see what pose worked better for him.

“I’ve never - my dad smoked. I think my Mom did too, before she had me, I don’t know,” Isaac admitted.

“Hey!” Scott said brightly clamping a hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to, if you don’t want to. It’s not for everyone!”
“Yeah, but some of us want to, so where’s the lighter?” Stiles asked impatiently.

“Umm.” Scott’s eyes grew wide.

“Matches?” Stiles asked, hopeful.

“No, I’m-I’m sorry,” Scott muttered.

“Let me get this straight,” Stiles started. “You paid sixty bucks for a carton of cigarettes and didn’t think to ask for a lighter?”

“I paid eighty, actually,” Scott corrected.

“Scotty!” Stiles flailed his hands dramatically.

“Ah, the disappointment!” Erica sighed. “At least we can bum a smoke when we go home for our visit!” She added as she nudged Stiles.

The reminder didn’t seem to improve Stiles’ mood in the least. On the contrary, he seemed to deflate more. Derek wondered about that before he brightly told them all that they can turn over the cigarettes now, and maybe focus on making that lacrosse team instead.

This seemed to cheer Scott and Isaac up, at least. Along with Boyd, they discussed the rules and game strategy. Lydia tried to plan out Beacon of Hope cheerleading uniforms with Erica who just wasn’t as into that type of thing as Allison would have been, so the conversation was largely one sided. And, Jackson seemed interested in trying out for their hypothetical lacrosse team, only if he was a natural. As he had never played before he didn’t know, but he loudly told them that there would be no way he would be a bench warmer.

Stiles seemed distracted and was still playing with his unlit cigarette.

That was until Melissa’s shadow cut across their little semi-circle they had formed sitting in the grass.
“Stiles!” Melissa boomed as her quick stride brought her closer. She had two students trailing behind her that Derek had never seen before. “What is that in your mouth?”


“I’ll give you a hundred and ninety-nine more useless dreams if you let us all off the hook?” Scott piped up, surprising them all.

Melissa didn’t even look shocked. The teachers really did seem to know everything.

“I want all two hundred on my desk in the next hour, Scott,” She ordered, “And I’ll see about making the punishment less severe. In the meantime, I have two new students joining our group. That’ll make us full, with Allison. More than full, so I expect you all to make them feel welcomed, and included.” She paused to give Jackson an ‘or else’ look. “This is Matt and Kira. Lydia, why don’t you show Kira around, and Stiles, you can show Matt the ropes.”

Everyone agreed and Melissa excused herself because she still had all of their belongings to check as well as give Matt’s parents their own tour of the grounds.

Kira was adorable. Her dark hair was streaked a multitude of other colors, giving it a rainbow effect. She had a piercing in her nose and eyebrow, and best of all she seemed to giggle after everything she said. She reminded Derek of his younger sister, Cora. The thought sent a chill through him. His dead sister, who had been burnt alive in the fire.

Matt, on the other hand, seemed like he might’ve been in competition with Jackson for who could be the rudest. He was blunt and not afraid to tell them all exactly what he thought about them. He didn’t dare tease Derek as he was clearly more built, but he seemed to find Stiles’ small stature fascinating to poke at. He also thought Lydia’s hair was gorgeous, and couldn’t resist telling Boyd that he could do so much better than Erica. All in all, the man had made an enemy out of everyone within minutes.

Stiles ended up volunteering to take him around campus just to stop Jackson from punching him. Derek didn’t miss the resigned look on Stiles’ face as he left.
Monday proved to be the worst day Stiles had had since coming to the reform school. He couldn’t believe the new guy he was partnered with and from the sounds of it, Lydia wasn’t enjoying her newbie either. Matt had a special way of saying just the thing to earn both himself and Stiles, as his guide, a look of incredulity from just about every student they talked to. Kira, on the other hand, seemed to be the polar opposite of Lydia’s brand of sunshine. The new girl listened to Korean pop, talked about karate and sword fighting, and refused to show people respect, unless they earned it. She wasn’t intimidated in the least by anyone at their group’s lunch table and best of all, that included Matt.

In short, Stiles liked her.

Matt had found a way to smuggle a digital camera on campus, or at least Stiles thought it was smuggled because he didn’t know anyone else who had one, but perhaps he was simply the first person to try to bring their own personal camera with him. Either way, the shutter sound was already on his last nerve. Matt must have fancied himself an artist as he would take seemingly random photos, non-stop. He had captured Lydia’s hair both in and out of sunlight multiple times already. Both Jackson and Derek had threatened to break the thing if they caught him harassing her any further.

That did seem to make Matt back off from Lydia, but he only focused more on other targets. Stiles was a favorite of his as he was always with him, but so was Allison. When they had met that morning during breakfast and again now, during lunch, Matt’s camera was getting highly acquainted with her face.

Scott marched across the mess hall with his backpack haphazardly hanging off one shoulder and a scowl marring his features. “You take one more photo of Allison without her permission with that thing and I’ll shove it...”

Unfortunately, Scott’s threat was cut short as Melissa entered the cafeteria and shouted out that he was still on shuns. His punishment was to spend time away from his group mates as he was deemed a ‘bad influence’ so he had to sit with the teachers. This meant that Matt turned his camera on his backup subject: Stiles.

The fact that the annoying kid had so many photos of him didn’t bother Stiles as much as the occasional comments he would make. Matt seemed to think each and every one of Stiles’ moles was a worthy subject, and the way he talked about them was both rather poetic and extremely creepy. Stiles wasn’t one to narc, but he was seriously thinking about talking to John about their
personal belongings policy.

At least he would get some time away from Matt in their next class, as it was economics with Finstock. But that tiny blessing was squashed as soon as he stepped foot into the classroom.

“Well class, today is our final day for the stock market project, let’s see who our victors are, hm?” As Coach said this he gave Stiles a thumbs up.

It took everything in him for Stiles to not slam his head down on his desk.

As Derek entered the mess hall that evening it was to an unusual sight. Stiles and Matt had just set their trays down at their regular table and everyone else picked theirs back up.

“What?” Matt yelled after them. “Where is everyone going?”

Derek saw the dejected look on Stiles’ face and as much as he wanted to tell the poor kid that he didn’t have to stick to Matt like glue, he also sympathized. Scott had been a pretty bad guide and it seemed that Stiles was determined to do a better job.

Kira was just leaving the lunch line when she saw her peers split table situation. She strode past Lydia without even stopping to acknowledge her or the others and sat on Stiles’ other side. Derek followed suit, choosing to sit across from him. While he might not have said anything, Stiles seemed grateful for their presence.

“Check these out!” Matt said to Derek as he passed along his camera.

Derek had half a mind to chuck the thing across the floor, but he froze when he saw what Matt was showing him. It was well known across campus that he and Lydia had had a thing and that they clearly didn’t anymore. So Derek was shocked when Matt’s camera had a picture of Stiles on it. It was Stiles chewing on a pen cap outside under the gazebo. This must have been during Chris’ class that morning, as they all shared English. Derek swallowed hard, did Matt catch him staring?
Was Derek staring at Stiles during class?

“There’s more!” Matt pressed a button and the next shot made Derek’s eyebrows disappear in his hairline.

It was a picture of Stiles drying off after his shower. And while it didn’t show anything too risqué, it did give a clear view of that barcode tattoo of his. Derek was both drawn too and put off by the inappropriateness of the photo. When did Matt take this? Why was he showing it to Derek? Did Stiles even know?

Kira chose that moment to laugh loudly at something Stiles said which brought Derek back into the moment. Neither one of them had any clue what was going on on the other side of the table.

Matt plucked his camera out of Derek’s outstretched hand. “Don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me!” He sneered under his breath. “But, that’s not the only secret,” Matt added quietly while tapping on Stiles’ tattoo.

Derek was still in shock. What did that even mean? What secret? Why did Matt think Derek would even care? He didn’t have time to question it as Matt declared himself done, even though his dinner was untouched, and jumped up from his seat.

“Don’t worry!” Matt shouted at the rest of Melissa’s group which sat across the hall. “You can have your table back! Didn’t want to be here anyway!” And with that he left.

Derek was glad that Stiles didn’t go after him.

“So,” Kira started. “Why are you all here? My Mom decided to send me away when I took my anger out on my dad - with my katana,” She said it so casually, it was almost chilling.

Derek and Stiles shared matching looks of disbelief.
The sound of water running was one of those noises that Stiles could sleep through, usually. Until it went on and on for what felt like hours, and he finally peeked his eyes open only to realize that it was still the middle of the night. Who was taking a shower this late? Or was it early?

A glance at the bed next to him told Stiles that it wasn’t Scott, or even Isaac as his curly hair was visible in the moon light in the distance. He tried to roll over but the pounding of the water only seemed to get louder.

Stiles crossed the bed lined room in the dark, taking into account all of the people sleeping in their assigned bunks. Everyone was there! So who was - oh, that’s right, the new guy. Of course it would be Matt. He couldn’t possibly annoy Stiles further in the daytime, so he had to wake him up at night, too?

The bathroom was set up so that several shower areas were separated from the toilets and sinks to allow for multiple students to use them at the same time. This was wonderful when everyone was running behind in the mornings, but right now, it meant that all the lights were off except for one and with the amount of steamed kicked up from the shower, it created a rather creepy vibe. It didn’t help matters when Stiles stepped on a puddle of water. What did Matt do? Flood the bathroom?

Stiles flicked the main light on only to see a pair of feet sticking out from one of the shower stalls. It added to the creepy factor ten-fold. But that was pushed entirely from his mind as he carefully jogged down the wet floor to help the guy. Stiles threw the curtain back, revealing a sight he wouldn’t soon forget.

Matt sat on the floor, slumped to one side. Despite being in the shower, he was still wearing clothes which clung to him, mimicking his dark hair glued to his forehead. In his hand was a plastic bag with several pills. But the most disturbing thing was just how blue his lips were. Matt wasn’t breathing and might not have been for some time.

Stiles screamed for help.

Melissa couldn’t believe it, one of her students, one of the kids that she told was safe here, had overdosed and was now fighting for his life in a coma. The boy seemed angry and lost in a way that reminded her of Jackson. He didn’t seem to be getting along with her other wards, but
sometimes the first week was rough for her kids. Scott’s first month had been a nightmare! But to overdose? The worst thing was, Melissa wasn’t sure if the concoction of pills he took was on purpose or was it a stupid mistake. A mistake that might just cost Matt his life.

She kept flashing back to John and the officers who had searched her boys’ dorm room that morning. Matt had several items that shouldn’t have made it past inspection, her inspection. She knew she had checked all of their luggage, so how had Matt gotten these things in? Did she check the same bag twice and accidentally skip over the other? The guilt flooded through her at the thought. Melissa would have to make an official statement and she wasn’t even sure what she would say. That it could have been all her fault? That she wasn’t sure? How would this make the rest of her kids feel? Maybe she should just resign.

“Hey,” John said with a tight squeeze on her shoulder. “The kids are done being questioned. I think we should sit them down, emergency group meeting, if you could. Those boys, they’re gonna need us.” He spoke softly, for which Melissa was grateful, but she caught on to the double meaning. John was not so subtly saying that he needed her too. That just because they had failed this one kid, didn’t mean they failed them all. Melissa followed him to the common room where all of her students sat bunched together, unusually quiet, except Stiles. Melissa turned to John, who of course already knew.

“He admitted to being alone in the bathroom with Matt and his bag of pills, they just want to question him further as he is a known user and court-ordered attendee.” John whispered.

“Question him where? Where are they, John?” It surprised herself, how angry she felt over knowing that Stiles might have been hauled down to the local precinct and without an adult, too.

“Chris is with him.” John added as he watched the fear flitter across Melissa’s features.

Melissa huffed out a breath she wasn’t even aware she was holding and turned to her students. These kids needed her at her best, not a Melissa harboring self guilt and thinking about what could have happened differently. Her students came here lost and it was her job to help them find their way, she couldn’t afford to appear conflicted, not at that moment.

“What happened?” Lydia asked, she was tear-streaked and not nearly as put together as she usually would have been.
Jackson sat next to her, but he didn’t even flinch when she spoke as he was staring at the ground. Scott and Isaac sat together and in front of them was Allison and Kira. The latter looked the least concerned and was probably thinking this was a daily occurrence. Erica and Boyd sat inappropriately too close on an armchair meant for one. Derek was leaning on their armrest.

“I’m sorry,” Melissa started to say. “One of the first things we tell you guys is that you’re safe here, that the pressures of the outside world don’t apply, that this kind of thing, can’t - shouldn’t - happen, anywhere, but especially here. And for that, I am so, so sorry.”

“But what happened, really?” Kira asked. “Most of us don’t even know.

John sent Melissa a sympathetic look before taking a deep breath. “Matt, one of your fellow classmates, overdosed last night. He’s currently in a coma and we’re all hoping he makes it through.”

“Not all of us,” Jackson interrupted. “I know we’re all supposed to be upset or whatever, but the guy was a dick. I’m not sad to see him go.”

This caused a murmur of talking from among the group until John held up his hands. “One at a time, you’re all entitled to feel how you feel, there is no wrong answer, okay.”

“How can you say that?” Allison squeaked at Jackson. “No one deserves to die.”

“He’s right though!” Derek, surprisingly, agreed with Jackson. “He was annoying, all those photos he took! Did you guys get his camera?”

“The police have it,” John replied. “I take it, you were all aware that Matt had brought with him more personal belongings than he was allowed?”

“Just that stupid camera!” Scott said through clenched teeth. “He was always taking photos, even during class. How did you guys not know?”

Melissa and John shared a look. They had dropped the ball with this one. Their students might not trust them anymore, and these were kids who didn’t trust anyone to begin with. A great damage had been done.
“I’m sorry,” Melissa said again. It didn’t feel adequate.

“We’re all sorry,” John added. “You’re right, we should have noticed. If a teacher had questioned his camera it could have led us to his stash prior to Matt’s incident. How does that make you feel? Let’s talk it out, are you angry? Upset? Afraid?”

“I’m not afraid!” Erica said a bit louder than she intended. “Big deal so a guy OD’d, it’s not the first time, and it won’t be the last, right? Happens all the time, really.”

“Did it happen to someone you knew?” Melissa asked with concern.

“I’ve seen people, not in my crew, but I’ve seen people,” Erica admitted.

Boyd encircled her in his arms and kissed the top of her head, which was too far for the no affection rule and John was forced to separate them.

“Anyone else?” Melissa asked. “How do you feel, Isaac?”

The teen shrugged. “I mean, I guess it was scary, hearing Stiles scream like that, I thought he was dead you know.”

“Yeah,” Scott agreed. “I’ve— I’ve never considered you know, what would happen if like, someone took it too far.”

“Drugs are illegal for a reason,” John agreed with a nod. “But that’s not necessarily something you think about when your taking them to check out from the world for awhile, huh?”

“Do you think he did it on purpose?” Kira asked. “Like was he trying to off himself?” She added with a smirk.

“You know, that is something I ask myself all the time,” John admitted with a faraway look in his eyes.
“Do any of you ever feel that way?” Melissa asked, genuinely curious. They weren’t equipped to handle suicidal cases, and she wasn’t trying to push any of her students to that point, but it was a legitimate feeling, and perhaps if they talked it out now, it would prevent someone from feeling that low later on.

“I have.” Jackson surprisingly said with a pleading glance at Melissa. “I don’t exactly feel welcomed at home, and it’s not like my birth parents wanted me, sometimes, I don’t know, sometimes I just think maybe it would be better for everyone if I just didn’t exist, you know.”

Melissa couldn’t help the small tear that escaped her eye as she crossed the commons to give Jackson a hug. “I hope you know, that you are wanted, by both of your adoptive parents, and by all of us here.”

Erica tossed a decorative pillow at the pair. “Not all.” She told Jackson with a wink.

“Anyone else ever feel that way?” John asked. “It’s okay, you can tell us, anything.”

“Not—not anymore, but like before, before I came here and I was cutting,” Lydia said in a small, detached voice. “I, um, I used to think that maybe I would go too far, too deep, and I would think how long it would take for someone to find me, you know. Like would it be the maid? Or my father checking in on me after a business trip? My mother? What would she do? Like if she found me dead and it was Sunday morning and her friends were coming over for brunch in the sunroom. Would she shut the door and pretend I was fine until after they all left?” She chuckled. “I used to think about that stuff a lot.”

“You’re okay now, though, right?” Allison asked, concerned.

“Yeah, I’ve learned a lot here, thanks to you!” Lydia told them all but placed a hand on Melissa’s forearm.

“I’ve never actually thought about it like that.” Isaac surprised them all by speaking next. “But I used to think that maybe today would be the day that my dad would just go too far, it was kind of a comforting thought, to think that it would all just be over. But I am so glad that I woke up in a hospital bed and shipped off to here, rather than a morgue.”
“And we’re glad you’re with us too!” John informed him with a small grin. “What about you Derek? How do you feel?”

Derek grimaced at being called out.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s okay,” John told him. “Scott, what are you thinking? Boyd?”

“I just keep wondering if like, I ever sold drugs to a kid who was planning something like that, you know? I just never thought about it before,” Scott admitted.

Before Boyd could say anything, the wooden doors opened and Chris came in with Stiles and an officer in tow. The policeman came up to John and pulled him off to the side so they could chat, presumably about the case. Chris took a seat and indicated for Stiles to do so as well. Melissa was worried for him. It wasn’t unusual for Stiles to be quiet, especially at group, but he had failed to make eye contact with anyone and was just sitting there, still as can be.

“So,” John announced as he made his way back over. “That was Deputy Haigh. He’s informed me that Matt is out of his coma and he’s going to make it! Naturally his parents are keeping the investigation opened, but I thought you’d appreciate knowing that he is doing better, for the time being.”

“Will he return here? Once he’s okay?” Jackson asked.

John sighed. “His parents hired a lawyer. There is a good chance they won’t let him return.” As he said this, he looked directly at Melissa.

Was he warning her? She was ready for any questions the lawyer might ask.

“Good,” Boyd said at last. “All he did was cause trouble, we don’t want him here, anyway.”

Most of the students agreed.
“He’ll get help though, somewhere, won’t he?” Lydia asked.

“I hope he does,” John replied easily. “I hope he does.”

“Stiles,” Melissa started tentatively. “Did you want to talk about anything? It can be traumatic, seeing someone lifeless like that. How are you feeling about, well, everything?”

Stiles didn’t look up as he replied. “It’s alright, it’s not like he was dead. I’ve seen worse, I guess. I don’t know, the cops were more concerned that I stole some drugs off him, and honestly, I thought he was dead and didn’t even consider it. Kind of wish I did, though, because it would have made this day go by a little faster.” He admitted with a shrug.

“Stiles did great, he was very cooperative, and respectful.” Chris told Melissa. “You’d be proud of him.” He added with a hand on Stiles shoulder which the teen quickly shoved off and scooted further away.

“So, are we done?” Kira asked. “Have we expressed enough emotion to satisfy your curiosity?”

Melissa looked at John. Obviously, the damage done here today wouldn’t be cured in one group session. It seemed like no one else had anything to say, however, so she wasn’t sure if he would declare the meeting finished or not.

“Okay, you guys are free to go. Boys, your dorm needs to be straightened up, please work together and ensure it’s done before dinner.” John announced after a pause.

Melissa wanted to talk with Chris, but it would seem he wasn’t the only one as John cornered him too.

“How was it, really?” Melissa asked as soon as the other students were out of earshot. “Is he okay?”

“I think he’s fine, he did a great job and was really cooperative.” Chris assured her. “They questioned him and searched him, but mostly we were just sitting there waiting on paperwork. You know how these things go.”
“Searched him?” John asked.

“Yeah, he had a pat down, but I was present and it was all to the book.” Chris told them. “I’d be more concerned about the lawyers; they sent a legal team to collect all the paperwork. They’re going for negligence on our part.”

Melissa couldn’t help but feel that comment was directed towards herself. She was the one that had failed to find the drugs.

It was quiet at first while the boys put their belongings back in their places. The police had a K-9 unit come through, but they found nothing. It would seem that Matt’s stash was just that ziplock and whatever he had already taken from it. But the mess from the search meant that all of the guys in the dorm had some cleaning to do.

The girls joined them. Erica helped Boyd fold his shirts, while Kira assisted Stiles. Allison hobbled over to Isaac’s bed, but he wouldn’t let her do anything. Lydia flopped herself dramatically on Derek’s bunk. This caused a bit of confusion among everyone, Derek included. Wasn’t she with Jackson now? Why did she sit on his bed? Was she trying to start something?

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Lydia started to say, placing a hand on Derek’s arm for comfort. “It must have been difficult after, everything that happened with your family.”

Jackson took just that moment to slam one of his dresser drawers shut.

“I’m fine, Lydia.” Derek insisted.

“You sure?” Jackson asked under his breath but everyone heard it.

“What was it like?” Kira asked loudly, distracting them all. “Being arrested?”
It took Stiles a few minutes to respond, he looked around the room and realized everyone was looking at him.

“Oh, they didn’t arrest me.” Stiles told them. “Not this time, anyway. They just questioned me again, same stuff they asked here, really.”

“But you’ve been arrested before?” Kira pressed. She wore a big grin on her face. “What was it like?”

Stiles shrugged.

“I thought that when my dad went to the hospital after I hit him, that they’d come haul me off, but nope, my mom arranged for me to go here instead. No charges, nothing, like it didn’t even happen. My whole family can just go on ignoring the fact that we have a serious communication issue.” Kira admitted.

“This one time,” Stiles said at last. “The cops picked me up after a sting of theirs. I was crouched under a table with another kid, and all of these adults were running by us shouting at each other, looking for the real bad guys, I thought to myself ‘hey they’ll just leave us here, it doesn’t even seem like they see us’, you know?” Stiles stopped folding his pants to look at Kira. “I was wrong. They didn’t even ask me to come cooperatively, one man picked me up and another grabbed Diamond around her waist, she was my friend, and that was it. I was thrown in the back of a police car. Spent the night in jail. They barely questioned me, took my finger prints, and an officer brought me back to my stepdads house the next day.”

“That’s it?” Kira asked. “What about your friend?”

“She ran away from a group home. I saw her again almost a year later, but I don’t think she recognized me,” Stiles said softly.

“They arrested me for drugs a few times.” Scott told them all, nudging Kira to get her attention. “My dad’s in the FBI and he would always show up with his badge and take me home, never had to spend the night there.”

“I’ve been arrested a few times, myself, for stupid stuff, like graffiti.” Erica told them. “They never kept me for long, either, but my brother has spent half a year in jail, now.”
Stiles shuddered.

“Why were you at someone’s house during a sting?” Allison asked Stiles with concern.

Stiles took a long time to reply. “I lived there, it was a hotel. Hole in the wall kind of place where people would go for drugs, heroine mostly, lots of people addicted to blues were willing to move up from the pills to the harder stuff. I did my best to avoid all of that.”

“Why wouldn’t you just go home?” Lydia asked while she cuddled Derek’s pillow in close.

Stiles never answered her.

The fight brewing between Jackson and Derek seemed to come to a head the next day at breakfast. Stiles found himself being pushed aside so that Jackson’s fist could find its target only for Derek to literally catch Jackson mid-strike.

The two angrily glared at one another until Kira gladly piped up. “Fight! Fight! Fight!”

This got the entire rooms attention, staff included.

John ordered the boys apart. He took a good look at the dysfunctional group of teens and went one step further. “Outside, now. All of you!”

Stiles followed after the rest of his classmates. John was angry. This might be the maddest Stiles had ever seen him. He looked at all them individually.

“Derek, Jackson, Scott, and Stiles,” John barked out each of their names. “I want you suited up. We’re going on a hike. Meet me by the south gate in ten.”
Stiles was flabbergasted. Why was he being called out? Sure, Jackson and Derek were clearly fighting and Scott had been cold to Derek over that last week, too, but what did Stiles have to do with any of that?

Stiles got dressed for the outdoor adventure the best he could without really knowing where he was going or what he would need. He was surprised to say the least when he arrived at the gate only to find Melissa standing there dressed as he had never seen her before. She wore a tight pencil skirt and business jacket. And a scowl.

“You boys better be on your best behavior for John! I’m already being pulled away by the lawyers and having John take you off campus now means that we will be understaffed here. He feels this trip is important enough to risk it, so I expect you all to do as your told and not disappoint me!” She said the last bit with a smile as she realized how parental she was acting.

As if to seal the deal, Scott jokingly said, “Yes, Mom! Good luck with the sharks!”

John arrived a moment later with a large rolled up yellow tarp. How he was able to carry it by himself was beyond Stiles’ imagination, but as soon as he was close enough, John ordered them all to take ahold of it. Together they marched off into the woods.

The tarp turned out to be a raft complete with life jackets and small plastic ores. After at least two hours of physically carrying the thing they made their way to a river’s edge. John had a pump that blew up the tiny boat while everyone else took a much needed break.

The issue was that there were six seats, six ores, and six jackets. But only five of them.

“Listen up,” John commanded. “This is the missing man formation. This is what happens when you’re down a guy, weather that be from an argument.” John paused to look at Jackson and Derek. “Or because you were unable to forgive someone.” He turned to Scott. “Or simply because of external circumstances. The point is, when you’re down a man, you’ll have to find a way to work together or none of us are going to be able to get this boat up stream.”

“What?” Jackson pointed to the river. “Up that stream? Those are like rapids!”

“It’s not that bad!” Scott huffed. “Come on, I’m hungry.”
“So, that empty life jacket is supposed to represent Matt?” Stiles asked timidly as he climbed in behind Derek.

“It’s Matt, you, me - all of us,” John replied eventually. “We’re all a little lost sometimes.”

Stiles still didn’t appreciate the seating arrangements. John and Derek took the front of the raft, while Scott and Jackson took the back. This left Stiles sitting across from no one. Immediately the lack of paddling from that side of the boat was a hinderance. The waves took them all over and more than once the boys found themselves paddling in a circle. The entire time John didn’t say a thing.

Eventually, Derek piped up. “Come on you guys! We have to work together! That’s the point of this whole stupid exercise, right?” He shot an evil glance at John who didn’t respond.

“Why should we take orders from you?” Scott asked. “I should lead.”

“I never asked to be in charge of this raft, or the triathlon!” Derek shot back.

“And yet there you are sitting in the front, again,” Scott retaliated.

“Maybe it’s because I don’t whine and cry about everything! Scott, you seriously started fights about everything when you first arrived here, you haven’t earned the right to lead!” Derek said, clearly frustrated. “Now paddle harder!”

“You do it then!” Jackson spat out. “Switch places with Scott, or take Matt’s spot.”

“No one is moving, now!” Stiles shouted out in a panic. “What if we tip the raft?”

“Well, clearly this isn’t working, twink!” Jackson argued back.

“Why do you keep calling him that?” Derek grumbled. “And why don’t you stop him?” He added to John who hadn’t said anything at all while they argued.
“He is though! He doesn’t even deny it,” Jackson sneered.

“Your best friend is gay!” Scott laughed and threw his hands up in the air, almost losing his paddle in the process.

“I don’t have anything against gay guys!” Jackson blushed a little with the admission. “But he’s mean to Lydia, so…”

“So, you make fun of him in retaliation?” Scott questioned.

“Lydia’s a bitch,” Stiles mumbled, causing all of them to still and glance at John to see if he was going to intervene yet.

He didn’t.

“Don’t talk about her like that!” Derek said in a low voice. “She hasn’t had as easy of a life as you think.”

“She’s not your girl to defend!” Jackson practically roared.

“She’s not yours either!” Derek replied calmly. “She’s a person! And you’re right. We’re not dating, I don’t think we ever were, but she is nice to me, and I’m not going to apologize for that! She’s my friend, Jackson!”

“She’s perfect,” Jackson replied.

“She’s playing you both,” Stiles muttered. Were the guys really not aware? It was so easy to see.

“Jackson you’re nice to her, so when she’s not feeling particularly wanted by me she crawls back to you. If you want to date her, put your foot down! Demand that she respects you and tell her to choose.” Derek suggested. “She’s mad at me about Allison’s ankle, anyway.”
As they talked they also floated further down stream, in the wrong direction.

Derek apologized to Scott again for his behavior during the triathlon. Jackson apologized to Stiles too, which was surprising. While no one said they were sorry between Derek and Jackson the two did come up with the plan to get them home together and surprisingly it worked. Stiles was told not to paddle. Jackson and Scott rotated counting out loud and everyone worked together in unison.

Stiles couldn’t help but feel a little useless as he sat there staring at the missing man’s spot. John said it could be any of them.

He thought of Diamond and how the next time he had seen her, she was so stoned out of her mind that she couldn’t sit up straight. He thought of Matt, just a kid like them with no one left to turn to, seemingly disliked and unwanted by everyone. He thought about Erica, and how easily it would be for her to get lost in her hood and fade away. He thought about Isaac whose own father did everything possible to beat him down and yet here he was, refusing to disappear. Stiles thought about Kira and how she seemed so multidimensional; one side screaming to be seen and another hiding away. Then there was him. The boy who ran away. Ran from everything.

It was getting dark by the time the raft broke out from the river and into the openness of the lake. The last mile or so was considerably less rough, rapids wise, and the paddling commands had faded with them. Stiles wasn’t sure when they gotten to the point where they could work together in unison.

On the deck, sitting with their feet in the water, was the rest of their group. Melissa was even there with her heels and stockings off, waiting for them. Lydia and Boyd both held a plate full of hotdogs and burgers each. Just the sight reminded Stiles of how hungry he was.

Melissa watched the sky grow darker and still there was no sign of John or her students. Sometimes these group bonding missions didn’t go quite as planned and she would be lying to herself to say she wasn’t worried. She had even gathered her team together to make them all a late lunch which would be turning into dinner if they didn’t arrive soon. She couldn’t wait to tell John how the dissertation went, but furthermore, she wanted to see how they all fared rowing back with the ‘missing man’.
Jackson and Derek were going to have to be separated if they couldn’t overcome their differences. Namely, the red headed one who chatted merrily about how Derek didn’t like hotdogs or how Jackson preferred only ketchup on his.

Allison was thankful to be allowed outside, even if she wasn’t given permission to place her feet in the water. And Kira, who seemed to have a different mood by the hour, was choosing to be bubbly as she told them all about one of the schools she attended that bordered on the Pacific Ocean. Boyd and Allison seemed interested.

That’s when the little yellow raft was finally visible in the distance. Isaac spotted it first.

John was wearing a smile, so that was a good sign at least. “So how did it go?” He asked Melissa.

Melissa smiled wide. “Matt is expected to go home by this weekend. He’s really lucky. His Mom also admitted to giving her son his camera bag before they left on Sunday and apparently the drugs were hidden in there. The lawyers are dropping their lawsuit.”

They made small talk as her students helped them out of the water and everyone shared their meal around a campfire that Melissa decided they had earned. John was pretty quiet, however, which did leave Melissa feeling a tad worried for her friend. What had happened on that raft? That was until he stood up to address the group.

“No more group exercises!” Jackson yelled. “We’ve had enough.”

John smiled. “No, no exercises tonight. I was actually going to tell you all a little bit about my son…”
Chapter 6

Episode 6

“Keep moving, team! If you want to get up the mountain and back down before the sun sets, we need to pick up the pace!” Melissa shouted to everyone.

Stiles had no clue why, it was only one person holding them up. Since they left the school two hours ago, Lydia had complained loudly about how her feet hurt, her stomach ached, she wasn’t feeling well, and so forth. Even Kira was doing a better job of keeping up and it was only her sixth day at Beacon of Hope, and this was her first official trip into the woods.

The best part, Stiles thought, about Lydia’s complaints was that neither Derek nor Jackson seemed to be babying her over them. The two were actually kind of ignoring her and choosing instead to talk about lacrosse plays. Was that official? Were they really going to form a lacrosse team?

“I can’t do this!” Lydia said for the hundredth time that morning. The small girl clutched her stomach dramatically. “My ovaries hurt! Ugh. Why can’t we just take ‘em out until we need them!”

Melissa paused in her step. As a woman, maybe she sympathized? Kira didn’t as she told Lydia to stop bringing their gender down, while Jackson told her to stop complaining and even went so far as to call her ‘twig’, but the usual nickname was said with more malice this time. Erica loudly
questioned if she ate all of her breakfast, and then suggested that perhaps she didn’t keep it down for long.

But rather than responding to her peers’ insistence and complaints, Lydia sat on a nearby boulder and refused to get up. Everyone passed by her, except Melissa. The two talked privately for a minute.

“So.” Stiles nudged Derek, boldly. “Is there any room on the team for a skinny kid like me?”

“No!” Jackson said immediately.

“Well, are you fast? We will need a lot of muscle to block the opposition, but we also need speed and people who can score,” Derek told him with a smile.

Stiles thought about it. He probably wasn’t fast enough, but shrugged just the same.

“I’m trying out!” Kira told them all brightly. “I’ve actually played before too, unlike any of you,” She added teasingly.

Scott perked up. “That’s great! You can teach us, then!”

Stiles hadn’t missed how Scott had shown some interest in the new girl. It was difficult to compare it to his crush on Allison as she was still out with her hurt ankle. Now that he thought about it, missing out on stuff like this had to be killing the poor girl. Lydia was her best friend, and Isaac and Scott were probably close seconds.

“Really?” Erica asked Kira. “Didn’t know girls could play, maybe I will too.” The blonde had gotten away with holding Boyd’s hand for the last mile or so because Lydia was keeping Melissa’s attention, and she squeezed her boyfriend at the suggestion. Boyd must have agreed, because he leaned in for a kiss.

“Separate now, you two!” Melissa’s voice interrupted them.

“Sorry,” Boyd muttered, more to Erica than for Melissa’s benefit.
Melissa nodded. “Okay, listen up, Lydia is heading back down. She isn’t feeling well and—”

“She’s faking!” Stiles blurted out, interrupting his counselor.

“And it looks like Stiles here, just volunteered himself to escort her. Do you know the path? It will be a good test of what you’ve learned since joining us,” Melissa added with a smug smile.

This particular trail was well worn and easy to stick to, but still. Why him? He just had to have opened his big mouth.

Stiles nodded when he realized Melissa was still waiting for his response.

“Report back to John and make sure Lydia goes to the clinic, and then you’ll be free for the rest of the day, okay.” Melissa told him.

Maybe returning to the school ahead of schedule wouldn’t be too bad. Stiles glanced at the others. “Sayonara! See you all at dinner if you make it back on time!” He said with a wave and a wink.

Seven matching faces of disbelief from his group mates stared back at him each with their mouths open in various degrees of shock.

Why had Melissa made Stiles of all people come with her? Lydia stomach was killing her, but worse, Derek and Jackson had barely spoken to her since their newfound friendship and while Lydia was really hoping to work things out with Derek, it was kind of unreal how cold Jackson was acting towards her lately. She could always count on him in the past to cheer her up or make her laugh but lately, he’d been so absent.

“Keep up,” Stiles called from around a curve. It was the second time now that he had gotten so far ahead that he was out of Lydia’s eyesight.
“Slow down!” Lydia ordered. It was like her nemesis was walking at twice the speed to return as it took for them to get out this far. She was sure Stiles was doing it on purpose.

“No, keep up.” Stiles retorted but his head poked out from behind a tree all the same. Good, he did backtrack for her.

“I need to rest!” Lydia protested as she sat down again. “You wouldn’t know what it’s like, being a girl.”

“No,” Stiles agreed. “I guess I wouldn’t,” He added as he walked back over. “What makes it so bad, huh?”

“Ugh, periods for starters. And child birth!” Lydia huffed out.

“You’re not in labor!” Stiles replied, deadpanned.

“We’re Just generally suppressed by your male egotistical ways,” Lydia finished as if Stiles hadn’t interrupted her.

“Really?” Stiles asked. “What about me screams entitled? Do you think I’ve ever been given anything simply because I have a dick?” He added sarcastically. “Actually, I think your princess tiara weight may have affected your brain, this world is all about money; those who have it,” he pointed at Lydia hard in her forehead, “and those who have to work for it.” He indicated himself.

“Well, you choose to make it more difficult for yourself. Don’t complain to me, put on some muscle and maybe you wouldn’t have such girly cheek bones, or ungodly long eyelashes…” Lydia muttered the last part but could tell Stiles had heard her.

“You know, you have nothing to be jealous of. It’s actually crazy to think that you are!” Stiles shook his head. “I’m refusing the invite to your pity party!”

“I didn’t say I was jealous!” Lydia protested with a cross of her arms. “But he looks at you sometimes, at your eyes, and I know it’s silly because Derek’s not even gay but…”
Stiles’ cheeks went a little rosier. “Okay, well you know it’s not like you ever asked me how I feel about it. Maybe I’m not even into guys!”

“Come on!” Lydia smirked. “It’s obvious you have a crush on him!”

Stiles didn’t respond and Lydia raised a challenging eyebrow. She knew she was right. Stiles couldn’t even deny it.

Lydia grabbed her stomach. “I really am in a lot of pain!” She said dramatically with added grunts for emphasis. “Pity party for one or not, I seriously can’t move!”

“Really? You can’t walk?” Stiles asked skeptically, but also for the first time showed some concern as he looked her up and down.

“Ugh, no,” Lydia admitted with an arm wrapped tightly around her midriff.

“Okay, we’re only an hour or so from campus. I can jog back and send John or something to come get you?” Stiles suggested, clearly uncertain.

Lydia only wailed louder.

“I’m leaving!” Stiles threatened. “If you don’t want to sit here by yourself you better come with me!”

Lydia still didn’t say anything intelligible.

“You sure?” Stiles called from his spot further up the path. “Last chance before you’re all alone?”

“Just go, and hurry!” Lydia shouted back.

Lydia truly didn’t think she could if she wanted to. She had never had cramps that hurt so badly.

And then, Stiles was gone just like that. Even the sound from his boots on the trail had faded and Lydia was left sitting on a log in the middle of nowhere, listening to birds chirping in the distance. She thought about her stomach. She really did eat breakfast, every last calorie. It was gross overly cheesy scrambled eggs. She didn’t think her cramps had anything to do with that.

This was just one of those things; a girl turning into a woman, entering adulthood, flowering. No matter what spin society wanted to give the event, it was annoying and painful just the same. It wasn’t her first cycle but she wasn’t exactly regular yet, either. Her Mom told her that was normal, but once she came to Beacon of Hope she learned a lot about malnutrition and how it could affect the body.

What would her Mom say to her now? Probably that she needed to keep her mouth shut, that it was unbecoming for her to whine and draw attention to herself, that all girls go through this and that she should just walk it off and hope the bloating didn’t affect her pant size.

Maybe she should walk it off? Now that Lydia thought about it, she was cramping worse by just staying still. She stood and told herself that she could do it, as she took baby steps down the dirt path. It wasn’t so bad and she was essentially bringing herself closer to being rescued. Ha! Maybe she would walk herself home before Stiles could even get John for help!

That was when it hit her and a sharp pain forced Lydia to double over. She stumbled in her stride and overcompensated in the other direction causing her to slide down the side of a steep hill. The pain from her ovaries seemed minuscule compared to the scrapes she had just endured on her arms. The tumble didn’t end there, however, as Lydia attempted to turn around to gauged her fall, the ground beneath her gave out completely and she plummeted deep into the ground.

Lydia screwed her eyes shut as she waited for the impact.

Stiles’ lungs burned as he broke out of the tree covered path and found himself facing the familiar log cabins. He was definitely out of shape still, and would have to work on that if he was serious about trying out for the lacrosse team. But first, he had to find John so he could then subsequently spend the rest of the day doing nothing at all. As everyday at Beacon of Hope was filled with one activity or another, the thought was rather appealing.
John, as it turned out, was down by the lake with Parrish’s students. They were learning how to fish and Chris and Allison were there too.

“John!” Stiles called out when he was within earshot.

It was probably the panicked tone Stiles used or simply the fact that John knew that all of Melissa’s students should be halfway up the mountain by now, but he jumped up and closed the distance between them in an instant.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” John asked while placing a hand on Stiles’ shoulder.

“I’m fine. It’s Lydia, she isn’t feeling well, girl stuff, so Melissa sent us back, but Lydia couldn’t finish the walk. I don’t know, do we have like a stretcher or something for her?” Stiles really wasn’t sure how John would get Lydia, he just knew that he would.

“Yeah,” John said slowly. “So, you left her out there, alone?” He added with more concern.

“I told her to stay put. She’s on the main path, not too far, maybe about an hour walking, but you’ll probably get there faster,” Stiles informed the senior counselor.

Chris made his way over, helping Allison who still wasn’t a pro with the crutches.

“Lydia’s hurt?” She asked sounding concerned.

“No, she’s Lydia,” Stiles responded. “So, I’ll just leave you to it, then…” He added to John.

“You’re taking me to her.” John looked at Chris. “You’re taking us. Let’s go get some medical supplies.”

“What?!?” Stiles flailed back. “I just ran all the way here!”
“We need to know where she’s at, you’re the only one who truly knows, it will be faster with you.” John explained. “Plus, you never leave a man down, she’s hurt and on her own!”

“She’s probably faking!” Stiles retaliated, although he didn’t sound as confident in that statement as he did when he said it on the mountain.

“I’m going too!” Allison insisted.

“No, honey, you can’t. You’ll only slow us down.” Chris told her, in a gentle voice while wincing at his bluntness.

“But, Dad!” Allison protested. “She’s my friend!”

“Tell you what, get the clinic ready. It sounds like she might be spending the night in there,” Chris added. “That will be a big help.”

“Let’s go!” John called as he was already moving in that direction.

Stiles couldn’t believe his luck. While everyone else gathered what they might possibly need for Lydia, he took his time replenishing his water bottle and resting.

“I don’t understand, she should be here!” Stiles said again pointing to the empty path ahead.

John could hear the panic in his voice and he sympathized a little, but really, Stiles shouldn’t have left Lydia on her own, even if it took them twice as long to come back. But now wasn’t the time to point fingers and he didn’t need to add to the teen’s rising guilt. More importantly, John had to find Lydia. Where was she? Protocol would have him treat this like the student ran, but not Lydia. She had improved so much since coming to his school, and not once did she even talk about running away. No, John had a sinking feeling that she might be lost.
“Are you sure it wasn’t further along the path?” Chris asked.

“Yeah, I’m positive. She was sitting on that log and refused to get up,” Stiles insisted.

Chris couldn’t help but share a doubtful look with John.

“Okay, here is what we’ll do,” John began. “Chris, you follow the path that way, maybe she got mixed up and thought she was heading home but went the wrong direction. Stiles you and I will continue to look around here for any trails she could have accidentally mistaken for the correct path.”

Stiles didn’t say anything but his expression showed his disbelief that getting lost was possible on the wide, dirt covered pathway. The only narrow section was lined with hills that even Lydia would know to avoid due to their steepness. Chris had already taken off at a jog up the mountain.

“Lydia!” John shouted.

They needed to find her quickly.

Stiles throat felt dry. He had screamed that stupid red head’s name so many times over the last four hours. Where the hell had she gone? Why the hell didn’t she stay put? He had half a mind to think the little devil did this on purpose just to get him in trouble.

Except, Stiles wasn’t in trouble, not really. He just felt kind of like he had messed up, big time. John had never said it, but Stiles felt like the counselor was disappointed in him, and for some reason just knowing that was troubling him. It was weird because he usually got a secret kick out of upsetting Simon. But this was… different.

And while a large part of Stiles wanted to give up, write Lydia off as gone for good, he couldn’t bring himself to suggest it. He couldn’t even stop actively looking for her, and he had been up and down so many small trails now that he felt good and lost, himself. John never let him out of his eyesight, however.
“Lydia! Princess!” Stiles called again and was surprised when a female voice responded back.

“Stiles?”

But it wasn’t Lydia. It was Melissa. She was on the main pathway with the rest of his group and Chris, all of which held different expressions ranging from bored (Kira), to disappointed (Boyd) and to mad, really super angry (Derek and Jackson). Oh no.

“How could you leave her on her own?” Derek roared. “She wasn’t feeling well!”

“You did it on purpose, you never liked her!” Jackson accused. “What did you do to her?”

“Enough!” John yelled over everyone before Stiles could even defend himself. “Stiles has been helping me search all day. He didn’t mean for Lydia to get lost, he didn’t want this to happen to her.”

“Have you called it in yet?” Melissa questioned.

“No,” John admitted. “I don’t think she ran, it’s just—it wouldn’t be like her.”

“I know, but John, we have to go by the book.” Melissa pressed.

Chris clapped his hands together. “Let’s get the kids back. We’ll continue searching on the way. I’ll send backup once we’re home, but right now, everyone here is exhausted.”

“I’m staying!” Melissa volunteered.

“Me too!” Derek quickly added.

“And me!” Jackson said as he shot his hand in the air.
“No,” John disagreed. “All of you need to go back to the school, stay put. If-if we don’t find her tonight, we’ll need a large search party in the morning. I expect you to be well rested and ready to go!”

Stiles felt John’s eyes linger on him a bit longer than the rest, but Chris was ushering him forward with the others.

“If anything happens to her,” Jackson started to threaten Stiles once Chris had moved himself behind the others to keep a better eye on the remaining students. “I’ll… I’ll…”

“You’ll what?” Kira asked, a bit over enthusiastically. “Personally, I think Stiles did us all a favor,” She added as she held out a hand for a high five.

Stiles silently shook his head and tried his best to will Kira’s hand down.

Lydia opened her eyes to darkness. Where was she? What had happened?

She tried to move and that’s when the pain she must have been suppressing erupted all at once, and with it was the realization that she had fallen; first down the side of a hill and secondly into the ground itself. Was this a hole? A cavern? That thought was pushed from her mind as she panicked over how stiff she was. Every part of her body ached as if it was all one big bruise and worse, her arms stung in a familiar fashion.

Lydia knew what that pain was. It was something she once sought out for as comfort. A reminder that she was alive; a real person with thoughts and feelings, somebody - somebody who could bleed. It had been over a year since she had longed for the relief of a cold blade, but the sting hadn’t dulled any in the time away.

Taking a deep breath, Lydia gathered courage she wasn’t aware she had, and forced herself to sit up and inspect the wounds. Both of her arms were marred with small cuts and scrapes. Nothing looked too deep and she found herself surprised with relief. That was good. She honestly wasn’t sure how
she would feel seeing cuts on her arms once again, and relief that it wasn’t anything major was definitely a positive sign. That is what a normal person would think!

With that small issue taken care of, Lydia quickly took in the rest of her surroundings and thought desperately back to the few things she had actually learned from Melissa. What are you supposed to do in a situation like this?

The cave was dark but a small hole in the ceiling emitted a little bit of light. If Lydia had to guess, she assumed the sun was setting. Or maybe rising? How long was she down here, anyway?

Thankfully, her backpack had fallen with her, because Lydia knew she had a water bottle in there. Unfortunately, she had stubbornly refused to bring with her the light snack Melissa had prepared for all of them, knowing deep down that Jackson or even Derek would have grabbed her portion and forced her to eat with the others. It seemed silly to worry over lack of food now after all the times she had turned her nose up at the idea of eating.

The light from above didn’t illuminate the entire hole, but her backpack did have a flashlight keychain on it. It was a Beacon of Hope standard and the small beam did its job. Lydia was both surprised by the vastness of the cavern and intimidated by the emptiness.

That was until the ray of light lit up a pile of white rocks. White rocks that were laid out in an all too familiar fashion.

Lydia screamed.

Next to her laid the remains of some poor soul, someone who had probably fallen into this same hole she just did and had never gotten out. She screamed until her voice was raw.

No one was coming, no one could hear her.

The sky above grew darker as Lydia took a few swigs of water and readied herself to yell some more. She took a deep breath and opened her mouth only to be interrupted.

“Lydia!”
A sharp and all too familiar voice broke the silence before she was able to, herself.

“It is not very lady-like to shout. Be a good little girl and play quietly!” Her mother scolded.

But it wasn’t the constantly disappointed mom she was used to these days. This was her mother from at least ten years ago, when her hair was longer and frame just a bit smaller. And she wasn’t talking to the Lydia currently curled up in a cave, but a little girl with strawberry-blond locks that was running around the backyard of their lake house with her arms stretched out and making airplane noises.

“But, Mommy!” The little girl protested. “I’m an airplane, Mommy. I’m flying home, just like Daddy!”

“Shh Lydia! Your Dad isn’t coming home this weekend, and when he does, he’ll want his daughter to be polished and respectful—and silent!”

“No, he’s coming home! It’s my birthday and he promised!”

“I told you to be quiet!” Her mother held up a cordless phone for emphasis. “Little girls don’t pretend to be airplanes. You are a girl, and you will act like one. Go play with the dolls your grandmother bought you.”

“Can I have cake and ice cream and have a birthday party with my dolls?” Young Lydia asked with excitement.

Her Mom pursed her lips and leaned forward to stroke one of her daughter’s cheeks in an almost loving gesture. Lydia leaned into the touch. “I think it’s best we skip the cake this year, you’re too old for all this baby fat.” She pinched Lydia’s cheek hard on the last word. “Now go inside and play quietly, like a good girl.”

The small child held a hand up to her reddening cheek and looked up at her Mom with round emerald eyes. “O-okay, Mommy. I will. I’ll be good.”

Lydia watched the younger version of herself sprint off into to her vacation house. As she did so, she felt all traces of her hunger dissipate. Even the water was unappetizing, now. She rested her pounding head on her knees in front of her and tried not to look at the bones.
It was eerily quiet.

“You have to keep calling for help!” Another voice told her. This one was also female, although it was a deeper pitch than her mother’s, and marred with an accent Lydia couldn’t quite place. “No one knows you’re down here. You can’t give up yet.”

Lydia spun around. Behind her was a figure; a woman not much older than she was herself, with dark tan skin, long braided hair, and almond-shaped ebony eyes. She was dress in animal skins and had a necklace made of feathers and fangs. But despite appearing from thin air, the lady seemed friendly and sincere. Lydia was going to question her, but as soon as she opened her mouth to ask, the woman disappeared.

Lydia spun back around and was surprised to see the bones were gone. Replaced by the Native American girl.

“Don’t suffer the same fate as I did. People are looking for you, let them know where you are.” The ghostly apparition said urgently.

“I-I shouldn’t.” Lydia found herself saying. Was this even real? “My mother…”

“Your Mom isn’t here,” The girl disagreed. “And you must! You must call for help, or you will starve down here.”

Lydia shrugged. “At least I’ll be thin when they fine me. My Mother…”

“Is not here. If you don’t yell right now, you’ll be just a pile of bones like me when they find us!”

“Good girls are quiet and respectful,” Lydia told the apparition in a shockingly spot-on impression of her mother.

“You must call, call for John, now!”
John?

John would be looking for her, Lydia knew the Native American was right as soon as she said it. Melissa would be too! How disappointed would they both be to know that she was thinking about giving up? It was… shameful. A different type of guilt than she usually felt when she did something wrong washed over her.

Lydia praised herself for having the highest grades. She maintained a smile throughout the day because it was expected of her. She used her manners and very rarely swore. She was a good girl, dutiful, in every sense. So why did she feel like perhaps she had missed something important, like maybe she was worth more, worth screaming for? Was she letting her mother win by sitting here quietly? Was she letting John down?

“John,” Lydia tentatively said the name out loud, barely more than a whisper. But as soon as she spoke it the braided girl nodded once before disappearing. A quick scan of the cave showed Lydia that she was alone again, only the bones breaking up the dirt covered floor.

“John!” Lydia called the name a little bit louder. “Help! Help!”

There was nothing, no response.

“Help me!” Lydia screamed up at the hole in the ceiling. “I’m down here! I-I don’t want to die!”

Still nothing.

“John!” Lydia yelled, louder still. “Melissa! Help!”

“I don’t want to die,” Lydia repeated to herself and instantly knew it to be true. “I don’t want to die down here in this hole. Someone! Anyone! Help me!” She screamed with a tear-filled sob as the terror of the situation finally set in.
John and Melissa walked in unison, both occasionally calling for their missing student. The conversation had long since ceased between them and Melissa had eventually called in the proper authorities. Lydia was reported as a possible runaway and rangers were now scouring the mountainside looking for her, as well as searching the nearby towns. But Melissa also trusted John’s gut, and the two continued to look for her in the wilderness where Lydia had last been seen.

The sun was quickly setting and if they didn’t find her soon, Lydia would be spending the night on an unwarranted camping trip all alone.

“What about the ridge, did you search it thoroughly?” Melissa asked.

John did. It was one of the first places he had looked. Lydia wasn’t scattered among the hill side. But as they had scoured everywhere else she may have wondered off too, it was worth a second look. Honestly, no idea was unwelcomed at that point. These students were his responsibility, how could he have let this happen?

As they backtracked along the main trail, Melissa stopped John by flinging an arm out, causing the two to stumble on the rocky and narrow pathway. This section of the trail was surrounded by steep hills and it led to the most dangerous part of the hike; the ridge. The sudden halt in his step was unexpected and he spun towards Melissa to tell her so, but paused when he saw her face. She was smiling.

“Shhhh,” Melissa hushed John before he could even question her. “I think I…”

She didn’t need to finish her sentence. John heard the cry for help too, and had already started sliding down the hill before Melissa could stop him, kicking up a cloud of dust with his boots as he went. He immediately regretted this decision as the ground beneath his feet felt unstable and the sand shifted uncomfortably. He called up to Melissa to warn her.

“John!” Lydia’s weak voice called out. “Is that you? Is it really you?”

The voice led to a tiny hole in the ground that was practically impossible to see in the now darkened forest, but a flash from Lydia’s light confirmed that she was indeed down there. They had found her!

“Yeah, it’s me! And we’re going to get you out of there,” John told his student, practically radiating with relief. “Report to me, what’s your condition?”
“I—I’m so glad you found me!” She called up with a tear-filled smile. “I don’t want to die down here.”

“Lydia is going to be just fine,” Melissa told her group. All of whom were awaiting news from the search and rescue team back in the school’s common room, and also happened to be up past curfew. “She will spend the night at the hospital, just for observations and will be returned to us in the morning!” She added, brightly. But Stiles noticed the uneasy glance she shot towards John. “Now, go to bed!”

With that they exited the large room and made their way across the grassy lawn to head to their dorms. Kira and Erica went one direction while the boys went the other. Stiles however, trailed behind.

He had endured an evening of blame and ridicule from Jackson. Derek, at his best would skirt his eyes away from him, and at his worse would shoot angry glares in Stiles’ direction. Isaac and Scott made it clear that by losing Lydia, he was upsetting Allison and that was not okay. Erica and Boyd seemed to agree that the best course of action Stiles could take at that point was to just give everyone else, themselves included, some space.

Kira, at least, seemed okay with being in his presence, but Stiles was less than receptive of her overly jovial mood. It was impressive how she could keep a wide grin on her face as she morbidly talked about how the forest should take care of hiding any evidence of foul play in a couple of days if he really had ‘offed her’! This remark only served to isolate Stiles further and Kira ended up spending most of the evening with the others anyway.

So, no one really noticed when Stiles wasn’t with them as they made their way to their respective cabins. John and Melissa didn’t seem to even notice Stiles lurking in the shadow of the main building as they headed towards the faculty cabins, either.

“She’s insistent that the bones belong to a Native American girl! She told Allison that the girl had helped her overcome the fear of disappointing her mother,” Melissa said in a frantic tone to John. “They won’t release her to us if they think she’s suffering from something more— severe.”
“She took one hell of a fall, evidence showed she hit her head, hallucinations are all par for the course. The doctors know that.” John tried to reassure Melissa. “Plus, she was dehydrated.”

“Yes, but she believes it really happened,” Melissa continued. “The state department is going to date the bones, determine if it was possibly a case of foul play. We don’t even know if they are male or female, let alone, Native American!”

“Does it really matter?” John asked. “Lydia overcame more than one hardship today, in her own way she faced one of her demons, and won. Essentially this experience may have really benefited her.”

“Yes, but not if they deem that she needs mental help, the kind we are not certified to provide.”

“She will come around, just give her time. Allison is with her tonight, the two will probably talk it all out, you know how they are.”

Melissa didn’t look entirely convinced. After they had rounded the turn, Stiles made his way off to bed with even more Lydia related worries than before. Which was something, because he didn’t like her, right?

Lydia had spent the whole morning curled up on her side in bed since returning from the hospital, just about everyone wanted to talk to her, but honestly, no one understood. Allison thought she dreamt the whole thing and Melissa couldn’t hide her doubt whenever Lydia mentioned the girl or her mother. But Lydia was there and these things DID happen. And worse, no one would tell her what was going to happen to the girls’ remains.

A part of her thought the Native American would greatly appreciate being returned to her family. She seemed so insistent that Lydia make it back to her own make-shift family-esque structure, that it only seemed fair to return the favor. The issue was that when she mentioned this to John and Melissa, the two only shared a look of disbelief before reassuring her that the bones were going to be thoroughly investigated.

They didn’t need to be investigated they needed to be properly put to rest!
Her group mates must have all been warned by Allison of her new ‘crazy’ theories too, because it was apparent that everyone was tiptoeing around Lydia. By noon she couldn’t take it anymore and she decided to stop speaking all together. Allison stopped by with lunch and shortly after Jackson snuck in to see how she was doing.

Scott, Allison, Isaac, and Derek all joined her for dinner and the five students awkwardly shared the meal in the girls’ dormitory while no one talked as Lydia refused to participate in the conversation, leaving all of her friends’ questions unanswered.

“Melissa was right to be concerned!” Scott said to Allison after a half an hour of no one saying anything. “This isn’t normal,” He whispered the last word, causing Lydia to internally roll her eyes. She wasn’t deaf, just sick of arguing her point.

Allison shot him a dirty look before sending one of pity at her. Melissa’s group was on after dinner clean up that week in the kitchen, which meant Lydia was returned to her solitude once the painful meal was over.

They just didn’t get it. And she was actually looking forward to being alone.

So she was surprised when the cabin door was pushed open not long after everyone had left. Lydia was even more shocked to see that it was Stiles who was visiting her.

“Hey!” Stiles called as he entered.

Lydia didn’t respond.

“Melissa said I could miss chores for this, couldn’t pass up an opportunity like that, now could I?” Stiles continued.

Silence.

“Not in the talking mood?” He barreled on. “That’s okay, it would seem my invite to your pity party included mandatory attendance. Melissa’s making it a requirement.”
“It’s not a pity party!” Lydia defended herself, annoyed.

“Oh, it’s not?” Stiles questioned. “You sure seem super sad and sorry.”

“Ugh, you wouldn’t understand!” Lydia huffed and rolled the other way.

“You’re mad. You’re pissed because this big, life-altering thing happened to you and you told someone and they didn’t believe you. What’s not to understand?” Stiles asked airily.

“Yes. But—”

“But what?” Stiles cut her off. “You think it happened, they claim it didn’t. You were there right? They weren’t. Who cares if no one believes you, you know what happened, right?

“So, you believe me?” Lydia asked, a little hopeful.

“God, no,” Stiles replied. “You want me to believe you talked to a ghost? Trust me when I tell you there is no way in hell ghosts are real. But I believe that you believe it, and that should be good enough because, let me tell you something: It doesn’t matter what I think or what Allison thinks, or Melissa, or John, or any one. The only thing that matters is what you think. And if a Native American girl helped you push past your mother’s negativity, then so be it. And if no one ever believes you, well that’s on them. You can’t control them!”

Lydia thought about that. She tried to absorb every word, because Stiles had come to see her and he was making sense!?

“How come you didn’t say Derek? It doesn’t matter what Derek thinks?” Lydia questioned at long last.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Stiles asked. “Of course it matters what Derek thinks! That boy is fine as…” he tried to joke but Lydia cut him off with a smirk.
“I knew it!” She exclaimed.

“Please. Didn’t I just tell you, it doesn’t matter what you think!”

Lydia pursed her lips. Not too many people would be able to keep up with Stiles’ logic, but she knew that he knew that she understood.

“So, what, are you declaring that you’re going to try and win him over?” Lydia asked with squinted eyes.

“There won’t be much competition, if they send you off to the loony bin”

Lydia huffed. “Is that my incentive?”

Stiles shrugged. “If you need it to be.”

“But it’s not fair!” Lydia protested. “The state can’t keep her bones! She needs to be returned to her people! She was probably lost and scared and all alone!”

“Sounds familiar,” Stiles retorted.

“Hey! I wasn’t projecting!”

“You said it, not me!” Stiles said while throwing his hands up in a defensive manner.

Lydia folded her arms and sat up.

“I didn’t want to die when I was trapped down there, I was sort of thinking I would, you know, and I realized how much I didn’t want to. Not this young and not down there,” She said at long last.

“I know,” Stiles agreed. “I never wanted to die either, not really, just wanted out. I just wanted
things to change; to be different.”

Stiles looked away with his little admittance.

“I, um— I looked up your tattoo, by the way, when you were new. I wanted dirt on you but when I found out, I wished I could take it back. I didn’t know how to talk to you about it.” Stiles didn’t reply so Lydia looked up and saw how deeply red his face had gotten. “It’s okay. I won’t tell the others,” she added quickly.

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed slowly.

“Did I ruin the party? Making it about you, when it was all about my self-pity?” Lydia attempted to keep the running joke going, wanting to maintain the friendly terms.

“Oh no! It’s still your solo shin-dig. I told you I want nothing to do with it!” Stiles laughed, but it sounded a bit forced. “So, I can tell Melissa you’re all good, no need for her to worry? I’m a superhero, your regular Batman!” He asked.

“Well, you got me talking again, although I think your only power would be annoying people into submission.”

“You’d be surprised how much that actually works!” Stiles gloated. “Well, I believe I’ve earned myself dessert. No need to worry, I won’t let the pack come in until they’ve finished. We wouldn’t want those calories near you!”

Lydia smiled. “Tell Allison to bring the biggest bowl of ice cream!”

Stiles left the girls dormitory not exactly knowing how well he did only to bump into an overly eager Melissa.
“Well? How’d it go? Is she any better?” She asked.

Stiles shrugged. “I got her talking, again. I think she’s fine, will be back to her usual snobbish ways eventually.”

“You sent Stiles in there?” John asked as he walked over with two suspiciously large bowls of sherbet. “That’s like shock therapy — for them both.”

“And what were you going to do? Bribe her to talk?” Melissa asked.

“Bribe the anorexic with ice cream?” Stiles quipped.

John couldn’t help but shuffle his feet, guiltily.

“Oh, and by the way,” Stiles added as he walked away. “I think we should have a ceremony, properly bury the girl’s remains.”

And with that he left the two counselors to join the rest of his group for his own sweet treat. Hopefully they would be more receptive of him, if he told them that Lydia was talking again.

Two weeks later the bones that were whisked off for scientific test after test were returned to the mountain side school. Two important things were proven to be fact. They belonged to an adolescent girl from a little over three hundred years ago, and she was indeed Native American, given the date. At that time, the local population was a mix between two different tribes. Both sent representatives and together with the school’s entire staff and student population present, they had a funeral. The first signs of a winter chill appropriately settled across the grounds for the occasion. It was a ceremony that included traditions from both tribes and concluded with Lydia getting up in front of everyone to say a few nice words.

She looked directly at Stiles as she spoke.

“Lastly, I would like to say thank you to the girl. It’s nice, knowing you’re not alone, so thanks for that…” Lydia finished her speech ominously.
Stiles was surprised to say the least, did she just thank him too?
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Beta Read by: fairyfey on 3/14/18, Huge thank you as I threw this at them at little unexpectedly and they still rocked it out super quickly! Check out their work here on Ao3 and on tumblr at gayglitterbabe!

Episode 7

“Okay guys, listen up,” Melissa shouted over the chatter of her teenage wards.

Today they met under the gazebo in an attempt to enjoy what was left of the autumn sun while they could. Erica was sitting in Boyd’s lap when Melissa approached and the two instantly sprang apart as their counselor greeted them. That coupling was a big factor in the next project her group would be partaking in, but first Melissa had some other matters to address.

“Erica,” She started. “You made it very clear that you would like to go home and visit your entire family. We talked with your parents and have arranged a flight home for you next week.” Erica perked up, showing interest and excitement at the announcement. “You will be expected to work very closely with John and I to ensure that you are ready to face some of the challenges associated with your old life. But we feel that you’ll be fine. You’ve grown a lot, learned a lot, and have the skills to make better decisions. Do you think you are ready?”

“Hell yes I am!” Erica answered with a wide smile before clamping both hands over her mouth. “I mean, yes, yes I am!”

“Good.” Melissa nodded. “Stiles, your step dad said he would try to visit, but we haven’t finalized a date just yet. I’ll keep you posted.”

Stiles blinked and swallowed hard but didn’t say anything so Melissa continued.
“Okay guys, as you can see Allison is joining us again. Welcome back, it’s nice to see you without the cast.” Some members of the group clapped and cheered while Allison failed at hiding her face behind her dark braid, clearly a little embarrassed at being called out. “I’m glad you’re able to join us for this project, it’s a fun one!”

As Melissa said this, John came over with a carton of eggs and several color-coded files.

“Okay,” John said with a large grin. “This exercise is going to be new to all of you, not even Boyd has done this one yet! We’re going to talk about you guys becoming parents.”

No one said a thing. It was obvious, however, that Jackson was struggling to refrain from adding his two cents.

“As your science teacher, if you ever have questions, please know my door is always open and no topic is off limits. But today we will focus on hypothetical what-if’s,” Melissa added. “It has come to our attention that even though we have a ‘no inappropriate touching’ rule, you guys are hormonal teenagers and sometimes the rules slip your minds.”

Both John and Melissa looked pointedly at Erica and Boyd, as did some of the other students.

“And what are some of the things that can happen as a result of a momentary lapse of judgement?” John asked. He was met with ten sets of blank stares even though Jackson and Scott were both gigging. “Really? No one knows? Isaac?”

The usually quiet teen cringed at being called out. “Well, I guess you can get diseases and stuff,” He muttered.

“Right. That’s true you can. What else? Derek?”

“Pregnancy,” Derek grunted the single word response with a shrug.

“Yes. Now there are several methods of protection to keep you safe that we have discussed in the past. For those of you who don’t know we have a yearly segment taught by trained educators who cover a wide range of topics, including relationships, decision making, gender identity, body image, birth control, and STIs. As Melissa said, if you have any questions, we are always here to
talk. But this exercise is focused on one aspect; hypothetical parenthood. Lydia, what would you do if you found out you were pregnant? Allison? Boyd how would you feel, knowing you had a child on the way? How would you provide for your baby, Jackson? These are all questions that you’ll be exploring,” John finished.

Melissa was impressed. So far, everyone still seemed interested in what John was saying, even if a few eyes had wandered to the egg carton with skepticism.

“I wouldn’t be pregnant,” Allison boldly admitted. “I’ve never— you know…”

“Abstinence is an option, a very good one.” Melissa encouraged. “Some of the scenarios that we cooked up for you are intended for later in life. To get the most from this, you’ll not only have to successfully overcome the challenges we’ve dealt each of you, but you’ll have to give a report so that we can all learn from your experience.”

Erica sighed loudly. It was no secret that she despised traditional school assignments.

“You’ll be happy to know that your presentation can be anything you like; a standard report of what you learned, a PowerPoint presentation, or even a skit, if you so please. Get creative!”

“So.” John took over again. “Without further ado, are you ready to meet your children?” He opened the egg carton. Prior to the exercise, each egg had been drained. “The babies are to be properly cared for, so no leaving them unsupervised. It’s easy to accidentally crack them, so be warned that we will be looking for any imperfections once this is over. But also, you will be given a salary and situation. I’d like to see each of you budget your money accordingly. Take into account daycare costs, if you go that route!” He warned. “There is a monthly financial worksheet in each folder to fill out that will be due with your presentations.”

“Okay, let’s start with our first couple. Boyd and Erica.” Melissa called. “You guys have been married for two years now. You have a beautiful baby boy!” Melissa passed over an egg with their folder to the happy couple. “You are also going through a divorce and will be meeting with our Judge, John, on Wednesday to discuss child custody.”

Both Erica and Boyd’s smiles fell.

“This is easy!” Erica told the others. “I’m the mom, so I’ll get full custody and Boyd, darling, you’ll just have to pick up a second job to support us!”
Boyd snatched his ‘son’ from Erica’s hand causing some of the others to panic, and warn him to be gentle. “You can’t just keep my son from me!”

“It would seem you two have some things to discuss before the hearing!” Melissa teased. “Allison and Isaac, you two are also married.” Allison smiled and Isaac blushed. “However, you’ve had some difficulty getting pregnant and are currently childless. There are several ways you can overcome this obstacle, and you’ll be given extra time in the media room to research. Your goal is to either have a child by the end of the project or report on the methods you tried that didn’t quite workout for you. This situation can be quite difficult on the marriage, so a word of advice, be supportive of each other.”

John pulled two eggs from the container. “Next we have Stiles and Jackson. You’re a successful couple who adopted twins, congratulations.” Jackson swore. “But it’s time for you both to go back to work as your careers could only be put on hold for so long during the adoption process. The problem is, you are finding it difficult to find a daycare that will take your kids. The prestigious one you had your hearts set on, claims they don’t except last minute additions, but you fear that you may be discriminated against as you are a same sex couple. Melissa happens to be in charge of the daycare, you’ll have to change her mind or come up with an alternative. Fortunately for you, Jackson, you’re a lawyer.”

Jackson only stared at John with his mouth open while Stiles accepted the eggs and folder begrudgingly.

“Lydia, you’re up next,” Melissa said with a smile. “You became pregnant shortly after graduating from Beacon of Hope. The father is out of the picture, so it’s just you. You’ll notice your budget is pretty low with just a high-school degree, too.”

The redhead looked skeptical. “How low? I can just ask my father for—”

“Actually, no.” Melissa interrupted. “Your parents were disappointed in the situation and have refused to help.”

Lydia looked outraged.

“Scott, you and Kira are just sixteen. Kira just told you she’s pregnant. Neither one of you have a job, yet. What will you do?” John asked.
Kira jumped up to claim her egg while Scott stared at the oblong object with fearful eyes.

“And lastly, Derek!” Melissa’s face turned darker. “Your story is a little sad. The mother of your child didn’t make it, she died during childbirth, making you a single father to a newborn! Good luck!”

Derek quietly excepted his egg while keeping his face impassive.

“Alright! Now name them, love them and should you need any legal assistance, John is playing the role of our judge, and I will be both the adoption agency and head of the best daycare in town. Now, my prices are so high that only Jackson and Stiles can afford me. But hey! Get creative with your proposals and maybe we can work something out!”

Her students didn’t seem too keen on the project.

“This would never happen!” Lydia protested. “I wouldn’t have a one night stand or whatever. This isn’t a real-life scenario.”

“If it did, though, would you love your child any less?” John asked.

Lydia didn’t answer.

“As you go through the ups and downs of parenting, I want you to consider some things; think about your own parents, learn from their mistakes, imitate their success. There are several questions pertaining to the relationship between yourself and your parents in the file. That worksheet is to be filled out individually and does not have to be shared amongst your peers.” Melissa ominously told them all. “You can break off into your respective groups now. We’re giving you all weekend to research, so take advantage of the extra time in the media room and you’ll present your findings on Saturday.”

Erica and Boyd looked liked they were already arguing, even if it was just with their eyes. Allison looked a little sad. Lydia’s eyebrows were raised in disbelief. Kira smiled and was patting her stomach while Scott looked like he might be sick. Jackson wasn’t even looking at Stiles, who had already neglectfully placed their twins on the grass to read through their file.
Derek seemed unfazed, until John called his name and asked for a word in his office. Melissa and John talked a great deal about giving Derek another death to deal with, even if this one was hypothetical. She knew John was a little on the fence about it and it would seem the two would be discussing the matter in an impromptu one on one session.

“I’ll leave you to it then!” Melissa told the others with a smile.

Melissa was barely out of ear shot when the arguing started.

“I’m out of here.” Jackson announced as he stood to leave. “You wanted those brats, you raise them. I want a divorce!” He spat down at Stiles who sat on the floor of the gazebo. As Jackson hastily walked away he stepped right over his ‘children’.

“Going to adopt some kids and split?” Stiles called after his retreating back. “Sounds a bit familiar.”

Jackson didn’t respond.

“So, uh, we’re expecting.” Scott looked a bit paler just saying it out loud.

Kira had a huge smile on her face. “The best part is, we don’t have to carry this little princess around with us! I’m pregnant so the egg can just sit on my desk all week! We have the easiest assignment!”

“So, we’re keeping it? Her?” Scott corrected himself when Kira’s look turned dark.

“Of course!” Kira replied quickly. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“It’s just, we um, have no money.” Scott tried to reason as he passed over the file.
“Want to go to the media room?” Allison asked Isaac as the two of them looked over their paperwork together. There were several options in there for getting pregnant and they all sounded pricey.

“I’ll go with you!” Lydia piped up. “I think I’m going to have to find me a husband - a rich one. Maybe a celebrity?” She added thoughtfully.

Allison gave her a doubtful look but didn’t bother to voice her objection.

Erica and Boyd were taking their nearly silent bickering to a more vocal level by the minute. Boyd argued for equal custody and Erica was adamant that kids need more stability. She told him every other weekend was the best she could do.

Stiles looked down at his own file and frowned. Jackson was a lawyer, it was true, but he was a doctor and both businesses were pushing for them to return to work quickly. But how was Stiles supposed to make this work when his… husband wouldn’t even acknowledge the project? He didn’t know if he quite agreed with Kira that she and Scott had the easiest assignment but he certainly thought he had the worst partner. Hypothetical marriage issues aside, Stiles also had this daycare situation to deal with. By all accounts he couldn’t see why the facility denied their application. It couldn’t be legal to turn away a consumer simply based on their sexual orientation, could it?

Stiles figured he would have to research it and stood to join the others in the media room. He took three steps before Erica called after him.

“Stiles! Don’t forget your kids!”

Damn. This project was going to be annoying.

Derek’s mood brightened immensely once John had asked him to go back to the office after they were assigned their ‘babies’. He assumed the senior counselor had news from his sister or even his
uncle on the status of his adoption. Laura hadn’t called in a while and the last time they did speak she wasn’t able to talk long and seemed rather curt with him. She said she wasn’t allowed to talk about the details of the case with him, which Derek found annoying but accepted none the less. He wasn’t sure what was involved in family adoption cases like this, but he had assumed that as a Junior in high school he would at least get some say in his legal guardian choice. Apparently, that wasn’t the case in California.

John, however, maintained a rather somber facial expression on the walk to his office. It was just uncharacteristic enough of the school’s owner to make Derek doubt the reason he was asked to join him.

“How are you doing?” John asked once they were both seated. He maintained that slight frown as he gave Derek a searching look.

“I’m fine.” Derek responded, feeling as though it may be a trick question because of the counselor’s demeanor. He also felt the hope that his sister’s good news had anything to do with why he was currently having an extra therapy session recede.

“How do you feel about this project? Becoming a parent?” John pressed. “Losing your hypothetical wife?”

Oh. That.

“Umm.” Derek hadn’t put too much thought into it. He didn’t actually have much time to consider things, really. “I’m glad you didn’t partner me with Lydia.” He answered at last. It was the truth.

John chuckled. “No. When coming up with these scenarios, Melissa and I were both adamant that neither you nor Jackson would have Lydia as a partner. I almost gave her to Stiles, but I had a hunch that Jackson and Stiles might still be working through their differences. I thought that they could benefit more from the push.”

Derek nodded thoughtfully.

“So, you’re okay with being a widow and a father? Want to talk about losing your parents, how that will affect your decisions for your daughter?” John asked tentatively.
Derek hadn’t even realized the connection, but now that it was pointed out to him, it did make sense. Of course there was a deeper meaning behind his assigned predicament. How did he feel about losing his parents? It wasn’t something he wanted to talk about, ever. John knew that. He was whisked off to this school and away from everyone and everything he had ever known. The loss of his parents and siblings were apart of that upheaval, and it was far easier for him to focus on other changes. Derek wanted to go home. He was repeatedly told no. What else did John want from him? It wasn’t fair.

Swallowing thickly around all of his thoughts, Derek answered after a pause. “It’s fine. It’s not like it’s real.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” Derek leveled his gaze to peer directly into John’s eyes. “Do I have to?”

John blew out a breath he was holding and fought to keep the disappointment off his features. “No, we won’t make you. But I’d like you to make some progress soon. Would it help if you talked with your uncle or maybe even Laura, if we can arrange a visit from them? We can call the grief counselor back up here too.”

“No.” Derek snapped at the last suggestion. “I mean, I’d love to talk to Laura. I... I think Uncle Peter— he sent me here. He won’t let me come home. I don’t know, I wouldn’t know what to say to him.”

It was John’s turn to nod. “I’ll talk to your uncle. I think you both have things to discuss, aggression and otherwise, keeping it all bottled up…”

“Isn’t good.” Derek finished the counselor’s sentence. “Yeah, I know. Can I go?” He mumbled the request.

To his surprise John dismissed him. Glancing at the egg in his hand, Derek decided he better head to the media room and figure out how to balance his assigned budget, after all, he had a little girl depending on him now.

Most of his group had a similar idea and were collectively taking up a corner of the computer lab. Allison and Isaac had two desktops between them, both with pink-hearted fertility clinic logos blaring on the screens. Scott had the one on Isaac’s other side and had a similar website up,
although his definitely said ‘Planned Parenthood’ and ‘Consider all options.’ Kira, meanwhile, had her chair flipped away from the blank screen behind her and she had several permanent markers in her hands and was coloring her egg. It would seem their baby would be taking after their mother’s rainbow hair. Surprisingly, Lydia was also coloring, although she was making some sort of sign with poster board. Stiles was on the girls’ other side and was clicking away madly on his keyboard. One glance at the computer screen told Derek that there were at least eight tabs open, and unlike the rest of his classmates, Stiles was too distracted by his work to greet Derek.

“I’m glad you’re here!” Lydia said brightly as Derek sat down. “Here, take this. I’ll be doing interviews tomorrow during lunch. You should come!” She pursed her lips, smugly.

Derek looked down at the sheet of paper she passed him. It was a poster. Apparently, Lydia was holding auditions for a potential boyfriend or father figure for her child. Did she really think that would work?

“Don’t look at me like that!” Lydia defended her idea before Derek had a chance to voice his doubts. “You’re freshly single, family of two, so am I. I think it was meant to be. Together we’d be a perfect family of four!” She clapped her hands excitedly. “Granted I could choose a different candidate, so you better come prepared tomorrow!”

Somehow Derek wasn’t so sure that was what Melissa and John had had in mind for her, but who was he to interfere? Derek grabbed a spare laptop and went to work, looking into extended paternity leave and found that combined with bereavement, he’d be able to take the whole month off of work, paid. It was a start.

Derek let Kira color his egg, once she had finished her own and an hour into their research he looked up and saw she had drawn matching faces on Stiles’ twins, unbeknownst to their father who seemed frustrated by the results of his web search. The legalese was too small for Derek to decipher, however. Isaac and Allison had also turned somber. It would seem they had tried in vitro fertilization once and it cost them nearly ten thousand dollars! If they went that route again, one or both of them would have to pick up a second hypothetical job. Isaac had volunteered.

Allison suggested that she babysit all the other eggs, going so far as to phrase it as a solution to Stiles’ problem too. Stiles whipped around in his seat at the mention of his name.

“Oh no!” He disagreed. “That daycare is going to accept these kids! I have all kinds of court cases proving their discrimination is unjustified. Unfortunately, they could counter and say it’s against their religious beliefs, but if they suddenly became a Christian only daycare, they would surely lose other clients— not to mention the media backfire.”
“Media backfire?” Scott questioned. “You know it’s not real, right?”

Stiles faltered for just a second before he continued to argue his point.

“Isn’t your husband the lawyer?” Kira asked. “I’m pregnant, remember. I need a doctor focused on my birthing plan!”

Stiles face went, if possible, even paler. “Birthing plan?”

“You know like what I want to happen on the day of—”

“You couldn’t afford me.” Stiles cut her off mid sentence.

“What?” Scott asked. “Dude we can’t afford anyone else, what are best friends for, huh?” He rolled his chair past Kira and Lydia to place an arm around Stiles’ shoulder.

“Best friend?” Stiles asked in a skeptical tone.

“Yeah, what am I then?” Isaac called across the room.

Scott seemed unfazed. “My BFFL,” He said with a shrug of his shoulders, causing both Allison and Lydia to giggle.

The answer must have satisfied Isaac however, as he once again looked content.

“But seriously bro.” Scott turned back to Stiles. “Isn’t Jackson the lawyer? How are you going to present this case to John and Melissa?”

Stiles looked thoughtful. “I don’t know, but I’m not going to let that daycare win. Denying kids simply because their dads are gay is just wrong.”
“Only one dad!” Lydia pointed out. “Jackson wants a divorce, remember.”

Stiles seemed unfazed and went to the printer to collect his findings. He called out that he would see them all at dinner as he crossed the room.

“Wait!” Kira called. “Your kids!” She passed the now decorated eggs over. Stiles looked at her artwork and was unamused.

“What did— never mind,” Stiles started. “Allison, how would you like to start babysitting now?”

Allison shot a triumphant look at Isaac as she greedily held out her hands for his ‘kids’.

Derek looked down at his own budget. Maybe he could use Allison’s daycare too.

Melissa was happy to see that all of the eggs were at her pack of teens’ table that evening for dinner, with the one exception of Kira and Scott’s. They explained that as she was expecting, that they wouldn’t need to carry around the baby, yet.

“I think I’ll give birth on Friday.” Kira happily told Melissa. “You know, so we get a day or two with the little one.”

Melissa had half a mind to tell her that it didn’t work like that, but chose instead to talk to them about their budget. How were they going to afford the hospital bills? Baby formula? Clothing, diapers, and toys? By their unsatisfactory responses it was apparent they would need more time to look into those things.

Everyone else seemed to be doing okay with the project and several students had little egg carriers to keep their bundles of joy safe and crack free. Derek, despite John’s worry, had his daughter practically covered in bubble wrap. It would seem that they were all taking the project seriously, at
Monday morning during class, it became apparent that some were taking it more seriously than others. Allison’s desk had three eggs sitting safely in a carton. Boyd said he was letting Allison babysit Vernon Jr. while Erica went to class, because she had to focus on school. That response was reasonable enough, but why wasn’t the egg on Boyd’s desk then? The other two belonged to Jackson and Stiles. When Melissa asked Jackson why Allison was egg-sitting, he claimed that those weren’t his kids! That he didn’t want kids and that John would hear all about it in court on Wednesday. Melissa didn’t press the matter further because she did have a class to teach.

That afternoon during lunch, Lydia took up a table to herself to hold potential boyfriend interviews. Initially, half the male population of the campus turned up. But when Lydia explained that this was strictly for the project and there would be no actual dating happening, most of the guys scattered. When she went even further to announce that said candidate would have to get a job and support her and her kid the remainder of the thin crowd vanished.

Lydia stayed at the table throughout lunch looking hopeful every time a male student passed by, however.

It would seem that Allison was still babysitting by the time dinner rolled around. Stiles had a stack of papers and was trying, unsuccessfully, to talk to Jackson about the his role as ‘lawyer’. And the pair were all but ignoring their eggs which sat on the other end of the table with Lydia’s and Erica’s. The girls were talking with Kira and if Melissa heard correctly they were planning a baby shower!? 

Chris caught Melissa’s eye across the mess hall and she left her students to join him.

“So, first Allison tells me she has to meet with you about adopting and next thing I know she has twins.” Chris complained lightly. “I know you were going for realism with this project, but I’m worried that may not be the case. Adopting is a process.”

“They’re not her twins!” Melissa interrupted. “She’s babysitting Stiles and Jackson’s.”
“She had them all night.” Chris replied doubtfully. “Maybe Jackson and Stiles are the ones not taking the project seriously.”

Melissa looked up at the two of them, who were clearly arguing, and frowned.

Allison wasn’t allowed to take the eggs home with her anymore and Jackson still wasn’t acknowledging them, which meant Stiles was on egg watching duties that evening. Scott reminded him that it wasn’t called babysitting when it’s his own kids. That didn’t mean that Stiles knew how to take care of them. His desk, which was so full of other papers, barely had room for the eggs, so they found themselves wrapped up in a shirt.

The next morning as Stiles was getting dress for the day he reached for the plaid over shirt and almost forgot about his fragile little pair, that was until one rolled haphazardly across the desk. A well timed catch from Derek ensured that his egg would live to survive another day. But from that moment on, Stiles vowed to himself he would do a better job at keeping them safe. Derek gave him a knowing look.

They made their way to the mess hall for breakfast where Stiles told Allison he wouldn’t need her to egg-sit that morning. Derek finished his breakfast rather quickly and disappeared. He reappeared with only a minute to spare until the pair had to go off to English together with two more bubble wrapped egg holders.

“For your twins.” Derek told him shyly as he passed the bubbled holders over.

Fortunately, English class with Chris was a good break from parenting. Unlike Melissa, John, and even some of the other teachers and counselors, Chris didn’t stop and check in on the ‘parents’ and chose instead to remain focused on their actual lesson.

Stiles was listening to Chris’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s The Tempest and didn’t realize someone was calling his name until Chris stopped speaking altogether.
“Stiles! Can I see you please?” John had said again. This time the entire class’ attention was on him. “You better leave those with Jackson.” He indicated the eggs which Stiles had gingerly scooped up as he stood. “Take the rest of your belongings, however.”

The look on John’s face told Stiles he wasn’t entirely happy, and for the life of him, Stiles didn’t know what he had done that would have caused him to be pulled from class to face an upset John. Jackson must have read John’s features too, because he didn’t even protest when Stiles placed the eggs on his desk.

He wasn’t sure why, but something in Stiles’ gut told him to give Jackson the court papers he had been working on as well, so Stiles handed everything over from their project. Jackson looked confused but accepted it. Stiles grabbed his backpack and joined the senior counselor in the hall.

The reason for John’s unease was obvious; behind him stood Simon.

It had been a little over two months since Stiles had last seen his stepfather, but the man looked much the same; still balding, still somewhat overweight. He smiled a predatory grin at Stiles, one that wasn’t returned.

“As you know we were working on getting you a family visiting day, and Simon decided that this worked best for him. Surprised us, he did.” John added gruffly.

“Yeeeah.” Stiles dragged out the word, not really knowing what else to say.

“You can give him a tour of the grounds, if you like,” John suggested. “I don’t believe you got one last time.” He added to Simon. “I need to go meet with Melissa. We’ll discuss your request.”

Stiles had no clue what request that was, but if it had been made by Simon, it wouldn’t be good.

“Did you miss me?” Simon asked casually enough once they were alone. “Looks like your new school has done wonders for you already.” The monster placed a hand on the side of Stiles’ face. “You look better without those cheekbones cutting glass.”

Stiles pulled free of his grasp and did his best to maintain a decent distance as he took his stepdad
around the grounds. He also did everything in his power to prevent showing the man his cabin. He just knew it would satisfy a sick part of the monster’s mind to see his sleeping arrangements, not to mention the fact that several other adolescent boys shared the quarters. The thought made Stiles feel ill. Simon had to go. This was supposed to be his safe place.

Simon told Stiles in graphic detail about his relationship with his friend’s mother. It seemed that the monster was at least upholding his end of the bargain and was pleased to see that Stiles was too.

“Keep your tongue in check while I’m here.” Simon warned when Stiles had failed to rise to his antagonism. “If they suspect anything, our deal is off.”

Stiles repeatedly told himself that this was his safe place and even if Simon was here, there was nothing he could do to him. John wouldn’t allow it. Melissa wouldn’t allow it. The self reassurance didn’t stop the bile from filling his stomach.

The brunette counselor jogged across the yard to catch up with Stiles and his step father just as students began emerging from the commons. As with any outsider, Simon attracted the students’ attention as they made their way to their next class.

“What do you think of the school?” Melissa asked optimistically as she caught up to them.

Simon put on a rather friendly façade as he replied that he was impressed and pointed out some of the locations he liked the most. One of which was the lake dock. Stiles liked to sneak out to the lake on nights he couldn’t sleep. He wasn’t sure how he would feel about that next time.

Melissa seemed apprehensive at first but quickly warmed up to his step-dad’s false persona.

Stiles was safe, Melissa was here and the monster couldn’t touch him.

The adults talked about Stiles’ academic success. Simon seemed generally shocked and jokingly commented on the difficulty of the classes if Stiles was managing to do so well.

Melissa was quick to defend her student, suggesting that Stiles was probably benefiting from the smaller class sizes and required attendance, as he had skipped or missed so many classes back in Tampa.
Stiles noticed Simon’s eyes narrow at the suggestion, but his counselor missed the change.

He was safe here. Simon couldn’t hurt him.

“All chance my proposal was approved? I’d hate to fly all the way here and only get to spend an afternoon with my son,” Simon asked Melissa.

Stiles cringed at the word choice. He hated it when his step-father called him kid or son. He would never be either of those things to that man, ever again. But that was in the past and he was safe here, Melissa wouldn’t let Simon hurt him.

“Because he is a court order attendee, there is some paperwork involved in granting your request, but as soon as John finishes that, you should be all set.” Melissa continued. “You’ll be out of here before lunch, something I’m sure both of you would prefer.” She added to Stiles who had been rather quiet during their walk.

Stiles froze in his tracks and slowly turned his head to look up at the monster who haunted his nightmares. Simon wore a triumphant smile. Stiles felt fear and nausea wash over himself in equal measure, chilling his extremities and causing him to shiver.

Melissa noticed. She brightly suggested he pack a jacket for the evening as it was expected to rain over the next few days and pointed both Simon and Stiles toward the boys’ dormitories.

Stiles couldn’t believe how wrong he was. He wasn’t safe here, or anywhere.

Melissa was not happy. She had a gut feeling that something wasn’t right. She argued with John that she didn’t trust Simon, who had shown up out of the blue to see his stepson. Granted they had contacted him about scheduling a visitation day, but he had yet to agree to one. It was odd that he would just show up, odder still that he asked for a day off campus; phrasing the request as a treat for Stiles for winning the economics project.
She tried to talk about family with Stiles often in their one and ones. John did too, and Stiles had never said anything to indicate that his step father was abusive. His records showed no signs of questionable bruises or anything else to warrant the feeling in her gut.

When John approached her about Stiles spending a night off campus and in the local town she initially refused. John suggested she feel him out, go walk the grounds with both of them and see if her opinion changed. Maybe she would gain some insight into why Stiles was rather shut off when it came to talking about his home life as it was such a stark difference when compared to how vocal and sometimes graphic he was about his time on the streets.

Melissa wasn’t prepared to have a reasonable conversation with the man. And while Stiles was quieter than usual, he was respectful with Simon; no angry outbursts, nothing to justify her mixed emotions. Stiles seemed if anything a bit bored with the walk of the grounds and embarrassed by his academic achievements. Both normal high school-age reactions. So begrudgingly she made up an excuse about paperwork and told Simon that Stiles would be given permission to leave the campus for the evening.

In truth, Melissa did have a form to fill out, but the granting of permission was solely on her shoulders as John had left the decision up to her. She did pull Stiles aside once his bag was packed and asked him if he wanted to go. Stiles hesitated but nodded with a glance in his stepfather’s direction.

Simon asked about decent burger joints in town. “Stiles loves curly fries,” He reasoned.

Melissa was happy to make some dining suggestions, it was a small town after all. And with that, she watched the two pull out of the Beacon of Hope driveway in a rental car while still battling the uneasy feeling in her gut.

Derek watched as Stiles was called out of class. He didn’t know where he went, but rumor had it that he was seen walking with a parent. Some were saying his dad was taking him home, which wasn’t allowed in court-ordered cases. But the mystery remained just the same.

Jackson didn’t care where he went and complained loudly that he had left his kids behind. “They’re not mine!” He said several times.
But by the time lunch came around, Jackson had already read through the court papers Stiles left and he was talking with Lydia on the logistics of the case.

“Stiles is right. If they want to fight us, the backlash would be horrendous. I think this might just be the case that solidifies my career! The law firm is going to love having me back!” Jackson was saying.

“It’s your only case.” Derek pointed out.

“So, you’re willing to keep your kids?” Boyd asked.

“It was never really about the kids, more like I couldn’t believe John partnered me with Stiles. But Chris actually made some good points when we talked about it after class. Said it was kind of like a challenge and Stiles was winning because he wasn’t running from it, or something. I don’t know.” Jackson patted one of his twins. “My parents adopted me because they thought it would save their marriage, it didn’t, but Stiles and I didn’t do that and even though I’m not gay and will still get that divorce, these guys shouldn’t have to suffer, you know. And plus, look at this, one of them has a crack! Stiles isn’t a good dad.”

Lydia inspected the egg and agreed.

Stiles didn’t show up for dinner either and wasn’t in their dorm room that evening. The next day at breakfast Scott asked Melissa about it and she explained that Stiles’ stepdad took him off campus for the night and that he would be back in the afternoon. Most of his classmates talked about what foods they would eat if they weren’t stuck in the mess hall with bland oatmeal, again.

Stiles wasn’t in any of the classes they shared and didn’t turn up all afternoon. Derek was just starting to wonder if the counselors were concerned when they had assembled in the common room for group and the thin boy was absent, yet again. Melissa was also not there - had she gone down to town to fetch her missing student? Stiles wouldn’t run, would he? Given the opportunity, he might. It was probably too soon for the new guy to have an off-campus family visitation.

John didn’t look too perturbed as he announced that court was in session. Jackson did a hell of a job presenting Stiles’ work to John and in the end, he proclaimed that the twins would in fact be able to attend Melissa’s daycare. To everyone’s surprise, Jackson denied the offer, telling them all that his
kids would continue to be babysat by Allison. They didn’t want to associate with an unequal rights-minded company like that daycare anymore.

Erica and Boyd presented their terms and conditions for their custody case next. It would seem that the two had more requests pertaining to their abilities to date and remarry others more than they did with Vernon Jr. John said they had more to work on and that they could try again the next afternoon.

“Anymore court related cases?” John asked the students.

Derek assumed they would be dismissed early if no one said anything. He was surprised when Scott raised his hand. Scott, Allison, and Isaac stood up and asked about filing legal papers for adopting. It would seem that Isaac and Allison were inquiring about adopting Scott’s unborn child. This was news to Kira who quickly uninvited all three of them from the baby shower she was throwing the next day.

John told the dysfunctional teenage couple that Melissa could sign off on all official forms as head of the adoption agency. Kira was not in agreement, and that would pose a problem. Allison was trying to reason with the irate girl when the common room door opened. Derek was shocked to see that it was raining out side, but also that Stiles and Melissa both walked in.

“Welcome back.” John greeted Stiles warmly. Melissa jumped into the Allison and Kira adoption argument seamlessly while Stiles ignored John and made his way to the back of the group. He ignored Jackson too.

The ‘will they or won’t they put their child up for adoption’ debate took up the rest of their group session until John decided to break it up so that the rest of the students would have some time to themselves before curfew. Isaac, Allison, Kira, and Scott continued their argument. No one else went far because it was still storming outside.

Derek tried to catch Stiles’ attention but he was currently being yelled at by Jackson for cracking one of their twins. It seemed like Stiles didn’t care. He sat there, almost motionless, while Jackson became more and more degrading by the minute. In the end, Stiles was accused of being a horrible father, to which he agreed before getting up and walking across the common room towards the door. He opened it to reveal the thunderstorm on the other side and promptly disappeared.

Derek watched all the counselors flick their heads to the door as it opened. It would seem John and Melissa were both easing towards it themselves. He wasn’t sure why he did it, he didn’t even realize he had stood up, but Derek found himself reaching the door at the same time as John.
“You’re leaving too?” John asked. “In this storm, without an umbrella?”

“I’m going after him.” Derek found himself admitting.

John gave Derek a searching look before sighing and agreeing. “Let me see your daughter. I’ll keep her safe, I promise.”

Derek darted out into the rain covered muddy grounds. He figured Stiles would head to their dormitory but some unexpected movement near the lake caught his attention. Stiles was making his way to the dock, in this weather!?

“What do you want?” Stiles asked without looking up as Derek sat down next to him.

“Why the hell are you out here in the rain?” Derek asked. “And lightning?” He added as thunder boomed in the distance.

Stiles didn’t respond for a long minute. Derek was just about to give up his hopes of ever getting him to talk when Stiles finally opened his mouth. “I guess I got used to it a long time ago - the rain.”

“Yeah,” Derek placated, although he didn’t actually understand. “It’s dry inside though. Just about half the campus is in the common room right now. Danny has a game of cards going.”

“It’s crowded in there.”

“Yes. Definitely more space out here. It’s just you know, a bit more wet,” Derek replied sarcastically.

The chuckle from Stiles was unexpected and when Derek turned to look at him to say more he was caught off guard by the way the water clung to the younger boy’s long eyelashes. Derek stared at them with his mouth slightly opened and felt the heat rising in his cheeks. Stiles seemed unaware of the affect he was having on Derek as he blinked and turned his head back to the lake.
“Pretty isn’t it?” Stiles asked after the moment of silence dragged on. For a heart-stopping second, he thought Stiles was referring to his own face as Derek had just been completely enticed by it. But Stiles continued. “The lake I mean. It’s so still usually, but a little bit of rain and the entire surface is jumping into life.”

Derek tore his eyes off of Stiles’ features to look at the body of water in front of him. He understood what Stiles meant. It was actually kind of interesting to watch. Every rain drop caused a splash and ripple and the ripples collided causing more water to spill upwards. The waves battled each other for dominance.

“It is.” Derek looked around and came across a rock. He chucked it into the center of the lake causing a ripple of his own that overtook several others and threw the rhythm of the lake off.

Stiles turned his head to stare at Derek again. He was partially amused and annoyed. “You can’t just throw a rock in there!”

“Why not?”

“Because.” Stiles struggled to find words.

“It’s not fair?” Derek suggested.

“Life’s not fair,” Stiles replied automatically, as if it was a phrase he had heard or said multiple times.

“I guess not.” Derek agreed again. “Are you okay?”

Stiles jumped as if the question was unexpected and abrasive.

“You’re not, are you?” Derek surmised. “My mom’s dead too, you know.” He whispered.

Stiles whipped his head around so fast that Derek wouldn’t be surprised if the younger teen suffered whiplash afterwards. He gave Derek a hard look that was only accentuated by the thick rain drops that continued to fall.
“I know. You don’t talk about it,” Stiles accused.

“Neither do you.”

“My mom died when I was eight.”

“I was fifteen,” Derek offered. “Do you...hate your stepdad because he’s still around? Because I lost my dad too and ended up here, thanks to my uncle.”

“I hate that monster because he’s a bad person,” Stiles said aggressively.

Derek was speechless. He felt the anger roll off the other boy with each word. He believed Stiles meant it, too; the surety in his tone was frightening.

“… and I hate my mom because she left me with him...”

Derek almost didn’t hear the admission. He wasn’t sure what to make of that statement either. But he knew that sitting in the rain was the least of Stiles’ worries. And that perhaps Stiles didn’t need anything more than a person willing to sit in the rain with him.

“Yeah,” Derek agreed, again he wasn’t sure what he was agreeing to. He found another rock and passed it to Stiles.

Stiles looked at the rock in his hand for a long time before he finally chucked it hard across the lake. Derek wasn’t sure if he meant to try and skip it, but the rock sunk swiftly as soon as it touched the surface of the lake causing the biggest ripple effect yet.

The boys sat outside until the storm stopped. It was dark by the time they made it to their cabin.
“How is he?” John asked Melissa once he had dismissed the students for the evening.

“Quiet,” Melissa admitted. “Simon said he was well behaved, said he was impressed with the improvement in his attitude.”

“Well, that’s something.” John offered an encouraging smile with his statement.

Melissa couldn’t shake the feeling that a quiet Stiles was too similar to the boy that had joined them at the end of the summer. She feared that her student wasn’t quite ready for the family reunion and maybe this was a step in the wrong direction.

John was attempting to reassure her when the sound of the door caught their attention. Stiles had just left, in the rainstorm!? She knew something wasn’t quite right. John and Derek beat her to the door to chase after him. To her surprise, John let Derek go.

Melissa had every intention of intervening, but John stopped her. “This might be good for both of them. They hold back so much when talking to us.”

“John, it’s a thunderstorm!” Melissa protested.

“I’m sure they are just going back to their dorm, everyone else from your group is here;” John reasoned.

Melissa wasn’t so sure, but John had started talking to her about a promotional video the school’s lawyers had suggested. After the positive reputation the school had gained from hosting the marathon, some thought it would be wise to capitalize on that image. He discussed the logistics of taking that step. Interviews with some of the students and staff, maybe showcasing an outdoor activity. It was a lot to think about. The school was supposed to be a shelter for their students, she didn’t want that to become compromised.
The next day Stiles seemed better. More talkative at least during breakfast as Melissa spotted him talking to Jackson, presumably about their project.

Isaac, Scott, Allison, and Kira must have mended their fence too, by the look of things. That night after dinner Kira threw a baby shower for herself. Most of the school attended. Although, that may have had more to do with the fact that it was raining again.

On Friday, Kira dramatically gave birth during breakfast and complained loudly that she shouldn’t have to attend class afterwards. Melissa had a hospital bill ready for her and Scott, but surprisingly, Allison and Isaac used their babysitting funds to cover the costs. They also explained that they would be openly adopting Kira and Scott’s baby and by noon the paperwork was finalized.

Lydia had taken down her boyfriend seeking posters that day as well.

Before she knew it, it was Saturday again and honestly, Melissa was ready for the parenting project to be over with. This past week was filled with so much unnecessary drama that she wasn’t actually sure they had learned anything productive either.

Her students were all waiting at the gazebo for her and John, however, and that was a good sign.

Lydia went first. She turned in her paperwork and essay and stood up in front of everyone to summarize her findings. It turned out that with some careful budgeting, she was able to make it work.

“Once I stopped focusing on finding a father for my daughter, I realized she still had one parent that loved her and that would be enough!” She happily told the others.

Erica and Boyd went next. They had come to a split custody agreement on Thursday, but unbeknownst to all, they had taken it one step further.

“So, since it was so difficult for us to decide how we would take care of Vernon Jr. individually, we decided that it would be best for us to come together to raise him.” Erica held up a poster board with a beautiful house that had two master suites.
“If we sold both of our homes we could afford this one, and save on utility costs too!” Boyd told them all.

Jackson called out, “But what if you want to bring a date home? Wouldn’t it be weird shacking up with your ex in the room next door?”

“That’s the best part!” Erica replied, excitedly. “We vowed not to date others and decided to work on our failed marriage, to see where we went wrong.”

Everyone clapped and John couldn’t help but laugh.

Derek went next and simply read off his single-parenting budget. He did a fantastic job and even factored in holiday and vacation expenses, which wasn’t included on the original sheet. He also told Melissa that he would continue to use Allison’s daycare as she had more reasonable prices and he wasn’t so sure about the quality of care he would receive at Melissa’s place, as her business seemed to promote inequality. He brushed past the emotional part of having to raise his daughter on his own and the loss of his wife, but Melissa assumed that was something they could talk about privately.

To follow that report Stiles and Jackson went next. Stiles held up a laptop and a PowerPoint came to life. It started off simply highlighting the civil rights movement and transitioned into woman’s suffrage. The screen cut to black for a second before the background faded into a rainbow whilst leaving LGBTQ in big block letters.

“Equal rights isn’t limited to color of our skin or our gender. No one deserves to be discriminated against simply based on their sexual orientation, either,” Stiles started.

“It’s despicable that businesses in this day and age feel they can get away with such unjustifiable hate.” Jackson continued.

The computer screen popped to a picture of Melissa with a X over her face.

“This woman denied our kids access to the best education we could afford simply because we’re —” Jackson cleared his voice and Stiles amended his statement. “Sorry, simply because I’m gay.” He stood taller with the statement. “Do you really want someone with such a closed mind teaching your children?”
Stiles shut the laptop, set it down and reached for his backpack while Jackson went on to describe the injustice of it all and sitting that the court agreed with them on Wednesday. Stiles meanwhile started passing out papers to all the students finishing with Melissa and John. It was the same image; a smiling Melissa with a large red X and under that it had the question ‘Do you really want *her* teaching your kids?’

The pair sat back down. Melissa stared at the flyer with her mouth open. She knew it was fictional but something in her broke a little at the way Stiles asked the question. The flyer also held no ties to the court case or mentioned equal rights in any way. It felt just a shade too personal and Melissa failed to recover quickly.

“And where are your kids?” John asked once the pair had sat back down. He was no longer smiling, himself. Perhaps he too thought the attack on Melissa went too far.

Jackson and Stiles shared a nervous glance before Allison piped up that she had them.

“Stiles helped Jackson with his court case and then had Kira to deal with. Their kids spend a lot of time at our place, but we don’t mind, we needed the practice!” Isaac informed everyone.

Isaac, Allison, Scott, and Kira went next and performed a well rehearsed skit. It included the birth of Kira’s baby to which Dr. Stiles was given credit despite his absence from the scene. It ended with the four of them enjoying a very open adoption, so that Kira could visit her daughter as often as she liked while attending college. Allison quit her job and ran an at home daycare facility and Isaac denied a promotion to spend more time with his new daughter too.

Melissa had recovered fully by the time they had finished.

“Well, very good, all of you,” She started.

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“Well, very good, all of you,” She started.

“Some more than others,” John butted in. “I’m looking over these eggs and several are cracked.”

“John and I will go over the budgets and parent worksheets with you guys individually over the next week,” Melissa continued. “What do you guys think? Was it difficult being a parent? Can you relate more to your own now?”

Some students agreed. Isaac was naturally really quiet. Stiles didn’t agree either, although Melissa
thought she heard him say that he never wanted to have kids, that this project just confirmed that. Derek was surprisingly really optimistic about that part of his future, stating that he hoped to actually have a daughter one day. Lydia loudly said she can’t wait to not be poor again.

“Jackson. Stiles.” John called as the kids were starting to leave as the meeting was over. “I want all of these flyers collected and destroyed. I know that it was apart of your presentation, and I’m not going to fault you guys for standing up for what you believe in. If you ever need someone to march along side you in a LGBTQ parade, we’ll be there. But Melissa is a teacher here and this is offensive to her in the real world, I don’t want to see them on campus.”

“This is all of them,” Jackson said quickly. “Only made enough for our group.”

“It’s true, it’s all of them,” Stiles agreed.

“Okay, Jackson, you can go.” John dismissed him. “Stiles, I noticed your paper about your parents is blank.”

Melissa hadn’t looked through the paperwork herself, and hadn’t caught that.

“Did you relate anything from this project back to how you were raised?” John continued. “It doesn’t have to be good lessons? Just eye-opening ones.”

Stiles looked angrier than she had ever seen him.

“This project sucked,” Stiles complained. “Jackson’s not even gay, so I had to deal with that, but also if I’ve learned one thing from my mom, it’s that I never want some little kid depending on me! What are you supposed to do if you die, huh? Then the kid has no one! Can’t I just write that I don’t want kids and leave it at that? It’s not like I’m going to accidentally get some girl pregnant, either.”

“You know a lot can change, you might feel differently when you’re older. And as an adult you sometimes forget what it feels like to think like a kid or a teenager, even. Reflecting on this now might just give you some perspective later.” John tried to reason. “And your mother may have left you earlier than intended but she loved you. You’ve told us as much. And despite your differences you do have your stepfather.”
Stiles eyes hardened. This wasn’t a good time for this conversation. “It’s hard to feel loved by someone who’s not there,” He mumbled.

“My son is no longer with me either,” John said softly. “I love him just as much every day and I like to think he still loves me too.”

Stiles cringed. “I just… if she loved me so much then why did she leave me w—” He shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. As far as parenting lessons that I’ve learned, I don’t want to be like Simon,” He bit out the word, “And I don’t want to be like my mom either. So, my page is blank.”

Melissa tried to lighten things up by bringing the conversation back to the eggs. Stiles admitted that he was pretty forgetful with them and focused more of taking the daycare agency down.

“Yes. We saw that,” John commented. “You might have a real future as an activist. Maybe you never have kids of your own, but by helping to shape the world into a better place, you’ll make it safer and happier for thousands of others.”

Stiles looked thoughtful. “This world isn’t a safe place for kids.”

“Sometimes, I suppose it’s not.” John agreed somberly.

Melissa let Stiles go as it was close to lunch time.

“Are we making any progress with these kids?” Melissa asked John doubtfully with a glance at the flyer in her hand after Stiles had disappeared from view.

“Some of them have to get out of the valley before they can start climbing the mountain,” John answered ominously while crumpling the papers up so Melissa’s face was no longer staring at him from multiple directions. “One thing I think we know for certain now, however, is that Stiles isn’t going to be having any more visitation rights with his stepdad.”

“You think there is something toxic going on there?” Melissa asked. She felt, not for the first time, a pang of guilt for letting Stiles leave campus.

“I think there is more to it than Stiles is willing to tell us.”
“John!” Melissa whined his name while her eyes welled up. “I let him go.”

“We let him go.” John corrected while leaning in to wipe a stray tear. “And we had no reason not to. But we do now. I think Stiles has taken baby steps to opening up to us since he’s been here and after this week, he’s taken one giant leap backwards. We can’t have that happen again, toxic or not.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Beta’d on 5/20/18 by the amazing fairyfey
Check out their work here on Ao3 and on tumblr at gayglitterbabe

Warning: Some noncon touching

St. Louis, MO Meth Terminology 101
- Shards – slang for Crystal Meth
- 417 - slang for Meth ([former] Meth capital zip code)
- The 417 – referring to a zip code where Meth is plentiful
- dick – glass pipe for smoking Crystal Meth
- dicksuckers – people who smoke Crystal Meth
- Baggies -pre portioned 1/16th bags for cheap sales

Episode 8

“So, can we?” Scott asked with large round pleading eyes. “Coach is on board!”

John looked up from his paperwork. He was reading through the fine print from his team of lawyers; they had found an investor. A business man who saw potential in Beacon of Hope, and who had ideas for how it could be more profitable. It would seem that promoting the school through an educational video was just the start of this ‘Deucalion’ guy’s many grand ideas. In front of him stood Scott, Jackson, Danny, and Kira all with equally determined faces.

“Really, a lacrosse team?” John asked. “Not something more, I don’t know - common? Like baseball or soccer?”

“A baseball field would be expensive to build and maintain.” Danny pointed out.

“Not to mention, I’m sure you’d put us to work building it!” Jackson said with a scowl.
“And soccer is boring!” Scott whined.

“Plus, I really want to hit these boys, knock ‘em down, you know!” Kira added with a glint in her eyes.

John didn’t doubt the girl’s conviction. But it also worried him. Lacrosse was a very physical sport, there was a reason the football team had only lasted one year…. “If Coach is with you guys to prevent it from becoming too rough, I don’t see why not.”

“Yes!” Scott held up a hand for a high five which both Jackson and Danny left hanging. Kira, not wanting to do the same nudged the boys out of the way and tripped over her own feet, the failed high five turning into a stumbled yet impressive catch on Scott’s part.

“Thanks,” Kira mumbled, a bit embarrassed.

“And you’re the one teaching us how to play?” Jackson asked doubtfully.

“She’s good—” Scott attempted to defend, but didn’t get the chance to finish because John cleared his throat.

“Scott, Jackson, I’m putting you two in charge of the budget. Make a list of equipment and costs and we’ll see what we can do. And we will be having tryouts. So no one, not even you four, are automatically on the team. In order to tryout, you’ll have to maintain good grades; A’s and B’s, just like the Basketball and Track teams. When is the season?”

“Spring.” Scott told him. “Track will be over and Basketball will be midway through.”

“Okay. Coach gets the final say on team members, if he feels a Basketball player shouldn’t do both teams because of practice and scheduling issues, then that’s up to him.”

“Got it,” Scott started. “And, John?”

“Yeah?”

“Can Derek try out?” Scott reached a whole new level of pleading with his puppy dog eyes.

“I’ll talk to him about it,” John answered honestly. “But I take it his bone-headed move during the triathlon has been forgiven?”

Scott nodded. “Yeah, yeah… he’s not all that annoying, really.”
John watched the students leave, excitedly talking about their perspective team and smiled. It quickly fell off his face when he read the investor’s ideas about expanding.

The breakfast table was less crowded than usual with about half of his group missing, but Stiles made his way over regardless.

“Where is everyone?” He asked Isaac as he sat down. Lydia and Allison were on the other side and Derek’s muscular form was visible in the line of students still waiting to fill their trays.

“Erica has a meeting with Melissa and I think Boyd is with her for some reason. I don’t know about the others, though?” The curly haired teen replied, unconcerned.

Derek sat on Stiles’ other side and all thoughts of their missing classmates were forgotten. Something had changed between them when Derek had foolishly joined Stiles sitting lakeside in the rain last Wednesday. They had barely talked but they didn’t need to; some sort of understanding was going on there. And Stiles wasn’t going to spoil things by questioning it. He nudged Derek with his elbow instead of a more verbal greeting, Derek returned it with a bump of their knees under the table. The action brought a half smile to Stiles’ lips.

“Did you complete your homework for Melissa’s class?” Lydia questioned Derek. “I can help if you like, elemental combinations can be tricky!” She added, sweetly.

“I think I figured it out, thanks.” Derek said pleasantly enough.

Lydia couldn’t quite hide her disappointment.

“Want to help me with geometry?” Isaac asked in a hopeful tone. “I don’t have a clue what Mrs. Morrell is talking about.”

Lydia huffed but came around the table to help Isaac all the same. Allison added her own two cents occasionally from her spot on the other side, but she wasn’t all that helpful as she couldn’t quite remember what she had learned the year before. The table was quiet and subdued with the occasional sounds of Isaac erasing an answer and Lydia pointing out where he went wrong.

That was until Jackson, Scott, Kira, and Danny came noisily barging into the mess hall with fifteen minutes of breakfast left to spare. Danny grabbed some fruit from the counter and made his way
over to his group, while the others joined Stiles’ table, interrupting the peace.

“We did it!” Scott said enthusiastically. “John said yes!”

“We can start practicing after school!” Kira added.

“We have to meet with Coach first, but yeah. Spread the word, we can run tackle drills until we get the rest of the equipment,” Jackson suggested.

“Well you told Danny, and everyone is friends with Danny, so I’m sure half the school will be there…” Scott reminded him.

“And I’ll get the other half to show!” Lydia reassured.

“Oh and the best part!” Scott told them all. “Derek, you might be able to try out! You have to talk to John, but I just know he’s going to let you!”

Derek seemed to perk up at the possibility.

“I wonder if they’ll let us form a cheer squad?” Lydia mused.

“Our lacrosse team didn’t have cheerleaders.” Kira shot her down quickly. “Girls shouldn’t be segregated to the sidelines!”

“Cheerleading is very competitive!” Lydia argued. “Our team used to go to States every year and we were coed!”

“Let’s focus on adding one sport at a time,” Erica said with a large grin as she and Boyd came over. Neither one had a breakfast tray.

“And where have you two been?” Allison asked. “The firewood shed again?”

“Actually, we were with Melissa.” Erica informed them. “I’m going home!” She added quickly, unable to hold it back any longer. “Just for two days but still, I can’t wait!”

“Oh no, Boyd, whatever will you do?” Jackson teased.

“School you on the lacrosse field?” He challenged.

“Oh, yeah, you have to talk to Coach about that. Basketball players might not be able to do both
teams because they overlap for a month,” Scott told Boyd regretfully.

“So, no hope for me getting back on that basketball team if I’m allowed to try out?” Derek questioned with a furrowed brow.

“Sorry, man,” Stiles told him sincerely, causing Lydia to narrow her eyes at the two of them.

“Coach will be on the field after our last class, you can talk to him then!” Scott suggested.

“Sure. Yeah—Wait, what field?” Derek asked.

Scott and Jackson exchanged a look. “Patch of grass between the commons and dorms.” The latter suggested with a shrug.

The team was going to be built from the ground up, literally.

The morning’s gossip was all about the new lacrosse team and who would be on it. Scott and Jackson even spent their lunch hour with Coach Finstock ‘going over numbers’, whatever that meant. So, it surprised Stiles when the pair slammed down their books just minutes before he had to head off to Parrish’s history class with the Juniors and Lydia.

“Hey!” Scott called. “Glad I caught you guys! Derek, Coach is going to push for you to join the team, have you talked to John yet?”

“No,” Derek answered truthfully.

“You better hurry man!” Scott pressed.

“You better hurry!” Stiles told him. “Don’t you have a lesson with John out by the picnic tables?”

“You’re trying out, right?” Scott rounded on Stiles in turn, while completely ignoring the warning.

“I— I don’t know, I probably won’t be any good,” Stiles admitted.

“Yeah, you better not,” Jackson agreed.
“No, come on man, you have to! It’ll be fun!” Scott said enthusiastically.

Derek nudged Stiles with his shoulder.

“Maybe.” Stiles conceded.

“No, definitely!” Scott pushed.

“Dude! You’re going to be late!” Stiles reminded him again. Why did Scott want him to try out so badly, the school had plenty of larger guys that would be better at crushing each other. Stiles was sure to be the crushee. Is that why Scott needed him there? Someone to cushion his fall? He looked up into Scott’s eager eyes and couldn’t help but see the guy’s sincerity.

“I’ll be there,” He promised. “Now go!”

A large portion of the student population was gathered on the open field; it seemed that Lydia and Danny had indeed told everyone. Coach Finstock seemed shocked by the outcome.

“Okay, guys,” He called.

“And girls!” Kira shouted out. Stiles couldn’t even see her over all the large frames that surrounded him.

“And girls,” Coach amended. “Take a knee and listen up!”

Finstock went on to explain the basics of the game and also informed them all that the team would be responsible for turning this patch of grass into their field and then maintaining it. The work would be in addition to their current chores, too. The proclamation caused several attendees to groan and a few actually left. He also told them of all the academic requirements and as official tryouts wouldn’t be until early next year, he said they had time to get any failing grades up.

“If you need help in a class, come to me now. We can make a plan with John and your teachers to get you guys back on track so that you’re all set once the season officially starts.” Coach did a good job of making eye contact with everyone as he spoke. “And, lastly, all lacrosse players will need approval from their counselor. I want to hear you’re participating in all group activities.”

A few more students left the field once his speech was over but the majority remained. There weren’t many people smaller than he was, so Stiles was intimidated, even without Jackson glaring holes in the back of his head. What was that guy’s problem this time?
Finstock had them line up to start basic tackling drills. Two hits in and Stiles was sure this wasn’t a sport for him. Fortunately, about half an hour into the drills Melissa called for her students to come see Erica off.

Erica, surprisingly was crying near the administration building while a similarly upset Boyd held and comforted her. Her mom stood awkwardly off to the side and eyed the two but didn’t intervene. Allison and Lydia both got a little mushy with their goodbyes as well. Stiles gave Erica a fist bump and told her she’d be back here before she knew it.

It was Scott that actually pulled her off to the side for a more private farewell and Jackson, of all people, followed. The three were discussing something rapidly. All Stiles could hear of the conversation was Erica saying she doubted it would work while Jackson reassured her that he’d done it before.

After her group mates finished their drawn-out adieus, Melissa swallowed Erica up in a tight hug, telling her student that she would be fine, that she was prepared to make better choices, and that Melissa had all the faith in her.

“And have fun!” John shouted as he jogged up. “Didn’t think you’d get away without a hug from me, did you?” He added once he was close enough for the interaction. “It’s all about choices. You’ll be surrounded by a lot of the things that got you sent to us in the first place. Keep your head straight, breathe, and think it through. We’ll see you in a few days!”

“Yeah,” Erica agreed. “My safe place is here,” she gestured to the grounds around her, “and here.” She pointed to her head. “You taught me well.”

“You’re a smart girl.” Melissa told her genuinely.

“See you all soon!” Erica said while fighting to keep the grin off her face. Boyd snuck one more kiss on her cheek and that was it. The Reyes’ were on their way to the airport.

Stiles reflected on the interaction he just witnessed; how protected Erica truly felt at Beacon of Hope. He couldn’t believe that just a week ago he had agreed. Now, however, he felt hollow and foolish for ever thinking such a thing.

For Erica it was surreal. She had thought about it, planned it even, but now she was doing it; going home for the first time in eight long months. She had missed three of her four sister’s birthdays and
several other important occasions. Erica had a lot to make up for in just two days.

After walking into her childhood home, however, the differences from her previous visitation weekend was obvious. Her brother had been sent to the state penitentiary seven months ago. His clothes, once strewn across their living room were no longer there. His ‘artwork’ and supplies as a graffiti artist were neatly packed away in one corner. In general, the house was cleaner than she had ever seen it, and the changes were…nice. And then Erica realized what the biggest difference was; her parents weren’t yelling at her brother over something he had done. They weren’t arguing with Erica. Her sisters weren’t crying in the room they all shared, no longer upset by the actions of their two older siblings. This was a house that was no longer home for the notorious Reyes siblings and all that entailed.

The quiet was broken soon as Erica’s little sisters noticed her parents were home from the airport. Excited screaming and tears of joy were shared by all.

That evening after Erica enjoyed dinner and dessert with her family, she stepped out on her fire escape for a moment of silence. That’s when she noticed it: her brother’s tag. The symbol that encompassed both her family tie to the streets but also the right to the territory for her gang, was missing. The patch of wall that had formerly held the mural looked as if it was painted over in a bland tan color at one point, but since then, several other artists had used the blank canvas for their work. None were as nice or as large as her brothers but the most alarming thing was how off all the colors were. Those marks couldn’t possibly belong to her family.

A wail broke her concentration as Erica attempted to decipher the intricate artwork.

“Erica Reyes!” The shrill voice managed to say once the shriek had ended. “Erica! Is that you?”

Erica looked down the alley to find the source of the scream and lit up when her eyes landed on her best friend, Ayesha.

“Girl! It’s been so long!”

Stiles was so incredibly sore that next morning. Scott had to resort to his old method of hitting him awake with a pillow to prevent him from missing breakfast. To his surprise, everyone else at their
Isaac had watched from the sidelines and was more than encouraging. Apparently, Kira was really fast and took down Scott with a complicated move that included a backflip. They were both in awe of her, and even Jackson had begrudgingly admitted that she would probably be making the team. No one really said anything positive about Stiles’ performance or lack there of, and surprisingly that was okay with him.

Stiles did think he’d skip practice that afternoon, at least. He’d done as Scott had asked and given it a try, but it just wasn’t for him. Then Derek had called him over once Stiles walked off towards the sitting area where Allison and Isaac looked comfortable and rather close. For some reason he couldn’t explain, Stiles’ feet carried him back out onto the field. It seemed that at least Derek would be his partner today as everyone lined up. That was until Danny jogged over and Derek’s line was shifted down by one. Stiles found himself across from an evil-grinned Jackson.

Just great.

Again, Stiles was rescued a half an hour into acquainting himself with the grass, this time by John.

“Stiles,” John called a second time. As his reaction time was getting slower with each fall, it took him a minute to find his feet but once he did it was to John looking a tad more serious than he was used to.

The senior counselor led Stiles back to his office where he was asked to sit.

“You didn’t have much to say during our last session together and I had some spare time, so I thought we could try again,” John started.

Oh.

John sighed when it became obvious that Stiles wasn’t going to start the conversation. “Just to remind you, you’ll have to participate in group sessions to get permission to do the extra curricular activities, but also we might not feel you’re ready for say the lacrosse team if you’re not making any progress in your one-on-ones either. You were doing so well, and that all changed last week, Stiles. What happened?”

Stiles swallowed thickly. What had happened? You invited my step dad up here, let the monster have his way with me… How could John expect everything to just go back to normal after that? What could Stiles possibly say to convey how betrayed he felt?

“Oh,” John said once the silence dragged on. “Can you at least answer me this - are you mad at Melissa? Was there real hate behind the little PowerPoint presentation? It didn’t seem like Jackson’s work to me, but correct me if I’m wrong.”
Had Stiles’ anger bled into that group project? He wasn’t sure. At the time, he hadn’t felt much of anything, anger included. Now he felt betrayed and foolish and so incredibly alone…

John was frustrated. Stiles was making some serious progress and all of that was derailed with one little visit from his stepfather. Melissa and he had mused that maybe the relationship was a bit toxic, that perhaps Simon was controlling and Stiles was nothing more than a puppet. But, now, John was starting to think there was something more going on there.

Stiles at least looked like he was thinking over what John had said, but he had still failed to say a word.

“I know you don’t want to talk about anything right now, or maybe ever again. But what if we start with something you feel more comfortable with? Can you tell me about the hotel you stayed at last fall? You said once that you thought you’d stay there until you were eighteen, that was until the raid. But what was it about that place that made you feel safe?” John wanted to add ‘what about Simon’s house doesn’t?’ But he bit his tongue. He wasn’t going to push that issue today.

Stiles opened his mouth and John sat back readying himself to listen.

“No,” Stiles said.

“No?” John asked, confused and let down.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Stiles replied.

“We need to make some progress here.” John continued to fish for information. “A part of our facility is the therapy aspect. So, tell you what, you can talk about anything. Anything you like. But I need you to talk Stiles, it’s not healthy to shut down like this.”

John saw the anger flash in the teen’s eyes. He knew he was starting to hit a nerve, but maybe an explosion of emotion was exactly what Stiles needed.

“I… I don’t trust you,” Stiles said at last.

Many students have said something simply to irk John over the years. Just about all of them had left him reeling at one point or another. But this, the flat tone Stiles used and how sincere he seemed, John didn’t doubt the statement and he also wasn’t sure how he could fix it. But he had to
“Okay. Fair enough.” John found himself saying. “I’m guessing Melissa and I lost your trust right around the time we let Simon on our campus. Can you tell me why? What happened—”

“You didn’t just let him in here!” Stiles exploded jumping to his feet. “You let that monster…” He trailed off knowing he had said too much and deflated back in on himself for doing so.

“Stiles, what did he do to you?”

“No.”

“Please. You can tell us and we can help you.” John pressed.

“No.”

“Stiles—”

“No.”

“We’ve dealt with abuse cases before. If he has hit you, or worse. Stiles we can help you,” John pleaded.

“No.” Stiles folded his arms and sank as deeply as he could into the squishy chair.

John didn’t say anything for a full minute. He figured Stiles could use the time to gather his thoughts and emotions, but honestly so could he. What was going on in Stiles’ home life to warrant this reaction? What did he call his step father? A monster? That was the word choice of a child, angry teens have called their parents a magnitude of different curse words while sitting in that very chair, but Stiles said the man was a monster… that was different. And worse, that ‘monster’ had had full custody of Stiles since he was eight…

“I’m sorry, Stiles,” John said at last. “I’m sorry I’ve lost your trust and I hope you let me earn it back.” He meant it too.

Stiles didn’t react, not that John expected him to.

“If you don’t have anything else you’d like to talk about, you can go rejoin the others on the lacrosse field.”
Stiles left before John finish the sentence.

He looked back down at the request he was reading through. The investor wanted to make pamphlets that could go out nationally that featured a few of their students’ and their issues. John could see it now: Stiles on the cover crossed arms and all and on the inside, him saying he didn’t trust them. Some brochure…

That evening Ayesha knocked on Erica’s window waking her up along with all four of her sisters. Erica shushed them before sneaking out.

Her once best friend sported a nice tan and dark, pin-straight hair. On her face was way, way, too much make up. Her eyeliner was ridiculously thick and surrounded by a bright teal shadow that didn’t match her crop top. Erica had, at one time, spent everyday running around the streets with Ayesha, but now, she barely recognized her.

“Girl, I thought your parents hauled you off to that reform school! What are you doing back here?” Ayesha asked while fumbling in her pockets for a cigarette for herself and passing one over in the process. Erica looked at the object and almost leaned in to take it before she pulled back.

“No. No thanks, I quit.”

Ayesha raised a skeptical, penciled eyebrow.

“I’m just home for today and tomorrow, visiting. So, tell me about what’s been going on? What happened to my brother’s tag?”

“Visiting? They let you out of there? I thought it was like a prison or something. But, uh, the city painted over it. You remember Roscoe? He’s running things here. Hasn’t put the tag back up.” She offered feebly.

Erica did remember Roscoe. She had never liked that particular friend of her brother’s and couldn’t imagine the state of her family if that clown was in charge.

“Well, let’s change that.” Erica’s mischievous grin slid easily back into place. “Do you have some cans?”
Erica spent a little over an hour working on her brother’s tag; their last name formed out of arrows with the gang’s sign in the center. Her work wasn’t nearly as flawless as her older sibling’s. It wasn’t as large as the one time permanent fixture, but it was something, she thought as she stood back to admire the piece.

A pair of cold arms wound their way over her shoulders causing Erica to jump.

“Nice,” A raspy voice said into her ear. “We haven’t had a Reyes sporting our symbol in months, glad to see one of them is back.” As he said that, Roscoe moved his hands down Erica’s body so they rested just above her jeans on her hips. He pulled her close against his chest and used his cheek to push her thick blond waves out of his way so he could whisper the words directly into her ear. “I’m happy to see it’s the younger one too. You look like you’ve grown up nicely, Erica.” One of Roscoe’s hands trailed the edge of her jeans, pushing the boundary to its limit while the other snaked under her sweater and fondled her left breast. “Missed us?” His free hand moved to where he knew her tattoo sported the same symbol she had just painted.

Erica thrashed lightly at the unwanted touch. But none of the six or so others said or did anything to get Roscoe to let up his grip. Not even Ayesha. How did her old crew sneak up on her so easily? Eventually Roscoe spun Erica around to face him properly.

“You home for good?” He asked while his eyes raked her body up and down.

Roscoe was taller than Erica remembered. He wore loose jeans and a hat over his unwashed hair. At one time, Erica would have laughed at the idea of her brother’s lackey running things, but now the guy emitted power. Power she was sure he got by carrying the Glock in his belt loop.

She stumbled over her words as she tried to recover from his onslaught. “N–no, just a day.” She managed to stammer out while squaring her shoulders and raising her chin defiantly. Roscoe may be bigger than she was, but she was still a Reyes and that alone commanded a certain level of respect in this neighborhood. “And hands off.”

Roscoe’s face split into a wide, challenging smile. “No worries momacita.” He practically hissed the words. “It’s just, you know, you haven’t contributed much lately. Haven’t really earned the right to that symbol…” He placed a hand over the still wet paint on the wall behind her and used the close proximity to speak quieter. “But we can change that. When do you leave exactly?”

Erica opened her mouth to say she would be leaving in the morning even though it was a lie but
Ayesha beat her to it. “Day after next. She’s only home for two nights and then back off to reform school,” She said sadly, and perhaps thought the information would lessen Roscoe’s interest.

It didn’t.

“We’ll have to work quickly then.” Roscoe shouted out to the others. “Jasper, how many Shards can we pull together by tomorrow night?”

“I’ve just returned from the 417, stash is decent.”

Erica’s eyes bounced back and forth between Roscoe and his ring of barely legal men talking openly about hardcore drugs. They couldn’t be serious. What could she possibly have to do with the Crystal Meth operation? She had never transported for them before, hell, even her brother wouldn’t have carried the numbers they were talking?! What did they expect her to achieve in just one night before she returned to school?

“Okay, Erica, meet me at the warehouse tomorrow after your parents are asleep. We’ll have it cut in baggies for you. Your little prison school won’t know what hit them, the dicksuckers are going to love you! We’ll work out a collection, maybe Elena can be the go between. You allowed visitors?” As Roscoe spoke he invaded Erica’s personal space again, but even his close proximity didn’t faze her as she worked out what the man had just said.

Elena, her little sister. It was bad enough that Erica was being asked to get involved in this little operation of theirs but her sister? No, no way.

“She’s fourteen!” Erica shouted the first thing that came to her mind as she rehashed the words again. “She can’t. She’s too young and way too smart for this.”

“Aye. Little Reyes, same age as you when—” Roscoe’s eyes darkened as he thought about Erica’s initiation day all those years ago. And he wasn’t even the member that took her virginity. Just thinking he had that in mind for her sister made Erica want to claw the guys eyes out. She probably would have attempted it, but the streetlight reflected off the magazine well of Roscoe’s pistol. She took a deep breath instead. What would John tell her to do? Melissa?

“Keep her out of this,” Erica said sternly. A few of his cronies mocked her, but Roscoe looked her over again.
“It’s been a while, Erica. Maybe you need to be reinitiated,” He said at last. “Come a little earlier tomorrow night and we can discuss leaving your sister out of things - for now.”

“My brother—” Erica started to protest.

“Is at Max.” Roscoe finished for her, challengingly.

What else could Erica do but nod her head. This was her own crew treating her this way.

As soon as Roscoe left she exhaled deeply and turned to Ayesha who was giving her a ‘what can you do’ look. And really, what could she do?

That puzzle stayed on her mind the entire next day as Erica acted like everything was fine. She made dinner with her grandmother and played Monopoly with her sisters. Her parents commented on how she was acting so much more mature and setting a wonderful example for her siblings. Erica felt the weight of their praise as she screamed internally that she was in over her head and certainly wouldn’t be winning any exemplary awards.

And of course all too soon, her family was sleeping, or mostly sleeping as Elena asked her where she was going when Erica got back out of bed.

“Shhh, go back to sleep,” Erica hissed across the dark room.

“Where are you going?” Elena questioned again. “You were out late last night too, you need to stop doing this to mom, she can’t take it.”

Erica paused on the window sill. “Just go back to bed. Don’t worry about me.”

“Erica!” Elena tried again.

Erica crossed the room and ran a hand over her sister’s mess of blond curls affectionately. “Just trust me, okay, it’s better for all of us if I just go. I’ll be back before they wake.”
Erica thought about her word choice. Was it better for her family to just do as Roscoe asked? She wouldn’t even let herself think of Boyd. How could she face him after letting that’s sorry excuse for a leader have his way with her? Not to mention she was surely going to be busted on check in, and that is if she somehow managed to smuggle the drugs through the airport!

She wasn’t sure when it started but Erica was full on trembling by the time she saw what looked like an abandoned warehouse. It was an eyesore in her neighborhood and just a street away from her apartment complex. But growing up, this was the ‘cool’ place to hang out and it later became her refuge when skipping school. Somewhere along the way, the fun was lost.

Now, however, the building loomed over her threateningly with its broken and boarded up windows. She thought about that time her brother had set off fireworks inside and nearly burned the place to the ground. Oh how she wished he had burnt it to the ground.

Erica placed a shaky hand on the large roller door and took a breath.

Lydia didn’t know why she did it. She couldn’t believe that she had stooped so low, but she had.

Stiles never returned to the lacrosse practice after his session with John, and Derek, in particular was really concerned. It wasn’t the first time she had noticed Derek act differently when Stiles was around or in this case, not around. It was the way the two had been with each other in their shared classes lately; not talking per say, but just generally on the same wavelength. A wavelength that used to include Lydia and lacked one particularly skinny gay kid.

The fact that she knew her distaste for their growing friendship stemmed from jealousy might be why Lydia acted so rashly. But was it rash? It was something that often had been on the tip of her tongue. She had forced it down and chose the better, more refined route, time and time again.

Except this time.

Derek rushed past the picnic table that served as bleachers for those that wanted to admire the lacrosse players without so much as a glance towards his fellow group mates. It was obvious he was looking for Stiles, Lydia just knew it. She too had noticed that he’d never returned, even though John was seen chatting with some of the other counselors and students.

“Derek!” Lydia called as she hopped down. “De-rek!” She drew out both syllables.
Derek halted in his stride. “What?” He snapped, clearly annoyed by being held up.

“I know you’re looking for Stiles.” Lydia managed to refrain from adding the word, ‘again’. “And I just— there is something you should know, he’s not— listen, he did some things when he ran away.” She felt her face heat up over her betrayal.

“What do you mean?” Derek asked. “Is he okay?” His concern instantly doubled and Lydia could kick herself.

“No. I mean yes, he’s fine now, but— ” Lydia took a deep breath and forced herself to look Derek in the eyes. If she was going to do this, she was going to watch the moment Derek reached the same conclusion she had. As shattering as that might be for him. “He used to sell himself. What I mean is he was a—”

“Stop.” Derek cut her off. “Why are you doing this? Why make up—”

“His tattoo!” Lydia tried to explain as it seemed she was already losing him. She saw a brief flicker of recognition cross Derek’s eyes and latched onto it, explaining that Stiles had a pimp, probably one he’d have to report back to eventually. She hypothesized what that could mean about him health-wise and warned Derek not to get involved in that.

Derek was quiet while Lydia talked and boy did she talk. Lydia hadn’t stopped her research of Stiles’ tattoo after simply deciphering it’s meaning. She threw statistic after statistic at Derek and watched as each unbelievable number hit him harder than the last. In the end Derek was motionless as well as speechless and definitely was no longer looking for Stiles.

But Lydia didn’t feel any better as she thought she might’ve. She actually felt a bit sick, looking at how upset Derek was.

Eventually, Derek asked quietly, “Do you think that’s why…why I, um, thought I might have liked him?”

Lydia didn’t even feel any satisfaction in finding out she was right about Derek’s developing crush. He sounded far more distressed by the revelation than she had assumed he would.

“Do you want to talk about it?” She offered and leaned in for a hug. But Derek’s quick reflexes anticipated the move and he dodged her easily.

“No.” Derek grounded out and he sounded angry now.

Lydia tried again but Derek stormed off and she was left alone, regardless of her secret sharing.
Stiles was late for dinner. He had almost missed it entirely, but doing so would have probably landed him another ‘talk’ with John. And he had had enough of that for one day.

Stiles was surprised to see that Derek wasn’t at the table. Lydia was and she shot him a curious glance before looking away shyly. What had Stiles done to her this time, he wondered?

He got another surprise when Melissa came over with an excited and tired looking Erica.

“Long flight?” Jackson asked rudely. But he was all but ignored as Boyd jumped up to greet his girlfriend. The two were told repeatedly by Melissa that they were ‘pushing it’.

She then informed them all that her team would be having a group meeting after dinner.

The rest of dinner was spent with Erica happily talking about her family. It turned out that Scott and Jackson had given her envelopes addressed from their parents and asked her to smuggle in instant coffee. Apparently, it had worked for Jackson once before and Scott wanted to give it a try. Erica regretfully told them she didn’t have time and never even made it to a store. What had she done with herself? She wasn’t sharing anything, stating that they would all have to wait.

Stiles finally saw Derek as he was the last one to make it into the common room for group. He purposely scooted over to indicate that there was plenty of room next to him, but Derek didn’t even glance in his direction as he slid, uncomfortably, into the chair that already housed Boyd and Erica. He greeted the latter quickly as he did so.

Melissa called Erica up and basically told everyone that she had a bit of an experience to share and left it at that.

Erica tentatively stood and looked far more hesitant to talk than Stiles had ever seen her do so in the past. Everyone stopped talking to pay attention.

Erica told them about the gang she was apart of in far more detail than she ever had before. It led up to her explaining that when she went home, so much had changed. She even openly admitted to sneaking out and partaking in graffiti in front of John and Melissa, but neither counselor interrupted. Erica told them about some new dog who was in charge and how they had basically
threatened her family, her real family. This guy made her a deal, that required her to sleep with him for her family’s protection. It unexpectedly hit so close to home for Stiles that he realized a bit too late that his mouth was open. As Erica spoke she rolled her eyes a lot and tried to play it off as nonchalant, but Stiles saw the way she was starting to shake.

“I didn’t know what to do, so I went to the warehouse,” Erica said flatly. Boyd cursed and almost stood but Derek held him back. “I was there, about to open the door for the sleezebag who wanted to use me to sell drugs and then some, when I thought about what John had said. This was my choice. And I didn’t want to open the door.” Erica broke into a wide grin. “I didn’t do it. I turned around and ran. Told my dad and he called the cops.”

“So, like, is your family okay?” Scott asked.

“Yeah. They arrested Roscoe. My story was good enough for probable cause or something and they raided the building,” Erica said. “Plus, they are going to continue to keep an eye on my family in case of retaliation.”

“That’s good, Erica!” Allison said. “I’m so glad you didn’t go through with it.”

“Yeah, sex isn’t a commodity for trade,” Derek said. It was an odd statement and something about the way Derek pointedly looked at him told Stiles that dig was personal.

So he had found out. Well, found out about one of his hidden truths, at least.

The rest of the conversation with Erica was lost on Stiles as he thought about that. From the anger in Derek’s tone, he assumed that meant Derek was mad at him and no longer friends or whatever they were anymore at the very least. That fact was far less a blow to Stiles than he thought it would be. He chose that life. On the streets he was in control, set his limits, and was properly paid. Nothing was taken from him there without his permission. He didn’t feel dirty because of his clients. His showers burned but that had nothing to do with being paid for sex. No. That was a part of who he was and there was nothing he could do about it now.

And if Stiles’ heart clenched a little at the sight of Derek’s back as the older teen made his way towards the exit once they were dismissed, who was he to admit it?

John cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention. Erica had just shared quite a harrowing tale and the majority of the students were congratulating her. It didn’t slip past him that Stiles sat there by himself and didn’t say a word, just as he hadn’t earlier in the day. But that issue aside, Erica had a
lot to be proud of, even if she had also broken several visitation rules in the process.

So John dismissed everyone else and called her over to talk about it. Melissa, who had gotten the story from Erica and her mom via the phone earlier in the day, gave Erica one more hug and told her how proud she was of her. John agreed.

“But,” John said the word and watched both Melissa and Erica’s head snap to his direction. “You snuck out past curfew. I told you Beacon of Hope rules still apply, and you committed vandalism, too.”

Erica was speechless.

“I think, in light of other events, the consequences can be small. How about double kitchen duty next week?”

Erica agreed quickly enough before being pulled off by Boyd who was still talking about what he would like to do to that asshole, Roscoe.

“I’m so proud of her!” Melissa said for probably the tenth time that evening. She really needed this, to see what good could come from all the hours and hours of talking with her students.

“Yeah,” John agreed. “I’m proud of her, too.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Beta read by: fairyfey on 6/25/18

Two chapters ago, I promised JaneErikaBrady a hug for Stiles, and I haven’t delivered yet [sorry] but the last line of this chapter is for you!

Hope you guys like this one!

I’m always nervous writing suggestive scenes for minors. If this is too much and deserves some sort of warning, please let me know, otherwise consider this your warning... umm, some bad language in this one too!

Episode 9

No matter how Melissa tried to sell it, sleeping on the ground during a camping trip was just that; sleeping on the ground.

Derek sat on a log by the dwindling campfire working on a knot that had formed in his neck. He was the first one out of their tent that morning and perhaps should have started cooking eggs for everyone else, or at the very least fed the fire so it would be useable for whoever deemed themselves chef soon. He didn’t do either of those things, however.

Instead he watched the shadow in Stiles’ tent. He was awake, which Derek knew because he was sitting. He also figured Stiles was aware that Derek was up as he was refusing to come out. Stiles had pretty much ignored him for two weeks straight. That was Derek’s fault… mostly.

Learning how Stiles made money when he ran away changed things. The fact was Derek was almost seventeen. He was a junior in high school and he had been intimate in such a fashion with exactly one person. Stiles was younger and if everything Lydia had said was true, he had been with
countless people. Not to mention he had a pimp. He was marked and claimed. Why would he choose that life? He had a home, right? It’s not like he had to go out and seek those types of people, people willing to pay him for sex. Logically, Derek could justify his confusion and fear. That didn’t stop his chest from constricting whenever Stiles walked into the room, however.

Suddenly, Stiles’ shadow stood in a crouching position, because he was too tall for the tent, and started to undress. Derek wanted to look away. He knew it was rude of him to stare but no one was around to hold him accountable for his actions and there was just something about Stiles that he was drawn too. He couldn’t tear his eyes away, even if all he was seeing was a gray outline of the thin figure.

Stiles unzipped his tent and finished buttoning up his checkered over shirt in the same silent motion. For a brief moment, their eyes met before both boys darted their gazes elsewhere.

“Sorry,” Stiles grunted in his tired, early morning voice. “Didn’t think anyone else was up.”

Oh. Maybe he didn’t know Derek was there.

“’s kay,” Derek mumbled.

Without explanation Stiles walked along the trail to the designated bathroom area, presumably to relieve himself and Derek took that moment to make it appear like he was doing more to maintain the fire. As he returned, Stiles initially went straight back to his tent, but Derek stopped him.

“You don’t have to,” Derek said quietly.

“What?” Stiles asked politely enough while his face betrayed his annoyance.

“It’s cramped in these little pop-tents, you don’t have to go back in there— just because I’m out here.” Derek explained.

Stiles looked hesitant for just a moment before he took a seat on the opposite side of the fire. No one talked for at least ten minutes. Every time Derek dared to look in Stiles’ direction, Stiles was pointedly not looking back at him. Derek wanted to say something, but he wasn’t sure what to say. Stiles’ hair was even more unruly than normal, he too probably had had an uncomfortable night of rest, maybe they could keep it light and talk about that. Derek opened his mouth to speak but
“Good morning boys!” Melissa chirped brightly. She took a deep breath. “Don’t you just love this mountain air? It’s going to rain all week, we’re really lucky to get out here before the big storm!”

Derek muttered his agreement. Stiles admitted that the fresh air was probably his favorite thing about being stuck up on the mountain. It being early December meant that the temperatures were close to freezing and when they talked their breath was just barely visible. It seemed appropriate as Melissa talked more about the weather.

“Just ten degrees less and we would be getting snow!” She said excitedly. “It doesn’t happen too often around these parts, except for perhaps the mountain peaks.”

As she talked she fumbled with the cooler and set out two dozen eggs. “Why don’t you two check our water supply for the return trip while I start breakfast.” She frowned at the fire and promptly placed two more decent sized logs on it.

Derek was reluctant to move, but Stiles stumbled over a stump causing Derek to spring up and catch his arm on reflex.

“Thanks,” Stiles hissed as he pulled his arm free of Derek’s grasp as if it had burned him.

They had plenty of water.

Kira was the next one up. She looked so irritable, even Melissa was wary. The multiple colors of her hair were all tangled together in an unfashionable way, and Derek thought he might have even seen a stick poking out of the mess.

The others soon followed in rapid succession. It may have had something to do with Melissa moving on to cook the bacon. Jackson took one look at Kira and asked Scott if that’s why he wanted to sneak coffee in so badly. The statement earned them both a reprimand.

With everyone awake, the quiet of the morning was gone. Derek looked around, and so was Stiles.
As soon as it was safe for him to do so, Stiles left the group of chatting students to slip off to a more secluded location. He found a view he wasn’t expecting; the overgrown forest gave way suddenly to a rocky cliff’s edge. The sight beyond it was breathtaking. The mountain they were currently on, while seemingly high because of the nature of the hike, was nothing when compared to its neighboring giants. Two huge land masses formed peaks and valleys, all dotted with lakes and rivers among the greenery. Stiles pressed his knees together so he could rest his head on them, and stared out at the vastness. Somewhere down there were all the little monsters of the world, but from his vantage point they seemed so minuscule. It was a nice thought.

Kira interrupted his peace shortly after he had decided that was what he had achieved by finding this place. She looked a lot how he felt and shuffled her way across the rocks to sit next to him without so much as a greeting. Pressure on his shoulder told Stiles that Kira’s head would be occupying that spot for the foreseeable future.

At long last she spoke. “Who do you want me to throw over that cliff?”

Stiles didn’t answer.

“Melissa sent a few of us to look for you.” Kira told him eventually.

Stiles huffed and went to go stand but Kira stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“I say you take all the time you need,” She added.

Stiles was grateful.

Melissa was proud of her students. They had made decent time on the way up to their campsite.
Especially Kira, as this was her first steep climb. Often the inexperienced complained about carrying all their gear, but she had done phenomenally well.

It wasn’t until halfway down the mountain that Melissa noticed her students’ pace start to falter. It happened about an hour after the rain hit. Everyone was thoroughly soaked, the laughter had simmered until it was almost non-existent, and no one was smiling anymore. Not even Allison who had seemed to enjoy the weekend away from her father’s watchful gaze.

It didn’t escape Melissa’s notice that her and Isaac seemed to be getting closer these days. It would seem that Chris’s daughter had picked a favorite from among her admirers. Allison was one of the few people Isaac would openly talk to. As they had both lost their mothers to cancer, they had that hardship to share. But lately the conversations between the two have been more frequent and jovial. They were often spotted together watching the lacrosse team practice after school; perhaps that was the push they needed.

Or maybe it was the fact that Scott almost seemed to be going out of his way to impress Kira these days. He had certainly attempted to break the school rules for her if he was trying to sneak coffee in. That is something Melissa will have to talk to him about in their session.

Kira was harder to read, however. She giggled a lot in Scott’s presence, but she seemed to be the friendliest with Stiles. If Melissa didn’t know better, she would think that perhaps Kira had a crush on him. But Stiles was pretty openly gay now and had been since the egg project. Although, Melissa suspected long before that. It was hard to tell when dealing with prostitution.

She thought that perhaps Stiles outing himself had something to do with the newfound friendship between himself and Derek. But the last two weeks had proven that suspicion false. Whatever good was happening there had ceased just as quickly as it had started. It was a shame too, because Stiles was becoming more and more reclusive as a result. How long would it be before her runner ran?

It wasn’t a guessing game Melissa wanted to play.

“I hate the rain!” Lydia said for at least the twentieth time since it had started.

“Yes, you’ve told us!” Erica rounded on her. “We still have eight miles to go, so if you don’t mind we would like to walk them, while carrying thirty pounds of gear on our backs, without hearing about your weather preferences!” The blonde shot Melissa a dirty look and adjusted her backpack as she said this.
Neither Jackson nor Derek came to Lydia’s defense and this seemed to annoy her. But as Boyd slid Erica’s pack onto his back without asking, Derek offered to do the same to Lydia’s and both girls seemed pleased.

Six hours later and Melissa’s teenagers were well past their breaking point. The rain had turned ice cold and was becoming almost painful. Due to the lack of shelter on this particular trip, they chose not to stop for lunch, so everyone was hungry and grumpy in addition to cold and wet. But at long last the tops of Beacon of Hope’s cabins were visible in the distance. As they got closer, Melissa noticed that something wasn’t quite right. Not a light was on in a single building. With the rain pour, no one was outside. The place looked abandoned.

“There you are!” An irate John screamed over the howl of the wind. “I’ve been so worried. Why haven’t you answered your radio?”

Melissa fished for the soaked device out of her bag while maintaining her stride and tried to beep it. It clicked over several times, but there was never any static.

“ Weird.” Melissa frowned. “I thought these things are water proof?”

“ Water resistant, yes, but not lake proof.” John shook his head. “You all looked soaked.”

“ Gee, ya think?” Jackson asked cockily.

“ Enough of that. Come on guys, hot showers, and warm food, let’s go!” Melissa shouted.

“Umm, warm food we do have, but hot showers are a no go at the moment.” John regretfully told them. “Powers out. Right now, we have everyone staying in the common room area because of the large fire place, but we do have a fire going in the kitchen as well. Why don’t you guys make your way over there and dry off.”

As if the promise of food was enough, Melissa’s students picked up their pace and headed towards the mess hall.
John held Melissa back a little. “I was so worried.” He emphasized the word. “Seriously, Chris has talked me out of searching for you guys singlehandedly twice now.”

“We’re fine,” Melissa assured. “Just a little held up because of the rain, I promise.”

John held her gaze for a moment longer before they jogged after the teenagers who had disappeared behind the double oak doors.

While Kira hadn’t complained, she certainly looked murderous as she sat on a chair close to the fire and caused a puddle to form under her as she had yet to take off her wet gear. Erica on the other hand was practically naked and certainly in dress code violation as she stripped in front of everyone. Scott was already ladling out bowls of soup for them all while pretty much everyone else was trying to find dry clothes from their packs and failing.

“I’ll—I’ll get you all some towels— and a mop,” John said slowly as he took in just how much water they had managed to trek in.

Twenty minutes later they all had on fresh clothes, a towel, and a warm bowl of stew in their hands.

“If the power stays out, you’ll all be camping again, this time in the commons.” John informed them. “I’ll need all of the staff to stay the evening, too, it will be a lot to manage. It’s already a bit crowded in there.” He added to Melissa.

“Of course,” Melissa agreed. “You guys finish up in here, I’m going to go see what I can do to help. Erica and Allison, I want you two to head down to John’s classroom. There is extra camping gear in there. See if we have enough spare sleeping bags for you all. I doubt these ones will dry before nightfall. Everyone else, there is a firewood collection list in the hall. I’m going to add all of your names to the list so check the times. There is rain gear by the backdoor so use that exit, okay? It’s going to be a long night if we don’t get power back on, so let’s all behave.”

Her pep speech was met with ten pairs of doubtful eyes.
As soon as John and Melissa left the talking erupted. Scott was trying to unsuccessfully cheer up Kira. Erica and Boyd must have felt the silent walk in the rain was too long without each other’s presence as she was sitting on his lap within minutes. Lydia finished her meal or what she was willing to eat of it and decided to braid Allison’s hair. Isaac and Jackson talked about major storms they had both lived through back home, the latter having spent one evening in the basement due to a tornado scare. This left Derek and Stiles as the only two who hadn’t moved.

Stiles dropped his spoon in his bowl with a clatter. He was already the furthest away from the fire and seemed inclined to shy even further from it as he scooted closer to a table to set the dish on.

“Aren’t you cold?” Derek asked tentatively. He hated the tension that had grown between them.

“Why do you care?” Stiles bit back with more malice than Derek thought he was capable of.

A few heads turned their way.

“I’m just saying, the fire’s that direction.” Derek pointed at the fire.

Stiles put his head down next to his bowl and ignored him. Derek was going to leave things there. If Stiles wanted to be stubborn and cold, who was he to interfere?

Ten minutes later, however, Derek noticed Stiles was shivering and he had had enough. He pushed his chair back loudly and got up, marching over to Stiles who he realized just a hair too late was sleeping. Derek had already placed two hands on his shoulders in order to roughly scoot him closer to the fire. The motion made Stiles jump to alertness. In one swift action Stiles kicked defensively. Derek moved his hand to block a nonexistent punch and hadn’t expected the attack to be lower. Stiles foot landed on its mark; Derek’s groin.

Everyone was watching the pair by then. Derek dropped to one knee and managed to rein in all of the curse words running through his head as he repeatedly told himself he had it coming. Stiles, however, did not.

“What the fuck man!?” He asked with blazing eyes.
“You were sh—you know what, never mind.” Derek managed to get up and gingerly walked back to his chair by the fire. “I’m over this.”

“Over what?” Stiles argued back. “You’re the one that has a problem with—”

“Who would be okay with— that?” Derek shot back.

Everyone else was thoroughly confused by then, except for perhaps Lydia.

“Fuck you Derek!” Stiles shouted. “You know nothing!”

“I know enough,” Derek defended hotly.

The sound of sneakers squeaking on the linoleum floor told Derek that Stiles was walking away. No one else said anything for a full minute before they resumed their previous conversations.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Lydia asked softly leaning into Derek’s ear. The action was so reminiscent of how Kate would lean over him during class that Derek almost jumped.

“No,” He replied flatly and scooted his chair a bit further from the girls who were still working on their multiple braided look. The ironic thing was, in doing so he put himself furthest away from the fire and closer to Stiles’ empty spot.

Things didn’t improve. The weather had only worsened as the day went on. Despite Boyd’s attempt, Derek just wasn’t in the mood for cards with the others. The common room was packed and somewhere, someone was crying about the thunder. Worst of all no one seemed to realize that Stiles wasn’t with them aside from himself and the last thing Derek wanted to do was bring up the name of the guy who had shouted at him (and landed a low blow) only just a few hours ago.

“Okay guys, listen up!” John called over all the noise to get everyone’s attention. “We have a serious problem. Every single one of you will have to help out with this one, too, so come on
everyone, up and at ‘em.”

The collective groan was deafening.

It turned out that the ice cream was melting all over the walk-in freezer and some of the counselors had taken the time to fill the mess hall with bowls and bowls of the sweet treat. The mood picked up immensely after that and an hour later the cafeteria developed a party-like atmosphere.

Try as he might to find him, Derek still didn’t spot Stiles among the crowd.

“You’re really okay with this music?” Melissa asked John. “I mean we’re in a state of emergency and that radio is using batteries.”

“Aw, come on - these are 90s classics. Doesn’t it remind you of our college days?” John asked with a sly smile.

“John, we graduated in ’85.”

“Well, who’s aging us now, huh?” John asked.

Melissa laughed at his foolishness and nonsensical logic.

“Come here, I have something for you.” John persuaded and led Melissa to the kitchen where a bowl of chocolate ice cream sat untouched next to a can of whipped cream. “There wasn’t enough for everyone and I happen to know you love whipped cream on your ice cream, so… eat up, you’ve earned it.”

It was a touching gesture. “Earned it, how so?” Melissa asked.
“I was seriously worried about you guys out there. You had a full group camping ten miles out when we lost power and I couldn’t reach you… but everything was fine. You got the kids back in one piece at least, kept your calm in the storm,” John explained.

“It was just some rain, wasn’t even lightning out at the time…” Melissa shook her head. “But I’ll take it - the ice cream, I mean.”

John topped off her bowl with the fluffy substance before spraying some on his finger tip for himself. “How’d they do? Kira handle it okay?”

“She did. Seemed kind of sad, less cheerful, a little morbid at times. I was thinking, do her records include a psych eval? She seems to wane between highs and lows,” Melissa mused aloud.

“You’re thinking she’s bipolar?” John asked. “Undiagnosed. Could be why she attacked her father…”

“I think it’s a possibility. We’d have to get her parent’s permission to have an eval done.” Melissa reminded him.

“And hers. I won’t do it without Kira’s full consent. You know me, I’m never a fan of taking a pill as an answer, we can work on her self-control and balance the two.” John thought about it. “I’ll talk with her mom.”

Melissa agreed and reached for the can of whipped cream.

Tentatively John asked, “And Stiles? How’d he do? Participate in group?”

“No, not really. I had the kids each share a childhood memory they enjoyed. He said he liked Christmas, but gave no further details.” Melissa frowned.

“But Isaac talked a lot!” Melissa told him. “His mom used to take him to a park and they would get McDonald’s sometimes after. He liked the toys he would get with the meal - it was really endearing.”
As she told John this, Melissa purposely kept the can out of his reach. There wasn’t much left. John noticed, of course, and swooped around her back to reach it. He just barely managed to tug it free at that angle. He sprayed another dollop on his finger as he informed her, “Spoke with Derek’s uncle. The prosecution is finally ready to move the case forward. He’s going to have to tell Derek soon. I’m still uncertain of the reason behind the subterfuge, but Mr. Hale’s lawyers are adamant.”

“It has never sat well with me. The only connection between the fire and the defendant is Derek and yet he’s been kept in the dark. He has no idea.” Melissa did her best to wiggle the failing can out of John’s grip.

“It is odd.” John nodded. “They say they’re protecting him, but if those sharks think for a minute that Derek had anything to do with…”

“No. I don’t think they do,” Melissa disagreed. “It’s obvious that Derek has no clue.”

John gave up on the can and simply opened his mouth. But instead of sharing properly, Melissa squirted John with the remnants and laughed openly at his disappointed and cream speckled face. He didn’t take the attack lightly, retaliating by swooping a finger through the whipped cream still occupying her bowl and throwing the proper ratio off.

“Hey!” Melissa pouted.

John shrugged and did it again.

The two were laughing deeply when their moment was interrupted by shouting from the other room.

The rumor was that there was a guy waiting out in the firewood shed. The place had a bit of a reputation among the students as a hook up location, so naturally the younger population were alight with the buzz of who was meeting him out there. What daring new couple were going to take advantage of the power outage in such a fashion? It was surprising, for Derek at least, when a slightly wet Scott and Isaac joined their group of students at the ice cream social with matching
“You know that guy that’s gonna get lucky tonight that everyone’s talking about?” Scott started as he sat down and reached for a slightly melted bowl of ice cream.

“Stiles!” Isaac finished the sentence for him. “Said to leave him alone when we tried asking him what he was doing out there.”

“Stiles is getting some action tonight?” Jackson asked skeptically. “With who?”

“I don’t know.” Scott shrugged. “But, good for him!”

“It’s kind of legendary, everyone’s already talking about it!” Erica admitted. “Wish we thought of that!” She added with a hand on Boyd’s knee.

Lydia made a disgusted face.

“I’m gonna go ask Danny if he knows who the other guy is,” Jackson said as he stood.

Lydia slid across the bench towards Derek in the space Jackson had vacated. She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. “Do you want to talk about it? Seems he can’t shake his… ways.”

Derek snapped. He threw her arm back towards her roughly and stood while shouting. “No, I don’t want to talk about it! I’ve already told you to leave me alone! Why is that so hard for you to understand? Don’t touch me!”

Lydia started to cry. The sudden outburst must have scared her, but also, Derek was embarrassing them both, in front of everyone!

The tears seemed to hit a nerve in Derek as he doubled his volume. “Stop it! Stop crying! You brought this on yourself.”
Lydia took a few steady deep breaths and stood to face her accuser. She was a foot and a half shorter than Derek and a third of his size but she squared her shoulders and faced him as calmly as she could manage in her shaken state. “I was just trying to help.”

Derek blinked. Before him was Lydia but also, he saw Kate.

— Flashback —

It was raining that night too, after the basketball game finals. They had won and Kate persuaded Derek to take a detour to her classroom before he went off to the big party to celebrate. They had met there several times after hours like this and the path was familiar enough in the dark. Derek had no issues walking it while holding his secret lover up so she could passionately show her appreciation for the victory on his earlobe. The two stumbled their way into the unused room, and Derek lightly sat Kate down on her desk. He was eager to please her; the noises she would make, just the thought of what was to come, had pushed all other thoughts from his mind. Kate wore a knee length dress in the school’s blazing red and gold. Derek pushed it up to reveal that that was all she wore. Kate didn’t even ask as she placed a hand on Derek’s shoulder and pushed him down while spreading herself wide for easier access.

“Show me what I’ve taught you,” She whispered.

Derek did as he was told, falling to his knees to please her. Kate’s moans were a beautiful sound filling his ears. That was until he heard a shrill scream.

Derek turned around to see none other than his own mother staring back at him in shock and horror. The sight was enough to send a chill through him, leaving him cold, everywhere. Kate shrieked too and quickly scrambled to cover herself.

“I— we—” She stammered out. It was the first time Derek could ever remember her acting so unsure of herself.

Derek’s mom was crying now with a hand over her mouth. “Save it,” She said icily and turned around. “Let’s go Derek.”

Derek scrambled up while wiping the wetness from his face on the back of his hand before leaning in to kiss Kate goodbye. She turned her head away from him and whispered, “We can talk about it, later.” She placed a surprisingly warm hand on his shoulder to turn him towards his mom.
“Now, Derek,” His mother demanded. “Get away from that— whore.”

— End of flashback —

“No!” Derek shouted.

Lydia scrunched up her face in confusion. “Fine, I won’t help and I won’t offer again. Just thought you’d want someone to talk to…” She said the words lowly, but as the majority of the room had stopped what they were doing to watch the disagreement, everyone had heard.

Derek blinked rapidly and shook his head. He pushed past Lydia to get to the doors behind her desperately trying to get into the hall and away from all the judging looks he was receiving.

“Derek!?” He heard Melissa call out his name in concern, but he ignored it and picked up his pace.

“Derek!” This time it was John. Derek didn’t want to talk to either of them about it.

Finally he managed to burst through the wooden swing doors that led into the hall. There he started to run, not with a destination in mind, but just to put as much space between himself and everyone else. He turned the corner to the common room and slammed into something cold and wet. It caused Derek to stumble in his stride and whatever he hit was knocked over completely.

Looking down at the floor, Derek was shocked to see Stiles staring up at him. His face was a mix of annoyance and surprise. But what Derek noticed more was the wetness of his hair and hoodie that clung to him. Why was he here? Wasn’t he supposed to be in the firewood shed waiting for his next conquest – the whore. His mind supplied the word in his mother’s voice. How disappointed she had sounded. How much Derek didn’t care at the moment, how mad he had been at her…

The fire killed his mother two days later and he never told her he was sorry.

Stiles recovered slowly from the impact and helped himself to his feet. He turned to walk away, seemingly not expecting an apology or explanation from Derek.
“I’m sorry,” Derek blurted out. If it was for Stiles or his mom or Lydia or Kate, even, he didn’t know. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…” He said the words quickly in succession.

Shouting from the hall told them that counselors were coming. Derek flicked his eyes behind him fearfully.

Stiles glanced between Derek and the hallway he had just burst through. “Come on,” He said grabbing Derek’s hand and pulling him towards the backdoor.

Stiles unhooked a rain coat from the rack and shoved Derek through the door, stumbling after him as quickly as he could. Derek took the coat Stiles tossed him wordlessly. Stiles pulled him out from under the covered shelter and into the pouring rain. Stiles’ hoodie did little to protect him from the wetness but it didn’t seem to faze him. Derek allowed Stiles to pull him along in the mud-soaked grass. Where were they going?

The answer became obvious as familiar buildings came into view. The dormitory cabins were dark and desolate looking. Somehow the idea of disappearing in one was a welcomed thought, however.

Once inside Stiles pushed Derek to sit on the floor. And started to help him get his wet sneakers and socks off. Stiles’ hands were trembling as he did so. And it hit Derek, suddenly, just how cold he was now that he was away from the fire.

“You need to get into dry clothes,” Stiles told him as he went to the bathroom to retrieve a few towels for them.

Stiles, himself, peeled one wet layer off at a time. Derek made the unfortunate mistake of looking up when Stiles’ back was to him, the barcode tattoo just barely visible in the dark. He felt an unexplainable twinge of guilt.

“Why did you help me?” Derek asked without thinking. “I mean, why bring me all the way out here?”

Stiles paused as he fumbled through his clothes, obviously looking for the warmest items he owned. “Seemed like you were trying to get away from them - you certainly were running when you knocked me over.”
Derek, still on the ground, still wet and cold, with the exception of his feet, thought about that. “I’m sorry for knocking you down.”

“Yes, you said that,” Stiles replied flatly. “It’s seriously not going to magically warm up in here, you need to get out of those wet clothes.”

Stiles went back to the bathroom, presumably to give Derek some privacy.

It took everything in him to get up. Derek did, however, do as Stiles asked. He felt drained - exhausted. His head hurt and the rain, which pounded on their roof and windows, didn’t seem to be letting up anytime soon. Before he really knew what he was doing, Derek crawled under his blankets and closed his eyes.

Twenty minutes later the sound of teeth chattering jarred him awake. Derek snapped up, startling Stiles who was sitting bundled up in his own bed in the process.

“Why did you help me?” Derek asked again. “I mean I was rude to you.”

Stiles thought about it. “You looked like you didn’t know where to go.”

“I didn’t,” Derek admitted. “They’ll be looking for us.”

Stiles seemed unfazed. “Let them. Do you really think they’ll send someone out here in the dark?”

“We’ll have consequences, maybe even be put on shuns.”

“Do you want to go back?” Stiles asked, a little curtly.

“No,” Derek replied automatically. “Not yet.”

And that was it. Instead of asking what had happened or if Derek wanted to talk about it, Stiles just
bundled himself up tighter in a little ball and looked away while attempting to quiet his shivering jaw.

Derek hesitated. “I’m sorry,” He said again.

“So I’ve been told,” Stiles replied sarcastically.

“I mean for um, ghosting you. I didn’t even explain—” Derek started to say.

“No need.” Stiles interrupted. “Why do you think I only talk about that stuff in my one and ones? I don’t expect you guys to understand.”

“Melissa knows? And John?” Derek asked a little disbelieving. “About um, your pimp?” He cringed at the word.

Stiles spun around to face him, shocked. “They know some… I haven’t told them about him, yet. I’ve never told anyone what the cops did, how do you know?”

Derek’s face must have betrayed his confusion.

“Wait, what do you think happened?” Stiles asked slowly.

Derek looked guilty. “Um well, I found out about your tattoo.”

“Lydia told you.” Stiles said, sounding resigned although he didn’t look mad.

“And Matt, but I didn’t actually look into it until after Lydia, but yeah, so I know you work for your— boyfriend, or whatever.” Derek choked a little on the word, clearly unable to believe anyone would consider the man that profited from selling them a boyfriend.

“He’s not.” Stiles almost laughed. “I didn’t ever call him that. What did you read on the internet?”
Derek looked sheepish.

“I met Connor when I was thirteen. He had a group of girls working in Ybor. They all had a bit of a soft spot for me, refused to push me away, didn’t mind sharing the corner as I had a bit of a different customer base. Anyway, Conner thought it was funny, at first, but then he saw my profit, and eventually he saw a black eye, and he intervened. From that moment on I had to pay him, that’s how it works. Out there, no one sits you down and asks you how you feel about anything. Shit just kinda happens to you and you have to roll with it. Working for Connor meant regulars, people suddenly knew where to find me, it meant more money too, better food, and a roof over my head.”

Stiles paused.

“Why didn’t you just go home?” Derek asked.

“I liked the freedom, I guess. The choice. It was my choice, and it’s not like I was going to do that forever. Eventually I’d have enough to leave town, right?” Stiles asked.

Derek doubted it but didn’t say so.

“So, is he waiting for you to report in or something? You’ve been here since August…does he send people to look for you eventually?” Derek asked, generally curious. One of the many reasons he was so disturbed by Stiles’ former profession was the thought that Stiles would be taken away someday. Gone, just like everyone else.

Stiles shot his eyes up to meet Derek’s. “He— dead,” He said emotionlessly.

Oh. Oh.

Derek was so stupid. He’d just assumed and so did Lydia, that Stiles was still entrenched in that life, biding his time here at their school. Derek figured Stiles would return back to his ‘boss’ by force or otherwise eventually; he hadn’t stopped to think about other possibilities. Maybe Stiles was out of that business for good? It still didn’t change the fact that he was more than a little experienced, used up. But it did somehow make the wrongness he felt when Lydia told him a little more bearable.

“I didn’t know.” Derek managed to say.
“You didn’t ask,” Stiles told him, challengingly.

“Do you like it? Is that why you did it, the sex, I mean?” Derek boldly asked. He wasn’t sure if Stiles wanted Derek to question him further or not, but he figured that since they were actually talking about it, he had better stop making assumptions.

Stiles shook his head. “No, not really. But it’s a hell of a lot better than starving. It’s usually over pretty quickly and then I don’t have to think about it again,” He said nonchalantly.

Derek closed his eyes. Kate’s image filled his mind. The way she was almost instructional, like the teacher she was, during their first few times together; telling Derek just how she liked it. He saw her clearly putting her mouth on him, remembered that sensation vividly. How could Stiles have that and not think about it again? How jaded did you become after multiple partners? Or maybe it’s wasn’t like that, in such a transaction? Maybe once there was an exchange of money the moment goes from exceptional to hollow? Derek tried to picture Stiles bent over a hotel bed getting fucked while counting cash. He couldn’t do it. Instead the image of Kate in his mind was replaced by Stiles peering up at him, looking through his long lashes; holding Derek firmly with both hands, waiting for permission.

Derek exhaled hard and felt the heat rise into his cheeks and elsewhere. Fortunately, Stiles seemed unaware of the change in mood. What was that about? Derek wasn’t gay, was he? What was it about Stiles that had him thinking?

“That’s it?” Stiles asked eventually. “No more questions?”

“That um, that thing you did with Jackson, where you made him…”

“When I made him hard? Or on his way to getting there? He’s a guy Derek, it doesn’t take much; some warm breath and a tickle. He still has the hots for Lydia and wants to kill me, you’ve seen him bury me in the grass during lacrosse practice…” Stiles finished.

“So you can’t, like, make someone gay?” Derek asked foolishly.

“No, Derek,” Stiles huffed out, annoyed. “Just like you can’t make someone straight, right?”
“I guess not,” Derek conceded and then— “I’ve only had sex with one person,” He blurted out.

Stiles stared at him.

“I mean, she was a girl, but…”

“But you’re kind of, maybe, just a little bit curious what it would be like with a guy?” Stiles finished the sentence for him.

Derek didn’t nod, but Stiles knew he was right anyways.

“Tell me about her,” Stiles asked him. “What was her name? Kate? What attracted you to her?”

It was a simple question but Derek stumbled over his words trying to decide how to answer.

“She was pretty, I guess?” He chose to go with.

“What about her was pretty? Her face? Her legs? What did she do that caught your attention? A good-looking guy like you probably could have had anyone, so how was she different?” Stiles probed.

That question only tangled Derek up further. What was different about her? She was ten years older for starters. She seemed to touch him a lot when simply walking up and down the aisle, that was probably what caught his attention first, but did Stiles just call him good looking?!

“Okay,” Stiles said a little exasperated. “She was clearly perfect and you can’t pinpoint why—”

“She wasn’t perfect,” Derek blurted out. “She was kind of controlling. She had a lot of rules to follow and anyway, I liked the way she made me feel, kind of like I was special.”

“Controlling? That’s not good. But okay, so she made you feel special, that’s um, well not a trait that’s specifically female?” Stiles looked troubled, like this wasn’t as easy as he thought it would
“Come here,” Derek demanded suddenly.

“What?” Stiles questioned because he never made anything easy.

“You’re cold,” Derek told him. “Come here we can share blankets.”

Hesitantly, Stiles crossed the room. Derek instantly felt the extra warmth from doubling up on their covers.

“So how was Kate controlling?” Stiles asked more out of general curiosity then still trying to get to the bottom of Derek’s sexual identity crisis.

Derek obliged him regardless. “Well we couldn’t get caught so she did have a lot of rules, but sometimes that carried over to— she was just really specific about what she liked and what I should do.”

“Had to sneak around? Did your parents not want you dating or was it hers?” Stiles asked automatically. “And how specific, did you get a chance to find out what you liked, too?”

“Umm, it was complicated.” Derek felt his cheeks heat again as the subject matter meant he was continuously picturing Kate being with him, but also Stiles’ closer proximity meant he was bleeding further into his thoughts as well. “I don’t think she liked it very much when I asked questions, so I kind of followed her lead, a lot of the time.”

“Hm,” Stiles said thoughtfully. “Was she older? Still doesn’t seem very fair…”

“She was,” Derek admitted, he didn’t have to tell him how much older. Stiles blinked back at him, expecting more. But now all Derek could focus on were those damn eyelashes.

“Well what about before Kate, did a guy friend of yours ever catch your attention?” Stiles asked.
“No,” Derek answered truthfully and he was pretty sure he saw Stiles’ face fall. “But I met Kate on my first day in high school, before her no one really caught my eye… How did you know? That you liked guys, I mean.”

Stiles’ face twisted. Derek didn’t mean to ruin the back and forth they had going, but he suspected he just may have by how troubled Stiles suddenly appeared.

At long last Stiles took a deep breath and replied. “Okay, don’t get all bent out of shape over this, but I guess I never felt like I had a choice— I was just a kid really my first time and it was with a guy and on the streets, it was always men who picked me up. That first time, I didn’t even know what was going on, a guy asked if I was hungry, it had just rained, so I was soaked, and he told me how I could make a quick buck. He even let me take a warm shower first— after that, I didn’t really question it, just figured guys liked me and that was it.”

That was horrible. And wholly not the response Derek was expecting. So Stiles, who was willing to go to bat for gay rights, wasn’t even sure if he, himself, was in fact gay? What a sight they made; a pair of muddled teenagers, neither one having a real grasp of things, sharing a bed and warmth and seemingly getting more confused by the minute.

“I’m s—”

“Don’t.” Stiles cut him off. “I didn’t tell you that for your sympathy, I was being honest and I meant it when I said not to get worked up over it. I didn’t get to choose, but I don’t think it would make a difference.”

Derek was frustrated. “Well how do you know?”

Stiles shrugged.

“I think— do you mind if I try something. Can I kiss you?” Derek asked, shocking himself as well as Stiles.

A flicker of emotion danced across Stiles’ face but it rested on something dark.

“Do you think that just because I’ve been around the block, that because others have just taken what they wanted from me that you can use me to test your preferences? Derek, that’s—”
Derek closed the distance between them, turning his body so that they were sitting across from one another rather than side by side. “Stiles, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. I doubt we would even be having this conversation if it wasn’t for the way you refuse to back down to Jackson or how the rain catches on your eyelashes. I’ve never considered what it would be like before Kate, because I hadn’t met you yet!” Derek admitted, doing his best to not look away from the hard honey-colored eyes that were searching his for sincerity. “I’ve been a jerk. I get it if you hate me—”

“Okay,” Stiles said softly.

“—what?” It was Derek’s turn to be taken off guard.

“You can kiss me.”

Thunder boomed in the distance.

“Re—really?” Derek tentatively moved a little closer. He thought about all the things Kate had taught him; what she liked, what she didn’t like, and then he glanced down at Stiles mouth and promptly forgot it all.

Derek placed a hand just under Stiles’ jaw with his fingertips resting on the side of his neck. Stiles didn’t flinch away from the touch, so Derek moved in closer still. He pressed their lips together, the softness was welcoming, so rather than pulling away and ending it there, Derek opened his mouth and was relieved to find Stiles mimicking him. Derek licked Stiles’ bottom lip, and notice the corners of Stiles’ mouth turning upwards to form a smile. Not wanting to let that go, Derek placed his other hand on Stiles’ cheek and turned his head just a fraction of an inch to deepen the kiss. This time his tongue met Stiles’ mid action, it almost tickled and Derek found himself grinning too. Needing to breathe, he backed up some, but not before delivering one last, unexpected peck.

While still holding his face, Derek searched Stiles’ eyes. “Was that, um—okay?” He asked breathily.

Stiles hadn’t moved at all since Derek pulled away, and the stillness was starting to panic him a bit. Did he do something wrong? Kate didn’t like it when Derek used his tongue, preferring he utilize it in other activities. Maybe he did mess up the kiss.
“I’ve never been kissed like that,” Stiles blurted out while moving a hand up to feel his lips while staring unashamedly back at Derek. The area around his mouth was just a shade pinker, probably from Derek’s blossoming stubble. Did he hurt him?

Derek started to panic. But Stiles moved his hands to grasp Derek’s and calmed him.

“It was good, real good.” Stiles reassured. “So tell me, do you think maybe you’re bisexual now or was that a one and done kind of thing?”

Derek smiled at the question, having completely forgotten why they had kissed to begin with.

John caught Melissa around her waist and the momentum spun them both. She was prepared to dart after Derek and Stiles into the storm with nothing more than the light sweater she wore to protect her. John grabbed some rain gear from the stand and suited up instead. “You stay here, you’ve already spent all morning getting poured on, I’ll go after them.” He grabbed a flashlight and darted off.

In the moonlight, he could easily see their shadows. John followed them all the way back to their cabin with every intention of going in there and asking Derek what was wrong. John paused on the steps as Derek’s voice rang out from just behind the door. It was difficult to hear over the rain.

“Why did you help me?” Derek asked Stiles. “I mean, why bring me all the way out here?”

“Seemed like you were trying to get away from them - you certainly were running when you knocked me over.” Stiles replied.

“I’m sorry for knocking you down.” Derek told Stiles and the honesty in his tone made John hesitant.
He listened in long enough to feel assured that neither one was sitting in wet clothing before John turned around to go consult a panicked Melissa.

“We have to go get them! Won’t they will freeze in there?” Melissa was trying and failing to keep her voice down.

“Give them some room to talk, maybe they can fix whatever was breaking between them?” John suggested.

“I’m going after them in an hour!” Melissa conceded.

The next two hours were filled with students complaining about not being close enough to the fire or not being tired enough for bed. It was past curfew and somehow, they needed to fit all of their wards in the cramped space. It wasn’t an easy feat and it didn’t help any that Melissa constantly asked if John was ready to go or her suggesting she would just go herself.

Finally, things had settled enough and John checked with Chris who was manning the radio. Nothing had changed, weather report wise, so he made his way over to an impatient Melissa by the back door.

“Let’s go get our boys!” She said enthusiastically and opened the door to reveal the howling wind on the other side.

Stiles and Derek were both asleep. Together. In the same bed… But at least they were covered by both of their blankets. John wasn’t sure why they hadn’t taken a few of the others’ covers too. The thought was pushed from his mind however when Melissa shined her flashlight on their hands. While the distance between them could have been deemed appropriate aside from the fact they were in the same bunk, their hands were tangled together as one.

That was new.

John frowned. “What do we do? They can’t share a dorm if they’re dating.”
“I’m not giving one of them to another counselor!” Melissa quickly protested.

“I wasn’t saying that, just, we’ll have to come up with a solution…”

“You’ll have to come up with a solution!” Melissa quipped. “This is your fault! If you had just let me go get them an hour ago…” She jested, with a laugh.

“Let’s wake them up. Come on.” John said as he shook their bed.

Derek was jarred awake from the most peaceful dream. Worse, it was to see a slightly amused John and Melissa glaring down at him. To his right, and blissfully unaware of the trouble they were in, was Stiles. Stiles who clung desperately to Derek’s hand.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning.” John informed him as he too glanced to where Stiles was still unwilling to let go.

“Are you okay?” Melissa asked, concerned. “You shouted at Lydia…”

“I’ll apologize,” Derek said quickly. “It was wrong.”

Melissa studied him for a minute but didn’t press any further.

“Okay, let’s wake him up and get you both back to the common room for the rest of the night. It’s freezing in here,” John told Derek. Melissa shot him a look that Derek couldn’t quite place.

“Stiles.” Derek nudged him. “Stiles, wake up.”
“Shhh. Go back to sleep,” Stiles mumbled.

“Wake up.” Derek repeated.

“Quiet, before Melissa finds us!” Stiles said into his pillow.

The roar of laughter from both of the counselors was enough to make Stiles spring up.

“Too late.” Melissa laughed lightly. “Now let’s move, come on, both of you. Let’s go.”

There weren’t many people still awake when Stiles and Derek moved their sleeping bags to the floor by the rest of their group. They knew they were being watched when they rolled out the too-thin fabric and made sure to keep some distance.

That didn’t stop Derek’s hand from finding Stiles’ again thirty minutes later.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

For those of you who’ve read Lone Wolf, you’ll recognize a few of my first original characters! The return, albeit a short one, of Nymeria Beta read by the fabulous fairyfey, check them out here on Ao3 and on tumblr @gayglitterbabe. Thank you!

Episode 10

“They look like a chain gang!” Melissa quipped to John as she came out of the mess hall with a cooler full of water bottles.

“Just learning the value of hard work!” John replied with a smile while accepting the offered beverage. “Storm knocked the fence down, everyone has to pitch in and put it back up.”

“Yeah,” Melissa agreed but her eyes strayed off to a particular pair of her students. “Do you think they took our little talk seriously this morning?”

“I do,” John said as he followed her gaze. “They’re both smart young men. They know the consequences if they mess up. Plus, we won’t earn Stiles’ trust if we don’t show any faith in him…”

“Suppose you’re right about that one. Any luck hearing back from that investor of yours? These repairs are going to add up!” Melissa tried to inject some positivity into the question and winced when she failed.

“Not yet, but the phone lines have only been operational for the past hour, and half of the students’ parents have been calling to check in on them.”
“Only half.” Melissa shook her head. “And that’s part of the problem.”

John shot a questioning gaze up at her. Melissa knew it wasn’t like her to be so pessimistic, but it had been a long night and the more she watched over the common room full of sleeping students, the more she thought about how each and every one of them ended up there in the first place.

She needed some sunshine and some good news, but instead she had to tell two of her boys that they would be pulling extra clean up duty for sneaking out and threatening to separate them permanently if they couldn’t respect the no inappropriate contact rule. It was especially difficult because deep down she felt that Derek might just be the best thing Stiles had going for him and that just maybe, Stiles could get Derek to open up about the loss of his family in turn. Derek was going to need the support too, with his uncle coming up in just a few days.

“Hey, Mel!” John said brightly. “It’ll all work out, it always does. Why don’t you take your group over to the rock wall after lunch? Classes are canceled today, take advantage of it!”

“The grounds are a mess.”

“And we’ll get it straightened up in no time,” John assured her. “Your group’s been helping all morning, go have some fun!”

“So, are you nervous?” Stiles asked. He was walking hand in hand with Derek in a shaded part of the woods on the edge of the school’s boundary. “You haven’t seen your uncle since—?”

“Parents weekend.” Derek told him. “We barely talked.”

“Hem. Well if he’s anything like you, he’s probably just really quiet.” Stiles tried to lighten the mood. “It’d be like you and Boyd in a room together, neither one of you ever says anything. I’m not even sure how you guys became friends to begin with… Did he grunt and then you grunted and that was it, you were like, I’ll take that one as a best friend, please?” Stiles joked.
Derek shrugged. “He’s quiet, I like quiet— you however, are not quiet!” He spun Stiles so his back was against a tree. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you talk as much as you did this morning. If you had put as much effort into getting those stakes in the ground, you would have been able to do more than three,” He joked.

“I did five, thank you!” Stiles replied smugly. “Reserving my energy for round two, later. But let’s back up, if you like quiet and I’m not quiet are you saying you don’t like me? Because you’re awfully close for someone who doesn’t like me.” He added with a challenging smirk.

Derek raised an eyebrow and leaned in further, until his face was mere inches from Stiles’. “I didn’t say I don’t like not quiet, too.”

“Wait wh—” Stiles question was caught off by Derek swooping in for a kiss. Their second kiss.

Despite his pinned predicament, Stiles wasn’t actually expecting that. He wasn’t fully certain of where he stood in Derek’s book. Sure, they had kissed last night and they had kind of ignored everyone else since, but that didn’t mean they were dating, did it? Stiles had never actually had a boyfriend before, so he wasn’t sure how these things worked. Were they dating? That thought froze him completely causing Derek to back up, alarmed.

“Oh, god,” Derek whispered, searching Stiles’ face. “Was that not okay?”

Seeing the panic in Derek’s features was enough to bring the life back to Stiles’. He quickly remembered to breathe and managed to latch on to Derek’s hand before the older teen had a chance to pull further away.

“Just unexpected,” Stiles said in a gentle tone. “I wasn’t sure— I didn’t know how you felt about — everything last night.”

“I— don’t know,” Derek admitted slowly.

“People will talk. They probably already are.” Stiles told him. “I think— you should be sure, before you, umm, do that again.” He looked down, unable to force himself to stare back at Derek’s questioning gaze.

“Yeah.” Derek agreed gruffly. “Sorry.”
“Hey,” Stiles said while giving Derek’s hand a squeeze just to emphasize that he wasn’t letting go. “Nothing to apologize for. This is just new, you know, for me too, I guess.”

Stiles allowed himself to look back up at Derek who still stood across from him. Derek was staring at him with such a fond expression, he couldn’t quite place it but he knew it was up there between admiration and… love? Whatever it was, it was unfamiliar.

“So- the, uh, rock wall?” Stiles forced out.

“Yeah,” Derek agreed quickly. “We should probably head that way.”

Two minutes into their walk and Stiles started asking more questions about Derek’s uncle. What did he do for a living? What side of his family did he come from? Was he as cute as his nephew?

The last one earned a grin from Derek. “I hope not!” He choked out.

The buzz of conversation from their classmates told them they were close and Stiles looked pointedly at Derek before letting his hand go. His palm instantly felt colder.

They were the last to arrive and admittedly a good portion of the conversation died down after they became visible. It certainly seemed like everyone was talking about them. It also appeared that Lydia wasn’t going to be congratulating Stiles anytime soon, too. She shot Derek a piercing look before turning back to Allison and flat out refused to acknowledge either of their presence for the rest of the rock wall climbing exercise. They were out by the man-made climbing device for a couple of hours (Erica took some coaxing, but she did it!) when the bushes rustled behind them.

A beautiful yet damaged creature emerged. It was a grayish-white wolf and probably pregnant by the size of her swollen belly. She had shaggy fur that was rather dirty and even missing in some parts. Her muzzle was scarred too, as if she had been on the receiving end of a claw fight. Which, given her species, she probably had been. The she-wolf circled carefully around the startled group of teens and Melissa, giving them all a wide birth at first. As she moved, the wolf slowly pulled back her lips revealing a row of sharp fangs, threateningly. She served as the perfect metaphor for this particular group of students; broken and yet not down.

“Okay,” Melissa called out to her students calmly. “No one move. Wildlife is just unfamiliar with us, no need to startle it, keep calm. They can sense that.” And while her voice remained even, her
face betrayed just how freaked out she was by the situation.

The wolf acknowledged her for making noise as she spoke but didn’t seem any more interested in investigating the brunette counselor. Instead she paced back and forth on the far side until she made a rather bold move by passing just between Scott and Allison and the latter squeaked. Stiles himself was surprised he was able to breathe, but somehow, he had managed to do not only that but he also kept still as stone right as the wolf pressed up against his pant leg.

“Stiles. Stiles!” Derek’s concerned voice rang out somewhere to his right, but Stiles had actually closed his eyes once the fangs were close enough for him to clearly see red flecks from her last kill on them. He also saw just how much of her coat was marred by scars and cuts.

And then the pressure was gone. Just as quickly as the wolf had decided to mark him with her scent, she was gone. She continued past Stiles to the patch of woods beyond. With a flick of her patchy tail, the forest swallowed her up.

“Oh my god. Oh my god!” Melissa was saying in a shaky voice. “The storm must have pushed her further south. I need to call this in, warn John. Stiles, are you okay?”

“I’m— fine. She didn’t do anything. But, I think she’s hurt.” Stiles told Melissa. “Is that normal wolf behavior?”

“No.” Melissa answered the question. “I’d have to talk to Chris about it to know for sure. But I don’t think so.”

With the wolf sitting so close, Derek and Stiles’ second shift rebuilding the fence was cut short as the counselors didn’t want anyone outside once the sun had started to set. They spent the evening in the common room; Derek listening to Stiles spout off random wolf facts from a book he was reading. With the fireplace still blazing, the room was warm and welcoming. It was… nice.
Three days later, Derek found himself sitting on the front steps of the main office building, waiting for his uncle to arrive. Stiles was with him and even though he wasn’t holding his hand, he did have his body pressed all along Derek’s side. In a way, it was just as comforting. Stiles’ endless questioning also brought with it a welcomed distraction for Derek. And while he was only grunting out single word responses, he knew that Stiles understood.

A tap against his knee made Derek look up. Three black cars turned off the dirt road on to their gravel driveway. The first was his Uncle’s Fairlady Z. It was too low of an undercarriage to take up the mountainous road, but the risk was nothing when Peter was concerned. A chance to downshift around the hairpin turns wouldn’t be passed for anything. The other two were matching Mercedes-Benz sedans with blackout tinted windows.

Derek didn’t have to turn his head to know that the entire campus had stopped what they were doing to spy on the extravagant newcomers. Stiles’ muttered ‘holy shit’ just about covered it. Derek took a deep breath and forced himself to stand.

His uncle stepped out of the sports car and hung his sunglasses on the collar of his white v-neck. He strode up towards the office where Derek was waiting for him as if he owned the place and no less than six business men scrambled behind him, each donning their own extensive pile of paperwork.

“Nephew,” Peter said as way of greeting.

“Uncle Peter,” Derek replied with a mimicked head nod.

Peter’s gaze turned to Stiles. His eyes raked the thin boy up and down landing on his upturned nose and he nodded appreciatively. “Nice. Excellent, actually. I knew this school would be good for you.”

Stiles’ face turned a shade redder just as John opened the office door to join them.

“Ah. Welcome. I’ve cleared out the office, just as you asked, and my schedule. I’d like to accompany Derek, if that’s okay with you,” John said pleasantly enough but his tone held a note of authority; a reminder of just who was in charge here.

Stiles lightly punched Derek in the arm and mouthed ‘good luck’ behind Peter’s shoulder as he descended the steps to make room for the horde of lawyers. Derek felt the loss at his side instantly
and sighed. They had better get this meeting over with.

It turned out Peter’s visit was to inform Derek that after an eighteen-month-long investigation the prosecution is ready to press charges against the ‘degenerate’ that set the fire to his parent’s house. This was news, to say the least, to Derek.

“Arson?” Derek managed to ask once he found his voice again. “It wasn’t an accident?”

How stupid was he to just assume that the fire that cost him so much was purely fate. Something that he or no one else had any control over - it changed everything. His face twisted into anger and he knew tears had formed in the corner of his eyes.

“Who? —Why?” It was taking all of Derek’s self control to not throw a punch at the wall. He realized too late that sometime during this earth shattering news that he had stood up and was pacing. John moved behind him, to place a firm hand on his shoulder. It grounded him.

“I was intent on keeping your name and connection as far away from the defendant as possible. I’m telling you this now because I had my suspicions, and the defense attorney has proven some of them to be true.” Peter continued in the same cold and calculating tone that he had just used when telling Derek that his parents had been murdered.

“What?” Derek was unable to process. Was his uncle implying that he knew the— bastard who did this? He knew the man that killed his mom and dad and— Cora? It couldn’t be possible. He refused to believe it.

“Your teacher Miss Kate Ar—” Peter continued.

“Kate!?” Derek choked up on the word. “What? What about her?”

“She initially claimed you as an alibi, but has since shifted the story towards your blame…” Peter informed him emotionlessly. Derek saw his uncle’s eyes were blazing, however. He may have the cool and calm façade of someone merely spouting out meaningless information, but the emotion - the hurt and rage - was there, lying just under the surface, waiting for the most opportune moment to explode.

“I— I don’t understand, Kate wouldn’t, she couldn’t, she—”
“She was your teacher!” Peter bit out the words with disgust.

John’s hand tightened just a fraction of an inch more.

“She has these letters from you, love letters. We’ve had handwriting analysis done and they authenticated them. She’s claiming you were obsessed with her and from where I’m looking she isn’t wrong.” Peter regained his control as he turned his back to Derek.

“That aside, you were clearly at basketball practice at that time, nothing in your letters indicates a reason for that—woman to do what she did and her excuse is weak; that you were obsessed with her, and she felt sorry for your home-life situation. She’s claiming you begged her to do it, and even if you did, she still lit the match herself.” Peter said the last bit in a low tone, detaching himself from the emotional aspect again.

Derek dropped to his knees.

“She wouldn’t,” He said to the ground more than to his uncle.

The entire time at least one lawyer was writing something, but as Derek opened his mouth to speak, every single one of them fumbled for a pen and notepad and one even held out a recording device. John’s heart went out to the teen. As much as everyone in the room wanted to protect Derek from the legal side of things, not a single one of them, his uncle included, seemed to care at all about the emotional ramifications of delivering this news in such a fashion. On top of that, it would seem Derek had a highly inappropriate crush on an adult, the one who was seemingly responsible for causing him so much pain to begin with.

“She wouldn’t,” Derek repeated to the wooden floorboards. “She—loved me.” He whipped his head up to meet John’s. “She loved me. There is no way Kate would do that— to my family,” He said while battling the tears that were escaping despite his best efforts to stop them.

Peter scoffed.
“Derek,” John said slowly. “Did she tell you she loved you? Did she say those exact words?”
Derek wasn’t much of a talker during their sessions, but he was alarmingly truthful in what he did say. And the way he was almost pleading for John to believe him now, he just knew that this wasn’t a one-sided affair.

“Yes.” Derek practically shouted. “All the time. That’s why I know she wouldn’t have done that—not to me!” He stood back up. “I don’t believe you,” He said to Peter’s back. “You’ve got the wrong person, it wasn’t Kate. Just— just let me talk to her!” He added with a wild look in his eyes. “I need to see her!”

Peter whipped around in a blink of an eye. “No!” He turned to one of the men wearing a business suit. “Would this information help or hinder the case? If it was proven to be true.”

The lawyer thought about it before saying they would have someone analyze the possible outcomes. Peter seemed to be doing that himself as he tilted his head in thought. After a long pause, he turned back to his nephew.

“How involved were the two of you? Hem, or should I say, how can we prove it?” He asked Derek in that calculating voice of his.

“What?” Derek faltered. “What kind of question is that?”

“Derek, how young were you when things started with, um, Kate?” John asked calmly.

Derek froze. “Fourteen,” He mumbled. “But she was twenty-four, and I know that sounds bad, but if she was thirty-four and I was twenty-four, no one would even bat an eye.” He defended, reluctantly. The pen scratches picked up ten-fold.

“Derek,” John said evenly. “If you were both consenting adults it would be different, but at fourteen, you’re not. She’s in a position of power over you. Do you understand the difference?”

Derek shook his head defiantly. “It’s not like that, she loves me! Just let me talk to her, you have the wrong person!” He shouted at Peter.
John and Peter shared a look and for the first time that day, John saw a flicker of concern cross Derek’s uncle’s face. They may have stumbled onto something large.

“She continued to be honest with me,” John said in the same understanding tone. “Were the two of you ever intimate? Or was it strictly a close friendship?” The clarification was necessary, albeit painful.

Derek backed away as if he had been physically attacked by the question. “Why?” He asked slowly. They all could read the truth from his hesitancy.

“We’re adding statutory to the list of charges.” Peter told one of the suits flatly and turned to his nephew. “We may have you testify after all. Over the course of the next week I expect you to fully cooperate with the team here. I want to know every last detail and how exactly your relationship led to murder.” His uncle might as well as just told Derek he blamed him completely.

Derek himself looked like a caged animal as he paced the little bit of the office he was offered. John saw his eyes dart to the window and door several times. This was going to be hell on him. What he needed was emotional support but what he would be receiving was judgmental tones and apparently a cold shoulder from one of the two family members he had left.

John moved in to offer what little support he could provide. In doing so he open up a pathway to the door. Derek didn’t hesitate to burst past him, rattling the wooden frame as the door was slammed shut.

“Let him go,” Peter said icily. “We’ve got to prepare. We’ll resume tomorrow.”

“Mr. Hale.” John rounded on him. “I know you’re angry. But that boy is just that a boy - a kid, who was taken advantage of by a predator, one who he thought he was in love with and you’ve just told him killed his family.” Peter’s eyes harden at the mention. “He needs you. He needs to know that this wasn’t his fault and that he is a victim in all of this too!”

Peter looked murderous at being called out but managed a nod. “Your advice will be taken into consideration.” He said curtly and showed himself the door. The lawyers followed without being asked.

John sighed and went to go look for Derek.
Stiles didn’t go far once Derek and his uncle’s entourage had disappeared behind John’s door. Scott and Jackson saddled up next to him at one point asking about Derek and his wealth, commenting on his uncle’s car. Honestly, Stiles had already forgotten the flashiness of the man due to his growing concern and worry. It was the way Derek was dreading the meeting that kept Stiles a little on edge.

An hour later when Derek burst through the door, Stiles knew he was right to be concerned. He quickly grabbed Derek’s forearm and shoved him in the direction of the closest tree cover. A ten-minute jog and they were completely obscured from prying eyes.

“What happened in there?” Stiles asked once he was sure they weren’t followed. Students wouldn’t go after them, not in the woods. It was still off limits because of the foreign wolf sitting. And apparently, they had moved too quickly to be spotted by any of the counselors.

Derek didn’t respond at first. He continued to pace the dirt path while clenching his fists occasionally. And then—

“I have to get out of here,” He said to Stiles. “You’re like an expert at running, how would you do it? We can go together!” He added brightly.

Stiles mouth suddenly felt like cotton. Run from here? It had to have been bad in there for Derek to even suggest it, but…

“I can’t,” Stiles admitted slowly. “It’s just if I get caught I won’t be sent here again. What happened?”

“They don’t understand.” Derek tried to reason. “They think she did it, but she didn’t. And now they think that just because Kate was older that I didn’t know what I was doing— they’re blaming her!”

“Blaming her for what?” Stiles tried to follow but he was already lost.
“Kate. They think she may have started the fire.”

Stiles sucked in a deep breath.

“And just because she was my teacher they think—“

“Wait. What?” Stiles interrupted. “Your teacher! You came here in the beginning of your sophomore year in high school, right? You told me yourself there was no one before Kate. She took advantage of you.”

“I know it sounds bad, but she loves me! She really does.” Derek pleaded with Stiles to understand.

“No, Derek, she doesn’t.” Stiles backed up a step. “She may have said that, but it’s a game to those people, she manipulated you… Got all up in your head, made you think it was your fault!”

“No.” Derek shook his head. “You don’t understand. I—I love her too. And yes, we had to sneak around but it wouldn’t always be like that, once I went off to college…”

Stiles backed further away.

“It’s just a game to them,” He repeated, more to himself.

“I just— I need to see her!” Derek tried again. “They think she started the fire. But I know she wouldn’t have done that, not to me. It makes no sense.”

Stiles tried to read Derek’s face and it was all eagerness. He meant it. He needed to see this girl that he loved, this teacher, who was delusional enough to fall in love with a freshman.

“The river,” Stiles said in a hollow voice. “I wouldn’t do it, but you could. Take a kayak down the river. Bypass the town here where they will be looking for you and take a bus once you’re able to.” He finished, hating himself for saying it because he knew it was a good plan and not one he’d heard done before.
“Thank you!” Derek leaned towards him. Stiles wasn’t sure if he was intending to hug him or something more, but he turned his head away regardless; sending a clear message that the contact was unwanted.

Derek must have been hurt by the gesture. Stiles knew he would have, had the roles been reversed. He couldn’t bring himself to look.

“Thank you,” Derek said sincerely.

That night Stiles was wide awake when he heard the springs of Derek’s mattress flex under his weight. He felt the pressure of it in his chest. Derek was leaving. He listened to the footsteps shuffle across the floor and thought his world stopped when they halted at the foot of his bed. If Stiles had sat up, if he had said ‘wait’, if he had done anything at all, he was sure Derek’s hesitancy would have swayed him against it. But he didn’t. He laid there, stock-still, barely even breathing, until he was sure Derek wasn’t on the campus anymore.

Derek had one goal in mind. He needed to talk to Kate, needed to hear it from her that she didn’t do it, that she didn’t kill his family and that she wouldn’t do something like that, least of all to him. He needed to see her say the words, and if she faltered for even a second, he was going to kill her himself.

The moon light was enough and Derek made it to the kayaks in no time. He picked the lock and even had the foresight to bring his rain gear because the water was sure to be ice cold. And with a clear goal in mind, he started to paddle away from his home for the last year and a half to return to the only other one he had ever known.

Melissa had missed her morning jog the last couple of days, because the rain had turned the ground
into sludge and mud. Today, however, was different. She tested the earth the night before and
made sure to set her alarm a bit earlier than usual to make up for the impediment in her exercise
routine. She had not, however, expected to find a student out of bed at such early hours as she
stretched and started her warm up.

But there was one sitting on the lake dock, and even at a distance she recognized Stiles. What was
he doing out of bed at four in the morning?

“He ran,” Stiles said simply when Melissa jogged over. He didn’t even turn his head to
acknowledge her. It was almost eerie.

Of course, Melissa knew about Derek and his uncle. It didn’t take much to put two and two
together. She did her best to rein in her anger over the fact that Stiles was just sitting outside and
had not gone to get someone to help.

“When?” Melissa asked as best she could without betraying her frustration. “How?”

“A while ago, maybe midnight? He—he took the river,” Stiles admitted still without turning in her
direction.

“I’m going to tell John and the others. You need to go back to bed,” Melissa informed him.

Stiles didn’t move. “Now. Stiles, I’m not asking.” Melissa ordered. “He has a serious lead on us
and could be hurt. The river at night alone is very dangerous, I don’t have time to argue with you.”
She meant to be factual, but knew her annoyance was obvious.

Stiles got up slowly and disappeared in the direction of the boys’ dormitories and Melissa took off
towards the staff’s.

“You missed lunch and breakfast and uh, we were on dishwashing duties,” Kira said softly. She
looked around before passing Stiles an apple. He was sitting on a picnic table facing the woods
behind the school.
Stiles accepted the fruit but didn’t eat it.

“He’s going to hate me, for telling on him,” He said eventually.

“He might,” Kira agreed. “He might also be really thankful that he didn’t die, you know, if something went wrong.” She added somberly.

“The way he looks at me— no one has ever looked at me like that, not ever…” Stiles admitted.

Kira studied him for a long while. She leaned in and kissed Stiles’ cheek. Just a quick peck, but it was enough to cause Stiles to lose his focus and turn his head.

“You do have other friends, if he’s too stupid to realize what he’s giving up.” She told him sincerely.

“Thanks,” Stiles said after he thought about it.

He opened his mouth to say more, but was interrupted by a soft whine. It sounded like a—puppy?

Kira beat him off the picnic table and to the bushes that obscured the source of the sound. Behind the shrubbery were three tiny wolf pups. They appeared to be freshly born. The image was made complete by the fact that their mother laid on her side. It was the injured wolf from the other day. She was motionless and sort of bloody, as if it had been a difficult labor, but the giveaway that she was no longer alive was her wide and unblinking eyes. They bore up at Stiles in an accusatory fashion.

He said she was hurt. They all knew she was pregnant. And now she was dead, and if they couldn’t figure out how to care for them, her pups were soon to follow.

“They are adorable!” Kira squeaked with delight.

Perhaps she was blind to the giant, bloody figure of death that accompanied them? Stiles didn’t
stop to think about it. He pulled off his outer shirt and scooped all three up into his arms, while doing his best to wrap them up tight to protect from the gust of wind that chilled him.

“We need a vet.”

Derek paddled for hours. He watched the sunrise the morning from inside his kayak and soon it would be well over head marking it midday. And he still wasn’t out of the forest. His stomach growled for the hundredth time. Why hadn’t he thought to bring food?

John told Peter right away. They had told the police as well, as it was protocol in all runaway cases. The school’s best hiking and tracking counselors were out scouring Beacon of Hope’s woods and national forest rangers, looking everywhere further. The fact was Derek was pretty decent in the kayak so there were a lot of possibilities of where he could be.

John was determined to find him.

Melissa called Deaton to come look at the wolf puppies. There were two males; a runt who was almost all black and a brownish-red scraggly little guy. They were outshone in every aspect by their sister. Her markings were the most similar to that of her mother’s as her coat was significantly lighter in color. She was also louder, faster and feistier. Dr. Deaton was lucky the puppy wasn’t born with teeth.

He delivered the grim news with an air of a man who had to do so too many times. “Unfortunately for them it would seem their mother came from an abusive home. Wolves are not native in these
parts, that coupled with the fact that she was pregnant at this time of the year and all of those cuts and scrapes. I’m assuming she was probably part of a breeding program and managed to escape during the big storm.”

“That’s terrible!” Lydia exclaimed.

“It is,” The vet agreed. “But also, the likelihood of her offspring making it without her from such an early age is slim to none.”

“What are you saying?” Isaac questioned worriedly. Coming from an abusive household himself, this had to be hitting a little close to home for the usually quiet teen.

“They’ll require around the clock care. I don’t have time to, myself, but I know of a few sanctuaries. I’ll make some calls, and see if we can get them in, but I’m afraid they may not even make it until then.” Deaton explained.

“They’re not going to make it?” Stiles questioned. He had been holding the white one, because the poor girl would squeal nonstop every time someone else picked her up.

“It will be difficult,” Deaton warned. “Hourly feedings, even through the night.”

“We’re not giving up on them,” Melissa stated matter-of-factly. “Tell us what to do.”

The vet explained in great detail what they needed to do and stressed that it would be highly unlikely all three would make it through the night. Somewhere during his speech, he had to start shouting over the female’s squeaks as Stiles put her down again. He was actually walking away, leaving the common room entirely.

“Stiles!” Scott called after him. “Where are you going?”

“Didn’t you hear him?” Stiles asked as he rounded on them all. “They’re not going to make it!” He added, almost with a hint of hysterics.

“They might!” Lydia tried for optimism.
“No. No way,” Stiles said with a shake of his head. “You guys take care of them, I’m out of here.”

Melissa had half a mind to tell Stiles to stop. Frankly, she hadn’t had much, if any success when it came to talking to him lately and she was starting to fear that their relationship was becoming a dictatorship; she told him to do something and he listened without question. She wasn’t a parent of his and wanted him to question her. She wanted him to form opinions, to argue, to have a mind of his own, so this time she let him go.

It would seem she had a care schedule to organize for three newborn wolf pups, as it were. Melissa told Doctor Deaton to call the sanctuary and that they would do everything in their power to properly care for the adorable trio. Her group jumped at the opportunity, with Lydia taking the lead. They grabbed sleeping bags and prepared a section of the common room for the occasion. Everyone who was scheduled to take feeding shifts through the night were going to have to stay the night there again. Fortunately, the list of willing volunteers was high. Unfortunately, no one could quite get the white puppy to calm down like Stiles could. Anyone who hadn’t signed up for the task left the common room promptly as the little girl’s pitch was just the perfect piercing tone. Melissa even snuck off to take some Tylenol that evening.

Her other worry, Derek’s whereabouts, was also a constant concern. John and Chris had been checking in with her regularly. Derek’s uncle Peter had initially joined the search for his nephew, even going so far as to have his team of lawyers out in to the woods calling his name, in suits and all. But once the day gave way to the darkening sky, Melissa had to argue against them staying out there any longer. Peter was livid. How could they lose his nephew? She couldn’t help but agree, how could they?

Derek paddled his way through the dangerous rapids, somehow successfully, and managed to bank his kayak afterwards. It took all his effort to get out of the boat; his arms were incredibly sore, his head hurt from the lack of food and water throughout the day and he had yet to see the next neighboring town. It was just trees. Trees and trees and trees for miles. He didn’t mean to close his eyes. He was just going to rest for a second, but before he knew it, he was out.

When he woke up it was fully dark again and the river had carried off his kayak. Just great. Derek was literally up a river with a paddle but no boat and he couldn’t help but think that with a boat and no paddle would have been better. He was also without his flashlight as that had been in the back of the kayak as well. What choice did he have? He started walking along the riverbank in what he hoped was the right direction? While carrying the paddle simply for something to keep his hands
busy. It was amazing how attuned to every little noise you become when you’re alone in the forest at night.

John refused to give up. He had tried several ideal banking locations with no luck. Derek wasn’t leaving a trace and that was worrisome. After all, they had recently seen a wolf, what other forms of wildlife were displaced by the storm? There were a million possible scenarios. John had to find Derek fast. Why had he run? Worse, why did Stiles actually encourage him to take the forest path to do so? It was incredibly dangerous and stupid, they had to have known that.

It was well past sun set when John pulled his dirt bike over. He thought he just might have seen something yellow in the water up ahead. The underside of their kayaks were that flashy color. He swallowed hard, preparing himself for what he may find.

It turned out it was indeed their kayak. He pulled it out of the water in hopes of retrieving it later and radioed in to the others his location. There was no sign of Derek in the boat at all. Where was he? Was he hurt and injured up the river somewhere? He kicked off and trailed the stream upwards.

Derek heard the zipping sound of a motorcycle. It sounded close. Did that mean he was finally near a road? That would be a huge relief, maybe he could hitchhike—

The thought was wiped from his mind when a dirt bike headlight disturbed his darkness. It was John, he just knew it when he saw the hunched-shoulder outline of the man who sat on top of the absurdly loud vehicle. A wave of emotions overtook Derek. Relief was prominent, also worry, he had committed a serious infraction, but also, he failed. He didn’t even get close to confronting Kate. He was a pathetic failure…

Derek slumped his shoulders and dropped to the ground.
John sighed with relief as he took in the state of his ward. Derek was tired, hungry and defeated, but he was okay. He was going to be okay and that was all that mattered.

“You should know something,” John said as a way of greeting as he hopped off the bike and placed a hand on Derek’s back. A point of contact. “Kate has been incarcerated since the investigation began. Your uncle’s lawyers are rather good. Her bail was in the millions. No jail would have granted you access.”

John knew why Derek ran. He also knew that running was a serious offense and Derek wasn’t ordered to be there. Peter could and probably would pull him from the program for this, but that was something the three of them could discuss once they were home, fed, and warm.

Derek didn’t get up.

“I can’t force you to return with me,” John continued. “If you’d prefer, I can send the local authorities to pick you up. It’s up to you. Either way, however, you’ll have to face your uncle. You’re going to have to explain yourself. You’re—”

“How could she do that?” Derek’s voice cut across John’s. “She really did… didn’t she? She trapped my mom, my dad, my—little sister in the house and killed them. Burned them all alive!? How…”

John sighed deeply. Dealing with these types of tragedies were never easy. Derek wasn’t going to overcome the guilt he was feeling for his connection to his family’s death anytime soon. The way he found out… no one should have to go through this hardship alone.

“Laura!” Derek whispered his sisters name. “This must be why she doesn’t want—”

“Your sister has fought for your custody.” John interrupted him. “Your uncle’s lawyers are, like I said, very good. But Laura wanted you to know what was going on, she did, but had signed a non-disclosure agreement as part of the court case. Let’s go get something to eat. I’m starving, too.
Stiles couldn’t sleep. He had so much weighing on his mind and they had yet to find Derek. Why did he tell him to use the river? Why did he have to go…to see Kate?

Stiles left his dorm with every intention on heading to the lake dock, as usual, but the common room light was on and caught his attention. That’s right, his group mates were heroically trying to save those damn puppies. As he neared the building the female wolf’s whine became overwhelming. Weren’t they soothing her? She liked to be rubbed on her belly, didn’t they figure that out by now?

He pushed open the oak doors without much thought. Scott was up, talking to the puppies as he fed them with an eye dropper. He was pleading with the white one to be quiet. Allison, Lydia, Isaac, and Melissa were all wrapped up tight in their sleeping bags with pillows over their heads in a failed attempt to block out the cries. It was apparent that none of them were sleeping well.

“Hey.” Scott looked up when Stiles entered.

“What do you want?” Lydia bit out, voice muffled from under her pillow.

“I think he’s here to help,” Isaac muttered as he rolled over.

“Let me see her.” Stiles held out a hand. Scott was all too happy to pass them all over and go back to bed.

Stiles initially soothed them while sitting on the couch in front of the fire but after he told Allison she could skip her turn because he wasn’t tired yet, he wrapped the pups up in his over shirt and took them outside. He needed a minute to walk and they had fallen asleep anyway.

Stiles had no particular destination in mind but when a string of vehicles pulled in, he realized he was waiting to hear back from the search team. Chris and Derek passed by him, both of whom looked equally tired and irritated. They were all heading to the mess hall.
John paused when he saw Stiles was out of bed. He eyed the puppies in his arms with a raised eyebrow.

“We’ve got some dogs?” John asked.

“Wolves, actually,” Stiles replied. “Uh, Melissa’s in the common room. I’ll head back there…”

John nodded.

“Hey.” Stiles paused John’s tired steps towards food. “Thanks for, uh, bringing him back.”

Doctor Deaton came by to check on their youngest wards early the next morning. Melissa greeted him cheerfully enough and led the vet to the common room where a sleep deprived Stiles was still feeding them, this time with Erica’s assistance.

Deaton said they had done a phenomenal job and told them to keep it up until the representative from the wolf rescue could be there that afternoon.

With that taken care of, Melissa asked Stiles to accompany her.

“We have a lot to talk about,” Melissa started. “You missed your kitchen duty yesterday, delayed our rescue and assisted in Derek’s escape. You should know, John never would have looked that far out if you didn’t tell him that he had used the river. I’m not sure of the details yet, but I know they found him last night without his boat. It could have easily ended much worse than it did, so thank you at least for coming clean when you had.”

Stiles didn’t react much to what she was saying but she felt the weight of her words pressing on him.

“We’ll talk more, tonight. I was thinking we can meet at the boat dock after dinner. Have a
counseling session out there, just the two of us.” As they walked she steered them toward the front office where John, Derek, Peter and the lawyers were all currently talking. Peter’s vehicle roared to life as it turned into their parking lot that morning long before anything or anyone else had a chance to.

Melissa didn’t envy that meeting, it had to be intense. But she also knew that aside from facing his uncle and John, Derek needed to talk to Stiles.

Stiles feet slowed as he realized where they were heading. He looked back at Melissa a little fearfully.

“I don’t think he wants to see me,” Stiles admitted lowly.

“You might be surprised,” Melissa assured.

Derek was standing at the top of the steps waiting for them. “Thanks,” He said to Melissa. “They’re, um, still discussing all of the terms of my imprisonment here,” He said lightly to the counselor. “If you want to join them,” He added with a chuckle.

Melissa nodded, knowing they needed a private minute to discuss things. She squeezed Derek’s arm comfortingly as they passed on the steps.

“Sorry,” Stiles said to the ground, more than to Derek.

“For what?” Derek asked genuinely. “Saving my life?” He tilted Stiles’ chin up to look at him as he spoke. “Thank you.”

Melissa watched as the two headed towards a nearby stack of wood that would eventually become a part of their new fence. Well, at least they were talking. And it seemed Peter was going to let Derek stay too. She turned towards John’s office feeling a bit more optimistic about the scene she was to see in there.
Stiles couldn’t remember the last holiday season he had actually enjoyed. That was until he had spent the rest of December and all of January shut up tight in the warm common room with his group mates. Derek was there and despite the hardship with his uncle and his uncle’s lawyers, who always left him reeling, he was surprisingly jovial at times. His over-the-top Christmas birthday celebration from Melissa may have been a part of that.

Melissa, thinking it was best to distract her kids from their bleak realities, turned the holiday and New Years’ time into a world learning experience. They partook in a wide range of culture traditions from all around the globe. Stiles, who admittedly enjoyed learning about different and new things, couldn’t help but thrive when meeting these challenges. All in all, he was starting to feel a sense of security when in the presence of his…friends? A *false* sense of security, his brain reminded him daily.

That nagging doubt didn’t stop him from accidentally smiling when he sat down on the rug in front of Boyd and Erica who clutched a handful of letters in their arms. Derek was in the chair behind him and automatically adjusted so that Stiles had a more comfortable back rest to lean into.

“Mail call!” Erica said brightly.

Stiles had received exactly one letter since joining Beacon of Hope six months ago (from Joe) so he was surprise when Erica tossed a thick envelope at his feet. Sure enough, his name was indeed
It was from the wolf sanctuary. Inside were twenty or so photos of all three of the rescued puppies; bouncing in the snow, tugging on a rope, and even one with them playing underneath a Christmas tree. They had doubled in size in the six weeks since leaving Beacon of Hope. Stiles automatically let out an ‘awe’ sound causing everyone to look at him in concern as they had probably never heard him make such a noise.

He felt his cheeks heat and knew he must be a little red in the face for letting the adorableness overtake his usually hard outer wall. Derek leant over his shoulder and told them all what Stiles was looking at. Isaac timidly saddled up to his side to look them over as well and Scott bluntly asked for a photo to keep. Stiles shared with everyone, even going out of his way to ask Lydia which one she wanted.

Lydia was reading a letter that she had received, several times by the jot of her eyes as they darted up and down the page, before she bothered to look up with a hazed expression. It would seem she had missed the entire exchange and was only falsely playing along as she plastered on a smile and plucked the first photo she could out of Stiles’ outstretched hand.

Despite Lydia’s odd behavior, the afternoon spent fireside was nice, calm, and ordinary. That was until Melissa came over with a lovely couple who were walking hand in hand. Stiles had never seen them before, but most of the others’ recognized the pair. Everyone was staring at the Whittemores with their mouths hanging open. It was no secret that last parents’ weekend Jackson’s mom and dad had gotten into a shouting altercation because each had ordered the other not to come. Instead of spending the two days catching up with their son in turns, they had spent the first three hours ‘talking’ in John’s office and the rest of the weekend causing a scene at the local hotel.

Naturally, everyone was a bit surprised to see how friendly they were acting towards one another now.

“Hi sugar!” Jackson’s mom greeted him with a flappy wave of her hand. Jackson looked confused by the unfamiliar nickname and didn’t react.

“Since we haven’t finalized things yet, rather than have you come home—” Mr. Whittemore started to explain, but Jackson cut him off.

“I know. I’m staying here for my yearly visitation,” Jackson said with gritted teeth.
“Why don’t you show your parents around,” Melissa encouraged.

“You missed the grand tour, last time,” Jackson said in an unimpressed tone to his mother and father. “Think you can manage it today?”

His parents brushed off Jackson’s condescending voice and encircled him in a hug. They truly appeared to be a perfectly normal family, at least for that moment. Jackson called out a goodbye to Lydia over his shoulder and led his mom and dad down the hall towards their classrooms.

Melissa asked for a moment of Lydia’s time to have a word and everyone else rounded on one another.

“What was up with that?” Scott asked.

“My dad said they nearly destroyed John’s office last year.” Allison added with wide uncertain eyes.

“It’s weird,” Boyd agreed.

“People can change,” Erica surmised.

Stiles wasn’t sure what to think.

The Whittemores accompanied them all to a small cliff’s edge the next day where Melissa was teaching the students how to properly repel down a mountain. Erica, in particular, was having some difficulty overcoming her fears. Mrs. Whittemore surprised everyone by offering a second voice of support to help calm and ease the scared girl.

Melissa held the top line tight above her and called out words of encouragement while Jackson’s
mom was on the ground doing the same. As Erica finally reached the soil, she was met with a high five and a shoulder pat from both of Jackson’s parents.

Jackson, having watched all of this from his perch on top of the cliff, pulled Lydia off to the side.

“This is so weird,” He muttered to her. “They were never like this, even when they were together. And they aren’t getting back together, I asked,” He said to her, clearly confused by the situation.

Lydia couldn’t help but feel a stab in her gut at the reminder of the letter she had received from her mother yesterday. She pursed her lips and replied, “At least they’re being well behaved. Why are you complaining about it?” She snapped.

Jackson jumped. “It’s so weird though,” He mused and started to head to Melissa who was calling for him.

Lydia shrugged. “Maybe there’s just love in the air,” She grounded out bitterly with a glance in Derek and Stiles’ direction. They had already gone as well and were congratulating Erica, too. “Just not the air in New York,” She muttered to herself when Jackson had jogged off to get ready to repel next.

Jackson, not wanting to miss out on an opportunity to impress his parents despite his uncertainty in them, set his personal best repel record and had even beaten Boyd’s time for the day.

Feeling a little daring herself, Lydia zipped down the mountainside just as Jackson finished his descent.

“Slow down!” Melissa called to her but Lydia wasn’t listening.

Instead she let go of the tethered rope completely and was free-falling for a second before Melissa could stabilize her with the top line. In doing so Lydia slammed into the rock wall and just happened to hit one of the few jagged formations. She felt the sting instantly on the inside of her upper arm and relished the sensation. Placing her hands back on the rope again, she tightened her grip and felt her muscles pull on the new cut. The pain brought a small smile to her lips.

“Lydia! Lydia! Are you okay?” Melissa called from her position up above.
“I’m fine.” Lydia smiled. “Sorry, just slipped a little.” She offered the feeble excuse lightly.

“I’m going to help you down,” Melissa called. “Go nice and slow. Hand over hand like we practiced. Derek, would you assist her once you’re able to reach?”

Lydia smiled evilly. As soon as she was within reach of Derek she collapsed in on herself, forcing Derek to take all of her weight. He cradled her, like a baby in his arms and tried to put her down once he undid her latch but she complained about a non-existent pain in her ankle and continued to lean on him all while shooting Stiles a smirk. She was surprised to say the least to see concern marring her self-appointed rival’s features rather than the annoyance she had expected.

Melissa grabbed the rope and quickly repelled down the miniature mountain herself, checking on Lydia even though the counselor didn’t have a spotter holding her own top line from above.

“Set her down gently.” Melissa told Derek. “Lydia, I was an RN for twenty years, you’re in good hands. Can you tell me where it hurts?” She asked in a soothing voice.

Lydia quickly denied even her ankle pain as she wanted to keep her sliced up arm to herself. She pinned it to her side and mentally congratulated herself for wearing a darkly colored sweater (black is slimming). Melissa wasn’t having that, however and tested her ability to roll her ankle, before deeming it okay for her to stand and try putting some weight on it.

Allison was really concerned, even offering to go get her old crutches and an ice pack. But twenty minutes after having everyone fawn over her, Lydia was given their counselor’s approval and the group made their way back to the campus to start preparing dinner, as it was their turn to cook.

Each of Jackson’s parents flanked his sides and told him how proud they were of him.

Lydia excused herself to get cleaned up prior to reporting to the kitchens, and she wasn’t even harassed or punished when she ended up being fifteen minutes late. She wore a new sweater, an early birthday present from her grandmother, which hid the evidence of her encounter with the side of the cliff earlier.

Every time she moved her arm above her head to grab the next potato to peel she felt a sense of satisfaction over the soreness she had successfully hidden away.
Day three of the Whittemores’ impressively cordial demeanor was simply too much for Jackson to hope for. His parents had politely bickered as they joined the teens for breakfast that morning. It was the oddest thing because their jabs were increasingly more personal but the more they insulted each other, the closer they sat. Mrs. Whittemore clung on to Mr. Whittemore’s arm to the point where he was wincing while his other hand sat on her shoulder where his fingertips were turning white from the strength of his grip.

Everyone noticed. Stiles couldn’t help it, he shared a glance with Derek whose eyes told him to drop it. Jackson seemed to mimic their growing discord. He went from cheerfully greeting them all to his usual insults within minutes. Stiles was pretty sure it was the first time that year he was called a ‘twink’ but he let the remark slide.

The Whittemores didn’t make it to lunch. An eruption in the hallway told every single one of the students that they had reached their breaking point. They screamed at each other over marital disagreements that spanned their entire relationship. Everyone listened in as Mrs. Whittemore admitted that she would have never put up with her ex as long as she had, had it not been for Jackson. Mr. Whittemore yelled back at her that Jackson was all her fault – that it was her idea to adopt.

“You needed a family remember!” He shouted. “Someone who didn’t have to work long hours into the evening!”

“Yes,” Mrs. Whittemore admitted. “And you still didn’t come home, even to be with your son!”

“His adoption didn’t change my practicing law! Had to pay the bills, still! Didn’t help any that you wanted an American, overseas would have been cheaper.”

“And you would have bailed on your family sooner had he not resembled you!” She accused. “Left me to raise him on my own!”
“You had nannies for that!” Mr. Whittemore contested. “I paid for those too, remember.”

“Oh, I remember! You certainly got your money’s worth; how many ended up on their knees for you?” Jackson’s mom spat out bitterly.

“More than I got from y—” Jackson’s father’s retort was cut short by John and Chris hushing them. It took some persuasion, but they were escorted off to continue their spat in John’s office. Stiles idly wondered if he had the foresight to remove anything breakable this time.

Coach Finstock continued talking about derivatives as if he wasn’t interrupted. Melissa’s call for Jackson to come back echoed down the hall a minute later.

Melissa couldn’t remember a time when she had ever considered canceling a group session. Deep down, however, she knew Jackson would deflect and become obnoxious in front of the others and would benefit more from a one on one. She had hoped to track him down after classes let out for the day, but was disappointed to find he had retreated to Parrish’s boys’ cabin and decided to let him be for the time being. She idly wondered if he would even show up that evening for group.

He didn’t, initially.

Jackson arrived twenty minutes late and high as a kite.

Melissa was momentarily caught off guard and faltered in her speech about learning to accept other people’s differences when Jackson strode in. He sauntered up to the small arm chair that housed Stiles and Kira, only able to fit them both because of their smaller stature, and tried to sit between them. Stiles jumped up, clearly willing to give up his spot if it meant not getting sat on, but the lack of fight seemed to only further Jackson’s discontent.

“What’s the matter, twink?” Jackson called after him with a snigger. “Afraid you wouldn’t be able to resist this?” He flexed a bicep and seemed to distract himself as he felt how solid it was. His face
split into a satisfied grin as he tilted his chin towards Melissa. “Please continue, wouldn’t want to interrupt,” He said in a tone that suggested he was rather kind to consider her.

Melissa gaped at him for half a second before reaching for the walkie on her hip and radioing John to meet them. That was it, she didn’t say anything else about Jackson’s behavior or state of mind. Stiles took the empty spot next to Lydia and Melissa opened her mouth to continue but as she glanced at Stiles something red caught her eye on Lydia’s elbow. Was that blood?

It was. She was wearing a tan long-sleeved shirt and unbeknownst to the wearer, a dark stain had blossomed on the interior of her right sleeve.

Lydia had been known to self-harm in the past but had never failed any of her regular checks since coming to Beacon of Hope. She had even opened up about her experiences both privately and in group. Melissa had thought that was one particular scar of hers that had healed. Now, however, an alarm bell was going off in her head. Had Lydia been duping them all? When did this start? Did it have anything to do with her mother asking her not to come home for visitation next week? Was this even self-mutilation? Maybe Lydia didn’t even know she was cut…

“Lydia,” Melissa stated calmly. “Hold out your arms please.”

The red head snapped her hands close to her chest so quickly that it startled Stiles to her right. He gave her a confused look, but in doing so she smeared the crimson liquid across her torso and dawning realization hit the entire group.

Melissa stayed calm but she also knew that that had to be a decent sized cut to produce the amount of blood she was seeing. Fortunately, that’s when John walked in, his smile falling when he followed everyone’s eyes to Lydia.

“This isn’t going to go away,” John told her in a steady voice. “Let’s see your arm and talk about it.”

“I’m fine!” Lydia snapped out Stiles’ favorite line so quickly, that Melissa looked between them both. She gestured for Stiles to move aside and both John and Melissa cautiously knelt down in front of Lydia.

“You are not fine,” Melissa said in a clear voice. “This is not fine. Let’s get you to the clinic and cleaned up.”
Lydia was crying now. Silent and pretty tears, something Melissa had never managed to do herself.

It took some coaxing, but John eventually got her to her feet.

“Want me to take over here?” He asked.

“No, group’s canceled,” Melissa called out to them all, causing John to look confused.

“Jackson needs a drug test and detox,” She said flatly. “That’s why I paged you, originally.”

Jackson was staring at Lydia with just as much concern as everyone else and seemed to have momentarily forgotten his chemically induced giddiness.

“Some group session you’re running here, today,” John jokingly whispered with raised eyebrows before rounding on Jackson who stood and seemed ready to go willingly.

Melissa shot John an exasperated look. There was no room for humor in this situation.

She turned to everyone else. “If you need a counselor tonight, go to Marin. I’ll let her know she’s in charge for the evening, otherwise, please, please be on your best behavior. And Scott, Isaac, when you talk with Allison tell her that I’ll need to speak with her soon.” She paused near the doorway. “Girls dorm will need to be searched before I can let you back in there, too.” She added to Erica and Kira. Both of whom frowned.

While Stiles had not witnessed the staff come together in such a crisis before, they certainly acted like a well-oiled machine when dealing with these particular issues. Not only was Melissa’s girls dorm searched by several counselors, but her and Parrish’s boys dorm were scoured too. They found nothing; not the tools Lydia used to injure herself and not the source of Jackson’s substance abuse.
Both students were being kept in the clinic under watchful eyes in the time being.

Stiles took advantage of the lack of supervision and joined most of the rest of his group mates in the common room playing board games. No one mentioned the reason for the change in their scheduled activity. It was like they all needed a moment to step back from the drama to process it. Instead the mood was light and surprisingly fun. Derek made ridiculous trades with him in Monopoly which gave Stiles the edge and ultimately secured his victory. Marin even allowed them to stay up late to finish the game, shocking them all.

Stiles wasn’t sure why he had trouble falling asleep that night. It was a good day for him, even if it was a horrible one for Lydia and Jackson. But something nagged at him until well past the time it took for the rest of the dorm’s resident’s breaths to even out. He sat up and looked across the room to Derek’s peaceful face. Stiles allowed himself to examine the features and declared the older teen perfect.

Derek had been going through so much lately. He had days where he pushed everyone around away from him, Stiles included, as he writhed in pain and guilt over the cause of his family’s death. Then there were times (like this evening) where he had been practically smiling, if only with his eyebrows. And sometimes he had days where opening up and talking about it seemed essential and therapeutic. Admittedly, Stiles enjoyed those times where the two of them would escape off into the woods and chat. He still wasn’t sure where they were dating-wise, but they were definitely more than just friends even if they hadn’t moved past lingering touches and hand holding since that second kiss.

There was a mutual respect between them. The wounds were still raw for both, even though Stiles’ were buried deep. And it would seem that for the time being they were balancing delicately on the verge of something more, but not quite ready to make that leap. It was a good place to be, it gave Stiles something to look forward to.

By all accounts, he should have fallen asleep in excited anticipation of the future. Instead, however, he thought about Jackson’s parents blowing up on each other in the hallway. Stiles liked them. He thought they were kind of cooky in an adorable sort of way and couldn’t begin to relate them to the monstrosities Jackson would talk about during group. Why did they put on such a show? Did they really think they could fake it for Jackson’s benefit? It was painfully obvious that all Jackson wanted was parents that cared about him, whether that be divorced parents or not. They just didn’t seem to get it…

And Lydia. Did she really cut her arm? Why? Why would seemingly perfect Lydia do that to herself?

Stiles peered through his window at the nearly full moon. It was rather bright that evening because
the sky was so clear. He just couldn’t resist not taking a walk of the grounds to the lake and back.

Lydia sat still and silent on the gurney in the clinic. She ignored question after question as Melissa and eventually John tried to get to the bottom of her injury. After an hour, the pair gave up any pretense of a conversation as they explained what actions would be taken next.

Her parents were to be informed. They could possibly request a meeting to discuss further action from there including taking Lydia home or sending her to a different facility. If Lydia was granted permission to stay at Beacon of Hope, she would have to pass a psychological evaluation to determine if she posed a risk to herself or others. She would be given more, maybe even daily, self-harm checks to prevent this from happening again. Basically, her opinion was a moot point now and her future laid in the hands of many others but certainly not herself.

Lydia couldn’t bring herself to care. Her parents probably wouldn’t either. Apparently, her father was in some legal trouble and possibly would be facing jail time as a result of embezzlement. Her mom, always sensing the danger and complying with her personal rule to stay as far away from it as possible, decided that a quick divorce was in order.

According to the letter Lydia’s mother sent her, she was granted full custody of Lydia and the majority of her father’s investments. As a result of this tumultuous time, Lydia’s mom had requested that she stay at her school for now, meaning she would miss her yearly visit home. Which happened to land on the same week as her birthday.

What bothered Lydia the most about the whole situation wasn’t that she had spent months planning the occasion from afar (quite a difficult task) or even the fact that she wasn’t going home. She was livid that all of these decisions about her parents and herself were made without so much as a consultation but even that wasn’t the worst thing written in her mother’s letter.

It was what was missing that had her feeling like she might as well just give up. Lydia had reread that letter a hundred times since its arrival. Not once in it did her mom say she loved her. There was no well wishes for her birthday. It was cold, devoid of feeling and any emotional support for all the negativity that it brought with it.

Lydia was to live under her mother’s care. The woman who thought a quick letter would be a fine way to inform her daughter of all these life changes. She just couldn’t take it anymore. And
frankly, the possibility of being sent home to that mansion, to have to endure living in its incredible emptiness was just too much.

Melissa assigned a senior female student to sleep in the clinic with Lydia. It was protocol in these situations that she not be left unattended at any time.

So Lydia waited. She waited until she knew her babysitter was asleep. She waited until Jackson and his watchdog were passed out in the neighboring room as well. Lydia waited and waited with her eyes closed and without so much as making a peep. Then she crept quietly out the door, snuck into her dorm to grab her cash and a jacket, and made her way towards the driveway without so much as a glance behind her.

Stiles was just about to head back to his cabin when he saw a shadow move out of the corner of his eye. Someone was up, and the chances that it was a staff member were high; creeping back to the boys’ dorm now would probably only get him caught.

Except the shadow was moving closer and at an alarming speed for someone who was simply making sure all the students were in bed. But, if it wasn’t a counselor, then it must be a student. Maybe it was a newbie in another group, someone foolish enough to make a run for it?

Stiles tried for stealth as he moved behind the gazebo in an attempt to cut the runner off. He stumbled on the wooden steps, stubbing his toe in the process.

“Stiles?” Lydia’s voice rang out clear and out of place under the night’s sky.

“Lydia!?”

To Be Continued
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Edited by my wonderful beta reader: fairyfey They are awesome please support their works here on Ao3 and on tumblr @ gayglitterbabe

Super long note that has nothing to do with this chapter, so please feel free to skip and ignore:

Firstly a big thank you to: QuillMe, EndgameSterekorBust, NikoPerri101, Dont_break_my_little_fangirl_heart, master_girl, Karma, Fryes, RosieRhino, jtelford, 3DBABE1999, and devoidcolourstiles

All of you have encouraged the making of this chapter, currently my inbox has 37 messages in it, I do plan on going through them all and I’m sorry for the neglect!

Also, sorry for the delay, hopefully the length makes up for it??

If I haven’t mentioned it lately (or at all) I work for a video game company. My goal, once it became apparent this wouldn’t be done by April as originally planned, was to finish before E3, well, that didn’t happen and I’m just throwing this out there but I’m pretty damn busy work-wise for like the rest of the year...

With that said I definitely will continue and finish this and would like to promise biweekly updates, but well we’ve proven that my word is worthless. All I can say is I’m very much so still an active member of this community (just donated again) and definitely will finish, I will also finish One Mistake once this is done, promise.

After that, however, I’m not going to post until a story is complete. That goal not applying to the pack reads fanfic series as each of those are complete stories and that series is practically endless...

Thanks for reading my rant! Thanks for sticking with my slow updates, thanks for the kudos and comments that it looks like I’m ignoring, but I swear I’m not!!

And enjoy!

Previously

Stiles was just about to head back to his cabin when he saw a shadow move out of the corner of his eye. Someone was up, and the chances that it was a staff member were high; creeping back to the boys’ dorm now would probably only get him caught.
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“Lydia!”

Episode 12

“What are you—” Stiles started to ask, but Lydia’s patience was already depleted.

“Go back to bed!” She snapped as she turned back towards the road.

Stiles was stunned for a moment before he caught back up with her.

“Where do you think you are going?” He tried his best to keep his voice down and tone civil, despite her attitude.

“ Doesn’t matter, anywhere —visit my dad maybe. Now go!”
Somewhere in the distance an owl hooted and jarred Stiles back into action. Lydia’s quick steps were taking her further from the school by the minute. The redhead was clearly able to walk and talk and had no intention on slowing down for a stunned Stiles.

“Now go back to bed and try not to tattle on me like you did Derek,” She ordered, as if it was final.

Stiles jogged up to her. “Think about this! What are you going to do for money? You’re just going to get caught and be in worse trouble, or…”

“Or what?” Lydia finally stilled her steps now that she had made it past the gravel and onto the actual road. “Wind up selling myself to the highest bidder, like you?” She laughed hysterically. “I have money, Stiles. I have credit cards! Now leave me alone.”

Stiles turned around and was surprised by the distance they had already covered. He doubted that anyone would hear them now even if they weren’t using hushed tones. Lydia, meanwhile, kept walking.

“So, what? You plan on calling a cab?” Stiles probed. “You suddenly have a cell phone too?”

Lydia sighed. “Just leave me alone.”

“No. No way,” Stiles refuted. “Absolutely not. You have no idea what you’re doing and you’re being rash. Some stranger could just pick you up!”

“Isn’t that the point?” Lydia asked bitterly. “I don’t need your help, just go!” They were far enough down the road now that she didn’t mind shouting the last word.

Stiles thought about it. Maybe he could jog back to Beacon of Hope and wake John and Melissa and get them to go after Lydia before she actually did something stupid like get into a car with a stranger. They were pretty isolated, it’s not like too many cars crossed this mountain pass. Except that’s when twin pinpricks of light appeared in the distance. Fuck.

Lydia picked up her pace.

“I’m leaving, Stiles, one way or another, I’m out of here.” She spoke in a deadly voice. “Now get
off the road, I don’t want you scaring my first ride.”

Stiles flinched at her words but ignored the request anyway. The headlights were getting larger.

“Whatever you’re running from, whatever you think this will achieve, it won’t, and you might not get a second chance,” Stiles warned with a faraway look in his eyes as he was unable to keep the memory of his first night without a roof from flooding his thoughts.

“I don’t need your advice,” Lydia said coolly.

Stiles continued his pleas. Lydia ignored him and waved her arms as she stood in the center of the road. The headlights multiplied as they approached because they belonged to a large semi-truck. The truck, thankfully, must have spotted the teens standing in the middle of the intersection as it slid to a stop smoothly, without running them over.

Lydia boldly sauntered right up to the driver’s side door with Stiles still spluttering reasons why this was a bad idea as he trailed behind her. The driver cautiously rolled his window down.

“I could have hit you both. It’s two in the morning!” The man said in a thick southern accent.

He was younger than Stiles expected; dark hair, dark eyes, and despite his complaint he wore a large toothy grin. It wasn’t necessarily predatory, but jovial enough to suggest that this interruption in his drive was a welcomed break amongst the mundanity.

Lydia flicked a warning glare over her shoulder at Stiles who was spouting off that they were students and that the driver should just ignore them.

“Hi,” she said sweetly. “I’ll give you a hundred bucks to take me wherever you’re going.”

The man smiled wider.

“Heading home to Tennessee, ma’am,” He replied in the same southern twang. “May I ask why you are on the lamb? Is that man bothering you?” He added with a glance to Stiles who unlike Lydia was dressed in his sleepwear and oversized hoodie still.
Lydia looked behind her and weighed her options with a tilt of her head. “Noooo.” She drew out the word. “A hundred and forty if you take us both.”

“Lydia, I—I can’t.” Stiles quickly stepped back as if being in her arms’ reach was going to ensure his captivity in the cab of the truck.

“Suit yourself,” Lydia started as she walked around to the passenger side. “I’m leaving, if you’ll have me along for the ride?” She added in an almost playful tone to the driver.

“Name’s Ern, Ernie Carmichael. You’re welcome to join me. You both are!” He said to Stiles. “Gets lonely, driving eighteen hours a day.”

“Lydia, stop!” Stiles shouted as Lydia nodded once and crossed in the beam of the headlights.

Stiles went to grab her, but made the mistake of clutching her injured upper arm. Lydia hissed in pain and Stiles retracted his hand as if the cut had stung him in turn.

“Sorry,” Stiles quickly spat out, but as soon as Lydia was free from his grasp, she was opening the door.

“What will it be?” Lydia barked down at Stiles as she stood on the trucks riser. “Are you staying here, or are you going to finally be free?”

The mix of emotions stirred by those words were practically overwhelming. Lydia refrained from rolling her eyes but a delicate brow raise clearly showed her disappointment in him as Stiles had yet to move.

“Bye, I guess,” Lydia said a little softer as she sat down.

Ern shook her hand before mentioning that he was on a timed schedule to Stiles.

Stiles glanced back at where he knew Beacon of Hope laid, just behind the trees and down the dirt
path. Should he get into the truck? How could he not? Lydia was going to get herself killed, but then again, if he left, if he ran away and was caught… The judge told him, if he was to run again it would be a stint in juvie and then house-arrest until he turned eighteen. Stuck in four walls with Simon and a monitor that tracked his movement should he attempt to escape again, until the day if his eighteenth birthday. He doubted he’d survive.

“Stiles!” Lydia snapped again. “If you’re not coming with us, then get off the road!”

It was an out of body experience. Stiles felt like he was witnessing himself step on the riser rather than physically conduct the action itself. He saw his arm pull his body up and into the cab on the bench seat beside Lydia. He watched his other hand grab the door and swing it shut. The door lock clicked softly, sealing his fate. The sound could have been a blaring horn however, for all Stiles knew, as it muted out everything around him for a brief moment while he excepted his actions.

Stiles was sitting on the worn-down leather of some random trucker’s cab next to Lydia in the middle of the night. And no one knew. It would be hours before they were discovered missing… What would Derek think?

“Buckle up!” Ernie warned lightly.

Stiles craned his neck around to stare at the trees he knew hid the school from the highway. It was already half a mile behind them.

Stiles refused to close his eyes. Lydia chatted merrily enough with Ernie for about an hour before allowing herself to succumb to sleep. But Stiles couldn’t trust the truck driver to keep his hands off Lydia, so he stubbornly fought the exhaustion that was quickly overwhelming him. The results meant that when the trio pulled into a large gas station that offered an attached diner for a quick breakfast ten hours later, he wasn’t on his mental game.

Stiles didn’t notice Lydia proudly offer to treat them all as she reached for her small zipper bag and pulled out a couple of twenties. He didn’t catch the look of greed that overcame Ernie’s face when Lydia tucked the little bag on the floor in front of her seat as they exited, either.

When the three of them found themselves sipping on surprisingly good coffee in the public albeit dingy setting, Stiles finally allowed himself a moment to close his eyes. Just a small bit of rest with
his head on the table. It was quiet in the restaurant, enough people to create a monotone of background noise, but not too much that they actually disturbed his sleep.

The coffee was warm too. That was Stiles’ last thought before he was being roughly shaken awake by a somewhat panicked looking Lydia.

“Stiles, Stiles, hey, I need you to go check the restroom. Ernie’s been gone for a while and both of your meals are getting cold.” She informed him, although she did at least look a little regretful at having to disturb his slumber.

Stiles noticed that her plate of fruit and toast was already, surprisingly, mostly eaten. His own meal, an over-stuffed omelet and fried potatoes covered in cheese, was cold to the touch. Even his coffee was room temperature now. How long had he been asleep?

“He went to the bathroom almost thirty minutes ago,” Lydia told him as if she had read his thoughts.

Stiles blinked a few times, pushing aside his nightmare which turned out to be a reality. He was once again a runaway and this time with Lydia Martin, of all people. He let her words wash over him. Thirty minutes? That did seem way too long. He cracked his neck and slid out of the booth. Most of the other patrons didn’t stare at him in his hoodie and sleep pants, but he felt self-conscious all the same. Their server eyed him suspiciously, but didn’t say anything as he walked past.

The bathroom was empty. Stiles checked every stall just to be certain. Before returning to the booth in the diner, he figured he might as well go check the parking lot to confirm his suspicion. The extra long spaces currently housed three semi-trucks, but none were the one that they had arrived in. Ernie was gone.

Stiles wasn’t even surprised. What respectable man would want to be seen with two obviously underage teens. He was impressed that Ernie hadn’t kicked them out of the cab ages ago, honestly. He just hoped that Lydia hadn’t already paid him the full hundred and forty yet.

Figuring he might as well quickly pull off the bandaid, so to speak, Stiles returned to an anxious Lydia.

“So?” She prompted. “Was he in there?”
“Uh, no. He’s gone, trucks gone,” Stiles told her. It really shouldn’t be a surprise to the red head, but he suspected Lydia truly didn’t know what she had gotten herself into.

That fact was confirmed when Lydia became three shades paler. “Wh— What?” She stammered. “Go— gone?”

“Yeah, you can’t really blame the guy, it’s sorta risky, helping runaways,” Stiles whispered. “We can always call John, you’d probably be welcomed back—”

“My—my money!” Lydia screeched. “He took my money!”

Stiles’ eyes grew wide. “All of it?” He asked slowly, trying to wrap his brain around the new reality. He had never dined and dashed before, even at his most desperate, as it was an easy way to get sent back home, but they already had two and a half decent sized plates of food sitting before them…

“No, I have sixty dollars, sixty, that’s it!” Lydia said shakily. “After this it won’t be much!” She added gesturing to their breakfast. “I am so stupid!”

Stiles wasn’t going to agree, but couldn’t bring himself to admonish the claim either. He tried to rein in his anger over the entire situation. “Okay, you can still call John and—”

“No.” Lydia quickly denied that option. “I can’t, I can’t go back there. I don’t want my mom to take me home.”

Despite the emotions coursing through him Stiles related only too well with that thought. He understood even if he didn’t know the reasoning. But still, Lydia had no idea how to live on the streets and neither one of them even knew where they were. His earlier plan of dining and dashing crossed his mind again. What were they going to do now?
Melissa was livid. How could Stiles and Lydia run? Why did they run? Stiles didn’t even go with Derek back in December, why would he leave now? And Lydia…

Melissa knew she was hurting over her parents’ divorce and she suspected that the student was feeling a little neglected as her mother had opted for her not to come home for her annual visit. When Melissa spoke to Mrs. Martin, it had certainly seemed like a tumultuous time and she understood the lady’s reasoning, and Lydia was rather understanding. But then again, as soon as Melissa saw the deep and untreated cut on Lydia’s arm, she suspected it stemmed from all the changes her mother had recently informed her of.

That aside, Lydia wasn’t a runner. She wouldn’t last well on the streets as she had always been so sheltered. But Stiles was, which is probably why he went with her, but what could Lydia have possibly said to make Stiles leave now? The whole situation left Melissa reeling.

The counselor was angry, that was true, but it was her worry that had her pacing John’s office waiting to hear back from the local authorities. Anything could happen to those kids, her kids. The need to wrap them up tightly in a hug was overwhelming. She hated not knowing if they were warm and safe.

Lydia couldn’t do it; leave the restaurant without paying. So now she had a little over twenty dollars to her name as both she and Stiles walked down the highway in the direction of the local town. Stiles insisted that they take Ernie’s wasted plate of food with them and fortunately the diner gave them drinks to go as well. It was all they had; a few Styrofoam containers and some change. Lydia had never had such a light pocket.

The server had given them an estimated number of miles they would be walking. It was a high number and one Lydia didn’t care to dwell on. How could she be so stupid? Stiles was right. She couldn’t hack it on the streets, she didn’t know what she was doing! The entire situation was just awful; her mom, her dad, their divorce, the embezzlement, the fact that she was turning sixteen in a few days and would do so on the side of the road with just Stiles for company…

Stiles didn’t talk. It seemed like he wanted to at times, but he always held himself back, probably from berating Lydia as she had gotten them both into this mess in the first place. Lydia still wasn’t sure why he had decided to come with her, but she was extremely thankful he had, if only so she wasn’t alone.
As the day grew longer, Lydia’s feet hurt, and she felt the chill of the wind. She knew Stiles must be miserable too with just cotton protecting him from the gust. Her drink had long since emptied and now a parched feeling in her throat was added to the lists of complaints.

Derek sat with the rest of his group mates in the common room, sans Jackson, Lydia, and Stiles, while John stood over them asking repeatedly for any information they might have about where the two teens could have disappeared to. No one knew anything. Allison was in tears and insisted that Lydia had never so much as talked about running away before. Jackson must have already been questioned in the clinic, because Melissa hinted that it was suggested that Stiles was behind their disappearance, but no one else had any evidence to support that theory. Derek didn’t believe it.

Stiles refused to leave with him just six weeks ago. Why would he go now? And with Lydia!? They hated each other. It just didn’t make sense. That fact was brought up multiple times and each reminder only left John and Melissa looking as confused as Derek felt.

The counselors had already contacted the local authorities as well as Lydia’s mom and Stiles’ stepdad. It was rumored that the conversations didn’t go well and one of them left Melissa in tears.

Derek was so lost in thought as he replayed his morning that he hadn’t even realized that John had dismissed them.

“Do you think Lydia finally snapped and killed him or something?” Scott jokingly asked. “Maybe she’s in the woods hiding the body…” He added the disturbing thought with wide, unsure eyes.

Allison sobbed louder at the remark and Isaac sent his friend a glare as he hastily escorted her from the room.

“I can’t imagine how she would have convinced Stiles to help her run away though,” Kira said thoughtfully. “She complained about him all the time— like all the time!”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure they weren’t friends, even if they’ve been civil to each other lately,” Erica agreed.
“You okay man?” Boyd asked Derek genuinely.

Derek didn’t really have a response. He wasn’t sure how he felt just yet, other than shocked. When Stiles’ bed was empty that morning, he’d assumed the younger teen was simply already in the mess hall. And when Stiles wasn’t there, he figured he might have had a meeting with Melissa or John or something.

The fact that he had ran away didn’t even cross his mind as a possibility until it was reported that Lydia was missing from the clinic. The entire school’s staff was searching for her, and that’s when Derek thought to ask the others if they had seen Stiles at all that morning. When no one had, he told the first teacher he saw, Allison’s dad, who had then radioed Melissa. Ten minutes later the emergency bell sounded for the second time in Derek’s memory and the counselors had to take roll call. The campus search was now extended for two missing students…

Derek felt numb at the realization. He could see why Lydia would ask Stiles to go with her, if she was thinking about running away. After all, Derek asked Stiles to accompany him… And as Lydia was confined to the clinic and possibly facing serious repercussions for self-harming, he even understood why she left in the middle of the night. Derek just couldn’t fathom a reasonable excuse for Stiles to go with her. And even now, hours later, he was still unable to comprehend it. And maybe a part of him, deep down, was mad at Stiles’ decision. Why would his—friend go with Lydia, who he didn’t even like?

Derek looked up at Boyd who seemed to understand that his silence was his answer and was grateful that he didn’t have to find a way to voice all his thoughts at least.

Finally. Finally! Lydia saw buildings just as the sun had started to set. It looked like a decent sized town that happened to have train tracks running through it. Something that Stiles told her was a good thing. She didn’t really care, because even better than the buildings - mostly old warehouses and run-downed store fronts (they must be in the business side of town), was the fact that she saw teens, or young adults, lots of them walking around and talking with each other, some of which carried their own Styrofoam cups, meaning that somewhere around here she could purchase a drink! At least one of her needs would be sated soon.

Lydia wasn’t even paying attention to Stiles’ protests as she found a little coffee shop and ran
inside to buy a bottle of unsweetened tea. His angry yells were a lot more difficult to ignore once she had stepped back outside from the café, however.

“What are you doing?” Stiles glared at her. He quickly lowered his voice as he eyed a nearby group of guys whose attention they had caught. “You barely have any money left! You can’t just spend it frivolously!” Stiles continued. “You need to be smarter about this.”

Lydia rolled her eyes. “This was the cheapest item in there, and I was thirsty! Do you want some?” She asked, holding the bottle out.

Stiles bristled and he looked at the offered beverage longingly. “No, I don’t want any!” He bit out. “I’m sure if we find a big enough store there will be water fountains, and that’s free.”

Lydia pursed her lips. “Suit yourself,” she said as she took an over exaggerated sip.

“’Scuse me,” a stranger said. It was one of the guys that had been listening in to their conversation. He wore dark-wash jeans and a white button up. “Is this guy bothering you?” He asked Lydia.

Lydia looked between the group of handsome young men, all suitably well dressed, and Stiles in his pajama bottoms and thin cotton sweater. “No, ah, I’m fine, thank you,” she stuttered out eventually.

“Come on,” Stiles said as he reached for Lydia’s hand. “We were just going,” He informed the strangers.

Stiles and Lydia only made it a few paces when two of the four guys stepped in front of them. The others came up behind, effectively circling the runaways.

“She doesn’t look like she wants to go with you,” the white-shirt man said. “Do you sweetheart?”

Lydia darted her eyes between all of them and instinctively moved closer to Stiles. She found herself wishing she had taken Derek or Jackson, or hell even Boyd with her instead of the smallest male she knew, but her doubts didn’t stop Stiles from standing protectively in front of her.
“Look man,” Stiles said as he squeezed Lydia’s wrist reassuringly. “We don’t want any trouble, we’re just passing through.”

“No trouble?” The man in a navy collared-shirt asked as he stepped closer. “It looks to me like you are the trouble. That’s a beautiful young woman you have behind you and she can make her own choices, isn’t that right honey?” He asked over Stiles’ shoulder, looking Lydia in the eyes.

Lydia was panicking internally and hoped that none of that showed on her face as she fought to keep her expression confident, but she also failed to answer and the hesitancy was all the strangers needed to continue.

“You know what I think?” White-shirt guy said to his friend. “I think what we have here is a gorgeous girl who wants to come out and party, perhaps join us at the club down on fifth? And her little brother here, is trying to stop her from having a good time?”

Stiles jaw dropped open for a second before he snapped it shut and looked up at the man in front of him, challengingly. “Just let us be. Neither one of us want to party.”

The man in the navy shirt grabbed Stiles’ upper arms so suddenly Lydia wasn’t sure when it happened, but Stiles had let her go as he was spun to the outer circle of the young adults that now surrounded Lydia. “We’ll let you be, little brother, but sis is going to party!”

Stiles attempted to dart between the two men that separated him from Lydia but one snatched the back of his hoodie.

“I’m not going to tell you again,” the man said as he shoved Stiles to the ground, hard.

“It’s—it’s my birthday!” Lydia squeaked out. “Ne-next week. Maybe just let us go and—”

“Your birthday, Angel?” The guy in the white shirt asked. “Well then, even more reason to celebrate.”

Lydia felt herself nodding slowly out of fear more than anything.
“Let’s get you a drink!”

“A birthday shot!”

“Lydia!” Stiles yelled from the floor. “Don’t go with them!”

“You can pick her up on the corner of Fifth and Main.” Lydia heard one of the guys call from behind her. When did she get that far from Stiles? “We’ll meet you in front of the club at two.” He added with a crackling laugh.

Lydia tried to spin around to look for Stiles, but the guys she was with were doing an incredibly good job of ushering her forward.

“So, Lydia is your name?” The white-shirt man asked. “That’s beautiful—fitting of you,” he added as the hand on her shoulder moved up to stroke her red hair affectionately. “How old are you turning?”

Lydia didn’t answer, she was too scared.

“Oh, come on, we’re going to have a good time. Let me just buy you a drink or two, this club is eighteen and up, but we can get you in, have you ever been? They do lots of line dances—girls like that sort of thing.” Lydia searched the guy with her large eyes. He sounded genuine, but she still didn’t trust him. “Have a good time for your birthday and don’t worry we’ll make sure you get home before your parents find out you snuck out…” He added in a whisper to her ear. The action caused her to shudder.

“We won’t make you do anything you don’t want to, promise.” One of the guys who had yet to speak told her. He did look a little bit younger than the others and Lydia felt like maybe that one was telling her the truth.

“Is it even ten yet?” The guy in the navy shirt asked as he caught up with them.

“It will be by the time we get there.” The white-shirt man said. “This is Lydia, and I’ve promised her a good time for her birthday, is your cousin working the door?”
The man in the navy shirt smirked at her. “He’ll let us in, don’t worry.”

Stiles wasn’t about to let being knocked to the ground stop him. He got up and darted under the asshole in the navy shirt effectively, but the bastard grabbed his hoodie again.

“Stop trying to be a hero, kid,” He sneered in Stiles’ face.

It didn’t work. Stiles struggled to break free from the grasp, effectively elbowing the man in his sternum. Navy shirt didn’t take too kindly to that and spun Stiles around to face him just so he could land a punch on its intended target. Stiles stumbled back from the force of the impact he took to his gut, but that was the man’s left hand. The real heavy-hitter got him a moment later; four knuckles to the side of his jaw, splitting Stiles’ lip.

The commotion was starting to attract further attention.

“Stay away from my girl!” The guy shouted as he darted out of Stiles’ range in an attempt to avoid retaliation.

The words did their job and the passerby’s looks of concern for Stiles morphed into disgust.

Stiles wasn’t going to let it go there, however, and he dashed forward, but an older couple stopped him from pursuing.

“Sir, you’re bleeding,” the lady said. “Perhaps you should just let this one go, there’s other fish in the sea, trust me.”

Stiles wanted so badly to roll his eyes at the lady’s misguided judgment but chose rather to ask where Fifth Street was. The guy in the navy shirt was already rounding the corner.
The club had a small line forming whilst other patrons were immediately let inside. Stiles couldn’t find Lydia amongst the crowd, but he did spot a group of girls who were complaining about their friend taking the pre-party concept too literally. Fortunately said friend was making quite a fool of herself as she danced to nonexistent music and was violently hitting the chain linked fence with her oversized purse and attracting everyone’s attention. Stiles took the opportunity to approach the bouncer.

“I’m with a group of guys who just entered,” Stiles said as he attempted to walk past. For a brief moment, he thought he had succeeded.

Until he felt a pull around his neck, which by this point was getting familiar. The bouncer had grabbed his hoodie and yanked him back without a warning. “Not a chance. What are you, fourteen at the most? Nice try, kid, now get lost!” The burly man chuckled to himself.

Behind him, it would seem the drunk girl was now singing along to a song that no one other than she could hear. Her lipstick was already smudged and her friends were doing whatever they could to distance themselves from her before they got to the front of the line. At least everyone’s attention was on the music-less dancer rather than Stiles who slipped off to the side of the brick building to look for another entrance.

He found two, but neither opened from the outside. They were probably emergency exits. How was Stiles going to get in? So much could happen to Lydia before two in the morning.

A glance at his pajama bottoms reminded Stiles just how improperly dressed he was for the occasion. Honestly, he’d need a pretty thorough makeover to gain access to the club from the front, and it’s wasn’t like he had money or time to go shopping. He figured his best bet was to wait within eye line of the back doors in case someone accidentally opened one. It wasn’t a good plan and he frowned, disappointed in himself for not coming up with something cleverer.

Stiles had just decided he might as well sit down while he waited, his feet were killing him from walking all day long, when the sounds of a girl crying jarred him from his trance on the immobile doors. Someone was hysterically crying! Was it Lydia?

Stiles jumped up comically fast in his haste to see who was making the high-pitch wails. His hopes fell when he saw it was the drunk girl. She was alone now, no friends in sight, and half the contents of her purse were strewn about in the grassy parking lot. She was scrounging frantically through her belongings on the ground, her cries getting louder by the second. As Stiles approached her head
snapped up revealing a face marred with black streaks as her eye makeup was clearly not waterproof.

She eyed Stiles for a moment before deeming him trustworthy and inviting him to assist in her plight.

“I ca- can’t fi- find my k- keys,” she sobbed. “Will you hel- help m- me?”

Stiles felt pity for her. Clearly her friends had gotten into the club and she had probably been denied…

“You shouldn’t be driving,” Stiles told her in what he hoped was a friendly tone. He knew he was a sight to see himself, with his mismatched clothes and a split lip. “I’m Scott, what’s your name?”

He said quickly thinking of the first name that came into his mind. He still couldn’t believe he had given Lydia away earlier in his panic.

“Dan- Danelle,” She said with a smile. “My fri- friends are d- driving, I was just going to wait in the c- car.”

Danelle took a deep breath and finally seemed to get her breathing and emotions under control as Stiles dropped to one knee to help her look. She had a magnitude of different items. There was a skirt and a pair of jeans and even a spare bra!? She had two half full bottles of water and several little bags full of cosmetics. As Stiles gathered her belongings neatly he placed the water bottle just a little bit further away in hopes of snagging them once he was had helped her into her car. He felt guilty at the thought, she was going to need the liquid to help prevent a hangover but his voice was also husky and throat raw with dehydration…

The keys turned out to be crammed into a small zipper pocket on the inside of her too-large bag. Once Stiles had found them she thanked him profusely.

Stiles felt so badly about his earlier attempt to steal from her that he just blurted out the question, “Can I have a water bottle?”

She laughed at him and reached into the floor space behind the driver’s seat of her car and gave him a full one. A peak into the sedan revealed that Danelle’s car was just as messy as her purse. Stiles was going to let her be, to sleep off her earlier intoxication, but the smudged face peered back at him, almost hopeful.
“Can I,” Stiles started to ask, but then he thought perhaps he should explain. “I used to do my friend’s makeup. Would you like me to uh, fix your face? You’d probably be able to go back and join your friends in the club.”

Danelle looked at him appealingly for the first time and smiled. “What are you wearing?”

Stiles shook his head. “It’s a long story…”

Danelle launched into her own summary of the night’s events as Stiles took a tank top from the top of her purse and started to gently wipe her face. She was actually rather pretty under all the heavy coloring and in the end Stiles was quite pleased with his work. She had also offered him a second bottle of water as Stiles was almost finished with the first one. He thanked her and put it in his pocket for later.

“Okay,” Stiles said appraisingly, taking a step back. “I think since you seem to live out of your car you should probably change into something else before you approach the bouncer again.”

Danelle laughed at him again. “It’s my friend’s car,” she said with a smirk, “and I think we both should change, you’re coming with me, right?” She looked at the clothes strewn across the back and reached for a pair of tight looking black pants. “What size are you in ladies?”

Stiles raised an eyebrow. “Really? Your friend won’t mind?”

One of the best improvements when working for Connor was how he, or rather his girls, made sure Stiles looked his best on working nights. This often included tight jeans and yes, sometimes female ones. Danelle scoffed at him and muttered that he was a skinny ass when he told her he wore a five. They turned around to change and it was Danelle’s turn to give him an appreciative Look.

“Huh,” she said to herself.

“What?” Stiles asked.

“Take off the hoodie and what happened to your mouth?” Danelle wondered aloud as she grabbed Stiles’ chin. “Do you wear makeup?” She asked brightly.
“Uh, not—not often,” Stiles responded unsure of where this was going as he shrugged out of his sweater and now only had a thin wife beater protecting him from the chill in the air. He shivered.

Danelle didn’t wait for permission as she fished through her bag, pulling out an eyeliner pencil. Once Stiles’ eyes were officially outlined, she pursed her lips in thought and ruffled his hair.

“Here,” Danelle said at last as she handed over a lip gloss. “Keep it.” Stiles assumed that had something to do with the cut on his face.

“So, we’re done? We’re officially getting on that dance floor?” Stiles jokingly asked. Lydia had already been in there for at least an hour. Stiles needed to hurry. She locked up her car and Stiles stored his clothing items and two more water bottles Danelle stole from her friends supply under the trunk of the car. Danelle must have had her suspicions, but she didn’t say anything. The two rounded the corner arm in arm and laughing loudly but the action looked right and this time neither one of them were attracting attention, aside from the occasional appreciative glances. Stiles’ pants were really tight…

The line moved quickly and before they knew it Danelle and Stiles were face to face with the very same bouncer who denied them access earlier. His eyes swept over them appreciatively as he held his hand out for the entrance fee.

Crap!

Danelle came to his rescue, however, as she fished out a twenty from her endless bag and winked at Stiles as she slyly announced that this was her treat. The bouncer barely glanced at the ID’s that she flashed, as he was already moving on to the next group of party goers. Stiles couldn’t have thanked Danelle enough. He was in the club! Now he just had to find Lydia!

Danelle spotted her friend instantly in that weird way girls do where they can just sense one another. They all seemed shocked to see her and even more surprised to see she had a date still attached to her arm. Stiles thanked her repeatedly as he scanned the room for Lydia.

Danelle picked up on the eye movement and leaned in close to be heard over the music. “Go find your girl, and—thanks, Scott!”

“Thank you!” Stiles said a little belatedly as he was jarred by the false name. “And try to stick to
water, avoid the hangover!”

With that Stiles walked the edge of the dance floor looking for Lydia or the assholes she had disappeared with.

Lydia was nervous as she was escorted inside the club. She was only fifteen, soon to be sixteen and she was pretty sure that made her the youngest person in there. Her nerves must have been visible because one of the guys, Jeffery, as he introduced himself, leaned in and told her a drink would help take the edge off.

Three drinks later and the edge was long gone and perfectly smooth, along with her dance moves. It turns out the guys were regulars at the club and knew half the people there. Several of their girlfriends taught Lydia a few dances and now she was getting back on the floor with every other song, barely able to rest in between. Surprisingly the atmosphere was incredibly fun and aside from those first shaky minutes in the beginning she was having a good time. A really good time!

She frowned dramatically when she came back to sit down and noticed her drink was empty again! Her frowned turned to a pout when she tugged on Jeffery’s arm.

“Pretty please!” Lydia asked sweetly with a flutter of her eye lashes. “It’s my birthday remember.”

Jeffery laughed. “Next week, right honey? We still have a couple of hours to go, how about you slow down, huh?”

“Aw, come on man, buy the pretty girl a drink!” His friend said with a flirtatious grin. “It’s her birthday!”

“She’s going to get sick!” Jeffery warned. Up until that point, Lydia had liked him.

“Hi,” Lydia said with a giggle as she held out her hand, “I’m Lydia.”
The other guy took the offered appendage and joined in a laugh. “So you’ve told me, twice now, I’m Zack remember.”

“Buy me a drink Zack?” Lydia asked as she slid across the couch, closer to the more willing male. “Please?”

Ten minutes later and Lydia clutched fruity cocktail number four in her hand, spilling it slightly as she refused to put it down while she migrated her way back to the dance floor. Out there she could feel the eyes on her. She knew her flashy hair caught the boys’ attention and the sway of her hips held it. On the dance floor her mother’s threats didn’t exist. With the music filling her head she had no room to worry over her father’s pending hearing. She was just Lydia and probably having the most fun she had ever had, she couldn’t wait to tell Allison about it… Allison! She would never get to see her again! She would never see any of them again!

Of course, that’s when Stiles flashed across her line of vision waving his arms frantically. Shecocked her head to the side and sighed.

“Lydia! Lyds! Oh, thank God I found you! Are you okay? Did they hurt—”

“What are you wearing?” Lydia interrupted his ramble to ask. She said each word pointedly slow to show Stiles how to properly speak as she had barely understood his quick-paced rant in her drunken haze.

Stiles just rolled his eyes. “I needed to get in,” He replied, again too quickly.

But Lydia wasn’t paying attention to his mouth. She raked his body up and down. Stiles’ thin legs which usually were a cause for ridicule during lacrosse tryout practice filled out the black jeans nicely. They were definitely women’s jeans and had a manufactured tear above one knee but the look just—fit. She assumed it was the low-rise waist which left Stiles’ hips exposed that did the trick. He wore a simple white tank top that was also rather form-fitting which accentuated his flat stomach and surprisingly toned arms. His dirty sneakers were a little out of place but it sort of worked, giving him a sense of flippancy to his look. She finally found his face and was surprised by how pale the thick eyeliner made him appear. His cheeks were just a shade pinker, probably from her obvious scrutiny, and his lips surprisingly red, although that swollen-ness was probably from the decent-sized cut he was sporting.

Lydia opened her mouth to ask about it but was cut off by Stiles.
“You done nitpicking! I had to age up some to get in here! Now, we should leave before those guys come back!”

“What? No, no way. I’m staying!” Lydia took a sharp intake of breath as an idea came to her. “We should dance! Here have some!”

She thrust her drink a little too aggressively at Stiles, causing a little more of it to spill, this time on Stiles’ jeans.

“No, we need to go!” Stiles told her. “And stop drinking that, it’s going to make you sick!”

“Dance with me!” Lydia whined instead.

The two continued that back and forth until Stiles finally conceded to the dance although Lydia suspected it was just so he could get close enough to take her drink from her. Catching on to his plan, she downed the last of it in three large gulps causing Stiles to stare at her with his mouth hanging open.

“Come on! It’s my birthday!”

“Weren’t you shopping for birthday dresses back in like October?” Stiles asked as he allowed Lydia to place her hands on his hips.

She chuckled. “Never too early to start the planning!”

The club, while featuring plenty of upbeat music, also played several line dance songs and had a bit of a country flare to it. This was a song that had a particular set of moves which Stiles was steadfastly ignoring. The result meant they had even more attention on them then his attire alone could warrant. That’s when Lydia noticed Zack’s narrowed-eye stare.

Lydia actually started to wave to him, thinking about her empty cup, but changed her mind when she looked back at Stiles and found herself wondering about his lip again.

“What?” Lydia asked dumbly, realizing Stiles had asked her a question.
“Don’t worry about it,” Stiles said as he shook his head. “We should leave after this song.”

Lydia bit her lip and then promptly grabbed Stiles’ hand and pulled him to the other side of the room; purposely further away from the front doors.

“There,” Lydia said happily as she resumed her dancing. “Now we don’t have to leave, Zack can’t see us over here.”

“Zack?” Stiles questioned. “But we need to go, we’re underage and alcohol is the last thing you need, we haven’t had a meal since midday when we shared the rest of Ernie’s…”

“Stiles please! I’m having so much fun! Don’t ruin it! It’s for my birthday!”

Fortunately, they were interrupted by a group of girls, one of whom seemed to know Stiles well, despite her getting his name wrong.

“You found her! Great! My name is Danelle!” A woman said as she shoved a water bottle in Stiles’ hand and pushed him aside to dance with Lydia. Danelle introduced three more ladies, all of whom were probably also in their early twenties. “Doesn’t Scott look great! That was all me!” She said with a big grin.

Danelle told Stiles to go keep their table for them and promised to keep Lydia close by. It looked like he wanted to protest, but when he opened his mouth to say so, Danelle refused to listen. Her dance moves were crazy and that’s when Lydia recognized her as the drunk girl who had made a scene in front of the club hours ago. How did Stiles talk he, of all people into helping him?

A few songs later the girls, including Lydia, made their way back to the table where Stiles was currently in a conversation with a guy who had to be nearing thirty. He looked at him hungrily and it appeared like he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Danelle’s friend Racheal approached the table. “Excuse me, but this spot is spoken for, and so is that man!” She said loudly, sliding an arm around Stiles’ shoulder. “Doesn’t he look so hot! My friend’s little brother, so back—” She stopped her sentence and stared at Stiles for a full minute before shouting, “Are those my pants!?”
Danelle broke into a giggle and sometime during the exchange Stiles’ admirer left, but not before leaving his business card on the table with his personal cell phone number scribbled on the back.

The two girls complained about Stiles’ use of Racheal’s clothes and Lydia finally sat down. It was at that moment that the room started to spin. She couldn’t make out clear forms beyond the hands in her lap which she was staring at, everything else was a rainbow blur. The music, which up until that point, was her main focus, had suddenly gotten louder. Lydia felt like she could hear each beat reverberate deep within her soul and the action was making her want to—

Lydia quickly grabbed her face. She had finally sat down and as soon as Danelle was done defending him, Stiles was going to ask if Lydia could have some of her water, but it looked like they had run out of time.

“Are you going to be sick?” Stiles asked Lydia as he scooted closer. “How much have you had to drink?”

Lydia simply shook her head and then abruptly stopped. The action was probably making her situation worse.

“Come on, we should go! I’ll leave your pants on your car,” Stiles told Racheal.

“He knows what car I drive!?” Racheal yelled at Danelle in turn, blind to the way Lydia’s entire demeanor had changed in minutes. “This is the last time you’re in charge of the purse!”

Stiles didn’t wait for the girls to settle their argument and chose rather to escort Lydia out of the club. However, Lydia somehow managed to spot the long line for the women’s restroom instead. She made a beeline for it, ignoring Stiles’ rants against wasting time, and smartly pushed past all the other woman to the unoccupied men’s room.

Or at least Stiles thought it was unoccupied. He followed after her and quickly found that there were two men at the urinals both of which silently pointed to the cubical that he assumed housed Lydia. A second later that thought was confirmed when the person behind the door started heaving; Lydia was throwing up.
Stiles was going to go help her, hold her hair back at least, but she also happened to have locked the door. So he chose rather to lean against it and wait. One of the men had finished his business and had left already, the other was washing his hands when the men’s restroom door swung open again. It was the navy-shirt guy, of course. Stiles groaned but tried his best to look the other way and blend in.

Lydia chose just that moment to spill her guts for a second time, drawing attention to the occupied stall.

“Hey!” The man said suddenly. “Look at me!” He didn’t wait for Stiles to oblige as he grabbed his chin to inspect the cut on his lip. He stepped back and took in Stiles’ whole appearance.

Stiles hoped it was going to end there as the man turned his back to go relieve himself. But Lydia with her ever perfect timing, opened her stall door and shakily came out. Her hair was a mess. Her shirt a little crooked. Stiles notice that she had lost her jacket, sometime during her night club experience and cursed internally, because it was probably with those guys. One of which was staring at them both incredulously.

“That’s where you ran off too?” The man asked in disbelief. “With him? Your brother!?”

“She’s not, we’re not…” Stiles started to explain, but talking was probably the wrong choice because navy shirt man charged at him. He most likely would have landed the first blow too, had it not been for Lydia and her absolutely wonderful timing.

Lydia opened her mouth, perhaps to defend herself or Stiles, but instead all that came out was a flow of liquid. Surely the rainbow colored monstrosity had once tasted great but from the disgusted look on her face it no longer did. Stiles had little time to worry about that because her puke landed on the guy’s navy shirt. His rage was palpable.

Stiles felt bad about moving her so quickly, but he needed to get Lydia away from any potential retaliation. In doing so, Stiles was now much closer to the man’s fist. But formerly navy-shirt guy seemed to have lost his train of thought as he caught sight of himself in a mirror.

“It’s ruined!” He shrieked. “Who even does that?”

Stiles didn’t wait for him to decide on a suitable punishment and finally managed to pull Lydia
from the room. She seemed compliant now and the two found their way out of the club in no time. The cold air and near silence was refreshing. Stiles pulled Lydia around the back to the overgrown parking lot.

It took him a minute to realize the car he was looking for was gone and in its spot was his sweater with two full water bottles rolled up inside. However, he was missing his pajamas! Racheal took his pants, presumably because he was wearing hers. He cursed himself because the tight jeans were a lot less comfortable and would seriously hinder his walking abilities.

Lydia looked dead on her feet and Stiles figured they had better find a covered location to rest for the evening. The back of the lot had some trees and other shrubbery. Cars lined themselves up against it, but he was fairly certain they would be out of eyesight on the other side of the greenery. He half pulled, half pushed Lydia over there and made sure she put his sweater on before laying down. She curled up into a tight ball inside the hoodie and was asleep in minutes. Stiles aligned her body so that her head was on his thigh as he sat down leaning against the tree, hoping that the sitting position would keep him awake and alert. He placed a water bottle in front of her eyesight just in case.

Stiles slumped over exhausted ten minutes later.

It had been over thirty hours since two of her kids went missing. Melissa couldn’t believe it. Lydia’s mom had provided them with her credit card information, the local authorities were aware and the search had been extended to neighboring counties. The fact was, they could be anywhere, even out of the state by then!

Someone had manned the phone and radio station constantly, just in case, during every minute of those hours. It wasn’t even her turn yet, but Melissa couldn’t concentrate on anything else and figured she would go relieve Marin of the duties.

She wasn’t sure how long she sat there lost in thought, hope and worry when the phone rang.

“Hello?” Melissa snatched the phone up before the first ring had finished.
“Mel-Melissa?” An uneasy voice asked from the other line.

But even sounding unsure of herself, Melissa couldn’t mistake that sound for anyone else. “Lydia!” She asked.

“Yeah. Yes, listen I’m sorry. I’m so sorry! I— we, I don’t know what to do— Stiles needs your help, and I don’t know what to do on my own?” Lydia said it all clearly despite the fact that she had definitely been crying.

“Okay. Okay honey, we will come get you guys. Just stay out. Where are you?” Melissa asked in as calm of a voice as she could muster. It was already taking everything in her not to start jumping up and down with joy.

“Umm,” Lydia replied uncertainly. “Ma’am, do you know what city this is?” She asked someone on the other side of the phone line. A moment later she returned. “We’re in Farmington, New Mexico. And umm, Melissa, I don’t know what to do. Stiles is in jail!”

“What!? Jail! New Mexico!?” Melissa couldn’t contain her surprise. “Okay, listen up, can you ask the person who’s phone you are borrowing where the jail is. Go there. John and I will meet you. Okay, tell the desk sergeant everything when you sign in, they will let you wait for us. Honey, we might have to fly so it will be some time. I’m sorry,” Melissa added regretfully. “And don’t get in a car with strangers. Walk there or call a policeman when you hang up with me if it is far, okay.”

“Okay.” Lydia sounded resigned. “Melissa, please hurry, Stiles needs you.”

*** Six hours earlier, New Mexico ***

Lydia couldn’t remember ever feeling as badly as she currently did. Was she dying? It was a definite possibility. Underneath her the ground was shaking, perhaps this was hell. Is that where she would end up now that she had broken her parents’ hearts? Now that she dragged Stiles along on this trip to the underworld? Eventually, the shaking was too much and she finally snapped her
eyes open if only to locate a place that would be less volatile. Instead of the frozen pits of hell she was expecting, however, she was met with blades of grass and a plastic water bottle.

The shaking turned out to be the black thing she was using as a pillow. Poor choice on her part. Lydia clamped her mouth shut to stop herself from vomiting once again as the events of last night came flooding back to her. Some of which were definitely experienced behind the hazy film of alcohol.

As quickly as she dared to move, which was really comparable to a sloth, Lydia rolled over to eye Stiles and get to the bottom of his quaking. Stiles’ lips were practically blue. He looked so cold in just a tank top, most of his upper body was left bare to the wind. Lydia glanced down at the worn material she had used as a blanket and realized it was Stiles’ sweater. She quickly took it off and gently shook him awake to get him to put it back on.

It took some coaxing but eventually Stiles woke and they both moved to the center of the now empty parking lot where the sun beamed down on them as it continued to rise.

Eventually, Stiles asked, “How are you feeling?”

Lydia still wasn’t sure if she was dying or not. Stiles took her silence as a chance to speak.

“Listen, I think you should get some breakfast, get some food in you, and then you should call John. Have them come pick you up…” He suggested.

In truth, Lydia had been thinking about that as well. She was sure of two things; being homeless, sleeping in the grass outside with bugs was not for her and neither was alcohol. She vowed never to drink again as she fought another wave of nausea.

“What about you? You could call them too, right, we could both go back… Until they send me home.”

“I—I can’t,” Stiles admitted sadly. “The courts— they said this is my last chance. I think they’re going to put me on house arrest… I can’t do that. I can’t go back. Once I know someone is coming for you I’m going to hightail it out of here.”

“What? Stiles no! Please don’t leave me, I’ll explain that it was all my fault!” Lydia protested.
“It’s not that simple, I have a record… Even if John and Melissa still wanted me, they can’t stop anything, can’t protect me…”

“Why do you hate your home?” Lydia asked in a small voice. “Is it because of your— pimp?”

“What? No, he was a monster to some, but not to me, never…” Stiles voice trailed off. “He deserved what he got though, I’m not sorry he’s dead, just sorry I had to see it…”

That bit of information was alarming, but she pushed that tidbit aside for later.

“Then why?” Lydia sat up to ask. “My mom is difficult to get along with, to say the least, and my dad was barely home and now they’re divorced and he might be in jail or something so I know I won’t get to see him and honestly weekends with my dad out on our boat or up in the Hamptons were all I ever looked forward to. So knowing I’m going home and won’t have that is tough, but it’s better than this.” She gestured to the field they were sitting in and her stomach rumbled loudly as if to emphasize that point.

Stiles shook his head. “I can go looking for leftovers, that bakery you went to last night isn’t too far, or I can buy you something as long as you promise you’re going to call John today. Once you’re officially broke, you’re officially desperate and that’s— not good.”

“What about you?” Lydia questioned as she searched her pockets for her remaining cash.

“Me?” Stiles flashed her a smooth grin. “I’ve never said no to a half-eaten blueberry muffin! You’d be surprised how many people only eat the tops!”

“Ew.” Lydia scrunched her face up as she started turning out her back pockets.

“Finish that water up too, I’m going to fill our bottles,” Stiles instructed.

“Stiles!” Lydia said in a panic. “I don’t know where my money went.” She was already on her feet searching the ground around them and retracing their steps back to the tree they slept next to.
Stiles sighed. “Keep looking, I’ll get breakfast.”

Twenty minutes later, Lydia still hadn’t located her lost cash and Stiles returned from his food run with his arms surprisingly full. Both bottles were filled although Lydia tried not to look at the murkiness in the water, he had several half-eaten muffins, and a donut too.

Lydia wrinkled her nose at the breakfast assortment. “Do I even want to know where those came from?”

“Here.” Stiles offered the donuts and a mostly full zucchini-nut muffin. A mother saw me eyeing the trash and gave me her kids’ leftovers. Apparently, the little girl didn’t like the vegetable in her muffin as much as her mom thought she would and her son didn’t even touch the donut he asked for after he’d finished his bagel…”

“And you?”

“I’m having blueberry! I already told you, and look this one had most of the top, some weirdo!” Stiles chuckled to himself as he broke apart a piece and popped it into his mouth.

Lydia hesitantly excepted the donut. It was plain, but surprisingly sort of warm still and it crumbled easily. “Yeah, the guy that didn’t eat the top of his muffin is the weird one…” She shook her head as Stiles steadfastly agreed.

The sun had warmed them both considerably but Stiles eyed Lydia’s thin long-sleeve shirt. “Do you want my hoodie back?” If we stick around until the staff arrive they might be able to let us in and search for your jacket, chances are the assholes left it behind. Although the workers might get pissed when they take a better look at us and realize how young we are… That fluff ball of un-brushed hair of yours is really quite a look!”

Lydia scowled. Stiles himself, looked like he had woken up on the wrong side of the bed after a long day of partying. His eyeliner stubbornly remained in place, although it did smudge some, giving him a more gothic look, which his crazy-tight black pants complimented well. Couple that with his lip and was that a purplish bruise along his jaw? He sort of looked like a bad ass and definitely still appeared a little older than he was. Lydia wondered how he had managed to convince the mom of anything, as intimidating as she found him to be.

Stiles saw her scrutiny and smiled. And yep, it was that grin that gave him his youth back. “You
like what you see?” He asked cockily. “Like I said last night, not that you remember, but I needed to get in the club to go after you and we’ll the PJs weren’t cutting it…”

Lydia rolled her eyes. “I do remember and I also recall you getting hit on! Don’t act like you didn’t like it!”

Stiles’ cheeks redden a bit at that as he pulled the sweater over his head to pass to her. Lydia held out her hand to take it but Stiles quickly pulled it back.

“Is that— is that blood!?” He asked with wide eyes.

Lydia’s shirt sleeve did indeed have blood on it. It would appear she had reopened the wound on her upper arm.

“Let me take a look,” Stiles ordered as he reached for her elbow.

“No! It’s fine, I’m fine!” Lydia snapped back.

“Please, it could be infected. Let me see!” Stiles insisted.

Maybe it was because she still wasn’t feeling her best, but Lydia caved and let Stiles push her sleeve up.

“You—you did this to yourself?” He asked after a moments pause. “We need peroxide and maybe a new bandage.”

Mutely Lydia nodded. She wanted to insist that she was fine but knew better to assume Stiles would except those words any more than Melissa or John had. She blindly followed Stiles down the street until they came across a small convenient store. Stiles looked her up and down and pushed her into the shadows.

“Stay here,” He ordered. “I’ll be right back.”
Stiles didn’t give her a chance to argue as he draped his sweater over his arm and entered the store. Lydia held her breath. He didn’t have money, what was he planning on doing? Beg for the medical supplies? She didn’t have to wait long to find out as a moment later Stiles was running out of the store with a hefty sized man chasing him!

Stiles passed by Lydia’s location yelling for her to stay put as he dropped the sweater at her feet. She had just a second to snatch it up before the store’s employee ran passed too. The guy didn’t even stop and consider the exchange as he kept going. A moment later shouts from down the street caught her attention.

“Stop that man! He’s a thief! Officer!”

“I order you to stop! Put your hands up!” Another burly voice boomed. “I said stop, sir, if you continue to run, it will be considered resisting arrest.”

Lydia peeked out from her hiding place just in time to see a second officer tackle Stiles to the ground. He was handcuffed and had his rights recited to him within minutes. Lydia stood there stock still. Stiles was attempting to wiggle free, but his fight was futile.

Before he was securely placed in the backseat of the squad car, Stiles head shot up and his eyes met Lydia’s despite the yardage separating them. He shook his head no and then was roughly shoved into the car.

Lydia was frozen. What was she supposed to do now? She almost chucked the stupid bottle of peroxide. She was so angry; her cut wasn’t worth this! Getting arrested!? And now she was alone, exactly what she had begged Stiles not to do to her earlier…

Lydia was pissed at Stiles and at the same time so worried. She didn’t know what to do. She found herself shaking with silent tears. The employee had another cop car at his store and he was talking to the officer inside. Out of fear, Lydia scooted away, but still with no destination in mind. She figured the least she could do was actually clean and re-bandage her wound so she made her way back to the grassy lot that provided a false sense of privacy for her to take her shirt off and do it properly.

The wind nipped at her bare arms and torso, but the sting felt appropriately deserving giving the circumstances.
Eventually the first of the night club’s staff members pulled into the lot. She parked her car near
the building and hesitantly came out. “I’m armed, bum, no money for you either, they collect all
the cash at the end of the night.” The woman warned although her face fell when she took in just
how young and little her supposed attacker was. Lydia was wearing Stiles’ hoodie again, it
dwarfed her.

“Umm, actually, do you think I could use your phone— and call for a ride?” Lydia asked.

The lady took a moment to consider the request before nodding once and inviting Lydia inside as
she unlocked the back door.

John and Melissa decided that driving was their best bet, last minute flights and rentals were just so
costly and they would still arrive in almost the same amount of time. They were hopeful. Lydia had
called and since then the local police department confirmed that both of their kids were there and
while Stiles was still in a holding cell waiting to be processed, Lydia was given instructions to stay
in the waiting room until her guardians could collect her. Stiles’ fate was still unknown.

That was nine hours ago. Now, after driving straight with only two quick pit stops for gasoline and
a restroom use, the hope had somewhat dimmed. It was dark out; almost ten at night, and with the
dimming sky came the realization of just how much trouble their students had caused. The store
owner wanted to press charges and John had already spent a good amount of time on the phone
with the New Mexican police as well as Stiles’ case manager back in Florida. A lot of possibilities
have been suggested and until they knew for certain where he would go, they weren’t going to send
an officer or his stepfather out to collect him. Unfortunately, the way it was said, made it sound
like they were discussing when rather than if either one of those scenarios would happen…

The Farmington police office was located in the center of the modest city. Melissa was driving and
she found it easily enough.

Once inside, John spotted the two rows of nearly empty seats easily, only one person was
occupying them. Lydia was fast asleep and looked like she might have walked the whole way here,
her hair was a mess and her clothes were grass stained and dirty. Melissa rushed over to kneel next
to her and John went to go sign himself in with the desk sergeant.

John was told to wait before Stiles could be moved into an interrogation room. Melissa
volunteered to take Lydia back to a hotel room.

Lydia had run away with a male student and was going to have to be questioned and tested respectively as was protocol in these situations. Her mother had requested a phone call with her the next day, so at least that particular issue could wait. Melissa was prepared. She was perfect for these situations, firm and gentle in equal measures.

John was mad. He wasn’t so confident in his ability to not raise his voice with Lydia and figured that his tough-love parental approach might be better suited for Stiles anyways. He was arrested for stealing after all…

“Mr. Stilinski, we’re ready for you, follow me.” A jaunty young officer exclaimed as he opened a side door.

As soon as John saw Stiles he felt his anger melt away. The kid looked like he was on the receiving end of at least a couple of punches. He had what appeared to be a healing lip, a purple bruise along his chin, and a decent sized lump on the side of his head. His eyes were also surrounded in blackness although from further inspection John was sure it wasn’t an injury so much as some sort of paint? He looked rough and pale with his bare arms showing. They were placed on the table in front of him where he was attached by handcuffs.

Stiles didn’t say anything upon seeing John although he didn’t look surprised either.

An officer came in and tossed a file on the table and invited John to take a seat.

“My name is Deputy Jerkins, I wasn’t the arresting officer as they’re off duty, but I can give you the gist of it. Your boy here— Stiles,” He said as he checked the paperwork, “was accused of theft by Mr. Renaldo, the owner of the Quick Stop, a local mart. Renaldo, chased the assailant out of the store and called for police assistance. The police ordered Stiles to stop, he initially resisted, but it looks like that charge is being dropped.” Jerkins looked through the paperwork quickly and raised his eyebrow at Stiles. “Stiles hasn’t said anything since his arrest. He refused to give his identity, refused his call, was fingerprinted and discovered to have a BOLO out for him as he was reported as missing. He has a history of repeated runaways and he’s only fifteen… Did I leave anything out?” Jerkins asked Stiles who darted his eyes away. “Is he a mute? That was actually written in the notes as a possibility."

John took several deep breaths. He was a deputy himself once, when he was married and a father. So often that world seemed like another lifetime ago, but just being here bought up all the buried feelings. He asked to see the report rather than answer the question on Stiles’ ability to speak.
“It doesn’t say what he was accused of stealing or if the items were retrieved,” John said after a moments paused. Stiles looked up at him curiously.

“It wasn’t recovered at the scene and the value is low, a misdemeanor. Mr. Renaldo is submitting a tape and a tally of the missing items tomorrow. He has apparently had some issues with theft lately and installed a new security system. His lawyers want to check previous incidents with his description and see if he can add more to the charge.”

“Stiles has only been in town for— when did you and Lydia get here?” John asked, turning to Stiles. “Answer me,” He added once it became clear that stiles wasn’t going to.

“A- a day,” Stiles croaked out. His voice sounded rough with its lack of use. “Yes-yesterday night. We walked from a truck stop by the highway.”

“That’s miles!” Jerkins said in disbelief. Stiles nodded.

“Can you get him some water?” John asked the officer.

Jerkins eyed them both but nodded and disappeared.

“What did you steal Stiles?” John asked in an even tone. “Quickly before he returns.”

Stiles’ eyes snapped to Johns and he swallowed hard in an attempt to speak more clearly. “Does it matter? Are they sending me back to Tampa?” Despite the hard edge that Stiles constantly surrounded himself with, his eyes were almost watering in his silent plea to not go home.

“Not if I can help it, but I need you to cooperate. The deputies weren’t impressed with your silence. It only made you look guiltier.”

“Look at me!” Stiles interrupted, raising his voice some. “They already think I am! I’m nothing but some punk troublemaker to sweep away, the sooner I’m out of their city the better, right?”
“What did you take Stiles?” John asked again.

Just then the door opened and Jerkins returned with an incredibly small cup of water.

“A gauze wrap and a bottle of peroxide,” Stiles started before taking a sip. “For Lydia, but don’t ask me where it is, I dropped it when I was being chased.”

John searched Stiles’ eyes. It was hard to tell if the teen was being honest. He’d always felt like Stiles wasn’t ever being completely upfront with him, but the way his cinnamon-colored eyes didn’t blink or look away made him think that perhaps this time, it was the whole truth.

“When is Mr. Renaldo supposed to return? I’d like to talk to him,” John asked Jerkins.

“Paper just says the morning. We have until two p.m. to press charges. This is Stiles’ public defender if you want to get in contact, unless your school is providing a lawyer?”

John thanked him and said they would indeed provide a lawyer if it came to that before he turned back to Stiles and told him to behave for the rest of the night and that he would see him in the morning.

A quick phone call to Melissa and Lydia confirmed Stiles’ story. It was early in the morning by the time Lydia had finished retelling all of her adventures since leaving Beacon of Hope. The two had certainly been kept busy during their time away from the school. The distance they covered alone, was impressive. On that note, John would have to talk to Mrs. Martin about pressing charges for theft and possibly even kidnapping against Ernie, should they ever locate him or Lydia’s wallet. He’d also like to get the boys from the club for supplying a minor with alcohol, but he knew that was even less likely to happen. More than anything he hoped he could talk Mr. Renaldo out of pressing charges and subsequently stop Stiles from being sent home for running away.

John definitely had a busy morning planned. He took the room next to Melissa’s and Lydia’s and found himself feeling like he needed a drink to settle his nerves enough to sleep. He laid awake for hours trying to shake the feeling. It wasn’t until the orange numbers of the alarm clock told him it was past three in the morning before he finally let the exhaustion take him under.
John and Melissa wouldn’t let Lydia visit Stiles in jail. But per her request and because John thought it could really help they did take Lydia back to Mr. Renaldo’s store. Lydia apologized and with Melissa’s assistance paid for the medical supplies.

Mr. Renaldo held firm to his belief that it wasn’t right for the kids to steal but he did let Lydia explain the entire story and he nodded along in understanding by the end of it and that was it. Melissa thanked the man for his time and Lydia was escorted back to the hotel room.

Melissa gave Lydia a notebook and explained that apart of her punishment would be quiet reflection. She was on Shuns for a week, so absolutely no interaction with her fellow students when she did get back to Beacon of Hope, and she was going to have daily therapy sessions with a specialist as well as daily self-harming checks with Melissa. The school had a grief counselor, Ms. Blake, on call for this sort of thing and she recommended a colleague who would also be willing to drive out for the sessions who specialized in behavioral issues.

And that was it. Lydia’s mom apparently requested that she stay at the boarding school until things settle down at least, and Lydia took that to mean indefinitely. She was actually really looking forward to seeing Allison, even if they couldn’t talk about anything just yet. It seemed crazy to think that she was dreading returning to school and in the end everything was fine… for her, at least.

It was after lunch when Melissa’s phone rang and even though Lydia couldn’t hear him, she knew it was John on the other side because of the way her face softened a bit. The conversation was short and stilted and when it was over Melissa told her to gather her belongings because they were going to head home. Just the two of them.

Lydia was burning to ask questions; what about Stiles? What about John!? How would they get back? Why wasn’t everyone driving together? But she was on silent reflection and as much as she wanted to speak up when Melissa had taken the liberty of ordering her a healthy grilled chicken sandwich for lunch rather than the fried one she was craving, she actually found that writing down her thoughts had been quite illuminating.

The first hour she spent making a list of everything that was happening or had happened that was out of her control, the next hour she jotted down failed solutions and was able to draw parallels from her decision making to future problems. She currently was coming up with better fixes for her initial problems and listing long term goals associated with each. On the top of her list was writing letters; one to her mother, her father, Melissa, John, Allison, and an apology letter to Stiles. She really needed to thank him and he deserved an apology for her role in his imprisonment.
They were on the road for about an hour when a thought struck her. Lydia flipped through her notebook to a clean sheet of paper and wrote in large letters ‘I really need to say something’. She held it up for Melissa to see and waited until the lane was clear in front of them on the highway to distract her.

“I’m sorry Lydia, you can’t,” Melissa replied with a frown. “We can discuss your reflections daily in our sessions, but we won’t be back to the school until after curfew, so you’ll have to wait until tomorrow’s one on one, I’m sorry.”

Lydia blew out a frustrated breath and flipped the page to write, ‘It’s important!’ She even underlined it twice.

“It can’t wait?” Melissa asked.

Lydia shook her head.

“Okay—” Melissa had barely finished the word before Lydia spoke.

“It’s about my arm. I know you guys turned the school upside down looking for how I cut it, but I uh, I actually did it when you were teaching us to repel, that day the Whittemores were with us… I just didn’t want you thinking you missed something or that it’s risky to let me sleep in our cabin. I’m— safe there, promise.”

Melissa looked thoughtful. “You’ll understand that it’s difficult for us to take your word for it. You messed up when you ran away, you’ll have to earn that trust back,” she said eventually.

“I know,” Lydia muttered to herself and flipped back to the bullet points she was making for the letters. The one for her mom was almost an entire page already…

It was almost eleven at night by the time Melissa parked her car in the school’s lot. She usually
chose to keep it in front of her personal cabin, as most of the counselors who lived on campus did, but Chris was waiting up for her with a sleepy looking Allison, both leaning against his truck.

“How was the drive?” Chris asked as soon as Melissa stepped out.

“Long. How’d you all do without us?” Melissa queried.

“The kids were good. Your group missed you, both of you,” Chris said the last part to Lydia.

Lydia clung to her notebook and the bag of dirty clothes desperately just for something to do.

“I missed you,” Allison admitted softly.

Lydia couldn’t bring herself to look at her, at the disappointment she knew she would find in Allison’s eyes.

Fortunately, Melissa chose that moment to inform both Argents of Lydia’s silent task. Lydia quickly scribbled out ‘Good Night’ in her notebook and tried to hold it up in the office’s porch light so Allison could see.

As soon as she was in her own bed, ten minutes later, Lydia added Allison’s worry to her list of things to apologize for.

Derek promised himself he wouldn’t immediately look at Stiles’ bed when he woke. He’d done that twice now, the second time, being more than aware that it wouldn’t be occupied, and still he felt the sting of defeat over its emptiness. His vow didn’t matter, however, because as soon as he got up to get dressed for the day he looked across the room and exhaled deeply with disappointment. The bed was still baron.

So naturally, Derek couldn’t believe it when Kira and Erica bounced into the mess hall asking
about Stiles. Apparently, Lydia had turned up in the middle of the night and was still asleep and the girls assumed that had meant Stiles was back too. But he wasn’t. Or at least Derek didn’t think he was, but maybe he’d simply missed him? Maybe Stiles was already awake, probably doing some consequence somewhere.

That hope multiplied when Melissa walked into the cafeteria moments later. She looked tired and stressed, but if she was back and Lydia was back, then surely Stiles was around here somewhere?

Their counselor forwent her usual spot in line and made her way across the hall to her students’ regular table.

“Morning,” Melissa greeted them. “I just wanted to let you know that even though Lydia is back with us she is on silent restriction for a week. Absolutely no talking. Please be respectful and don’t try to goad her into it. Both Jackson and Lydia are on shuns as well and should be treated as such until we inform them otherwise. Also, I heard you guys were well behaved for Chris yesterday, you all went fishing. That’s nice. Thank you for the good report.”

“He let us cook them!” Scott said enthusiastically. “We made fish tacos! It was great, best meal I’ve had since coming here!”

“Awe come on Scott, we’ve cooked fish before on our overnight trips!” Erica said thoughtfully.

“Yeah, Chris has like a special seasoning mix or something, they were so good!” Scott doubled his effort.

“I’m pretty sure it was just blacken seasoning,” Boyd supplied.

“Well we should definitely bring some on all future overnight trips,” Kira suggested.

“I think it was the homemade tartar sauce,” Isaac wondered out loud.

“It’s not tartar, my mom’s recipe,” Allison told them all. “It’s like a mayonnaise cabbage mix—”

“What about Stiles?” Derek interrupted her and bore his gaze into Melissa. “Is he coming home
Melissa sighed. “It’s complicated. John’s with him, without going into too many details, he was transferred to the local authorities in town here, early this morning, and currently I’m hopeful that he will be released to our custody, maybe even today. Let’s all hope that that will be the case. I’ll let you guys know if it changes. I know you’re worried about him too.” She attempted an encouraging smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

The table was quiet while everyone processed what Melissa had said. Once she was gone Scott asked, “So he was arrested?”

No one really had an answer, but Derek knew there was no way in hell he’d avoid Lydia. He needed to question her as soon as possible.

It turned out questioning Lydia was more difficult than Derek thought it would be. All of the teachers knew of her current punishment and Lydia was kept isolated from the others during class. She wasn’t called on by teachers either. It was after lunch when some of them had a free period that Derek was finally able to get near her as she was scribbling in her note book under the gazebo. Unfortunately, the redhead wouldn’t break the rules.

“—Fine then, don’t say anything, write it down, what happened? Why was Stiles arrested? What did he do?” Derek felt his temper rising with each unanswered question.

Lydia looked contemplative as she considered his request and quickly flipped to an unused page. ‘My fault!’ She jotted down and turned the notebook sideways so Derek could read it.

“Your fault!” Derek practically roared. “Well then why is he the one in—”

His complaint was cut short by the arrival of a police car. The sirens weren’t on or anything but just the county markings on the side of the vehicle was enough to attract everyone’s attention.

Derek thought Melissa looked a little exhausted that morning, but that was nothing compared to John who appeared as if he hadn’t slept and even from a distance the dark half-moon marks under his eyes were visible. The man was tired.
Derek found himself abandoning the gazebo and moving closer to the car. Lydia was right behind him. Surprisingly Kira jogged over too, probably out of curiosity’s sake.

A police officer stepped out of the driver’s side and immediately went to open up the backseat door. John came around the side and waited.

Stiles’ worn sneakers appeared first. If it wasn’t for those, Derek would have doubted the rest of the guy that came out of the car was even him. Stiles’ pants were tight and low, too low. Derek’s focus was lost on the jut of his hipbone. It was difficult, but Derek tore his eyes away from that particular feature to take in the rest of him. Stiles’ face was a mess—a hot mess, a black smear encircled his eyes causing the golden color to pop. He also looked like he was on the losing end of a bar fight. He also wore John’s jacket, a dark brown leather which sort of made him look like a badass. Or maybe it was the fact that around his wrist in front of him were silver handcuffs…

Melissa came running by and didn’t even wait for the cuffs to be removed to give Stiles a hug. She grabbed his chin and examined the obvious bruise there and tutted. That’s when Stiles’ eyes slid past her and landed on Derek’s.

They stared at each other for what felt like eternity before Kira piped up from his side.

“You have a thing for bad boys!” She taunted. “Bad boys, bad boys, whatcha gonna do?” She sang the song with a slight chuckle. “Although I certainly don’t blame you,” She added as she turned around.

The officer was removing Stiles’ cuffs and he immediately started to massage his wrists. How long had he been locked up? John thanked the officer and pulled both Stiles and Melissa into the front office and away from prying eyes. Mainly Derek’s prying eyes.

Eventually Lydia returned to the gazebo, but Derek just continued to stand there, completely stunned. He couldn’t get the image of Stiles out of his mind, and it was so hard to reconcile that with the boy he knew who usually had on at least three shirts and a baggy pair of pants. Derek knew he had a bit of a crush on the younger teen. He was aware that it was mutual because of the way Stiles would blush sometimes when they held hands.

Their relationship hadn’t been strictly platonic for a while now, but Derek was still figuring things out. Still reeling over Kate and accepting that maybe he liked guys too, or perhaps he liked them more? It was all confusing, and that Stiles handcuffed, tied down and wearing clothing that left
nothing to the imagination... He didn’t know what to think.

And then a very sour thought immediately put an end to all the lucrative ones that were swimming in Derek’s mind. Stiles was dressed like that and arrested because he ran away. He left, with Lydia, and not with him. The realization left a bitter taste in his mouth, and rather than wait outside the office, Derek took off to be the first to arrive for his last class of the day.

“You are not to leave campus unless approved by me and supervised by a teacher or counselor.”

“You must participate in fifty hours of community service and will do so in conjunction with the local probationary office. They have been informed of your situation and confirmed that you’ll always be accompanied by an officer.”

“You have a disciplinary hearing, date and location still pending. Per your request we are petitioning the courts for it to take place locally. I’ll keep you informed.”

“Officially, all charges have been dropped as per your agreement to serve the community.”

John skimmed the file in front of him to sum everything up in a monotone voice for both Stiles and Melissa’s benefit. “All sounds about right to you?” He asked Stiles when he was finished.

“If Mr. Renaldo dropped the charges why does Stiles have a pending hearing?” Melissa asked immediately, showing significantly more concerned.

“It’s his case worker in Tampa. The hearing could take place there too. One of us will have to fly with him, if that’s the case. It’s to discuss his habit of running away.”

“Oh, okay. The community service is in conjunction with parolees? Adult parolees? That doesn’t sound safe,” Melissa asked.
“It’s a part of his required supervision. He’ll always have an officer with him. Probably will be cleaning up the local parks. We’ve worked it out so he can do five hours every other Saturday until it’s complete, that way he can still participate in some of your group activities too.”

“Okay.” Melissa sounded like she wanted to object but didn’t. “When will we know—”

“If you want to keep talking about me like I’m not even here, may I just go, please?” Stiles was annoyed. He was hungry and thirsty and tired. The transportation took all night long and he was handcuffed the entire time which just made it nearly impossible to sleep. He was cranky and the last thing he wanted was to hash out everything again.

“No, you may not just go, Stiles,” John replied a bit acidly. He was definitely feeling the long night too. “Constant supervision! I’m liable for you, had to sign my life away for you just to be here right now! You’ll be lucky if I don’t move my bed in your dorm just to keep an eye on you at night. You should be grateful and as this concerns your future, you should pay attention.”

It took everything in him not to blanch at the thought of being watched in his sleep. It was also pushing Stiles’ restraint to not roll his eyes at the comment about his future. But he was grateful, at least a little bit, for John coming to help him, although, honestly Stiles was hoping they would give him jail time for the theft charges, maybe that would have kept him away from house arrest. As it were, being confined with the monster until he was eighteen was still on the table, right? Still a possibility?

John must have asked him a question because both counselors were looking at him impatiently.

“Do you have any concerns or issues with the new rules?” John repeated for Stiles’ benefit.

“—Uh, if it does come to it, I’d rather serve time in like a real jail than house arrest. If I can have a say in that?”

Both Melissa and John were staring at him in confusion.

“It’s not the same thing, you were in a city lock up, serving time would be a statewide juvenile detention facility. It’s not even close to what the New Mexican police offered you; a solo cell because of your age… it wouldn’t be like that in juvie,” John explained uncertainly.
“Yeah, I know. It’s whatever, just— forget I asked— I don’t have any complaints or anything. I understand the rules, promise. Won’t go anywhere unless you tell me to first.”

“Okay,” John agreed, still a little bit weary. “You can go get some rest. You will report to Melissa for dinner. Lydia and Jackson will be as well and they can’t speak so please do not engage them in conversation. Tomorrow morning meet me here after you’ve eaten for your consequence. Now, you can go.” John excused him and Stiles didn’t wait a beat for either counselor to change their mind. He had one goal in mind and that was burying himself in his bed. He only had a few hours to nap before dinner.

Once in his dorm however he couldn’t help but take in how alone he was. Everyone else was still in class. John and Melissa had presumably missed all of their classes over the last few days… It was rather nice of them to come pick him and Lydia up.

Stiles’ eyes lingered on Derek’s bed a little bit longer than the rest. Was he mad at him? What should Stiles say when he saw him next? He thought about writing a little note of apology. Start with that, and see how angry Derek was after. But Stiles made the mistake of sitting down on his bed to dig through his drawer for paper. Somehow that led to his head falling back on his pillow, and before he knew it, Stiles was out; fast asleep, blank paper still clutched in one hand.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

8/11 update: edited by fairyfey, they are amazing! Check out their works here on Ao3 and on tumblr at gayglitterbabe!

Sooo. Welp. It frustrates me to no end to have my ‘clever’ episode numbers thrown off from the chapter numbers but I’m going to do it anyways.

Just about every other comment last chapter mentioned Stiles’ pants so I thought what Derek would think if he walked in on a sleeping Stiles after class. But Derek’s POV is not the opening/closing one for the next episode so that was going to throw me off... so I thought extended scene, directors cut, whatever you want to call it.

And then it got heavy... sorry.

Thanks for all the love!

Bonus Scene:

Derek had so many thoughts racing through his head that he honestly didn’t catch a single word of what Harris was saying during class. But school was over for the day and now he could escape to his dorm and properly think. It was a nice and sunny day, so chances were that no one else would disturb him, too.

He moved so quickly after class that Derek assumed at the very least he’d be the first to occupy the dorm room and perhaps his mood would ward off the others if it came to that. He threw open the cabin door with every intention of collapsing on his bed to sort through his thoughts, but the image that met his eyes froze him in place, instead.

Stiles was sprawled out on top of his bed with one arm flung haphazardly off the edge and his face buried deep into the comforter that laid beneath him. He hadn’t even managed to get under the thing! Those damn pants clung to him and Derek found his eyes drawn to the swell of his ass. The jacket must have been returned to its owner, because the tank top he wore had ridden up just
enough to leave a strip of skin exposed. Two little back-dimples stared tantalizingly at him.

As soon as Derek could recover from the unexpected sight, he realized that Stiles was still wearing his shoes. He must have been exhausted! Derek looked behind himself, half expecting someone else to come interrupt his self-appointed brooding time. When the yard was clear of students returning to their dorms, he closed the door quietly.

Very carefully so as to not wake the sleeping teen, Derek started to untie and remove Stiles’ sneakers. He had managed the first one without issue but Stiles stirred a little once Derek grabbed the second. He paused, hands still on the laces, as Stiles rolled over onto his side.

Derek took in his face. The black marks from his eyes had now spread to his cheek bones leaving the rest of his skin a deathly pale shade. His hair was a mess, which was normal but now it appeared a little too greasy. His bottom lip, while blood free, was definitely bigger than he remembered, and that coupled with the purplish-yellow bruise on his jaw meant that Stiles had indeed been in a fight. Was it something that had happened in prison? Derek was supposed to be mad at him for leaving! But it was difficult to feel anything aside from sympathy for that face.

Assured that Stiles was still asleep, Derek continued untangling the knot on the remaining shoe. The new angle was a little easier to work with and a moment later he was sliding it off, when Stiles stirred again. This time the sleeping boy pulled his legs up, forming the fetal position.

“Please stop,” Stiles murmured.

Derek immediately did as he was asked. He had no choice since Stiles slid his foot up, shoe half hanging off of it, when he bent his knees. Derek was just about to reach for the shoe regardless, as it was barely even on him now, when Stiles spoke again.

“No, I don’t want to. Please not— not tonight.” His face was pinched and brow furrowed.

It dawned on Derek then that Stiles was dreaming and his words had nothing to do with the removal of his sneakers. Whatever Stiles was seeing behind his closed lids it couldn’t have been good with the way he continued to pull himself in further, a slight shake to his body.

Derek was torn, should he wake him? Stop the nightmare? Let him sleep? His shoe would fall of on its own by this point. Maybe he should go get a counselor. Stiles sort of looked like he was in pain; did he just wince? Derek’s indecision was interrupted by Stiles again.
This time it was barely just a whisper. “I’ll be a good boy, I swear I will…”

Derek didn’t like the fear he heard lacing those words. He needed to wake him. The memory of startling a sleeping Stiles in the kitchen during the blackout storm came back to Derek so he purposely went around to the other side of the bed, where he was sure he’d be able to protect himself better. He was just about to place a hand on Stiles’ shoulder when he noticed the single tear rolling down his cheek.

“Hurts.” Stiles barely spoke the word, but Derek was sure he heard correctly.

The dormitory door opened at what was probably a normal speed, but it stilled Derek’s outstretched hand and caused Stiles to shoot up.

Lydia stood illuminated by the sunlight on the other side of the door with wide uncertain eyes that jotted back and forth between Stiles and Derek. She held an envelope in her hand and opened her mouth to say something but thought better of it and quickly clamped her jaw shut.

Stiles took in Lydia for a second and then nearly jumped out of his bed when he realized how close Derek was to him.

No one spoke.

Eventually Derek allowed his outstretched hand to drop to his side, awkwardly. “You were having a nightmare, I was going to wake you up,” he explained.

“A— night-mare,” Stiles repeated, croakily. With a shaky hand, he moved his hand up to wipe at his face, turning his back on both Lydia and Derek.

Lydia wasn’t leaving or coming further inside so Derek felt perhaps he should explain what he could. “Lydia can’t speak, she’s on silent restriction. Did you want to give someone that letter?”

“John mentioned that,” Stiles said quietly still facing away.
Lydia nodded and hesitantly approached. Before giving Stiles the note however, she grabbed a pen from his desk and scribbled something on it that made Stiles chuckle. After that she sort of bowed her thanks to Derek and left.

Derek, feeling confused and not sure if Stiles was okay or even what his nightmare could have possibly been about, awkwardly retreated to his own bed. Stiles had yet to fully turn back around but he glanced down at his appearance, his eyes trailing from the shoe on his bed to the one on the floor.

“I tried to take your shoes off,” Derek started to say. “But umm, then you started talking—”

Stiles whipped around at that, eyes wide. “What did I say?”

“What—what were you dreaming about, it umm, was weird, I think—”

“What did I say?” Stiles repeated, this time in a deadly tone, narrowing his eyes as he spoke.

“Well, at first I thought you wanted me to stop taking off your shoes and then—you said something about being good, and then…” Derek trailed off, glancing at his bed just to break their eye contact.

“And then what?” Stiles asked, his voice a little louder this time.

“You said you were in pain, that it hurt…” Derek looked up in time to see Stiles nodding to himself and he got up.

Stiles stood with his bare arms exposed, looking lankier and somehow more dangerous than Derek had ever seen him and that included mere hours ago when he was stepping out of the police car still cuffed.

“Thanks,” he muttered at last. “I’m going to take a shower.” He turned for the restroom.

“Wait,” Derek sputtered out. “What was that about?”
Stiles paused. “Just a nightmare, like you said.”

“That wasn’t a normal nightmare!” Derek had some bad ones occasionally of his family trapped and burning. Even more recently with the addition of Kate standing impossibly tall over the house, still in her school pride shirt and usually nothing else… He woke from them in a cold sweat sometimes too. But Stiles was shaking, pleading and even crying. What was he dreaming about to cause that?

“Don’t worry about it. I’m fine. Sorry you had to see that,” Stiles said as he slipped off to the bathroom.

Derek had so many questions. His early anger was all but pushed from his mind but a moment later the sound of water running indicated that even if he did follow Stiles into the bathroom, the other would be indecent and the conversation just wouldn’t be right. He found that he had stood up and was halfway to the room regardless. Derek paused on his way back to his bed, Lydia’s letter sat unopened on Stiles’ desk with his name written in big loopy handwriting.

He turned it over and read in a sloppier scrawl, ‘you’re a mess, go take a shower’. Lydia even had the gull to add a winking face. Derek felt his earlier anger return, albeit this time with a new red-haired target.

And then he remembered that Stiles had chuckled at the remark. Was that something friends would say to one another? Were Stiles and Lydia friends now? His head was swimming with thoughts and concerns. Derek sat on his bed and waited for Stiles to return.

Stiles, it would seem, had a different plan, as he stayed in the shower for over an hour. The steam from how hot the water was had started to bellow out from under the door. Derek took the hint. Stiles was serious about not wanting to talk, so he left the dorm hoping that perhaps they’d be able to discuss everything during dinner.

One thing he now knew for certain; despite how well Derek thought he had gotten to know his friend over the past six weeks, he didn’t really know him at all. Stiles was keeping secrets.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Edited on 8/21 by the fantastic fairyfey

WARNING: again, the whole fic is extremely triggering for many reasons. This chapter has a section where Stiles thinks about his childhood sexual abuse in detail, nothing explicit, but the word choices might be an issue for some.

Chapter Notes

I’m sorry that you’re all probably sick of my apologies, but like Lydia, I should learn to apologize better, right?

I will go through my inbox tonight and start the next chapter tomorrow. Thank you for the love! It makes my day.

Now on to my apology and excuses: Did you know that season 5 of fortnite coincides with how long it took me to post this chapter? It’s not a coincidence... As a matter of fact I literally took three days to write and self edit this and that was preceded by more than a month playing video games and ignoring Microsoft word completely. For that I am sorry.

I took my “I’m just going to take a small break” concept way too far. The best I can offer is to take your requests in the comments, so feel free to ask for things to happen in this story (I almost made John offer Stiles a candy bar because of a comment, it just didn’t feel right and may still happen) or ask for suggestions for future fics. I have a list of suggestions for the pack reads fanfiction series so keep them coming! And if your suggestion is for me to finish this or One mistake, it’s going to happen, promise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Episode 13
“Yes… I understand—I know, we will definitely reschedule.” John was already rubbing a temple with one hand as he clutched the office phone with his other.

It was barely past eight in the morning and he had already spent over an hour talking with various caseworkers and lawyers regarding Stiles. Unfortunately, he had missed a conference call with the school’s proposed new investor during the retrieval of Melissa’s students and was stuck working out the details of the future call with his feisty secretary. Deucalion’s firm had already ‘donated’ the materials for the recently rebuilt fence. It wouldn’t do for John to linger much longer without signing the contract.

Fortunately, he was interrupted from having to placate Kali any further by a knock at his door. “I’ll get back with you as soon as I can—by noon, your time, promise! Okay, got to go—yep, goodbye!”

John allowed himself a minute of silence before he opened the office door. It was Stiles.

“Thank you for coming,” John began. “I take it you’ve finished breakfast? Feel better with a couple of proper meals in you now?”

Stiles nodded once.

“Take a seat. Melissa will be joining us soon, but I’m a little crunched for time so we can begin without her. We’ve heard Lydia’s version of events and now I’d like to hear yours.”

Stiles sighed and dove in. He started with not being able to sleep and deciding to walk the school grounds to clear his head when he ran into Lydia. He told John that it wasn’t planned, and he had initially only followed her to stop her. Stiles explained his thought process about returning to the school but choosing to stay with Lydia once he saw the headlights and he explained his fear of letting her go alone with the stranger.

“—I just, I’ve been there, you know. Lydia was so optimistic and so blind to where hitchhiking could lead. I figured if I went too then this guy would at least have to fight off both of us. I know I shouldn’t have, but what if something had happened to her?” Stiles rambled. “What if I stayed here and the next time we saw Lyds, it was in a bodybag? And trafficking girls is no joke, she could have easily been mixed up in a ring, she’s pretty, like really pretty! They would have drugged her
“Okay.” John held up a hand. “Those are all possibilities, but Stiles, what if the next time we saw you, you were in a bodybag? You could have been drugged and sold or an infinite number of other horrible outcomes. The fact is you are both incredibly lucky that something worse didn’t happen and your safety is just as important to us as Lydia’s.”

Melissa slipped silently into the office with those words and made her way to lean on John’s chair in a show of solidarity. Her usual smile was absent as she bore her eyes into Stiles who didn’t show much of a response to what John had said.

“Do you understand?” Melissa asked. “You matter too. While it was brave of you to tag along with Lydia, it was risky. You are important too. One student’s wellbeing isn’t more valuable than another’s. I hope if there is anything you take away from this experience, it’s that. As noble as your intentions might have been, it wasn’t worth your safety…or breaking the law.”

“We haven’t gotten to that part yet,” John informed her as he studied Stiles’ reaction. He looked…doubtful?

Stiles continued his tale. He had a lot more to say about the night club and how he had been separated from Lydia than she had informed them. They had also found the source of Stiles’ bruised jaw. The bump on the head was later explain when Stiles told them of his arrest. The violence involved in that scuffle was enlightening as well.

“And that’s it. From there you know what happened. The police called you and I guess they picked up Lydia too or something and you came to get us,” Stiles finished.

“Not exactly,” Melissa said. “Lydia called us first.”

“Oh,” Stiles seemed shocked. “Well, I’m glad she did, I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t have lasted long on her own, honestly. I mean who loses all their money?” He added wistfully, with a shake of his head.

John huffed out an unexpected laugh at that but didn’t comment.

“Stiles, honey, no one deserves to be homeless and to have to struggle like that. Not Lydia and not
you either. True, some people fall on tough times, but you’re fifteen. Your worries should be focused on keeping your grades up, not your financial issues or where your next meal will come from!” Melissa said in a steady voice. “Do you understand that? That’s why none of us want you living on your own, that’s why the courts sent you to live with us, to stop you from running away again.”

Stiles couldn’t keep his eye contact at those words and suddenly seemed more interested in the ground. “I just—I didn’t want to run, not from here, anyway. I won’t do it again,” he said at last in a small voice.

John leaned forward and asked, “Why did you want to run away from your stepfather’s home, Stiles?”

Stiles didn’t respond and failed to look up.

“Listen, we’re doing everything we can to convince your case worker not to petition the courts to switch your sentence to house arrest.” Stiles’ eyes shot up, all round and pleading. “I know you don’t want that!” John added hastily. “You need to tell us why, if he’s abusive—”

“No,” Stiles quickly refuted. “He’s n—not,” he staggered to say.

“Please,” John added. “Please tell us, we can’t help you if we don’t know the whole truth. Stiles, why are you protecting him?”

Stiles balled his fists up in his lap and simply looked lost for words.

“If he threatened you… we can make sure he won’t come near you again. We can protect you, but you have to tell us,” Melissa tried in a gentler tone than her boss.

“It’s not—you can’t—don’t say things like that!” Stiles whispered eventually.

“We want to help you,” John emphasized. “You’re not here to give your stepdad a break from parenting, you’re here so we can help you to become a successful adult. So, if he’s done something to hinder that, in any way, tell us, please.”
“No. No he’s— fine, it’s whatever— you can send me home, if you want to—”

Stiles attempted to say that sentence without meeting either of the counselor’s eyes, but John cut him off. “We don’t want to. The last place I think you should be is anywhere that makes you so afraid, and you are clearly frightened of him, but we can’t protect you if you don’t tell us why. Say the words and we’ll bring child protective—”

“No!” Stiles burst out. “Please don’t! You can’t—”

“We’re here to help,” Melissa assured. “CPS will help you too, protect you, they won’t send you home if—”

“You don’t know anything!” Stiles challenged.

Melissa shared a glance with John. This was a conversational topic they had attempted to breach with Stiles in the past and it had yet been successful. Whatever Stiles was hiding, he wasn’t willing to come forward.

“If you’re concerned about Simon getting in trouble—”

“I don’t care about him!” Stiles spat out with disgust.

“Clearly you have strong opinions on the matter,” Melissa said with a raised eyebrow.

“Has he hurt you?” John asked more gently.

“No,” Stiles replied quickly.

“Abuse can be more than physical, we’ve talked about emotional abuse in group, or sexual—” Melissa attempted to press, but Stiles jumped up, interrupting her sentence.

“Stop. Just stop,” Stiles shouted. “It’s fine, forget I ever said anything,” he added in a more appropriate tone as he sat back down.
John felt Melissa tremble back when Stiles had sprung out of his seat in a haste to stop her from asking that question. Subconsciously he patted her thigh in a sign of reassurance. They may have finally broken down another of Stiles’ walls.

Trying his best to remain calm and collective, John started, “Men can be the victims of sexual assault too. That type of abuse isn’t limited to one gender, just because you’re male doesn’t mean a sexual advance is automatically welcomed, despite society’s tendencies to portray men as always up for the act. If your stepfather touched you—"

“Shut up!” Stiles bellowed harshly. “God, just stop! He didn’t, okay?” Splotches of red now marred his cheeks as he adamantly denied the claim. “The last thing I need is for you guys to accuse him of— that!”

“Stiles, what is it then?” Melissa asked.

“We’re on your side and we’re here to help,” John added. “Give me something to work with; a reason to convince the courts that this is the best place for you.”

Stiles shook his head as he kept his gaze adverted. “I—I don’t need your help. Whatever the caseworker decides is fine. You guys tried and that was something but I’m not— you can’t help me, okay? Can I just get my punishment and go… please?” He tacked on the last word with extra emphasis.

John glanced at Melissa and knew she was fighting to hold back tears.

“I can have CPS here, today. We can file a petition and immediately block Simon’s custody, it would be temporary until we gathered all the information for the charges but it would be enough to stop your house arrest,” John tried to reason.

“Just stop it. You can’t— it won’t work,” Stiles mumbled, “and even if it did, it would just make things worse, so much worse.”

“Worse?” John asked. “How so?”
Stiles pressed his lips together further as he continued to look away and refused to answer the question. “My consequence?” He asked instead after a minute of silence.

“Consider your community service as punishment enough. Starting tonight for dinner you can sit where you like rather than at the staff table with us, no more shuns. You’ll be leaving with Chris soon, actually, for your first day on trash pick up! The local park on the north side of town will be spotless by the time you’re finished, I’m sure. You’ll meet the probation officer too and fortunately Chris has a lot of pride in this town because he volunteered to stay with you and give a helping hand, as well. Oh, and Stiles, the curfew applies to all students, no more nighttime strolls, okay?”

Stiles looked perplexed. “Thank— Thank you,” he stammered out as he stood again.

“You’re going to want some sun protection, long sleeves and a hat,” Melissa called after Stiles’ retreating back in the mothering way her teens had grown accustomed to.

As soon as the door was shut, Melissa rounded on John in turn. “This isn’t over. We’re not giving up just because he refuses to talk.” The tears she was suppressing had finally started to fall.

“I know. We can’t push him either, it might only serve to isolate him further. It will take time, it’s already been months, but we’ll get to the bottom of it,” John said with determination. “We have to.”

Melissa needed a few minutes to recover and John still had to arrange his schedule to fit in that conference with the investor so the two sat in relative silence until it was interrupted by another knock on the door.

To John’s surprise it was Derek who entered. The head counselor quickly shuffled some papers around to see if the young man had a scheduled session or a meeting with his uncle’s lawyers, but nothing came up.

“Good morning Derek!” John greeted a little belatedly.

“I’m sorry am I interrupting?” Derek asked, unsure, as he glanced at Melissa’s tear-stricken face.

“No, sweetie, of course not, we always have time for our students, and if not, we make time,” Melissa said, sincere. “Is this about the video statement you’ll be recording next weekend?”
John felt a wave a guilt wash over him as he thought about how little time he truly had, as he was already playing catch up with the paperwork and Derek’s court statement had slipped his mind. He nodded in agreement all the same, however.

“It’s um, it’s about Stiles actually,” Derek admitted.

Both John and Melissa perked up a little. “Is everything okay?” Melissa asked, her face giving away her worry.

Derek sighed. “I don’t know,” he started as he explained his concerns from hearing Stiles talk in his sleep the other day and how the younger teen had been avoiding him since.

Melissa shared several more knowing looks with John before Derek had finished.

“I know the two of you have been close lately and you said it yourself in group when he was missing that you didn’t understand, that you were mad at him for running away, how do you feel now? Are you still angry? Confused?” Melissa asked gently.

“I don’t know,” Derek repeated with frustration. “I mean I want to be mad but not after what he said in his dream and why won’t he talk to me? I know he was on shuns but we could have talked last night before bed, I think—I think he faked falling asleep to avoid me…” he trailed off, not meeting either counselor’s eye.

“Thank you for coming to us,” John said in lieu of answering Derek’s concerns. “We’re worried about him too, and I agree with you that his dream was probably based on something that happened, although I don’t think it was recent; during his stay in New Mexico. Stiles hasn’t been as forthcoming as some of our other students, yourself included, and while we have our suspicions, that’s all they are at this moment. None of us can force him to open up to us and while it may seem cruel, all we can do in the meantime is continue to be there for him. Let him come to us when he’s ready.”

It was pretty much the same thing John had said to Melissa, but he was worried that pushing too much would only send Stiles further away.

“Just be there and ready to help when he’ll let you,” Melissa added reassuringly. “Thank you again for sharing your concerns, and if you want to talk more, we can, anytime.”
“But— I’ve told him!” Derek protested. “I tell him about it all! The lawyers used words such as— ‘rape of a minor’ and ‘the victim’ and—and ‘manipulation’! And Stiles talks to me afterwards, I’ve told him everything! He knows— why didn’t he tell me about— whatever that dream was about? I mean my mistakes cost me my family! Why can’t he tell me his?” As he spoke, Derek grew louder and now his brows were scrunched together in confusion.

“I’m glad you opened up to him,” Melissa said soothingly. “It’s important not to bottle up all those emotions, and I’m sorry he hasn’t in return, but don’t write him off just yet. No one’s experiences are the same. Maybe-maybe he felt you needed a shoulder to lean on and that you just couldn’t handle his traumas yet. Give him time.”

Derek looked ready to argue when there was yet another knock on the door. This time it was Chris.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Chris began, “Stiles and I are leaving now, and I just wanted to let you know I have a Kali on hold on line one and a Dr. Geyer on line two. I’d start with the woman, I’m pretty sure she mentioned sharpening her nails while she waited for you. See you tonight.” And then he was gone.

“Leaving?” Derek quickly questioned. “Where—”

“Community service, he’ll be back before dinner,” Melissa told him. “Listen, let’s take a walk and continue our discussion just the two of us, okay? Let John take his calls. Are you ready for tryouts this afternoon?” She added in attempt to raise everyone’s mood.

Derek hesitated to get up but followed Melissa to the door, regardless. John sent the student what he hoped was an encouraging smile as he looked for his calendar buried under other pieces of paper.

Before they left however, Melissa whispered to John, “I know you’re busy, but I um, I need to talk to you too. Tonight, maybe?” She did her best to keep her grin in place, but John saw the cracks behind the façade.

He nodded. “Of course.” She was gone with a click of the door and John hesitated to pick up the phone again.
Derek saw Stiles leaning patiently against Chris’ truck. He was back in his oversized flannel tees and jeans. As soon as the two made eye contact, the younger teen flitted his eyes away and Melissa squeezed Derek’s shoulder in an attempt to get his attention.

The two walked the perimeter of the campus once as they discussed further how Derek felt. He dove deeper into how uncomfortable the lawyer sessions made him feel and Melissa spent a good deal of time stressing that Kate’s actions, the fire, wasn’t his fault. Despite saying it multiple times himself, Derek didn’t quite believe the statement just yet. He brought that fate on his family the moment he acknowledged Kate’s advances. There was no getting around that indisputable fact, but he placated Melissa by telling her what she wanted to hear. They talked a little bit more about Stiles as well. Discussing another student wasn’t necessarily proper, but Melissa kept the conversation to how Derek felt about things rather than what could have happened to his classmate.

In the end they found themselves on the newly finished lacrosse field, where several of the students were running drills and practicing for the official tryouts after lunch. Derek joined them, thanking Melissa for her time.

Melissa tried to get a moment alone with John after that, but it seemed the office phone was ringing nonstop all morning and the man was seriously busy. She thought perhaps lunch would be a good time to intervene and attempted to do so by bringing him a sandwich from the cafeteria, but his door was closed still and when he yelled for her to open it after her knock she spied the empty Reese’s wrapper on his desk and a guilty look on the senior counselor’s face. He held the phone in one hand and was scribbling notes with the other. Melissa placed the plate of food on the only part of his desk that wasn’t occupied by paper, mouthed ‘later’, and closed the door behind herself as she left.

She pressed her back against the door and squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to keep her emotions in check. It was eating her up inside; everything Stiles and Derek had insinuated. If—If her suspicions were true, God, she had allowed Stiles off campus with that man! So many other instances with Stiles were coming back to her. She had failed him, spectacularly. Whether Stiles kept the truth hidden or not, it was her job to protect and love these kids.

It took several deep breaths for Melissa to regain control. John and her students needed her to remain calm. She didn’t have the time or the right to berate herself for that mistake, not yet.
“Ma’am are you okay?” A stranger asked suddenly, causing Melissa’s eyes to fly open.

Standing before her was a smartly dressed gentleman and a young teen she could only assume was his son. The youth had a thick head of brown hair and face scrunched up in annoyance as so many new arrivals often did. This one however was just a tad familiar.

“I’m fine, thank you,” Melissa started. “You’re Satomi’s student, aren’t you? Liam, right?”

The father smiled. “Yes, yes, I’m Dr. Geyer and this is my stepson, Liam Dunbar. I spoke with your director, Mr. Stilinski this morning,” he said politely. “We were hoping to observe your curriculum and assess the program, see if perhaps this is a better fit.”

“Oh?” Melissa glanced at Liam to see how he felt about considering Beacon of Hope, but the teen had yet to acknowledge her. “Well John’s in a meeting right now, I can take you back to my office if you like, my name’s Melissa, I’m a counselor here and we can talk about—”

“I was hoping to get a more hands on experience. Could Liam perhaps participate, while I observe his behavior?” Dr. Geyer interrupted to ask.

“Oh, hm. We find that parental interference can cause disruptions for new students. We offer healing and a place where the student is meant to feel safe. It’s a school, don’t get me wrong, but also a sanctuary.” Melissa started the safe place speech and paled at the reminder that she told Stiles the same thing that first night when they met in the mess hall.

Dr. Geyer saved her from faltering by interrupting again. “I should be clear. Liam isn’t necessarily on board yet. He has some rather strong opinions about your school, and I assured him that we wouldn’t make this official until he was more comfortable with the idea.”

That was new. Students were sent here either by the courts or by parents who felt they had lost control. The school was truly a last resort for most (with the exception of Allison) and it wasn’t the first choice for any of the kids in attendance. Melissa doubted a weekend retreat would be enough to sway any of their students, let alone one with such preconceived animosity towards the place. However, Dr. Geyer looked so eager and Melissa didn’t have it in her to disappoint him without giving his son a chance.

She smiled wide, a little forcefully. “Well, if I remember correctly, Liam, you were a big fan of lacrosse? We will be having tryouts for the team shortly, we can head that way and I’ll introduce
you to everyone and the coach just as soon as we go through the check in process. Typically I would search your bags—"

“I’ll go get them!” Dr. Geyer said brightly.

Melissa did her best to refrain from showing her surprise. How long were they going to stay? Or was this just incase they decided to make the transition permanent? Either way, she wasn’t sure whose group Liam would be assigned to and none of the other counselors were around to discuss it. She glanced at John’s door and chose not to disturb him. For now, she would take Liam under her wing.

Despite being told he wasn’t allowed to try out, Jackson was leading the scrimmage drills on one side of the field while Danny went over blocking techniques on the other. Most of the students had paper numbers pinned to their backs and fronts, while a few looked like they were merely spectating. Melissa was glad to see Derek out there with the others with what appeared to be a genuine smile on his face.

“Well, Liam, would you like to meet Coach? I know you’re not officially a student yet but perhaps you’d like to participate in tryouts just in case,” Melissa asked.

Coach Finstock shook hands with the newcomers, his eyes lighting up as Liam boasted about his lacrosse prowess. Melissa kindly reminded the coach that Jackson couldn’t participate.

“Ah caught that did ya? Was hoping you’d let him slide…He’s a great talent.” Finstock argued.

“You’ll learn here Liam, that actions have consequences. If you break the rules, you’ll lose privileges. It’s an honor and a right you earn to participate for our school’s team.” Melissa was proud that most of her kids were among the numbered students and she was pleased to see Kira and Erica mixed in with the sea of boys.

“Can’t be too difficult then, to make the team, with all these rejects around,” Liam muttered.

It was one of the first things he’d said and despite his stepdad scolding him and demanding he apologize, Melissa merely waved off the comment and told him to grab a number and get on the
field. She then led the doctor to an almost unoccupied picnic table to watch. Boyd sat by himself, cheering for his girlfriend and other group mates.

“Hey Melissa, did you bring a date to tryouts?” Boyd boldly asked.

“This is Dr. Geyer, Liam’s stepfather. You remember him from the triathlon? They are considering our school, taking the weekend to observe.”

Boyd creased his forehead. “Didn’t know we could do that,” he said eventually.

“Would you have stayed if given the option?” Melissa asked.

He looked contemplative. “That first month was scary. I came here at the start of my ninth grade year,” he explained to Dr. Geyer. “There aren’t too many freshmen here, I think we had seven total in my English class. Anyway, I thought everyone was sent here for doing horrible things and I thought I’d be killed in my sleep…”

“My son’s a freshman,” Dr. Geyer said as he watched the teens line up for sprints. “Although I suspect he’d be the one to do the killing.” At their shocked expressions, he quickly added, “he has an issue with his temper.”

Boyd nodded as if that was understandable.

“And now? How do you feel about being here at Beacon of Hope?” Melissa asked, already knowing the answer.

Boyd chuckled. “I don’t want to leave, actually. I can, well I have one more right of passage to complete first, but,” he pointed at Melissa, “you claim I’m ready to plant my flag, but I’m just not sure.”

“You are ready,” Melissa encouraged. “You’re so much stronger than you were when I first took over your group two and a half years ago. You’re wiser, making better decisions and valuing yourself in a way you weren’t able to back then. You barely spoke and now look at you!”
“Would you say that you’ve improved then?” Dr. Geyer asked optimistically.

“Big time,” Boyd agreed quickly. “I, um, I lost my sister. She drowned when I was thirteen. I was with her, I was supposed to be watching her, but I couldn’t save her. It took me too long to fight the current and… I didn’t get to her in time….” Boyd paused with a faraway look in his eyes. “I didn’t speak for months after. My mom was so worried. A counselor suggested this place, I was scared of coming here, but now I think it was the best thing my parents could have done…”

Melissa patted his shoulder, proudly. “You’ll definitely be a Beacon of Hope success story. We just have to get your flag on Triskelion Point.”

“Triskelion Point?” Dr. Geyer asked. As a local it would make sense that he’d recognize the difficulty with that feat.

“It’s not the trek that’s holding me up. I’ve learned enough about life and survival in these woods from Melissa here, but our flags are supposed to represent our growth and I’m having difficulty with visualizing that. I became the man I am because of the people here. The counselors, my friends— I was a loner before. It’s not just me getting to that mountain top, it’s all of us!”

“Very— inspiring. I’m starting to think you had us sit here on purpose.” Dr. Geyer teased Melissa.

“Well, I’ve been known to make a smart move every once in awhile.” Just saying the words out loud caused Melissa to grimace as she thought of Stiles and the big mistake she had made with him.

Dr. Geyer went on to explain the extent of Liam’s temper. He was expelled from Devenford Prep due to several instances of fighting. Hence the reason for looking into the other local schools. Melissa inquired about any recent changes at home, but Dr. Geyer insisted that he and his wife had been married for nearly ten years and the relationship between himself and his stepson was actually pretty good. His real father had moved out of the state a few years ago and that time was difficult, but things had gotten better. Melissa suggested they look into a pediatric psychologist and even recommended a few that had worked with students at the school previously. They talked about possibilities, such as Intermittent Explosive Disorder. The doctor admitted that he had considered it and said that his wife had expressed similar concerns with her first husband. In the end, they both love Liam and simply want what’s best for him. Boyd commented that the kids whose parents truly care seem to do alright eventually and that he thinks Liam would really benefit from not being cooped up in a classroom all the time.

They were just telling Dr. Geyer about the rope bridge course when Coach’s whistle interrupted.
The students on the field had formed a circle and it was clear there was a disruption going on in the center. Both adults jumped up to see what happened while Boyd seemed satisfied that Erica was clearly away from the entanglement of bodies on the floor.

“What is going on?” Melissa called over the noise as Finstock bellowed out that everyone involved in the altercation would be running laps.

At the center of the circle was Isaac nursing a swollen eye socket. Scott was seething to his right and Jackson and Kira were there too, both glaring daggers at one boy: Liam. Liam, who didn’t look remotely sorry and was actually pacing with pent up frustration. Derek and a few others jogged over while Finstock’s threats were enough for most of the other lacrosse hopefuls to back away.

“What happen?” Melissa asked in a clear voice at the same time Finstock yelled, “I don’t even want to know how you managed to get your elbow that high. Dunbar I’m moving you to defense and you’re only allowed to injure the other team from now on.”

“What? No!” Melissa protested.

“I am injuring the other team, Coach. I play for Devenford,” Liam said smugly causing all of the other students to protest why he was even here, then.

Dr. Geyer was quick to point out that Liam was no longer allowed on Devenford’s campus, much less be a part of their team. He took it a step further and said that he wouldn’t be playing for Beacon of Hope either unless he could reign in his aggression. Finstock quickly countered that point by listing off examples of better uses for his anger, all of which revolved around playing lacrosse for him. Melissa ignored both men and instead went into nurse mode on Isaac’s eye.

“That will definitely be bruising, but I don’t think anything is broken,” she said at last. “Allison, can you take him to get cleaned up and ice it every ten minutes until I find you two and tell you otherwise,” She ordered.

Allison had rushed over as soon as she realized that it was Isaac who was hurt. Melissa suspected she was with Lydia before, but now wasn’t so sure as the redhead wasn’t in sight.

“We don’t want him on our team!” Scott addressed Coach. “He’s a spy!”
“And violent,” Derek added.

“If he’s allowed to try out then so should I!” Jackson argued.

“You shouldn’t even be on this field right now!” Melissa warned causing Jackson to stalk off before she had the chance to add more time to his sentence.

“Liam, despite Finstock’s preference, we don’t condone violent behavior here. We talked about this, and if lacrosse is too much we will not hesitate to ban it,” Melissa said with authority to all of them. This caused everyone to groan, even Coach.

“It was an accident, really, his face got in the way of my elbow, right guys?” Liam asked the group at large with pleading eyes.

If they didn’t agree with the blatant lie, the sport could be forfeited for all. Danny was quick to say it was a clean hit. Kira didn’t voice her agreement but nodded along regardless. A few of the others vouched for Liam but Derek simply folded his hands and looked doubtful. It was Scott however that refused to play along.

“No! No way that was—he knew what he was doing, and he had a smirk on his face the whole time!” Scott told Melissa firmly. “This is Isaac we’re talking about guys, we can’t let some outsider just hurt him like that— Isaac! How many bruises has he had to endure?” He asked the circle of students who weren’t helping him. “This is bull—”

“I didn’t see it, but I believe Scott,” Derek said firmly.

“Well you didn’t see it!” Liam replied with extra snark.

Melissa met Scott’s eyes and inclined her head in agreement with his statement as she addressed the group as a whole. “Let this serve as your one and only reminder to keep the game clean.”

Dr. Geyer apologized and benched his own son despite Coach claiming the man didn’t have the authority to do so. Melissa excused herself to go track down Isaac and Allison, leaving the doctor to sit next to his son in silence.
Tryouts resumed. Scott took over Jackson’s leadership role easily and soon Liam was back on the field. Every play Scott called was designed to make the new student look bad. Derek went along with Scott’s calls easily enough, earning a high five from the crooked-jaw teen when he sent Liam crashing into the earth with a shoulder check. Liam was quick to call out that it was a good hit while glaring menacingly at Scott. Everyone felt the animosity between the two.

Not long after, Stiles jogged up with the number ‘24’ pinned to his front. “Sorry I’m late man,” he called out to Scott.

Derek didn’t miss the way he purposely ran the long way around the field to avoid him. Scott quickly talked Stiles into his plan of attack on the newbie which Stiles didn’t even question. He didn’t have to know Isaac was nursing a black eye to play rough, it was clear he had Scott’s back no matter what. If Liam was disappointed that the late player wasn’t pitying him for all the hits he was taking, he didn’t show it.

Eventually, Coach’s whistle blew again, signifying the end.

“Allright, the official team numbers will be posted on my door after breakfast tomorrow and we will meet for practice at three! Better not be late!” Finstock bellowed out before they were fully dismissed. “And you all played well today. I’m obligated to say that, so you know if your counselor asks, I did, okay?”

Stiles was already heading back to the dorms with Scott and Kira, while they both questioned why he was late. Derek, feeling as though he would have to wait forever if he gave Stiles time to come around, decided to stalk after them. It was his dorm too, right?

Kira merrily went off to the girls’ side, saying something along the lines of wanting to get a shower in before Boyd and Erica decided to commandeer the place for a make out session.

“Hey, Stiles, can we talk?” Derek asked just before the trio made it to their cabin.

Scott gave Derek a hopeful thumbs up from behind Stiles’ back. He missed Stiles’ scowl and the contrast between the two was almost funny.
Stiles blew out a deep breath before agreeing and the two bypassed the dorm room in favor of the shaded grass near a large oak tree. They were both a little sweaty and sticky so what harm would sitting on the soil do now?

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Stiles started before Derek had a chance to organize his words. “Yesterday, I mean…”

“About your— dream?” Derek clarified.

“Yeaaah,” Stiles drew out the word, highlighting the awkwardness.

Derek took too long to find a way to speak as that was mostly what he wanted to discuss.

“Well, this conversation has truly been enlightening, big guy,” Stiles said with a smirk and patted Derek’s knee. “But uh, I’d like to go take a shower, so…”

“Why’d did you run— with Lydia? Did you two— did you plan it?” Derek asked before Stiles was able to get up.

“No!” Stiles didn’t hesitate to say. “Not even remotely, I just didn’t want her going by herself…”

Why were you out of bed when she ran in the middle of the night?”

“Couldn’t sleep.” Derek felt his anger soften with those words. “It’s actually kind of ironic to look back on now, because I was in bed literally thinking about our game of monopoly and how much fun we had that night and still couldn’t sleep. I went out to the lake dock— I do that a lot actually, when I saw Lydia trying to leave.”

“Why didn’t you— did you even want to— to come with me?” Derek asked quietly.

Stiles took another large intake of air before replying. “I was up, when you snuck out. I know that you paused at the foot of my bed. It was really difficult not to move.”
Derek didn’t know what he expected but such honesty, to know that Stiles purposely didn’t run with him, it was harder to hear than he thought it would be.

“I wouldn’t have been able to help you. I’m not good at kayaking during the day light,” Stiles explained. “You were sneaking out to see someone that I thought was still your girlfriend. At the time neither one of us really understood how much she was manipulating you, and you thought you loved her, told me so that same day.” Stiles paused. “I might get sent home still— for running with Lydia, if my case worker or the prosecutor, or whoever it is that gets to decide these things, thinks I should live under house arrest, rather than here. I knew it was a possibility, I wasn’t planning on coming back. I’m sorry for that, but if I wasn’t so stupid, if I didn’t get arrested, I wouldn’t be here now. I was going to get Lydia somewhere safe and then disappear, I’m sorry.”

Just hearing Stiles admit that he was leaving him, without so much as a goodbye, was hard. Derek didn’t know what to say and it must have shown, because Stiles kept going.

“I honestly don’t know what I’ll do if they send me home, but I can’t live there until I’m eighteen. I just can’t.”

“Why though? And what do you mean you don’t know what you will do. They can track you if you have an ankle monitor and that’s what would happen, right? Derek asked.

“Yeah, but—I can’t live with my stepfather.” Derek had to strain his ears to here the words.

“Is that what the dream was about? You can tell me,” Derek insisted.

Stiles shook his head, “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can! Isaac’s dad is in jail, they can do that to yours too.”

“It’s not the same. I can’t talk about it,” Stiles said fearfully.

“I tell you everything!” Derek said with more anger than he meant to. “Why are you keeping this stuff from me?”
Stiles scooted away, putting a full yard between them. “I can’t—you don’t have to. I thought talking was helping you, but—”

“It does help!” Derek insisted. “That’s why you should—”

“I can’t!” Stiles stood and said the words with more venom than before.

Derek knew that he had pushed too far. It was exactly what John had warned him against. When he looked back up, Stiles was gone, and Derek was all alone under the tree.

Stiles head was reeling by the time he made it to the mess hall for dinner. His conversation with Derek was playing on autopilot in his head, occasionally accented with Melissa and John’s pleas to come forward about his—*abuse*. Despite what the counselors might think, Stiles didn’t have a problem acknowledging what the monster had done to him. From the first time in third grade when the school had an assembly dedicated to teaching the elementary students about ‘bad touches’, he knew his mother’s husband was in the wrong. But it made his mom happy to see her boys getting along and she wasn’t willing to provide for her husband in such a fashion anymore, and Simon explain that it was Stiles’ turn to help out. It made Simon happy, and even though it left Stiles confused, it was okay—he could endure it.

But it continued after his mother’s death. It got worse, actually. Simon wanted to do painful things and he didn’t like it when Stiles fought back or refused. Any lingering doubts about who those warnings were for the year prior were erased from his mind. Stiles knew he was a victim of sexual abuse, even though he was only a nine year old boy. All the speakers talked about what women should do in those situations. It wasn’t the same and Stiles wasn’t sure who he could trust.

And Simon had his threats; many of them. When the fear of one would ware off, it was quickly replaced by another. *Your mom would be so disappointed in you, Stiles.* ‘The cops will blame her.’ ‘They won’t believe you. You’re annoying and talk too much, no one cares about you.’ So when Stiles was eleven and decided he didn’t want to take it anymore, he ran away.

When the officer had asked him why he ran away he told them that he had been sexually abused. Looking back at it, maybe it was the wording. If he didn’t use the adult terminology, if he simply
said he was afraid, maybe they would have done more to help him. Instead he was assigned his first case worker who came out and inspected his home exactly once. Simon and Stiles were interviewed separately and the case worker agreed with his stepfather that Stiles was acting out because of his mother’s death and repeating what he was taught to look out for in school. That coupled with the fact that he was picked up for prostitution and the caseworker assumed Stiles had an unhealthy obsession with sex.

Simon was furious. Stiles was lucky to escape without broken bones and he had a whole new reason to keep it a secret. It’s not like anyone believed him anyway.

But it wasn’t fear of retribution that held Stiles’ tongue now. Despite losing faith in John and Melissa after spending a night on his knees in a local hotel, Stiles believed the counselors wholeheartedly would try to protect him. He had never met anyone so willing to help before and even if their pleas to help him were misplaced and wasted, they had helped the others—Like Derek. They had helped Derek immensely.

However, simply stopping his return home to open an investigation wouldn’t solve anything. There was no proof and there was no proof last time. It was a battle of who could speak their way to victory, and Simon had won. If he accused his stepdad again, Stiles would be bidding his time in the mountains, while the monster would be free to exact his revenge, and the target of said revenge had already been made clear, Joe’s little brother.

Stiles wouldn’t put anything past Simon’s capabilities and if keeping his ghosts hidden meant that a five year old would never be haunted himself, it was worth it. For Stiles it really was that simple. As much as he wanted to bare all of his problems for the world to see, starting with John, he just couldn’t, and frankly having that offer dangled in front of him time and time again was becoming troublesome in its own right. Every time he said it was fine or that Simon wasn’t hurting him a piece of him died a little inside. He doubted he had much left to go before he’d be a walking, empty husk.

“Stiles… Stiles, you okay, man?” Scott asked, his tone betraying his worry.

Stiles blinked a few times before he realized where he was. He was so lost in thought, that to his peers it probably looked like he had completely zoned out. Everyone was looking at him with concern, none more so than Derek, which was truly a feat because he was also skirting his eyes.

“Yeah—Yeah man, I’m fine,” Stiles replied roughly, voice cracking on the final word.

Kira waited until the rest of the table continued their conversation before she nudged Stiles. “Hey
after dinner, Melissa’s girls’ dorm, be there,” she whispered.

“What? Why?” Stiles asked without bothering to keep his voice down.

Kira stepped on his foot. “Shhhh. Just do it.”

Stiles’ curiosity was peaked but Kira turned back to Scott who had apparently took it upon himself to plot out Liam’s demise. He was barking out orders to everyone.

“Did you see the bag in our dorm room? I think he’s staying with us!” Scott complained. “I can’t believe they’re making him share a room with Isaac! Plus, our group has enough guys.”

Boyd shrugged. “The dorm has ten beds, were not full yet.”

“Have you seen Isaac’s eye?” Scott asked, incredulously.

Stiles looked up and was startled to realize that Isaac and Allison were both at the table too. He must have really been out of it. The skin around Isaac’s right eye was already bruising. That would probably take a week to fade at least. Isaac himself seemed okay, however, a bit more cheerful with how much attention Allison was giving him.

“It’s Isaac!” Scott said as if that fact alone was enough to warrant his scheming.

Stiles spotted the new guy looking miserable across the hall eating dinner with his father. Despite Scott’s insistence and Isaac’s eye Stiles still felt a little sorry for him. The kid was bound to be teased for having an overprotective parent here. If Jackson wasn’t still on shuns and sitting with Melissa, Stiles was sure he’d have already found several new nicknames for the freshman.

Stiles, himself, wasn’t a fan of knew people, although Kira turned out to be alright, so maybe they ought to give the kid a chance too? A minute later and a squelching sound accompanied by a wet smack on the back of his head and Stiles couldn’t disagree with his previous thought fast enough. The wet remnants of a straw wrapper stuck to his neck. Turning slowly to follow the trajectory and Stiles found himself staring at a smug Liam. Perhaps they should teach the kid a lesson or two…
Stiles was all for cornering Liam with Scott but as soon as he placed his tray on the empty stack with the other students, Kira hooked her arm through his and tugged him towards the dorms.

“You don’t have much time, go quickly!” She hissed.

No one seemed to realize he wasn’t with them as the group of angry teens made their way towards the common room looking for the newbie, so Stiles didn’t feel so badly about abandoning them. Kira walked with Stiles until the girls’ dorm was in sight but stopped abruptly and pushed him.

“Go,” Kira ordered.

Stiles did. It wasn’t his first time in the girl’s dorm, but he still felt strangely out of place. It was empty except for one chair. The back of a strawberry blond head told Stiles that Lydia had probably arranged this whole thing. He didn’t know how that made him feel.

She cleared her throat. “Thank you for coming.”

Stiles awkwardly sat down on her bed as she gestured.

Lydia looked him up and down before she began. “I felt you deserved an apology to your face and that my letter wasn’t enough. It’s killing me not being able to talk to you guys. Are you okay? Did you get in trouble?” She asked earnestly.

Stiles met her gaze. “You still haven’t said it.”

Lydia sat up a little straighter and narrowed her eyes. “Fine, I’m sorry. Happy?” She bit out and then thought better of it. “I’m really sorry, actually. No one talks to me because I can’t speak back and Melissa hasn’t answered any of my questions so I honestly have no clue what the counselors are making you do. I hope you didn’t get in too much trouble, I told them it was all my fault. Did they drop the charges?”

“I have community service every other weekend, fifty hours of it,” Stiles said plainly.
Lydia winced. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“It wasn’t too bad today. It’d be worse in the summer, but I don’t mind the breeze and Chris went with me and glared at all the drug offenders they had out there, so it was kind of quiet and nice,” Stiles admitted.

“They have you with real criminals!”

Stiles shrugged.

“So, you’re staying here then? I am too! Isn’t it funny how neither one of us wanted to go home and we both get to stay, in the end?”

“You don’t have to return to your big empty mansion?” Stiles quipped. “They haven’t decided for me yet, my case worker, I might still be sent home,” he told her while keeping his emotions in check.

Lydia looked horrified. “Are—are you going to go, if that’s what they decide?”

“No, I don’t know, maybe.” Stiles fiddled with his hands as he spoke, he was so sick of discussing this and not knowing what was actually going to happen to him. “It’s okay, you don’t have to blame yourself, or whatever. It was my choice to go with you.”

“Would you do it again? Knowing that I’m alright and that you might have to leave—” Lydia asked hesitantly.

“I would,” Stiles replied, sounding sure. “John and Melissa gave me this speech about how I’m important too and should value my self worth over yours, but I wouldn’t have let you go by yourself, never. You could have been killed.”

Lydia’s breath hitched. “We both could have.”

“Well at least we wouldn’t have died alone.”
Lydia sent Stiles a real smile at that. “Thanks,” she muttered.

“So why are you avoiding Derek?” Lydia asked breaking the spell that settled over them with the seriousness of the previous conversation.

Stiles fell back on her bed and sighed. This was another thing he was sick of thinking about. “I thought no one was talking to you? And it’s not like you can ask questions, so how did you know?”

“I still have eyes, Stiles! I’m not blind! He was acting really strange when I went to your cabin. And now neither one of you will look at the other… You barely spoke during dinner,” Lydia said matter of factly.

“You were watching me from the staff table?” Stiles asked with annoyance.

“I’m not the only one, Melissa was boring holes into the back of your head.”

“Why can’t everyone just leave me alone?” Stiles huffed out.

“Maybe because we care?” Lydia offered.

Stiles raised a doubtful eyebrow at that, but Lydia maintained her stance on the matter by refusing to break eye contact. “They do care about you, Melissa, and John, and Derek!”

“And you!” Stiles finished for her.

“Maybe a little,” Lydia admitted. “Okay maybe more than a little,” she added after seeing Stiles’ smirk.

“It’s wasted on me though,” Stiles told her. “Your concern. It’s not going to help me at all once I’m back in Florida…”

“Well then maybe we should keep bothering you with it while we can?”
“Please don’t!” Stiles interjected. “My head hurts enough as it is, I don’t think I can handle any more heart to heart talks.”

“Well then, let’s talk about boys,” Lydia suggested. “You and Derek…”

“How do you always get your way?” Stiles asked. “Fine. There is no me and Derek, we’re just friends.”

“But you want there to be more,” Lydia said knowingly. “And I’m pretty sure he does too.”

“It’s complicated. You know all those meetings he has with his uncle and the men with flashy cars?” Stiles asked.

“Yeah, about the fire?” Lydia prompted.

“Well there’s more to it than that, Derek’s been talking with me about it and a lot of fucked up shit happened and he blames himself now, which is just bullshit, but it will take time for him to see that, and I think maybe he sees me as more than just a person to vent to, I know he does, it’s in the way he looks at me. And I want that, God I want that with him, but he needs time, and I’m used goods, you know, he deserves—”

“Stop,” Lydia interrupted. “Don’t even finish that sentence. Look at me,” she demanded.

Stiles did and was surprised by how close they were now. Lydia rolled her chair right next to him and tilted his face towards her to force Stiles to keep eye contact with her.

“You are not used goods, Stiles. Experienced, sure, but not unworthy. Don’t ever doubt that.”

Despite her words, Stiles couldn’t quite agree. And it truly didn’t matter if he wasn’t going to be here for long anyway. Lydia saw the conclusion form on his face. He knew she doubted his resolve by the way she tutted as she let him go.
“What about you?” Stiles pressed in a hope to change the subject. “How’s your arm? And have you talked to Jackson since you’ve been back?”

“My arms is healing, and I’m not supposed to be talking with anyone, remember,” Lydia reminded him.

“Isn’t stopping you now, though,” Stiles pointed out.

“Well I really needed to know that you were okay, although I don’t quite feel like you are… at least I know. And I am sorry, I needed to say that.”

Stiles smiled. “And Jackson?”

Lydia let out a humph, clearly annoyed that Stiles wasn’t falling for her distraction. “He’s… Jackson. He’s tried to talk to me so many times and keeps getting in trouble for it. I’m kind of thankful that I can use my silent restriction as an excuse to not face him yet.”

“He was worried about you, too.” Stiles thought of the irony behind Lydia forcing him to acknowledge Derek while she was purposely hiding from Jackson.

“I don’t know how I feel about him. He’s made it clear from day one that he likes me and I like him, but I’m not sure if I like him because he likes me and I like to be liked or if I like him for him. I’ve never been sure, so I push him away, I guess.”

“You should be sure, before you take it any further,” Stiles suggested.

“I know. I wish it was easier. He comes from money too; did you know that his adoptive dad has actually worked for my father before. My dad kept a lot of lawyers on retainer. In my mind, dating him would be practical, my mom would love him, I think, on paper.” Lydia sighed. “Maybe that’s my hold up.”

“Maybe.” Stiles shrugged. “How are your parents and the divorce and um, the jail-time thing, by the way?”
“I don’t know.” Lydia’s face turned sour. “My mom refused to tell me anything and just wanted to know what Ernie looked like for the police description. They are looking for any activity on my credit cards too. I don’t think she even cared that I went out drinking with complete strangers…”

“I’m sorry,” Stiles said. “That that happened, I mean. And that your mom’s a little cold about it all.”

“I’m used to it,” Lydia admitted. “Her loss, right?”

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed. “So, when is your actual birthday?”

Lydia’s head dropped. “Three more days. I won’t be allowed to speak, so it will be a rather quiet affair.”

Stiles grimaced, he was hoping her punishment would be over by then. He racked his brain for a way to cheer Lydia up. “Hm, maybe we set a record? Maybe we traveled the farthest or something and will be notorious here at the school now?”

Lydia laughed. “Not even close! One of Marin’s seniors had her boyfriend pick her up once. They found her living in his dorm room in Anchorage! I think the two got away with it for like a week before the roommate was fed up with the additional person.”

“Man! Running to a college campus, that’s actually pretty smart!”

“Don’t get any ideas!” Lydia joked.

The two carried on far longer than they should have but it was nice and strangely uninterrupted. Was the girls’ dorm always so quiet? It was dark by the time Stiles checked the yard to see that the coast was clear for him to dart out of the room unnoticed.

Upon returning to his own dorm the reasoning behind their quiet retreat was made clear. Melissa was standing in front of an irate Scott. John was physically holding back Liam and Dr. Geyer was mumbling apologies and just about everyone else in his group stood off to the side excited with anticipation of what was going to happen. As he moved closer, Stiles noticed the pile of wet clothes draped across the lawn.
“He ruined my clothes!” Scott yelled.

“They’re just wet! Thought you needed a good cleaning; besides you would have noticed if you weren’t too busy talking to coach about cutting me from the team,” Liam attempted to defend himself.

“That guy has a serious attitude problem!” Scott tried again. “And he hit Isaac!”

“I remember you had an issue with your temper at one point,” John said calmly to Scott.

“Had?” Liam questioned, doubtfully.

“Enough Liam! You’ve caused enough trouble for one day, don’t you think?” His stepfather asked.

“Let’s just go. I told you I’d give this place a try and I did. It didn’t work out,” Liam tried to reason.

“No one is going anywhere until this is all cleaned up,” Melissa announced. “Scott, get dressed for an over night. Liam, I want every single article of wet clothing in a dryer and then put on your best pair of hiking boots. The rest of you are to stay in your dorms for the remainder of the night. Curfew is coming early. I’ll be by to check on the girls’ shortly.” Her tone left little room for argument.

Stiles quietly entered the dorm and tried not to stare at Liam as he trudged back and forth to the bathroom arms weighed down with Scott’s clothes, even his boxer briefs. Scott grumbled about not having proper hiking gear and Isaac let him borrow what he needed.

Once the dormitory door shut for the last time and both Scott and Liam were on the other side, Stiles turned tentatively to Derek.

“What was that all about?” He asked, unsure if the older teen was in the mood to talk with him.
Derek considered the question, or more likely the source and then fought to keep a grin from forming as he said, “It’s actually a rather funny story…”

Melissa now had two furious teens standing in front of her. “Scott, you remember what it’s like to be the new guy? Liam are you purposefully making this experience tougher than it needs to be?” She didn’t give the boys a chance to respond. “Well, we have an activity here, Scott’s familiar with this one because he too had an issue with letting his temper get the best of him. Acting without thinking is a quick way to make enemies and we can’t have that. Your teammates will be depending on your ability to get along. Scott, do you remember the buddy-hike-back that you and Derek did?”

“But it’s already dark out!” Scott protested.

“Yes, I suppose we should get going because you’ve already missed the most ideal time to set up camp,” Melissa agreed.

“What’s the buddy-hike-back?” Dr. Geyer asked unsure. Liam looked nervous as well.

John stepped up, supporting his counselor’s choice, despite the late hour of the day. “It’s an exercise where we drop two students off in the woods and they have to hike back to the school. They’ll be supervised, but ultimately, the counselor will not intervene. It’s an opportunity to make and learn from your mistakes while depending on each other.”

“Not to mentioned we’ll be tied together with a two-foot piece of string and every time it snaps, we have to retie it!” Scott grumbled.

“I think you boys will be in sync by the morning,” John told them. “Dr. Geyer, you’re welcomed to drive out with us as we drop off your son and then I can take you to a spare cabin if you’d like to stay on campus for the night.”

“Dad, let’s just go home, I don’t want to do this,” Liam whined.
“Is it safe?” Dr. Geyer asked.

“I’ll be with them the entire time,” Melissa assured.

“I think—I should go home. Let Liam experience what your school can offer without my presence. Let me calm my wife, she’s been worried about him all day,” The doctor said slowly as if he was considering his words carefully.

“We won’t go far,” Melissa told him. “I’d say they’ll be back by lunch, if you’d like to be here when he returns?”

“Lunch, tomorrow?” Liam protested. “We will bring food, though right, for the morning?”

“We have to be resourceful, work together, and live off the land,” Scott said while folding his arms. He clearly didn’t like the idea either.

“Dad!” Liam turned to his stepfather. “You can’t leave me here. I’ll starve!”

Dr. Geyer looked like he was struggling to decide.

“I assure you, we won’t let him starve to death,” Melissa said kindly.

With a nod and an apology, Dr. Geyer turned away from his stepson who was spewing insults at his back.

John and Melissa prepared the truck to take them to the drop off location in record time.

“Are you sure your up for this? It’s been a long week,” John asked her before he let her trail after the boys. They had already snapped their string three times. It was going to be a long night.
“It’ll be good for them. For Scott especially to move into the leadership role and teach a new student. I need this too, I think, to see the progress. With Lydia, Jackson, and Stiles all backtracking, I think it will be good for me too,” Melissa said with a half smile.

John held her gaze for a second. This woman had such an incredibly large heart, and she filled it with the worries and concerns of their students. He admired her. Scott was lucky to have someone like her in his corner. Even if he didn’t appreciate it at this moment. Knowing that he should say something, but finding himself lost for words, John simply returned the smile and squeezed her hand once for good luck before Melissa disappeared off into the darkness with only her flashlight illuminating her way.

It was only after he couldn’t see the beam of light that he remembered that he had promised her a conversation. His stomach soured at the thought of pushing it aside any longer.

Sunday morning was quiet. It took John a moment to realize that the only difference was that his phone had finally stopped ringing. Well that and the fact that Parish’s students were still on an over night. And Lydia was still on silent restriction and currently, five others were on shuns, which was a record high, and Melissa was still trailing after two of her own as they worked their way back… But it was quiet, birds chirping merrily somewhere amongst the mountains was all he could hear and it was nice.

That peace was interrupted as soon as he entered the cafeteria. Apparently, Coach’s list of players was posted early and Jackson (who was somehow listed as an alternate captain) decided that the lacrosse team should sit together. This meant that most of the usual groups were disrupted and some people were complaining. Danny and Jackson also took it as their duty to push two tables together which left Marin’s girls without their usual place to sit; they weren’t happy.

“Jackson! Shuns, remember?” John called out as soon as he took in the hectic mess.

Within minutes, Marin’s table was restored, and John assured everyone that they could sit where they pleased.

After the chaos died down, John made his way over to Boyd, Erica, Derek, Kira, and Stiles who were pointedly staying out of the way of all the furniture rearranging. “Congratulations Kira, first string is quite an honor,” John told her. “And to you too, Stiles, for making the team.”
“I made the team!?” Stiles asked perplexed.

“Number twenty-four, right?” John asked, worried that he made a mistake.

“Wow.” Stiles seemed amazed. “I didn’t actually bother to check it…”

“Well, keep your grades up, all of you. I’m looking forward to the first game, I’m very proud of you. And Derek, I talked with coach yesterday. He says that you’re a natural on the field, just as you were on the court, but he felt that you should dedicate your time to one sport and really focus on it, if your going for a scholarship. So you may choose—”

“Basketball! I choose basketball. Can I really rejoin the team?” Derek asked with bated breath.

“This is great man!” Boyd quickly told his friend. “We lost our first two games. We need you.”

“Coach might have said something similar,” John told them as he walked away, watching as Stiles clapped Derek on the back excitedly.

Melissa broke the tree line right at twelve. Scott and Liam, both of whom looked tired and grumpy, were just a few minutes behind her. John didn’t miss the way Scott offered to untie the rope now that they could. His offer was said without malice.

Liam thanked him, genuinely, and then they both rounded on John.

“Can we go have lunch?” They asked in unison.

“That’s actually a little too in sync. How’d the trip go? Learn anything?” John asked instead.

“I learned that skipping breakfast sucks,” Liam said, his exhaustion clear on his face.
“I learned that even when people judge you, it’s up to me to prove them right or wrong,” Scott replied thoughtfully. “And, uh, that if something scared me in the middle of the night, my first reaction probably shouldn’t be to bite it…”


Melissa winced. “Scott bit Liam…it’s a long story, they’re both okay, right boys?”

“Bit him?” John said to himself. “But why?”

Melissa was obviously hungry too as she headed towards the Mess hall, behind the boys, simply shaking her head.

“Wait, I—” John attempted to say but was cut off by a vehicle pulling in. Dr. Geyer and a small woman who looked so much like her son, that there was no question that she was Liam’s mother, got out of the car. They both looked relieved to see their son.

“Liam!” His mother squeaked as she raced towards him.

“Get off, Mom!” Liam hissed.

“Well how did it go?” Dr. Geyer asked.

“They did great, uh, for the most part,” Melissa told them. “We were all just going to get lunch, you’re welcome to join—”

“Actually, Mel I—” John started to say but was interrupted by Liam.

“Can we go home now?” He pleaded. “I gave it a try and some of it wasn’t so bad, this school is definitely less of a prison than I thought, but I just want to go home.”
“Honey, you can’t go back to Devenford. We’re trying to appeal, but you can’t miss school in the meantime,” his mother said gently.

“Why can’t I just live with my dad, then?” Liam asked with a raised voice. “Why wasn’t that an option from the beginning.”

His mother shook a little with Liam’s anger bleeding into the question.

Dr. Geyer attempted to remain calm between them. “We haven’t talked with your father about it yet, but I suppose we can. Are you sure you want that? You’ll be much farther away from your friends.”

“What friends? They all go to Devenford and I’m sure they hate me now, I just… I want to go home,” Liam said again. He was breathing a little harder now.

“Okay, okay honey, we’ll take you home and talk about this. No need to get so upset.” His mother tried to soothe.

“Thank you for your time,” Dr. Geyer said to Melissa and John. “I’ve got those phone numbers you gave me. I’ll make some calls, promise.”

Melissa smiled encouragingly. “Keep our number too, should you ever change your mind, we’d love to have Liam here!”

Scott looked a little perplexed but held his fist out for Liam to bump, all the same. “Good luck, man, I mean it.”

“Yeah— yeah, you too, and good luck to your team, you’re not half bad,” Liam replied.

Before the Geyer/Dunbar family had left the parking lot, Scott was already half way to the kitchen. Melissa seemed eager to follow, but John caught her arm to hold her back. She looked at him questionably.

“I’d like to ask you, if you’d want to— join me, at my cabin for lunch instead?” John stumbled
“John Stilinski, I’m pretty sure there is a reason the other counselors don’t let you cook. Do you have edible food at your place?” Melissa asked with a huge grin.

“I may or may not have had Chris pick up take out from the town…”

“Oh! What did you get?” Melissa asked teasingly. “It will effect my answer.”

“I thought anything would be better than what the owner of this place serves here?” John asked, just as playful. “Italian, eggplant parmigiana.”

“Huh, you didn’t! That’s my favorite, how’d you know!” Melissa asked amazed.

“Well it was your favorite in college, things could have changed, it was a little risky…”

“You remembered?” Melissa asked in awe, clearly not fooled by John’s offhanded comment. “Thank you! I’d love to join you for lunch.”

“Good. I was hoping you could talk to me now about what was bothering you yesterday,” John said pointedly. “I’m sorry I’ve been so busy lately.”

Melissa’s face fell. “It’s just with our suspicions about Stiles. You realize we let him leave this campus with his stepdad back in November? I let him go with his suspected abuser,” she said between tears.

John stopped in his tracks. He hadn’t thought of that, but it did make sense with how cold Stiles was after that visitation. It was clear how upset Melissa was over the realization, but for John it only served to fuel the fire in his fight to keep Stiles safe. They’d have to appeal to his case worker and make them understand. Stiles can’t go back to Florida.
- Should this fic ever get it’s planned sequel, we will see more of Liam and hopefully here from his POV about his bonding trip with Scott. I’d like to shuffle around the POV characters a bit in the next one and I’m thinking we won’t have Derek’s, Lydia’s, Erica’s, or maybe even John’s in Season two. Melissa is staying as it’s her group of students (well sort of) and Stiles will most likely have an interesting enough storyline for him to warrant keeping his spot. I’ve already name dropped a season two villain and we will have some seriously jealous Stiles as a result of that character... But the POVs will focus a little on the newbies too, Like Liam. Corey maybe (I just feel so invisible) or maybe Malia... we shall see.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Edited by the fantastic fairyfey

Also Derek’s hurting like hell... he stutters some, he’s a tad... explosive... he’s dealing with a lot, he’s hurting, please bare with him.

Chapter Notes

I have so many comments to go through. One that went unanswered was a question of my posting schedule. Currently it would seem like I’m barely managing a chapter a month... that was never my intention. This was supposed to be finished in April. Last year when this writing thing was new to me I whipped out my first fic in like a week and was like that wasn’t so bad, why does it take people so long to post? Well a year later and I’ve learned a lot and cringe when I read those first stories... Another thing, I figured that tops this story would be 50k. 30k is my preference for reading, it’s easy to complete in a couple of hours and anything over 100k pretty much guarantees I can’t finish it uninterrupted, so seriously I’m sorry for that! With that being said there is probably a bunch of un written assumptions you can make in this fic, like just pretend that Stiles and Scott get in trouble for talking in class a lot. Or that Kira’s really weird and awesome and doesn’t take shit from anyone. But every time she starts something with someone Stiles is dragged in... in general the groups one big family these days complete with rifts and black sheep. But like this would go on forever if I documented all the little things.

Also personal note I’ll be cruising for a week in October and I’m seriously am looking forward to some hard core island writing. Like I better come back with at least three chapters for you all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Episode 14
Tuesday afternoon was quiet. Suspiciously so. The last time Melissa had gone so long without hearing from one of her kids was the day she and John had found most of them swimming unsupervised in the lake. So naturally she was cautious, but no amount of probing turned up anything out of the ordinary. John listened to her concerns, but in the end suggested that perhaps they had finally done the unthinkable and all of their teens were simply doing their homework as they should be.

That was suspicious too.

Melissa was surprised, to say the least, to find that her kids were right where they ought to be and on time for dinner. Their usual table was full and calm with the occasional too-loud laugh or outburst. Lydia and Jackson had reported to their assigned dining room seating as well; they were both still on shuns.

Jackson’s sentence had been extended due to misbehaving to the point where he would now be here longer than Lydia. Usually he was late or would attempt to sit with Parrish’s students or... something, so the fact that he was on time and not protesting his seating arrangement was raising alarm bells in Melissa’s head.

The final straw, however, was when the counselor stood to take her nearly empty tray to the compost section of the mess hall. Underneath the tray was an envelope with her name on it. When did that happen? How did it get there without her seeing? Cautiously, Melissa picked it up and scanned the room for her students. They were gone again… All of them! Suspicious indeed.

Feeling the anxiety building inside her, Melissa opened the letter to reveal a homemade, yet still rather impressive invitation. ‘You Are Cordially Invited to A Silent Masquerade’, was written in large loopy handwriting, followed by, ‘In Celebration of Lydia Martin’s Sweet Sixteen’ in an opposing color. There were instructions on the back stating that talking was prohibited and that masks were preferred.

Melissa laughed to herself. Lydia was surprisingly okay this morning during their private session, even though it was her birthday and she wasn’t going home to celebrate, and she was still technically in trouble. Melissa’s smile faded some when she saw the time and location of the party; seven o’clock in the common room. The same time as group. Her students thought they were so clever…
The common room was completely transformed; decked out in black and white balloons all sparkling with silver glitter. The couches and tabletops were littered with dry erase markers and miniature whiteboards some with reminders to stay quiet boldly written on them. The monotone colors kept with the scheme. Where did the party supplies come from? Melissa chalked it up to being one of those things she would never know.

Music played softly from over the interior balcony where two students from another group were serving as disk jockeys, a borrowed laptop sat between them. It was rare for the media equipment to leave its assigned room, but several counselors seemed to be in attendance all of which must have approved of the setup. Coach Finstock was perched on the balcony, most likely there to approve the song choices. His arms were crossed but his face betrayed his true feelings as he gazed fondly over the crowded room with the slightest hint of a smile.

All of the students in attendance were wearing paper masks like one would at a typical masquerade party, but these covered their mouths rather than around their eyes. The concept of concealing their identity seemed lost on the teens, but the point was clear; no speaking.

John sauntered up to Melissa as she took in the sight. The corners of his eyes were crinkled and she suspected he was more involved with this party than he would let on. He was wearing a hastily colored half-mask that was definitely designed by one of the less talented students, not that Melissa would be so forward as to share her personal thoughts on their artistic abilities. Without making a peep, John handed another mask to Melissa, this one for some reason was adorned with feathers. Stifling a laugh, because no one was making a sound, she accepted the offered facial decoration happily.

The large banner hanging across the balcony read, ‘Happy Birthday Lydia’. Allison greeted Melissa first, using a white board to tell her that the party was a surprise. A glance in the guest of honor’s direction, however, told Melissa otherwise. Lydia was finely dressed head to toe, in a short silver garment that was surely breaking dress code. Her outfit was topped off with a beautiful clay mask that left her eyes exposed; like two emerald jewels bringing the ceramic to life.

It was a fun atmosphere. The music itself wasn’t blaring as it easily carried throughout the unusually quiet hall. Melissa found herself enjoying the pop rock tunes more than she would have predicted, although seeing her kids clearly having a good time might have had something to do with that.

Many of the students who attended Beacon of Hope had been socially outcasted amongst their peers at home. For some this may very well be their first ever school dance. Melissa made a mental note to talk to John about expanding on that.
Most of the students danced in the area of the floor that was cleared. Just about all of the girls huddled together at one point or another jumping and swaying to the music. A lot of the guys made their way onto the dance floor too. The birthday girl was a permanent fixture in the center of the crowd, but rather than leaving others out to feel excluded, Lydia’s circle of friends surrounding her was constantly changing and growing. With one exception.

Jackson trailed Lydia all night, sharing her limelight. The overprotective teen didn’t seem to protest when Lydia danced with the others either—for the most part. He did struggle with being unable to speak when Stiles closed the distance between himself and Lydia. The pair were grinding way too close for the school’s proximity rules, before Stiles migrated over to Kira’s circle where the dance moves were more like energetic hopping rather than inappropriate touching. The move was enough to hold off Jackson’s anger.

The inability to shout meant that there was a constant relay of messages between the dancers and the DJs with the white boards. Some students took it upon themselves to act as runners for this task. Isaac was amongst them, he seemed to gravitate towards Allison more than the others, ensuring that her music requests, and by extension the birthday girl’s, were always met.

Knowing that they were being heavily chaperoned seemed to have nixed any thoughts of taking the party too far, so it remained relatively calm. As much as she didn’t have any say in this celebration, Melissa had to admit it was a great one. She couldn’t fight the grin she wore behind her mask as she took in the sight of all the kids she’s come to care about having such a good time.

Behind the façade of the party, Melissa took her time ‘talking’ with each of her students in turn. It was surprisingly very insightful. Isaac, who was notoriously silent during group had a lot to say when he could write it down. Kira wrote her responses to Melissa’s questions in the form of poems, some of which were not half bad, despite her vulgar word choices.

Erica on the other hand, seemed to struggle with having to resort to writing. As one of her teachers, Melissa knew she wasn’t the best in the class academically speaking. The seventeen year old was still reading at a sophomore level and Melissa had spent many afternoons working with her privately in order to ensure her homework was completed. Seeing her struggle now, outside of the classroom, had her realizing that her dislike of writing might be more than simply not knowing the correct answer. She pinned that thought for a more private discussion later. The evening was turning out to be very insightful, indeed.

The counselor caught up with Derek who was one of the few students who had avoided the dance floor all night, choosing instead to play word games with Boyd and a few others from the basketball team. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves and the Hangman drawings were pretty comical.
Chris kept an eye on his daughter, basically ensuring that neither Scott nor Isaac were within five feet of her while dancing, but this allowed Kira to manage a couple of slow dances with Scott. Eventually Erica and Boyd were wrapped around one another in the corner, moving in slow circles to a song as well. Melissa cringed at the prom-esque shift in music before she recognized some of the songs as those from John’s personal collection. As if sensing her thoughts, John miraculously appeared, armed with a white board of his own.

‘My I have this dance?’ was scribbled on the board, and despite the confidence he was portraying, Melissa caught the way John’s hands shook a little. She offered her hand for him to take and regardless of the silent rules, a few cat calls and cheers erupted from the students as the two counselors made their way onto the dance floor. John was nothing short of a perfect gentleman, holding her hand firmly and placing the other on Melissa’s waist. She felt her cheeks heat at the contact and fought the urge to blink away from John’s intense stare. Her breath left her momentarily and she was sure she would have been speechless if not for the no talking rule.

Their moment was interrupted, however, a minute later when the common room doors swung open revealing two complete strangers. A rather beautiful woman with dark flowing locks, tight jeans, and heels that were all wrong for the mountain she was standing on, walked in as if she owned the place. Behind her was a beefy, bald man who was holding professional recording equipment. Melissa was stunned, as was most of the people occupying the common room, but John took one look at the two, noticed the flashing red light on the camera and immediately charged them holding his hand over the lens to block filming.

“What is going on?” The strange female said, being the first person to break the silence with more than an accidental laugh or cough since the party began. “Is this some new-wave music therapy, or something?” She asked with disapproval.

John did his best to usher the two back outside, but the camera man stepped around him and attempted to get the whole party on film. Whispers started to break out amongst the students and within minutes the volume was threatening to overshadow the music. And just like that the spell was broken. Chris took it upon himself to have the DJs pause their current track and when Melissa turned back around it was to see that the strangers and John were gone.

John had a sinking suspicion that he knew who these people were, and he knew he wasn’t going to like it. Pushing them back out the door was the easy part, getting them to leave the campus would surely prove to be much more difficult.
“You must be John, we spoke on the phone. So nice to finally meet you in person! I’m Kali, Deucalion’s executive assistant and this is Ennis. We hired him to direct that promotional video we discussed; I’m sure you remember.” As she spoke she held out a manicured hand. Each nail was filed to a tip and painted blood red. They looked lethal, John hoped his students wouldn’t get any ideas.

Ennis didn’t bother with a handshake and instead attempted to film the entire campus, despite the fact that it was in the evening and the moonlight was limited. He looked only mildly interested in what was being said.

“Yes, I’m John. And if you recall I said the video sounded like too much. That we should start small and—"

“Ah, but this is Deucalion’s project now - his investment. A part of that is turning this place into something more…” Kali eyed the weather-warned wood with disgust, “appealing— profitable.” She settled on. “And this video well, we can play it in schools across the country and—”

“But we don’t cater to every student,” John interrupted. “We’re here for those in need—”

“And imagine how many more you’ll be able to help with a proper expansion? How many kids you can remove from abusive homes or get away from street gangs? Deucalion has shared your tales with many others in well established circles. This is a good thing, John, don’t be afraid of success.” Kali placed a lethal hand on his forearm and the other snuck its way on to his shoulder to steer his gaze towards the open land. John felt the sharpness of those nails pricking his skin. “We can double or maybe even triple the amount of attendees within this space, we’ve talked about the ten-year plan, think of all the profits!”

Profits? John was struggling to keep up with the amount of students he currently had. He’d always made it a point to be involved in each and every one of his ward’s healing process. He wanted them all to feel safe coming to him as well as their assigned counselor. Imagine how limited his time would be if they tripled the number of students.

Unfortunately, that was when Melissa stepped out.

“Just what exactly is going on?” She asked them all, but her eyes landed on the intimate way Kali’s touch held John close.
“We’re just discussing business,” Kali answered quickly before John could do little more than open his mouth.

“The investor wants to shoot a promotional video— something to share with other educators to let them know of our program— something I haven’t agreed to yet,” John said pointedly as he wiggled free from Kali’s grasp.

“Yet!” Kali said happily, slapping her hands together. “I can work with that.”

“No more cameras, not until I’ve settled the details with your boss,” John told her in a tone that left little room for debate.

It didn’t work on the savvy woman. “Listen, we have to film this place anyway,” Kali attempted to reason. “Deucalion wants shots of the grounds to give to the architect. He’ll be coming this weekend expecting to see the beginnings, at least, of the promotional video. Let Ennis do his job, he will sell this place. All you need to do is run things, business as usual.”

“This weekend?” Melissa asked. “John, Derek has to film his hearing statement. And Marin was going to lead the graduates on their attempt to reach Triskelion Point. She has eight students not ready yet, the rest of us will have our hands full.”

“Perfect! A real expedition! And the trial stuff sounds serious, can we film it?” Kali asked excitedly.

Ennis meanwhile was experimenting with lighting angles and shots of the front office. Currently, it looked a little spooky with the dark windows, but certainly not alluring.

“No, you may not, what these kids have gone through— are going through— it’s private. They’ve had to face real demons, it’s not something to—” Melissa attempted to say but was cut off by Kali’s eagerness.

“Oh, that’s good. Write that down,” Kali told Ennis with a snap of her wicked fingers.
John saw how upset Melissa was becoming. He assured her he would handle everything and suggested she go back inside, to enjoy the party. Melissa’s lips thinned at the idea, but Kali nodded eagerly, wrapping a hand around the head counselor’s wrist to tug him towards the office. John spun back around in time to catch Melissa’s bushy ponytail disappear behind the door. He’d have to explain all of this to her soon. Even the bounce of her hair screamed tension; she was upset.

“Let’s talk details,” Kali suggested as they marched across the lawn. “That’s what I’m here for, you set your limits and we will make this work, I promise. Ennis won’t shoot anything too private, maybe we can get some counselor interviews, students even, if they’re willing…” John made a noise of disagreement. “Or I can hire actors,” Kali quickly amended. “I assure you this is a good thing!”

John was at a loss for words. Despite Kali’s apparent willingness to comply, he felt more like she was trying to pull one over on him. She simply didn’t come off as genuine and it left him with an uneasy feeling of doubt growing deep in his gut. She was also clever and seemed to think up a counter to any point John argued. In the end, it would seem she got her way; the cameras were staying, Deucalion was coming, and John had an entire school, staff and students alike, to protect from the invasiveness.

His head was pounding from Kali’s argumentative voice, and John really, really wanted a drink.

Most of the teens were discussing in hushed whispers about who the strangers were. Jackson claimed loudly that they were probably here because they’d heard about his inventive party idea and wanted to run a local news report on it. Lydia narrowed her eyes at that, and Isaac quickly explained that it was all of their ideas, a joint effort from the entire group. Allison pointed out that the whiteboard concept was all her effort. Stiles had half a mind to remind them that he actually came up with the idea, but Jackson started complaining about the money he’d spent and that silenced him. Aside from the no speaking and music only thing, he really didn’t offer up as much as the others anyway. Turning his back on the pointless argument Stiles saw that of all the students, Derek was the only one not speaking, aside from Lydia, now that they could. The older teen was looking at the common room doors with wide uncertain eyes.

Melissa reappeared within minutes and once she took in the sight of all fifty or so students talking at once, her face fell, and she announced that the silent portion of the party was over. They had half an hour until curfew. Some of the counselors moved the furniture back and Danny took over the music playlist with Coach. Lydia took it all in stride and continued to use a white board to talk with
the others. Melissa came by to check on her group as soon as she could and assured them that everything was okay. Her face gave away how little she believed the statement.

“Were they here for…” Derek tentatively asked. Although he failed to complete the sentence Melissa understood.

“Oh no, honey, no your VATE is still scheduled to be recorded on Saturday. Your uncle has arranged for one of his lawyers to read the prosecution and defense attorney’s questions verbatim, so you’ll at least be familiar with the individual too. Don’t worry, you’ll do fine,” Melissa gave Derek a reassuring pat on the back and Stiles watched the tension drain from him with the touch.

Most of the other students sent the two of them questioning looks as almost no one knew all the details behind the hours Derek spent talking with his uncle’s flashy lawyers. Derek’s eyes however avoided them all and locked on Stiles in a silent plea to be there for him.

They hadn’t really discussed it since Stiles’ return, but Derek’s pending statement hadn’t actually left their minds either. Stiles wasn’t sure if Derek wanted to vent with him or not anymore. In the past after every lawyer session the two had hid in the shadows of the trees and Stiles would listen while Derek would complain. Stiles would poke fun of the lawyers’ style or condescending tone and Derek would laugh. There would be lingering hand holding and murmured words of encouragement and it would be okay.

Now Derek was hurt by Stiles’ admitted lack of confidentiality in return. Stiles didn’t go to him or rely on him when dealing with his own issues and now Derek knew. He obviously had a problem with that fact too, but what could Stiles do? He had to keep his secrets, just that; secret.

But as their eyes met, Stiles saw Derek’s vulnerability and knew how nervous he was and of course he would be there for him on Saturday. Of course he would! How could Derek doubt him, even for a moment? And instead of simply nodding in their usual quiet way of communicating when they were around the others, Stiles walked around Scott to grab Derek’s hand and squeezed it once for good measure before turning to Melissa to ask what time.

Everyone stared at their interlinked hands. No one said a thing about it.

For Kali and Ennis only being two people armed with one camera, they sure seemed to be
everywhere. Despite the counselor’s protest the pair had managed to intrude on every single one of Stiles’ classes. They plopped down at his cafeteria lunch table and told the students to pretend they weren’t there. They found themselves huddled along the rest of the teens during lacrosse practice. They attempted to film Melissa’s group session and were successful for all of about three minutes before the counselor unleashed threats of bodily harm using her vast medical knowledge, but the warning was clear, and Kali was left holding the camera as Ennis felt the need to cover his man-parts with both hands as he retreated.

Ennis was even in the boy’s dormitory one morning trying to get dramatic shots of the students waking up. ‘Needs to be more enthusiastic,’ was the first thing Stiles had heard that day, it startled him. The camera man asked Jackson, who was considerably more cooperative, to do a few takes jumping out of bed as if he couldn’t wait for what the day had to offer. Stiles rolled his eyes and Boyd threw his pillow at the camera, causing Ennis to shout about expensive equipment.

All in all, Stiles wasn’t the least bit surprised when Ennis and Kali came running over to the front of the school to see who was arriving when Peter’s sports car zoomed in on Saturday morning. This time it was just Peter and one of the lawyers; a business man armed with a thick briefcase and a camera of his own, although this one was significantly smaller than Ennis’.

John welcomed the two before pointing Kali in an opposite direction. She quickly hid her disappointment, but Stiles saw it flash across her features. John, Peter, the lawyer, and Derek all disappeared in the office, leaving Stiles to sit on the steps by himself as he usually did during these meetings. But this one was different, Stiles knew.

This was Derek’s official testimony. This video recording is what the judge and jury would see. This would lead not only to Kate’s guilty murder charges but the additional charges of statutory rape of a minor. From this moment on, Derek’s first love, his first relationship ever, would be reduced to him being labeled as a victim. How could a series of questions affect someone so irrevocably?

Stiles chewed his nails down to the quick and had ran his hand so often through his hair that it was standing up on its own by the time several more vehicles pulled in. There were a few SUVs and a van and they were all filled with teens; kids that were Stiles’ age, not a single parent in sight. What was going on?

Melissa must have had the same thought because she jogged up as if out of nowhere with Chris and Parrish in tow.

“Hello, and who might you all be?” She asked the group at large.
“Ah,” Kali interrupted, as she made her way over in a less dramatic pace. “They’re with me. Students from the high school, hired as actors. Davenford Prep has a wonderful Drama department, did you know? Perhaps with the profits we could allocate some funds to build a similar program here.”

Melissa looked murderous.

“So,” Kali continued, completely immune to the death glare as she turned her back on the teachers. “I have scripts for some of you, line up so I can get a good look. These are for one on one interviews. Based on my observations over the past few days, you skinny girl - you can play the one suffering from bulimia.” Kali thought for a moment and pointed to one of the boys. “And you, yeah, you have that sad emo hairstyle, this one lost both of their parents. Perfect!”

Even the paid high schoolers seemed put off from Kali’s blasé attitude. The students took their typed scripts, however, and started reading.

“Okay perfect, let’s do the interviews first and then we’ll fake some group activities— have any of you ever played lacrosse?”

Stiles had never seen Melissa look so furious. Parrish was physically holding her back. In the end the counselors and Chris let Kali conduct her scripted interviews at one of the picnic tables as long as their filming didn’t interrupt with any of the school’s actual activities.

Stiles busied himself by imagining what the fake students were saying. They all looked so happy. Like they’d never had a trouble in the world. The ones that weren’t on camera laughed and joked with one another while passing around their cell phones sharing images. A few of the girls walked around taking selfies with the trees and mountain peaks serving as backgrounds. The kids didn’t know the first thing about being a student here.

He doubted whether any of them had ever woken up crying or jumped from a shadow. At that thought, a flash of instant hate came over Stiles. But just as quickly as it came, it went. It wasn’t these kids’ fault that he was messed up, hell maybe they were messed up too and just better at hiding it? So what if they were getting paid to play the screwed up teen role? They didn’t really know the source of his pain, no one did, and he was sure if he could have made a quick buck to act like a normal teen he’d have done it in a heart beat. Could he do it? Act normal? What makes them normal and him—not? In some ways not very much, but in others...

Stiles’ musings were interrupted when the office door slammed open. Derek emerged at a run, not
even glancing in Stiles direction, but Stiles didn’t let that stop him as he took off after him.

Derek’s uncle was shouting for them to come back but neither Stiles nor Derek turned around.

It’s weird to think of their spot as their spot but of the millions of trees in the forest surrounding the school Derek and Stiles had always ended up at the base of the same overgrown oak. And today was no different. Derek was naturally faster than Stiles and by the time he had caught up, the older teen was already curled up near the roots. Stiles collapsed on the ground next to him, purposefully making lots of noise so as not to startle him. Derek’s red rimmed eyes glanced up, considered his company for a minute and the burrowed themselves back in his knees.

Stiles didn’t say anything for as long as he could stand the quiet, which seemed like forever, before he tentatively placed a hand on Derek’s. The older boy jerked back from the touch.

“Why are you even here?” Derek asked in an accusatory fashion. “I mean you made it pretty clear you’re not going to enlighten me with your own problems. What is it? Do you get off on hearing about mine or something?”

The words were bitter and hateful, and Stiles would have been offended had they not been followed by Derek’s hitched breaths. Instead he remained still, refrained from reaching for Derek’s hand again, and asked what happened.

“What happened—what do you think happened?” Derek exploded. “They asked— the lawyers sort of prepared me for— but the questions from the defense— they asked—”

“What did they ask? Wasn’t Peter and John with you?” Stiles probed after Derek grew silent for too long.

“They asked about everything! How she made me feel, when she touched me, where she touched me, how— they asked how she touched me like I had to explain how sex worked…”

“That’s— rough,” Stiles offered lightly. “Was John in the room for that?”
“No, no it was like a two room set up thing so John and Peter could see, but only the interviewer and I were on tape. So my responses weren’t coached,” Derek told Stiles, sitting up back against the tree.

“Well that’s good at least, that he wasn’t in there for that part, because like it would be really awkward to sit down for your next one and one and think about that conversation…”

“Stiles I am literally only going to be able to think about this conversation the next time I have to see him now, thanks, he heard everything,” Derek said dryly.

“Awkward…” Stiles said with a small grin, it was returned with a glare. “What did you tell them?”

“It was the defense teams’ questions. They ah, wanted a lot of details, how she made me feel— That kind of thing. I hate her, she killed my family— I hate her so much.” Derek’s eyes welled up again.

“Did you tell them that?”

“Yeah. Yes, yes of course— it’s just—”

“Just what?” Stiles pushed.

“I hate her!” Derek yelled. “I do— but I—”

“You loved her, or you thought you did,” Stiles helpfully supplied.

“Yeah, the defense has these letters—”

“Letters?”

“Yeah, like she was my teacher and so I’d write her letters and turn it in with my homework or—”
“Okay, yeah, and it’s bad because?” Stiles really didn’t want to know. The look of pain on Derek’s face, his hunched shoulders, whatever idea the defense had cooked up was really messing with his friend. He couldn’t take it.

“Sometimes I complained in them—I didn’t even remember one until it was read back to me.” Derek’s voice grew soft and low, as if whispering the confession made it less true. “I um, I wrote that it was annoying having to hide our relationship, that my mom—that mom would never understand, and that I wished I just lived with her— with Kate— instead.”

Stiles waited for more, assuming some hateful thing was written where Derek wished death upon his entire family or something. When no more confessions came he asked, “That’s it?”

“What do you mean ‘that’s it’?” Derek exploded. “I gave her grounds to do what she did. I gave her a reason! I suggested we live together so we didn’t have to hide, said my mom would never understand. It’s all my fault, and the defense knows it.”

“First of all, it’s not your fault, not even close,” Stiles told him confidently. “And second, if that’s the defense’s strategy, if that’s the best they could do, Kate’s going away for life. I mean who interprets the thoughts of a fourteen year old boy in a love letter as permission to do such a horrid act. Especially when you didn’t say anything about wanting to harm your family!”

“—I would never!” Derek interrupted.

“I’m surprised they aren’t going for insanity, I’d think that would’ve been more plausible, given your age, inexperience, and lack of consent.”

Derek was no longer shaking and considered what Stiles had said. “Peter wants her placed on Death Row, but in California the sentence has to go through the Supreme Court before it’s approved or something, but it doesn’t matter, I wrote—”

“That you didn’t want to keep your secret affair with a woman ten years older than you secret. That’s it, that’s all you wrote! If she took that and twisted it to mean that you wanted her to hurt your family that’s on her,” Stiles interrupted. “And if that’s what happened than I truly do think she’s messed up and could totally get away with the criminally insane act. But you know what? From the very beginning she’s sort of seemed like someone who just enjoyed messing with you. She got off trying to make you flustered in class and being risky in school. She manipulated you and I don’t know, maybe hurting your family like that was the next step. Had your uncle not sent you here, would you have crawled into her waiting arms to grieve the loss of your family?”
Derek sucked in a sharp intake of breath. “—Maybe.” He admitted slowly, face screwed up in disgust.

“The defense trying to blame you is weak. If that’s all they have, then it should be a fairly quick trial. Did you finish your testimony?” Stiles winced asking the last part and hoping that this whole thing was finally over. It was well past time they let Derek move on to the healing part.

“Yeah, I— it has to be done without pausing the tape, so my responses aren’t influenced,” Derek answered. “I tried to leave, but Peter— he said, he said it was my fault and this is the least I could do for his dead sister…” he muttered.

Stiles gasped. Derek wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“He’s right too, if I hadn’t— my Mom is dead— my dad— Co—Cora—”

Stiles instinctually grabbed Derek’s hand again, and this time he didn’t pull away.

“Look at me.” Derek didn’t. So in an action similar to Lydia’s last week, Stiles placed his hand on Derek’s chin and forced there eyes to meet. “I’m sorry your uncle said that, and he lost his family too, I know, but it was wrong of him, okay? You didn’t— do that to your family,” Stiles swallowed and continued in a steadier voice. “You didn’t kill them. You didn’t light the match, you didn’t ask Kate to do it either. She did that, okay! She did, not you!”

Derek’s eyes flickered across Stiles’ face. And the two of them stared at one another without speaking for what felt like an incredibly long time, in reality it was probably no longer than a few seconds, before Derek jerked his head out of Stiles’ grasp.

“It’s not that simple,” Derek said as he stood, wiping fiercely at his eyes. “Saying something doesn’t just make it true, talking about it doesn’t automatically fix it, which you’d know if you ever gave it a try, but you won’t will you? It’s not even a matter of right now, you never plan on telling me what that nightmare was about, huh? You’ve talked with John and Melissa and stuff about being— homeless. But you never tell me anything! Isn’t that like manipulating me too? You’re so damn secretive Stiles, why would I believe you!? Huh?”

And with that outburst, Derek turned to leave.
Stiles sat there, stunned, for the next ten minutes until a tickling sensation on his cheek brought him out of his daze. He brought a hand up to wipe at his face and was surprised to see it was wet with tears.

Neither Stiles nor Derek had much to say during lunch. No one else noticed as the entire table had taken it upon themselves to complain about the ‘new students’. Lydia criticized their clothing choices, Scott pointed out how poorly they acted, and Erica seethed about how much money they were getting paid. The rumor was in the thousands.

“They don’t even look like us!” Lydia said again. It was apparent she was enjoying the freedom of free speech.

“Did you see that one pretend to cry?” Boyd asked.

“Horrible,” Erica told them.

“It was atrocious,” Kira agreed.

“Ashley was my friend in middle school,” Allison admitted sadly. “The one with the braids— she did a good job acting like she didn’t remember me…”

“Screw Ashley,” Isaac told her with sincerity.

Before anyone else could comment or agree with Isaac’s sentiment, Kali scraped her chair loudly as she pulled it out and stood on it, commanding everyone’s attention.

“At three o’clock today, my group of actors will be playing a game of lacrosse, we need some volunteers to be their opponents,” she announced.

Somewhere someone booed her, and another student shouted out that they expected to be paid as
much as the fakers. Most however went back to their lunches and ignored the interruption.

“Guys,” Jackson said as he snuck over from the staff table, he was still on shuns. “We should totally do it!”

“What volunteer?” Kira asked, skeptically.

“Think about it,” Jackson explained. “We’d be able to tackle the fakes!”

“I doubt they’ll let us get physical with them,” Isaac pointed out.

“It could be good practice,” Scott added thoughtfully. “What do you think Stiles?”

“Me!” Stiles asked shocked. “I don’t know, who’s better to play the losers than a bunch of losers, I guess.”

Most of the table gave him a weird look for that.

“I like the idea of hitting them, I didn’t like the way the guy with the hair was looking at Erica,” Boyd concluded. “Derek?”

“No.”

“What? Why not? You’ve been moody all afternoon, get that aggression out,” Kira suggested.

“Yeah, Hale, stop moping,” Jackson added. It was the wrong thing to say.

Derek stood abruptly even though he had barely touched his lunch. “I’m leaving,” he announced.

Everyone turned to Stiles once Derek was out of the room.
“What?” Stiles asked pointedly. “I’ll play, damn it, jeez.”

Mostly everyone continued to look at him with concern, but the response was good enough for Jackson. “Okay I’m going to sign us up!”

Pretending to play lacrosse and actually playing lacrosse was not the same thing. Ten minutes in and the person Stiles really wanted to hit was Kali. She assigned him a tackle scene— him getting tackled— over twenty times before Stiles colorfully told her where she could go and walked off the field.

Scott told him that evening after dinner that he didn’t miss much and that they ‘fake lost’. Of course they did.

Melissa wasn’t sure why, maybe Kali truly did have a death wish, but she received a request for a personal interview in her mailbox to take place after dinner on Saturday. Of all the counselors, she felt she was without a doubt the one with the lowest tolerance for the camera— flat out refusing to teach until they were out of her classroom, so she didn’t understand why she was chosen for this task.

Instead of answering the probing questions that were asked of her, Melissa told Ennis’ lens about the pride she feels in seeing her students’ progress. She talked about the transformations that she’s witnessed and the struggles that had entailed. Ten minutes in and Kali called cut before dismissing her.

Melissa didn’t mind and used the time to go find Derek in his cabin; the student hadn’t shown up for dinner. The counselor broke protocol to bring it to him and wasn’t surprised to find him already curled up in his bed despite it only being six in the evening.
“Want to talk about it?” She greeted.

“Can I say no?” Derek asked after a failed minute of pretending to be asleep.

“You can, actually,” Melissa offered. “But I bet you’ll feel better to get it off your chest. What you did today, it was hard, but I’m proud of you. John’s proud too.”

“It’s just frustrating, I didn’t want to run off and rely on Stiles after and I did anyway, it’s like I can’t help myself. He just says all the things he’s supposed to say and he usually doesn’t tell me he’s sorry, which is really annoying when people apologize for my mistakes, for my dead family…” Derek said all of that into his pillow so it was muffled, but also it wasn’t entirely what Melissa was expecting.

She assumed Derek’s melancholy mood was a reflection of his invasive interview not his relationship with Stiles.

“Oh,” she let slip. “Can I have a chance to say all the things I’m supposed to say and apologize when you don’t want to hear it for things neither one of us could control?” Melissa asked.

“He did,” Derek said as he rolled over and eyed the food with interest. “He apologized and told me it wasn’t my fault.”

“It wasn’t your fault, you know that, right?”

“I— if I didn’t fall for her, I thought she loved me too, if I didn’t—”

“Who knows what would have happened. That woman— Kate wasn’t in a stable state of mind, she wasn’t making smart decisions and things could have ended up the way they did no matter what. Do you know what the String Theory is?” Melissa asked gently.

Derek sat up, thrown off by the unusual question. “That’s the one where particles disappear in our world and they reappear in others, connecting them right?”

Melissa tilted her head. “Sort of, in short it relies on the idea of multiple dimensions, and I like to
believe that in them we all live similar lives up until certain points when things change. So for example, there’s a world out there where Kate flirted with a different freshman or where the fire happened but your family escaped.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I do. I am your science teacher after all,” she chuckled. “Although I supposed there is a world where I’m still a nurse, where John still has his son and we reconnected in a different setting, or better yet I had a son too and our kids became best friends and—”

“You think there is a world where you two just got married in college?” Derek interrupted to ask, raised eyebrow and all.

“Maybe. But in that world Beacon of Hope might not exist,” Melissa told him wisely.

“So, I probably never came here, never met Stiles…”

“Is that significant for you? Meeting Stiles.”

“I— don’t know,” Derek admitted.

“Well my little girl heart believes in soulmates and I think when two people are meant to be they always end up together, in every universe, in every dimension. Noticed how I included John in all of mine?” Melissa shifted uncomfortably with that admission.

“You really like him, huh?” Derek questioned. “He likes you too, you know. I can’t imagine a world where I don’t meet Stiles here, like what if the fire happened and I went off to live with Laura and we never talked about any of it? By the time I do run into Stiles, I’d be a mess and he would—”

“Who knows, maybe in that world he lived with his real dad after his mom passed, and he was hurting but not as haunted as he is in this one. Maybe you two still find each other and heal together? How is that going for you, by the way? I know we said you can’t be much of a couple here with our rules, but how do you feel about him? He is a guy, after all. Are you okay with that?”
Derek gave Melissa a flat stare.

“Okay, okay, I suppose you’ve shared enough. You’ve really been talking more lately and I’m proud of you. What you did today, those interview questions, I know it was hard and I’m proud of you for making it through that as well!” Melissa tapped Derek’s desk. “Eat, I’ll come by before curfew and check on you one more time, and Derek, it wasn’t your fault and I’m sorry it happened.” She said the last bit with a teasing smile.

Derek returned it with a roll of his eyes that was so reminiscent of Stiles, Melissa almost paused in her retreat.

Sunday morning an actual Limousine, stretched, sleek, and shiny pulled into the school’s parking lot. It was unable to fit in a singular spot and took up three vertically instead. Instantly Derek felt multiple sets of eyes on him, but he knew his uncle and this was not him.

The driver of the extravagant vehicle came around the side and opened the backseat to reveal a middle-aged man with sunglasses and a cane. Was he blind? All around him, students started muttering their suspicions and craned their necks to try and see if a new student was also going to emerge. All hopes that that was the case were squashed when the snappy Kali woman and her camera lackey boldly sauntered up to the man. She pecked him once on each cheek before grasping his hand to place on her elbow to escort him to John’s office.

The rumors were flying. By lunch people were talking about how the school was being bought out, how the government was taking over and how John was going to leave them all… It didn’t help matters that the Davenford drama club had also returned and appeared not to be filming anything. Everyone was suspicious.

Derek ignored the rumors for the most part, as he moved through the buzzing lunch line with nothing to add and hoping to make it in and out of the mess hall before he had to deal with the rest of his group. He paused when he arrived at his usual table, expecting to be the first and frowned as it was already occupied. Stiles was there, of course, pushing around the questionable mac and
Derek hesitated before he placed his tray on the opposite side of the table. “Don’t you have to actually eat it?” He asked bluntly in lieu of a greeting.

“You’re early,” Stiles acknowledged. “I’ve been off dietary restriction since the holidays, gained twelve pounds, thank you! And I’m pretty sure this isn’t edible.”

“Yeah,” Derek agreed as he eyed his own yellow blob. He opened his mouth to say more but Stiles beat him to it.

“Listen, I’m sorry, I can’t tell you what that dream was about,” he said without looking up. “I have nightmares sometimes and I can’t talk about them with anyone… But I will tell you one day,” he added with conviction looking up and meeting Derek’s gaze. “Right now, I can’t. It affects more than just me, but I will, I promise, and you should still, I don’t know, talk to someone, John maybe, because I know it helps you.”

“I think I talked with Melissa about it last night,” Derek admitted.

“You think?”

“It was weird. I think she has a thing for John.”

“I can see that, the way they stare at each other, it’s mutual,” Stiles agreed readily.

Scott chose that moment to join them and instantly monopolized Stiles’ attention. He had lots to say. Apparently one of the Davenford students was considering partnering with him on getting banned items onto the campus.

“We need a list, Stiles, what do people want?” Scott asked pointedly.

“Why would I know? I haven’t even thought about smoking in months actually, and it’d be stupid to try and—”
“No nothing like that, I was thinking coffee, candy maybe…”

“Oh, fuck yeah, hey what about umm, peanut butter cups!” Stiles asked with his eyes lighting up. “And soda, you’d make a killing selling that here.”

Within minutes the two had several plans and Scott was all lopsided smiles. Derek didn’t have much to add to their conversation, as he wholeheartedly didn’t approve, but he was feeling less animosity already and was able to return the small grin Stiles shot his way.

Before lunch let out, Kali had another announcement for them all.

“As you all know, we’ve been putting together a short documentary that highlights the benefits of Beacon of Hope. It is a part of an initiative to gain national attention for all the wonderful work you do here. We have a rough copy set to go, and I’d like to invite you all to view it first. Please keep in mind that the projects’ lead investor is on campus today as well and all comments should be courteous.”

The loudest snort of disapproval came from Melissa herself.

The screening was set up in the common room where the blind man from that morning was already sat next to John. Derek found it peculiar that he cared so much for the viewing of this rough draft as he wouldn’t be able to actually see it, but that comment was definitely in the ‘too rude’ category and wouldn’t be voiced by him. The rest of Melissa’s group of students and surprisingly Melissa herself all crowded together into the packed room to see the mini-documentary.

Kali stood again and thanked a bunch of people no one knew before signaling for the lights to be cut.

Immediately the projector flickered to life showing a student kayaking and another climbing the side of a mountain. Both were missing the usual safety gear. Upbeat music started to play and several more outdoorsy activities, all done by students who didn’t actually attend the school, were shown before it cut to an actual classroom and the first real shot of Beacon of Hope.
Derek saw himself staring out the window while Chris talked in front of the classroom. He saw Boyd helping Erica with homework in the very same commons that they sat in now. He watched another student raise their hand and ask for extra help in Marin’s class. The voiceover message spouted out the benefits of hands on teaching.

Then it cut to personal interviews with several of the hired students. Their stories were too simple, ‘I started doing drugs and now I’m clean’ or ‘I used to feel so alone’. Oddly Jackson’s perfected pout was amongst them and he talked about his ‘immense progress’ and as he talked the screen flashed through his day— all incredibly fake as he woke up with vigor and scored the winning goal of the lacrosse game. (Despite the fact he was actually on the losing team’s side.)

Derek was ready to walk away, as were several others if the grumbling was anything to go by, when Stiles’ face adorned the screen. He looked pained. Distressed. He was standing outside the front office staring at something intensely. The voice over started to talk about struggles and difficulties, but Derek couldn’t follow, he couldn’t take his eyes off the haunted ones coming from the projector as Stiles sat on the steps and started to bite his nails nervously, one knee bouncing.

It was then that Derek took in the rest of the scene. His uncle’s car was just barely visible in the background. This was Stiles waiting for him during his VATE recording yesterday. The camera captured Stiles looking down with his hair ruffled before it quickly cut back to the other students claiming they were cured or better, all thanks to Beacon of Hope.

It was ridiculous.

The film ended with two not real students passing a football, a sport they didn’t offer, from one to another. Someone flicked the lights back on. Kali and the investor were already carrying on a conversation about how wonderful it turned out and neither seemed to notice how quiet everyone else was. Lydia spoke first.

“Excuse me,” she said boldly, standing up to be seen and heard due to the large number of people in the room. “Do you know anything at all about our issues? Do you know what my struggles are? Or Stiles’ since you made him the poster boy of hurt teen in that— video,” she said the last word with contempt.

“Do you even know why we’re here?” Isaac asked as he stood next to Lydia, in an uncharacteristic act of bravery.

“Why I’m here?” Erica added.
“Or me?” Scott asked as he too stood.

All around them more and more students stood and asked Kali the simple question.

Derek took it all in, his classmates literally standing together because they felt so misunderstood, a feeling that wasn’t knew to any of them. It was a show of solidarity.

Derek stood too.

Stiles felt his face grow hot as he saw how long his anguish over Derek was captured on film. He felt every bit the part as the words that accompanied his turmoil were broadcasted out for all to hear. The documentary painted him as lost, alone, and hurting, and he was, he was all of those things despite how much he tried to hide it, it was there so clearly on his face for all to see.

Derek had to know. He must realize that this was Stiles, pathetically near pacing, while he sat with his uncle’s lawyers. He couldn’t bring himself to look and see what Derek thought. How embarrassing! How could he face him or anyone really?

Watching the rest of the film was surreal. Stiles knew that there was more and that it finished, but all he could see was his nervous nail biting habit, all he could hear were the words ‘when you’re at your lowest’ on repeat with that image.

Suddenly Lydia was saying something to his right. And then Isaac, and Erica, and Scott. Everyone was standing all around him and Stiles didn’t know why, but thankfully the mass of students in front of him blocked his view of the screen and he was finally able to pull his eyes away.

“Well,” Stiles heard John’s voice, even though he couldn’t see him. “I think they’ve made it clear that you still have some editing to do. And also, all of the shots with students under the age of eighteen will need a signed permission slip from their parent or guardians in order to be used. As
acting guardian for all Beacon of Hope students, I do not give you permission. I find it invasive to their privacy. Yes, even for you Mr. Whittemore, although I did enjoy your performance.”

A muttering of agreement broke out all around Stiles as he was still sitting crossed legged on the ground. A hand appeared suddenly in his face. It was Derek’s. Stiles knew without even following the toned arms up to see concerned eyebrows.

Stiles allowed Derek to pull him up and away from the slowly growing chaos.

“Umm,” Derek looked a little lost for words, which was understandable. What would you say to someone who obviously was way too invested in their business to have freaked out so publicly. It wasn’t right for Stiles to look so broken, it was Derek’s stressor, his trial interview. It wasn’t fair to him.

“I’m so—” Stiles started to say but Derek cut him off.

“Thank you. I know that the Kali woman saw all those things when she saw you and made that video, but I know that you were really just worried for me, and I didn’t even think about what it was like for you— I’m sorry for that, and then I got all mad, and—”

“God no, it was nothing for me I was just waiting for you— and I’m obviously a mess, the video said so, I—”

Stiles failed to finish his sentence because Derek moved his other hand, the one that wasn’t still grasping his, to the side of his face, thumb caressing Stiles’ cheek softly. Stiles’ breath hitched, and he was simply unable to continue talking.

“That video’s wrong,” Derek told him with a surety that Stiles wasn’t capable of at that moment. And then he moved in and kissed him.

It wasn’t explorative like their first kiss, or chaste like their second. No, this kiss was deeper. A gift of reassurance and gratitude. It held so much, and Stiles felt it; felt Derek’s need to express himself beyond words and incomplete sentences.

Similarly, to when he saw himself on film moments ago, time seemed to slow down for Stiles. It was just the two of them and the noise surrounding him blurred into an unrecognizable fuzz.
Until it wasn’t anymore.

“Boys.” Melissa’s voice pierced the haze easily. And just like that their moment was gone.

Derek sprang back but his grip on Stiles’ hand tightened.

“Just… we have rules, don’t— get caught.” It looked like the words pained her. “Stiles, honey, I wanted to see if you were okay and to assure you that that footage will not be making the final cut.”

“I’m— fine. It was— it’s weird seeing yourself like that I guess,” Stiles admitted.

“Hm, well, it seems my entire interview was omitted, so I wouldn’t know,” Melissa replied with sass. “Now I hear there is something about a rematch going on out on the lacrosse field. Why don’t you two go join the others! And have fun!”

Derek raised an eyebrow in question, but Stiles managed to pull him out of the room regardless.

John, Deucalion, Ennis, and even Kali all joined Melissa as she sat on a picnic table watching the Beacon of Hope lacrosse team (with a few additions) take on the Davenford Drama club. It turned out to be a much more even match without the scripted falls. While the students played John talked.

Deucalion was a great listener and considered all of John’s concerns. He even ordered Kali to take notes as they discussed tactics. In the end, a gradual increase in staff was proposed; two additional counselors to start over the summer. With up to ten students each, the rise in profits would be felt across the board and John was much more comfortable with the idea of working in the additional students into his counseling program over time. This would assure he would be able to be there for each of them in the beginning when it was the hardest.
Beacon of Hope lost the game. The students from both schools didn’t hold back and it was a good learning tool as it exposed some issues with Beacon’s defensive line. They took the loss in stride, even Coach was caught smiling when Erica managed a goal although it was for the wrong team; an error Kira more than made up for.

For the novice players nervousness was peeled away, leaving confidence in its wake. No doubt the team would be ready for their first official game next month. The best part was the genuine hand shakes that were exchanged between both schools in the aftermath. Davenford was graceful with their win and Beacon was excited to try again.

Melissa didn’t waste any time, however, with rounding up her students as they were needed to serve dinner in the mess hall. It was already running a little bit behind as Parrish’s group was late to the kitchen due to the impromptu game.

As they took off to clean up it was impossible to miss the close proximity between Stiles and Derek. She shook her head at the intertwined fingers they thought they were hiding.

John spoke too closely to Melissa’s ear, causing her to jump. “You do see that right? It’s not just me?”

“Yeah, I see it,” Melissa replied with a soft sigh.

“And?” John prompted. “What’s the plan? If they’re getting physical, it wouldn’t be proper for them to share a dorm, we talked to them about that, and I thought Derek was still mad that Stiles ran…”

“They’re good for each other,” Melissa said matter-of-factly. “I’ll keep an eye on their— progress. But we shouldn’t intervene just yet.”

“And who’s keeping an eye on our progress?” John asked playfully.

Melissa snorted at the forwardness. “How about you escort me to dinner? A dinner without having to dodge the cameraman no less, and we’ll go from there.”

John offered his arm for her to take.
Chapter End Notes

Melissa ships 'em
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

beta’d by the wonderful fairyfey, please support their works here on Ao3 or check them out on tumblr at gayglitterbabe!

WARNING:
- Isaac mentions his home life abuse with slightly more detail
- Stiles talks about his first time running away. While it isn’t explicit it’s more than suggestive and it makes my gut twist, so if you’d like to avoid it skip the 6 paragraphs starting with: “The first time,” Stiles spoke up out of the blue,

Chapter Notes

Another chapter so soon! The next two chapters which will correlate with episodes 16, 17, and 18 are closely related and may even have a cliffhanger set between them, so I’m going to finish them both before posting so you won’t have to wait long on that cliffy.

I have a request for the readers! The last chapter will include a prom-ish sort of night, soooo what music are these kids sneakily listening to in the media room? Feel free to throw around band or song suggestions because I think that’s going to be a conversation, but I was thinking that maybe one of the teens would be a secret music buff and have like a perfect angsty yet hopeful playlist ready to go for that occasion. I think I mentioned Kira’s love of Kpop but the rest are blank slates...

Thanks for all the love and kudos and comments! You’re they best!

Episode 15

The next few weeks were tumultuous at best. Every time Melissa or John made the effort to single
him out, Stiles felt fear creep over him. He was constantly expecting to be told that he would be shipped back to Florida, although whether it be for a hearing or permanently was still yet to be seen. The not knowing was killing him and as a result he found it impossible to relax.

Derek wasn’t doing much better. In addition to visibly jumping when Stiles’ name was called, he’d also flinch whenever he was asked to go to the office. Kate’s trial had officially started, and Peter was making good on his promise to keep John informed, which meant daily updates. Truly the only thing Derek needed to hear was that she was found guilty and until then he wouldn’t be able to breathe easy.

The Hale name and intricate details of the arson case meant that it was getting national coverage too. For Derek’s well-being, the counselors took it upon themselves to visually monitor all media room activity. Stiles knew it was to give Derek as much of a sense of privacy as possible, but it also meant he didn’t feel comfortable opening or responding to any of Joe’s emails. Not knowing if Simon was keeping up on his end of the bargain was messing with his nerves as well. His fingernails didn’t stand a chance.

As a result, the tension poured off both Derek and Stiles in waves and was starting to affect the others. It got so bad that one Friday afternoon Melissa moved her group session to the sloping lawns near the lake and instructed them all in the fine art of yoga. It actually helped quite a bit and soon became a weekly activity.

It was during one such yoga session in the first week of March that John approached Melissa’s group solemnly. Stiles took one look at the head counselor and immediately found himself drawn to Derek’s side. The older teen’s eyes were already staring back at him, the tree pose they were supposed to be doing was all but forgotten. They just knew one of their names was about to be called and from John’s expression it wasn’t going to be good either way. Melissa told her group that they were done early and dismissed them for the day. She must have sensed the doom as well because she came up behind both Stiles and Derek and offered a reassuring side hug to each as she sandwiched herself between them. The three stood together as an immovable wall against whatever bad news John had come to deliver.

“Stiles,” John called, the timber of his voice just an octave lower than it should be. “You have a phone call to take in my office.”

Melissa’s head snapped up and she glared at John in an almost accusatory fashion. Perhaps she didn’t appreciate his frankness, but it sounded like someone was on hold for him, and it would have been a lot worse to make the walk to the office alone had John used the radio to page Stiles instead. And just like that their wall broke. Stiles stepped forward instantly feeling the lack of warmth where Melissa’s arm had been across his shoulder. Derek reached out a hand for him but Stiles shook his head and mouthed ‘later’, knowing that they would meet beneath their oak tree.
“So, who is it? The case worker? What did they say?” Stiles couldn’t stop the questions from spilling from him as John didn’t offer anything else and walking in silence was killing him.

“No, it’s um, how much do you know about your step father’s dating life? His girlfriend has something important to tell you.”

“Melissa, I think I’m ready, but I have one request.” Boyd broke the counselor’s stare as she was watching John escort Stiles back to his office. She hadn’t realized any of her other students stuck around as they now had the Friday night free from other obligations.

“And what’s that?” She asked, doing her best to give Boyd her attention. She was dying to run off to the office herself, but knew that John would be there for Stiles, too.

“I feel like Triskelion Point is more about the journey and when I started this I was alone. Quiet and shy, I had no one, not a single friend,” Boyd started to explain. “But I’ve grown, I have you guys now,” he added with a rough pat to Derek’s back. “Instead of making that climb with the other graduates, I want to do it with all of us. I’m not a senior anyway and our group has been a big part of my journey, you know?”

Melissa smiled. “That’s wise, and true. Traditionally we only let those who are ready to go home do the hike, juniors and even sophomores have done it in the past but not many. You’ve made huge strides in your time with us, does that mean you’ll talk to your parents about going home this summer?”

“Yeah, my mom’s really been pushing for it and I’m not as afraid anymore, I think it might be time,” Boyd paused to look at Erica’s retreating back. “Even if it will be difficult being so far away.”

“Okay,” Melissa agreed. “It sounds like you’ve thought about it. How about your flag, is it still blank?”
“It is, but I, um, have a plan for that too, it’s a surprise,” Boyd admitted as he glanced back at the ground.

“Okay, well we had a day hike planned for tomorrow, if you can convince the others into making that into an overnight, we’ll go. You’ll have to make it clear that this is for your graduation and that they will have to do it again when they’re ready,” Melissa paused as she considered the obstacles associated with Triskelion Point. “Typically, we only make that climb with a handful of students at a time. The paths are narrow and steep, I’ll see if John will join us too. It’s not an easy trek, Erica will have some challenges with heights.”

“Really!? Tomorrow! Erica’s improved a bunch and I’ll help her through, I’ll help them all as they’ve helped me!” Derek gave his friend a nod, silently communicating that he was on board with the change in weekend activities. “I’ll go ask the others right now! Thank you, Melissa!” With those parting words Boyd jogged off to join the others.

“Alright kiddo,” Melissa rounded on her remaining student. “Do you want to strike up a conversation on the office steps for absolutely no particular reason at all?” She asked with a teasing half grin.

There was really no need for the question, the two were already moving in that direction. They needn’t wait long. No sooner had Melissa sat down on the wooden walkway when the door opened and Stiles emerged. His eyes appeared darker, his breaths more shallow, and any good the interrupted yoga session had done had been wiped cleaned with only a few minutes in John’s office.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Stiles told both Derek and Melissa without even glancing in their direction. His hollow expression was fixed somewhere off in the distance.

Melissa’s eyes slid past her student to rest on John’s who gave her a minute shake of his head, a warning to let him go for now.

Derek didn’t get the memo.

“What happen?” He asked, despite Stiles request to not talk about it.

Stiles brushed past him without responding so Derek turned to John. “What happened?” He
John blew out a deep breath. “It’s private,” he said with a pinched face that was glued to Stiles’ back. “Give him time, he needs to— process.”

All the hope visibly melted from Derek’s expression. Instead of disappearing into the forest as they usually did Stiles made a sharp turn for the lake. Derek was already standing again and seemed torn as he wavered from one foot to the other.

After a minute of not knowing what to do he turned back to both counselors. “I’m sorry,” Derek told them. “I’ve got to try.” He darted off behind Stiles.

Once they were alone, Melissa turned to John. “What happened?” She tried Derek’s failed question. “Was it his case worker?”

“No, not that—” John informed her with a sigh. “Come inside, and I’ll explain, although we really should respect Stiles’ wishes and not force him to talk about it until he’s ready, his response was so — atypical, I think he’s struggling with acceptance at the moment. But let me explain, because this could change— everything.”

Melissa wasn’t expecting that, but she was happy to be getting some answers and eagerly followed the head counselor inside.

Derek found Stiles sitting on the lake dock. He joined him and was pleased his presence wasn’t ignored completely. With classes over for the day and it being not quite dinner time, they weren’t alone. Danny and Jackson and a few others were talking animatedly about the lacrosse team and they all stopped to greet Derek. Stiles, however, did not.

The two sat in silence a few feet away from the others, just watching the occasional fish jump. Eventually, Derek gathered a handful of rocks that were within arms reach and formed a little pile
between them.

“Care to disrupt the ripples again?” Derek asked casually as he skipped a stone. It impressively did four skips before sinking in.

“The lakes pretty smooth today,” Stiles pointed out, but he grabbed a rock regardless.

The two took turns until the meager pile was completely depleted. Four skips remained the record.

“You know you can tell me, right, whatever they decided?” Derek asked eventually. “We’ll figure something out, John will help.”

“I don’t think he can, this time,” Stiles said slowly. “I don’t think I’d want him to, even if he could…”

The cryptic words left Derek reeling. It was frustrating, but he did his best to remain focused on Stiles; his wishes and wants. Which were of course for him to not talk about it, because Stiles didn’t share. Despite how unfair Derek felt it was for the younger boy to keep his secrets, he did appreciate the fact that Stiles wasn’t pushing him away either. So they sat in silence on the lake dock; it was such a stark opposition to how chatty they were when underneath the oak tree.

Braeden practiced her speech one more time. It was a three hour drive to the remote ‘therapy’ school, so she had plenty of time to get her attitude just right. In the driver seat next to her was her Communication Studies professor. He gripped the wheel a little too tightly as he was still nervous over his student’s proposed plan. Braeden, a University of California sophomore, was a talented writer and she was hoping to obtain one of the coveted spots on the school’s media team next year. Either way she had a bright future in Journalism ahead of her and going undercover to expose the gritty underbelly—in this case of one of those expensive reform high schools—was just a stepping stone in her career path.

The twenty-year-old was at the perfect age to play the part. When her hair was down and her face set, she easily looked her age, but with a little smudged make up, too much jewelry, and her hair
pulled back into a floppy bun she could pull off a teen’s appearance. Today she was playing the part of Braeden, seventeen, angry, and misunderstood. Her thick mascara framed her big brown eyes in a way that was so reminiscent of her actual high school days that she was sure she looked the part. Now she just had to act it.

“Are you sure about this?” Professor Tandy asked, not for the first time since they’d started the journey.

“Positive. We’ve already arranged for the paperwork to not go through, so I’ll have today and tomorrow to talk to the students and get as much dirt as I can before they realize the mistake and you’re sent to pick me up, we’ll be back in Davis by tomorrow evening and I’ll have my story!” Braeden said with a wide grin.

“And the angle of your story?” Tandy questioned.

“You read my interview with Mr. and Mrs. Deahler. Their son OD’d here, and the rumor is that the school is undergoing financial issues despite their tuition costs. Where’s all the money going if it’s not protecting kids from sneaking drugs on campus, huh?” Braeden asked in turn. “Something’s going on up on these mountains, and I’m going to find out what!”

“Alright, now I know I’ve mentioned it before, but this is going to be a difficult climb. John and Melissa are only here as support. This is my challenge and because I’m dragging you all with me, you’re my responsibility, too. Don’t be afraid to ask for help!” Boyd held up a map. “Triskelion Point is an odd shaped mountain peak with three jagged rock formations. We’re going to take this path and make base around the twelve mile mark. That means more hiking today, but the last two miles are steep. It won’t be easy, but I know we can do it!”

Melissa’s teens huddled around the forest path that would lead them to their expedition; double and triple checking all of their supplies. John and Melissa were doing their best not to interfere while still using their eyes alone to mentally check off all the most important items. The group was just about ready to head out when Chris’ voice stopped them.

“Wait! John, hold up!” Chris called. “I have a new admittance, but ah, she’s missing her transfer
papers. What do I do with her?” He asked the last bit without shouting as he was closer now.

The student in question was jogging along not far behind and caught up with Chris easily. Her father however was yards behind them.

“Missing paperwork?” John questioned. “I don’t think we can do anything for them, Ms….?”

“How about this?” Braeden, the new student informed them all. “Listen I am not getting in a car with that old man again! You can’t make me!” She sneered. “I like camping, I can go with you and on Monday my transfer will have come through!”

Melissa introduced herself and the others and explained that that wasn’t how things worked. Braeden’s father however, who didn’t look remotely like her although that was sometimes the case in interracial children, refused to take her to a hotel in the meantime. It was clear that the two had argued their entire drive to Beacon of Hope. Braeden kept insisting that she go camping with the others and after twenty minutes, in which Boyd’s positive demeanor had given away to an increasing amount of impatience, John decided they’d take the new student with them if her father would sign a permission slip. Both Braeden and her dad seemed more than pleased with the outcome. The whole exchange was odd and in the end they were all running an hour behind.

Boyd took the hiccup in stride, he shortened their schedule breaks from fifteen to ten minutes, and before long was leading the group of close knit teens and one stranger as if he was born for the task.

“So what’s the school like?” Braeden interrupted the semi silence going on within the circle of students as they walked.

Boyd was leading the way with Erica and Kira instep behind him, the two girls deep in their own hushed conversation. Jackson, Isaac, and Scott were all muttering occasionally with each other too. Allison and Lydia while walking side by side were fairly quiet. Derek had Stiles for company behind them all, but he wasn’t talking either and the counselors were a good distance behind them, letting Boyd take charge.
Allison, who was usually the first to open up to newbies told Braeden a little bit about Beacon of Hope. It seemed like with each tidbit of information Braeden would ask more and more.

“So, I heard a kid almost died a few months ago, were any of you around for that?” Braeden asked eagerly.

Allison and Lydia exchanged a puzzled look before Jackson piped up. He told a sordid tale about Matt, it involved the exaggerated near-death of all the boys in their dorm. Jackson embellished the truth and Braeden ate it up. The extreme line of questioning continued for hours.

During a break Erica came around to check everyone’s water bottle levels and told Derek that the others suspected Braeden was a spy. Perhaps someone from the state or their investor’s team to investigate them. So naturally they were going to mess with her.

“Scott’s going to talk about all the drugs he used to sell and Jackson’s already going on about how to huff cleaning products. You two need to play along, we want to scare her!” Erica told them with a grin.

Derek agreed, thinking about how he could casually drop his name and the current trial would be enough to unsettle the new girl. Stiles didn’t say anything.

“Did you hear what Jackson was saying?” Melissa asked John with a puzzled look on her face.

“Yeah, I think the kids have picked up on the fact that something isn’t quite right with our new student,” John suggested.

“Not right? How so?”
“I’ve never had a teen volunteer to go camping and on their first day, no less. The new ones never want to do anything,” John explained. “And she had to leave her belongings behind to get checked by one of the other counselors; she didn’t even protest, that’s so unusual. I think your group’s on the right track, her over eagerness was one of the reasons I agreed to take her with us, if she’s looking for dirt on the school I figured the best I could do is keep an eye on her.”

“Dirt? You mean like an undercover cop? I hope not, the kids have been a little too forthcoming, if you ask me,” Melissa said with a worried glance up the trail.

“No, if she was working with the authorities, I’m sure she’d be back here questioning us, I’m thinking she might be trying to get a story for the local paper maybe, or perhaps something more political, to try and shut our funding down.”

“Well that’s not good either!” Melissa exclaimed. “Why’d you take her with us, then?”

“We have nothing to hide, and what Boyd’s doing is big, maybe it will open her eyes some if she sees the benefits of our program first hand, and this is a difficult climb, at the very least, she’s going to get a workout…”

“Oh, that’s sneaky!” Melissa gasped with a playful slap to John’s chest. “Should I tell the kids to stop the embellishing?”

“No, like I said, we have nothing to hide. I’m proud of each and every one of them, even if their progress is currently being elevated. So far we’ve saved Scott from a long, hard life of professional drug dealing, and Erica from running a street gang. Jackson would have surely been in jail, if not dead, based on what he’s told Braeden so far. Beacon of Hope’s their only saving grace at this point.”

“They may be going overboard, but you really have saved those kids— hundreds of kids who have come through your program,” Melissa pointed out.

“We’ve saved them together,” John corrected as his left hand found Melissa’s right.
It was during lunch as Kira was going on and on about her skills with a blade when Braeden boldly turned away from her to ask Derek what he did to be sent to the reform school with a few bats of her eye. Kira’s mouth dropped open mid sentence as she was both being ignored, and Stiles’ man was getting hit on. Lydia, Allison, and Erica all picked up on the shift in mood too. It would seem none of the guys were as quick to read the situation.

Derek was typically quiet anyway, so his one word responses weren’t out of the ordinary and when he flat out told the suspected imposter that his family all died in a fire, Braeden’s eyes lit up. It was clear that she had put two and two together, having had access to the headlining news lately.

After that, everyone started to bug Stiles to share some of his more sordid tales. The girls wanted Stiles to insert his dominance and scare Braeden off a little. She had yet to move away from Derek’s side. Stiles, however, seemed to be the only one not playing along with Braeden’s game. This led to Isaac taking the floor.

He told them all an honest story about his father drunkenly locking him in the freezer. The spooky way everyone else instantly stilled was enough to warrant Braeden’s attention. She pulled her eyes off Derek and listened to Isaac’s haunting tale. Isaac explained that he wasn’t sure if his father would remember that he did it the first time. He admitted that he thought for sure he’d die in there; the ice chest turned coffin.

“The first time?” Braeden asked Isaac, uncertainly.

“Yeah... All I can say is thank God I’m here now and he’s in jail, I don’t know what I’d do with out all of you,” Isaac replied, his eyes landing on Allison as he spoke. She returned his gaze with an encouraging smile.

Braeden was speechless for the rest of lunch.

Boyd gave the group a positive talk about how they were all doing well and making up the time they lost with the late start. ‘Only three more miles and we’ll make camp,” he told them. “And, Scott, Chris gave me that seasoning he used on the fish tacos, so if you want we can go fishing here,” he pointed to a stream on the map. “I know we didn’t bring poles, but we can make a net!”
“Hey, you should participate,” Derek told Stiles as the group was split between finding wood for a campfire and catching fish.

“I’m picking up wood, am I not?” Stiles snapped back, annoyed.

“I meant in the ‘frighten off the new girl’ game. Isaac had her spooked but, you should tell her about what it’s like running away, going days without food, that sort of thing…”

Stiles felt his gut clench. Did Derek realize what he was asking of him? What starving for food led to? Had he forgotten so easily the barcode on his back or what it meant? Stiles ignored the suggestion and continued gathering wood in silence.

An hour later, however, as Boyd and Allison cooked dinner with John and Melissa’s support, the others had finished with setting up everyone’s pop tents and were sitting on the assembled logs with very little to do. The exhaustion from the day’s trek was really starting to settle on everyone and in general the mood was subdued.

“The first time,” Stiles spoke up out of the blue, “I was only eleven, and I had no clue what I was doing.” He picked up a twig that was on the ground and started to poke the dirt with it just so he didn’t have to look up and see who was listening to him. He felt their eyes, regardless. “I ran away,” he added for Braeden’s benefit. “That first night, God it was amazing. I went to the park, it was only two blocks away and I used the swings, like all night, slept in one of the slides. It wasn’t too bad, I’ll never forget it because the moon was full and the park was so bright even though the lamps weren’t on.”

Stiles paused before continuing. “It was on the third night that I was so hungry, that I decided to walk to McDonald’s. I didn’t make it there, but it’s not like I had any money anyway. A car pulled up to the curb, it was silver and old,” he chuckled to himself, “just like its driver. But anyway, I’d seen the car before, circling the park, I was pretty sure the man knew I was by myself, so when he asked if I was hungry and I told him that I was, he invited me to get in and I did without hesitation.”

A few of the listeners gasped at that, but Stiles refused to acknowledge them.
“So, he told me he’d get me food, suggested I take a shower, and brought me to a hotel. The shower was great and much needed; it’s always hot and muggy in Florida…” Stiles explained.

“The man took my clothes, to wash them, he’d said, but that meant I was wrapped up in a towel—and somehow still dripping wet, when he returned.” Stiles stabbed the dirt with such force the twig broke. “He told me that it was okay to be naked in front of him, suggested I would feel more comfortable if he was naked too. I— didn’t.”

Stiles’ gaze was now locked on all the holes he created in the ground and he blew out a deep breath before continuing. “He wasn’t too bad, didn’t touch me much, more into looking… Long story short, I got a happy meal, and the next time I was really hungry I made the mistake of soliciting an off-duty police officer. That was the first time I was arrested. I don’t think it’s on my record though because I’m pretty sure the cops thought it would scare me straight or something. No one really listened to me back then, I was just some dumb kid, really, so why would they, you know…”

Silence. Even the crackling fire seemed muted by Stiles’ words.

Eventually Stiles stood, still ignoring everyone around him as he walked off into the woods on the trail that led to the river.

It took less than a minute for footsteps to catch up with him. Stiles spun around, expecting Melissa or John as that story would have been new to either of them, had they been listening, but instead found himself face to face with Derek.

“I— didn’t know,” Derek muttered out. “When I said you should—”

“I didn’t do it for you or for Braeden,” Stiles cut him off to say. He meant it, too. “I’m just so sick of keeping it all inside…”

“So, tell me! Tell me everything!” Derek pleaded.

“I can’t!” Stiles shouted. He pushed Derek’s chest hard in an attempt to create more distance between them, but the result had Stiles sliding back on the foliage instead.

“Why can’t you?” Derek roared back, loosing his temper.
“Because— because you’ll look at me like how you are right now! You don’t really want to hear about this shit! No one does! No one should have to!” Stiles forced himself to meet Derek’s eyes and all he saw there was pity and confusion.

“Yeah, okay, you’re right. It’s hard to hear, especially because you had a home you could have gone back to, so you’re right Stiles, I don’t understand it!” Derek placated. “Explain it to me and maybe I’ll get it,” he challenged.

“Explain it to you?” Stiles repeated with incredulity. “You want to know why I chose to be used, touched— violated over going home? No,” he shook his head. “You don’t get an explanation for that!”

“Stiles, please,” Derek attempted in a calmer tone as he moved closer to close the gap between them.

“Leave me alone!” Stiles demanded, his eyes flashing dangerously with the words. “Don’t touch me! Get away!” He screamed the last bit.

The bushes rattled nearby revealing John and Melissa, both heaving deep breaths as if they were running.

“Derek, honey, why don’t you come with me,” Melissa suggested in a soothing tone.

Derek looked like he wanted to protest. Stiles turned his back to the three of them and sat down on a boulder near the river. If they wanted to stay or go, it wouldn’t matter, he was done sharing for the day— forever maybe.

“It’s just us,” John said as he sat on Stiles’ right.

Stiles didn’t acknowledge him.

“I know there has been lots of exaggerated story telling today, but I’m pretty sure yours was fairly accurate,” John started. “Eleven is really young, but it wasn’t your first time, huh?”
Stiles fidgeted, uncomfortable with how easily John had made that assumption.

“I don’t know what it’s like, what you’re feeling right now, I’m hoping some part of you is relieved, maybe, because—”

“He isn’t dead yet,” Stiles whispered. “And it’s like I did so much to get away from him, and for him to just— What was the point?”

John sighed.

“I will never be clean. And what was the point?” Stiles asked again, feeling tears fall down his cheeks.

The two sat in silence by the river for a long time. When they returned everyone had already finished their dinner and Melissa brought them both a heaping plate full of fish.

Melissa stood from her place around the fire and announced that they would do a group sharing exercise before bed. She then reached into her pack and pulled out a bag of marshmallows. Most of the teens cheered and started scrambling around as they looked for good skewering sticks on the ground. Stiles didn’t join in the action and as a result Derek very pointedly found a two-pronged stick and started a double marshmallow roast.

“Okay, so I’d like to start by telling Boyd that he has done a phenomenal job leading us out here so far, and also, I saw you picking berries earlier, you’re up to something and I’m on to you!” Melissa announced once everyone who wanted to was working on their dessert. “So for tonight’s exercise, I figured we would keep it simple, let’s welcome Braeden to the group, go around the circle and just say what’s on your mind.”

Boyd went next, standing up to thank everyone for keeping up on the hike and warning them about what laid ahead, obstacle-wise. Erica told Boyd that she’s proud of him and that she is absolutely terrified of the rope bridge that he had just mentioned. Kira made a general announcement that she does not, nor will she ever, enjoy sleeping on the ground and that the school’s sleeping bags are too flat. Lydia seconded that statement before glancing at Stiles and said in a smaller voice that she never considered what it was like, not even when she herself had attempted to run, to be so— lost.
That statement drew Stiles’ attention and he peeled his eyes away from the fire for the first time since he sat down. Lydia looked like she might have been crying too. It was odd to consider that his story earlier would affect others like that, but it reiterated to him that he shouldn’t have talked about it.

Allison went next and had a lot of nice things to say to Boyd and Braeden, who sat to her right.

“What about you, Braeden, want to participate? Have anything to share?” John asked as she seemed to need the prompting.

“Why should I tell you guys what I’m thinking?” She asked with an unwarranted amount of attitude.

John threw his hands up and assured her it was optional. Stiles noticed that earlier too, the new girl while perfectly pleasant when asking questions and fishing for information, seemed incredibly mouthy towards the counselors, almost like she was trying too hard.

Isaac went next and mentioned how it felt good to share his fears earlier, how he can say it now and confidently know that he’s safe and won’t ever be that scared little boy again.

Derek skipped over Jackson and made a smart ass comment about how when people don’t talk about their feelings it gets all bottled up inside. It was something Melissa had said on multiple occasions but the way Derek spouted off the phrase and stared directly at Stiles, everybody knew where the jibe was aimed.

Jackson opened his mouth to say something, probably that he was skipped, but Stiles beat him to it.

“My stepdad had a heart attack. He’s in the hospital,” Stiles told Derek directly even though the others could hear.

Derek blew out a deep breath and buried his face in his hands. “I didn’t know,” he muttered. “Dammit, I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“I didn’t want to talk about it,” Stiles replied, his eyes blazing once more.
Again, Jackson attempted to say something, but—

“Are you okay, man?” Scott asked from Stiles’ other side. “Can you go visit him? He’s like all you have left, right? You must be so scared—”

“Don’t tell me how I feel!” Stiles spat out as he jumped up. He turned around in an attempt to head back down the path towards the river, but it was fully dark now and John stopped him.

“Stiles, don’t run!” The counselor warned as he stood, readying himself for a possible chase.

“I didn’t know,” Derek repeated a little more brokenly now.

“But it probably means no house arrest,” Lydia pointed out with hesitation, attempting to sound positive.

Stiles rounded on her in turn. “If that monster dies— it means— everything I did— Do you know what that makes me?” He screamed at both Lydia and Derek in turn. “Do you know what I am?”

Feeling trapped Stiles turned away from the group, his feet mere inches from the stack of washed dishes. He sent the plates flying throughout the campsite with a kick to the pile. John who was positioning himself between Stiles and the forest had to duck to avoid getting hit by the plastic disks. In his haste to just get away Stiles spun back around, nearly tripping over his own feet in the process. He stumbled and all the momentum he had built up sent him tumbling towards the fire.

Melissa was already on her feet but simply too far away. Stiles locked his eyes with her terrified ones, but before he felt the flames lick his face, his body slammed into something hard. Derek scooped Stiles into his arms, burying the smaller boy against his chest.

Stiles broke down into tears again. So many tears and for so many reasons. He was pissed that the monster might die without having had faced consequences for his actions. He’d never felt like he needed justice until his chance to get it was being threatened and by something so mundane as a heart attack, it just wasn’t fair. Stiles also couldn’t begin to cope with his life choices now that the reason behind them might disappear; the monster was what he was running from, without it, what was he? A simple whore? The corner rent boy? He was also pissed that Derek kept pushing him, who was he to demand he open up? Stiles just couldn’t take it any more. He was ruined long before he decided to run away, if Derek only knew half his truths, he’d never touch him again.
Derek, who was currently shushing him with one arm wrapped tightly around Stiles’ lower back and the other moving up and down in a soothing gesture.

Stiles cringed at the thought that it was Derek that saved him from face planting into the fire.

“Stop it!” Stiles shouted, pushing against the solid wall of muscle that held him firmly in place. “Just leave me alone!”

Derek stilled in his attempts to comfort.

“Don’t… Don’t touch me,” Stiles said weakly.

When Derek dropped his arms to his side silently, Stiles turned to run once more. John and Melissa were right behind him now, however. There was no where left to go. Face splotchy and tear stricken, Stiles collapsed to the ground in almost the same spot he had originally started in, his back propped up against the log he was once sitting on. He let out a broken sort of wail of defeat and buried his face in his hands in an effort to block out the world around him.

Melissa watched Stiles’ breakdown with her mouth hanging open. Lydia was standing now too, her hands covering her face in shock. Scott moved aside after Derek caught Stiles to give the two of them room. He was still shaking from the near miss that took place right next to him. All three of them had dropped their marshmallow sticks in the process.

Everyone else in the circle was practically motionless, even Braeden seemed to comprehend the significance behind the emotional outburst. Jackson’s mouth was still hanging open as if he was going to say something, but the words were long since forgotten on his tongue. John and Melissa were the only two who dared to move as they slowly made their way to Stiles’ sides.

Eventually Stiles looked up. He glanced at John who was crouched down to his right and then Melissa who was cramped into the small spaced to his left. Stiles flung himself at her, smashing his head into her shoulder.
Melissa was momentarily caught off guard before she encircled the teen in a tight hug of her own. Only until she was able to, did she realize how badly she needed the action herself. She closed her eyes and rocked him gently. Something, she perceived, Stiles had probably not experienced since his mother’s passing.

All around them John ushered the others off to go brush their teeth and get ready for bed.

Derek was the first to wake. His eyes were glued to Stiles’ tent, where the figure inside was immobile. The others soon followed, including Boyd, who had breakfast served at an alarming pace. Before they knew it, it was time for their climb to continue with the thin, chilly morning air surrounding them. John gently woke Stiles and politely asked the others to give him space. Everyone obliged the request, even Derek. Braeden seemed less in the mood for questions. Perhaps she wasn’t a morning person, or maybe seeing the rawness Stiles displayed the night before had her rethinking her undercover motives.

Less than twenty minutes in and the relatively calm river that was perched near their campsite twisted into something more lethal as jagged rock formations created rapids. Of course the group had to cross. The water was sure to be ice cold.

“Okay guys, this is the rope bridge I mentioned.” Boyd pointed up towards a sloping mountain side where three simple ropes connected one side of the river with the other. They looked ancient.

“Ah, when was the last trip made out this way?” Jackson asked, nervousness sweeping into his voice.

“Yeah, that can’t be safe!” Kira agreed.

“Why’s it so— high?” Erica asked John accusatorially. “You did that on purpose!”

“A bridge like that requires some give,” Melissa explained. “If we made it directly above the
water, the rope wouldn’t last.”

The group made their way up the rocky slope and even Derek had to agree with Erica’s statement about the unnecessary height. It now felt like they were being asked to cross a canyon and the river was so broken by the boulders below, it offered little comfort.

“I’ll go first,” Melissa announced as she picked up a fourth and much smaller line. She created a harness and attached herself to the safety line. “Once I’m across I’ll reestablish the Belay. Boyd, after that, it’s up to you to get everyone else across!”

Melissa was quick and efficient. Boyd encouraged Erica to go next, before she thought about it too much. The entire group cheered her on, even Stiles. Lydia went next for similar reasons, despite not being willing to voice them. Jackson quickly followed her, and practically sprinted across the rope without so much as looking down.

Boyd encouraged Stiles to take his turn next. He hadn’t said a word to any of them all morning, but Derek noticed his hesitation and shaky hands when fastening the carabiner.

“That’s right, one foot in front if the other, keep both hands on your supporting ropes! Good job!” Derek joined Boyd’s motivational chanting.

Kira and Isaac both made it across agonizingly slow after that.

John then turned to Braeden. “Okay you’ve seen it done, are you ready to try?”

“There is no way that’s safe! How can you expect students to do these things? I could die!” Braeden protested.

“Melissa and Boyd will support you from both sides. Sometimes facing these fears out here helps when facing challenges back in the real world, a lot of the kids here just need a little success in their lives. You saw Stiles last night? Imagine how elated he’s feeling right now having had conquered that?”

“That’s insane! This is insane!” Braeden said with a squeak of fear.
“Do you want to see Derek or Scott go, one more chance to see it done?” John asked with more venom than Derek had ever heard. “Or would you prefer if we left you here to start writing your editorial, hem?”

“Wh— what are you talking about?” Braeden failed to hide her surprise.

“What’s the story?” John continued to press. “You looking to uncover the greasy underbelly of the American youth? Trying to dissect these kids’ tribulations to write something compelling and eye opening? Or are you going to paint them as a danger to society?”

Braeden’s face morphed from one of general fear into longing and regret. “I— I’m a UC Davis student, just trying to get on the school newspaper,” she admitted without making eye contact. “I was thinking these schools are rather costly, and kids still get hurt, Matt—”

“Matt Daehler was just a kid who needed some help getting his life back on track, he chose an extremely harmful path, but fortunately for him, he’s doing well and getting the treatment he needs. I email his mother regularly.” John held out his arms to indicate Derek, Boyd, and Scott who couldn’t help but be apart of this conversation. “Life has failed these kids in one way or another, and yet here they are, overcoming challenges every day. What Boyd’s done all weekend it’s a huge deal, but his success won’t see the light of day on your school’s blog, huh?”

Braeden’s face was growing more scarlet by the second. She turned her head away from the teens, clearly too embarrassed to admit that John was right.

“Listen, paper or not, what’s really important right now is that we get this kid to the top of that mountain. So you can stay here and we’ll meet you on the way back down, or you can come with and witness something truly worth writing about,” John didn’t leave any room for debate as he offered to help Scott out with his harness.

Derek followed Scott and was surprised to see that Braeden did decide to cross after all. The college student was pretty quiet for the remainder of the trip.

“This is it guys, Triskelion Point!” Melissa announced once the wooded area gave way to an open expanse of rock and dirt witch gradually sloped upwards to form three different peaks. It looked like a giant had gifted the mountain with a crown made of jagged rocks.
“We made it guys!” Boyd said excitedly.

“I think we all need a rest, why don’t you and Melissa finish off the climb, we’ll wait here,” John said with an obviously forced and over exaggerated yawn.

“You’re really going to make us do this again!” Erica asked, annoyed.

John smiled. “Sure am! Hopefully you’ll feel the pride Boyd’s currently feeling when you do!”

“Hey, at least we can all do it together again!” Kira said cheerfully.

“Speak for yourself,” Lydia inserted her opinion into the conversation. “I do not want to do this climb with the seniors next year and have to do it for a third time when I graduate!”

“Ah, yes, we do have a bit of a divide in this group, huh?” John asked with a knowing smile.

“And first step to getting here is completing your solo trip,” Melissa added, catching on to where John was going with this.

“Quite a few of you are ready for that trip, I think,” John said conversationally to Melissa, as if this wasn’t previously discussed.

“So, Lydia, you and Erica, and Derek— and Isaac, and yes, even you Jackson have all been with us for over a year now.” Melissa gave out a cheesy fist bump to each student as she said their names.

“Don’t forget about Allison,” John added, with a fist bump of his own to Melissa’s pseudo group member.

“Yes, and Allison!” Melissa amended. “Your dad said your welcome to join the others, we want to see your flag here one day too!”
“So, our solo?” Jackson questioned. “What do we have to do?”

“It’s a secret!” Boyd said ominously. “But three days in the woods by yourself is really the gist of it.”

“Two nights and like two and a half days,” John corrected. “And you’ll find out, next weekend!” He added to answer Jackson’s question.

“Next weekend!” Lydia pouted. “We have to go camping again? No way!”

“I’m close to my one year, why can’t I go too?” Scott asked, obviously a little disappointed.

“If you wait, you’ll be with me and Stiles,” Kira pointed out.

“It’s called a solo for a reason, guys, and that’s the only hint you’re going to get! Okay, Boyd lets see that top secret flag of yours!” Melissa said cheerfully.

Boyd slid his pack off his back and rummaged through it revealing his still blank flag. “I need you guys to help me finish it,” he said simply and continued pulling out two zip lock bags, one with red and blue berries and the other with a fine white powder.

“I learned this from the Native American funeral we had,” Boyd said as he poured a little of his drinking water into the bag with the powder. It instantly created a white paste. He took the other one and started squishing the berries between his fingers. Everyone watched intently as the popping sound was a little hypnotic. It reminded Derek of stepping on bubble wrap as a child.

“So do you guys think I could get your hand prints?” Boyd asked when he was finished with the two mixtures.

Derek went first choosing the white, because he did not want the deep red juice near his clothes. Lydia was quick to place a white print as well. Allison, Kira, and Scott all did red ones next and filled in the blank spaces on the flag. Jackson placed his big print so that it covered some of the others. Isaac and Stiles followed his lead, leaving the center opened.
“Do you want us on there too?” Melissa asked. She was watching with rapt attention as the simple artwork came together.

“Sure,” Boyd agreed. The counselors took opposing corners.

“Hold your hand like this,” Erica instructed. She placed her hand next to Boyd’s and they pressed down together creating a heart in the center.

“It’s upside down!” Lydia pointed out when she stepped back to take the whole thing in. “The poles on the other side, so the heart is upside down.”

“That’s okay,” Boyd assured her, “we’re all a little upside down sometimes. Thanks guys! Now I did not bring extra water because I was not hauling that all the way up here, so you’ll have to clean up in the river.”

“The river’s cold!” Jackson complained.

Boyd smirked. “Yeah, I know!”

Braeden watched the group without adding any input, but a smile tugged on her lips all the same.

“Alright, it’s approximately a twenty-eight foot climb up each peak. As you can see the previous students have decorated them all rather heavily. Which one are you going for today Boyd?”

He picked the middle one. While Boyd and Melissa climbed the remaining distance by themselves, everyone else sat and cheered them on. Once he was at the top Boyd took in the sights and Melissa snapped several photos of him posing with his flag.

“Guys look this way!” Melissa called out to her remaining students. “Group photo!”
The trip down the mountain was less dramatic. Stiles spent several hours walking alone. He felt isolated, and the worst thing was he had done it to himself. Every time his eyes flickered to Derek he felt a pang of guilt tug at his insides.

It was after lunch that he finally did something about it.

“Hey,” Stiles said tentatively to Derek who was currently listening to Braeden and Erica complain about how much their feet hurt. “Want to— wanna walk with me, when we— you know— walk again?”

Derek’s reaction was a little too slow for Lydia’s liking, so she kicked him in the shin.

“Ah, yeah— yes,” Derek stammered out. “How are you feeling? No, I mean—”

“It’s okay,” Stiles stepped in to save Derek from having to find the right words. “I’m sorry for um, biting your head off yesterday, and hitting you because I think I did, and umm, for freaking the fuck out, in general…”

“Don’t push it, Stiles!” Melissa’s voice called from the other side of the boulder they were leaning on while munching on granola bars and fruit snacks.

“Are you okay?” Derek asked, ignoring their counselor.

Stiles shrugged.

Derek held out his arms. It was a simple gesture and Stiles faltered when he saw it. Instead of going in for the hug, though, he chose to wedge himself between Derek’s feet, burrowing his face into the same chest he collapsed on only just the night before. Derek didn’t delay as he wrapped both his arms around him instantly. Then, Stiles felt the weight of Derek’s head as it dropped on his, he was completely encased. Derek used his body to form a barrier between Stiles and the outside world.
“I don’t deserve you,” Stiles whispered into the warm darkness that was Derek’s shirt.

Derek didn’t respond for a long time, so Stiles assumed his words went unheard. Eventually, Boyd called that it was time to start moving again. Rather than let Stiles pull away, however, Derek’s hands moved up to his face. He leaned in for what Stiles assumed would be another kiss, but instead Derek tilted his head and whispered into his ear, “Yes, yes you do.”

Derek’s hand slid down again, this time allowing his fingers to tangle with Stiles’. Hours later, the pair would arrive back on campus, still hand in hand.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Beta read by the fabulous fairyfey! I’ve been lazy to post this update, so I’m sorry for the delay. 7/12/19

WARNING: panic attack, mentions of abuse, bad language, non-con touching, dark thoughts, somewhat left on a cliff hanger

Chapter Notes

I’d like to give a big thank you to supernatural_lover01 for helping me focus and move on in order to get this out to all of you!

For those of you following along with Higher Ground’s episodes, the following 2 or 3 chapters are a combination of episodes 16-20. Some stuff (Kira’s arc) has been removed completely and will be played out in the sequel. There is simply too much going on as it is.

In my head I call this one Promises and Unread Letters

And lastly, I’m so god damn sorry this took so long. I actually cut this chapter early so the clffy here wasn’t my originally intended one which I think is worse and will now be the middle of the next chapter. I just had to get this out so I could stop working on it and move on. With that said, it is my goal to have the next chapter posted a week from tomorrow. Please feel free to threaten me in the comments if I fail to do so. Hope some of you are still with me!

Don’t take those above warnings lightly because this chapter gets— dark and I hate it.

Episode 16

The Monday after Triskelion Point everyone was tired and exhausted during their classes. The day
dragged on and the evening was subdued. Derek found himself and the majority of Melissa’s male students in their dormitory long before curfew. Everyone was quiet, so Stiles’ silence didn’t stand out.

Tuesday evening was a movie night. The giant projector was set up on the lawn near the fire pit and students were scattered about, sitting on blankets or picnic tables while enjoying the latest adventure in the Marvel universe. The movie seemed to hold Stiles’ attention and while Derek was dying to know what the other was thinking as the two sat inappropriately close, he didn’t dare interrupt to ask.

Wednesday, during group Derek held Stiles’ hand as they shared an armchair and listen to Jackson drone on and on as he made up for his lack of sharing time from their previous weekend hike. Melissa didn’t press her students that evening and kept the conversation flowing organically, rather than calling on each of them individually to speak. Stiles didn’t say a word.

It wasn’t until Thursday after class when Derek finally scrounged up enough courage to pull Stiles aside and attempt a conversation.

“Hey,” Derek said meekly as he ducked out of the path of students, pulling Stiles along with him. “We, um, haven’t had much of a chance to talk since—”

“Yeah,” Stiles agreed on an exhale, looking at the ground. “I—”

“Stiles! There you are!” Scott called when he spotted the pair. “Come on, practice! Our first game is on Monday. Let’s go!” Without waiting for a reply, Scott pulled Stiles’ other arm. “Sorry Derek, see you at dinner!” He called over his shoulder, not sounding even remotely apologetic.

Stiles appeared alarmed at the sudden tug and shot Derek a remorseful look but didn’t say anything to hinder his friend either. Derek watched the two of them go, his mouth hanging open in an unspoken protest.
At dinner the entire table talked about nothing aside from how ready the lacrosse team was. Boyd tried to bring basketball into the mix and he nudged Derek for help, but Stiles’ muteness must have been contagious, because Derek found it difficult to string two coherent words together on the subject. John stopped by before they were finished with his daily update on Kate’s trial and asked Stiles to report to his office once he was done eating.

Derek tried to find him later, but the younger student wasn’t in the common room, by the gazebo, or even down by the lake. He knew he was no longer with John because the head counselor was currently disrupting an argument that had broken out between two of Parrish’s students.

Giving up, Derek went to bed early, only to find Stiles already in his. He paused awkwardly in the doorway as the two stared at one another, both hesitant to start a conversation.

“Listen,” Derek said at the same time Stiles mumbled, “So, the things I said—”

They both paused to let the other continue. Then they both talked over each other at the same time before halting once more. It was frustrating, and they weren’t getting anywhere.

Finally, Stiles huffed out, “Tonight, come with me to the lake after the others are asleep. I want— I want to tell you something. I— I think I need to— and I can’t say it all here where anyone could overhear.” Despite the bravado in his tone he looked unsure of the words. “If— if you want to, that is?”

Derek managed to nod once before he was not so gently bumped aside as Jackson barged into the cabin. Stiles fumbled with a school book and pretended to read but Derek saw the way his eyes failed to move and recognized the blank look as the same one from their movie night and during group – even at dinner and in class all week. Stiles was obviously lost in thought, but perhaps Derek would soon find out what he was thinking.

Sneaking across the grounds at night was exhilarating for Derek. The path they took avoided all light posts and seemed well memorized by Stiles. He pulled Derek along without hesitation. They didn’t dare speak while within earshot of the other dormitory cabins, but as soon as their shoes
touched the wooden dock Stiles blew out a deep breath and made up for his three days of silence.

“Okay, so obviously my stepdad’s in the hospital or whatever and you already know I don’t like him. I keep thinking about how if he dies, everything I promised I wouldn’t say would die too. Like that part of me will die with him, and that’s a good thing— it is because I hate that part of me, but it was sort of a shield, I guess, to the rest of me and what I am without it isn’t— good. It’s toxic. I don’t know if I could live without his poison though, because it counteracts the others. If I’m the only one that knows, I just feel like it will eat me up— I feel like it already has…”

Once Stiles opened his mouth the words tumbled out in quick succession. Derek wouldn’t have interrupted even if given the chance because it was obvious that Stiles needed this. He needed to pace and to ramble and to fling his arms around to emphasize a point; a point that while clear as day for Stiles couldn’t have been more muddled for Derek.

“So, I know it’s a lot to ask but if I’m going to tell someone I need to just do it, you know, get it over with. And if I tell you, then maybe I can tell Melissa and John too and they can make sure that kid is safe or whatever, I don’t know— I don’t know what will happen after that but if that monster dies, what he did to me won’t die with him, because I won’t be the only one who knows…” Stiles looked down at Derek clearly uncertain.

His brows were knitted together and face set in a frown, he needed reassurance and he came to Derek to get it. It was a start.

“Okay,” Derek agreed, but to what he wasn’t sure. He reached for Stiles’ hand and pulled him down so that they could sit facing each other. The moon reflected on the early morning mist above the lake surrounding them with an ethereal glow. It felt calming, like it was just the two of them, despite the fact that there was an entire school full of people sleeping just off to their right. “Tell me. If you’re poisoned, maybe I can be the antidote?” He suggested with a small grin.

It seemed the corny joke was enough to settle Stiles, who’s face lit up at the sentiment. It darkened just as quickly as he looked away to speak. “You’re sure? It’s a lot to handle?”

Derek nodded. “Tell me,” he repeated, he had never been more sure of something in his life.

Stiles wavered only a moment more before his eyes locked onto the still water. “So, my mom married a monster and then she got sick and left me with him, but it started before that, I think. She became forgetful and sometimes would freak out on Simon because she wouldn’t remember who he was - she did that to me too, actually. Simon— he started sleeping in my room. My mom was better on days when she woke at her own pace and wasn’t bombarded with us, so it became the
norm, I guess. My room wasn’t terribly big or anything and Simon was an adult, so it wasn’t like he was going to sleep on the floor, so he just started sleeping in my bed. I didn’t really think much of it. My cousin slept in my bed with me once when she visited, and I had had sleepovers at friends houses and stuff, so I just thought it was normal,” Stiles spoke easily enough as if he couldn’t feel the ice trickling into Derek’s veins with each word.

“I remember waking up in the middle of the night and not really knowing what woke me but once I was up his breathing was impossible to ignore. When I close my eyes, I can still hear it, his—grunts,” he shuddered at the thought.

Stiles chewed his bottom lip for a moment before continuing.

“He caught me once. God, I think about that, if I had just pretended not to hear him, would none of this have happened? I was such a stupid, stupid kid and so god damn curious, you know. I remember staring at him, shocked, when I realized where he was—touching himself,” he choked on the word. “Like it was dark in my room because I didn’t use a night light anymore, but my eyes must have been so wide because I can still picture it clearly. And he caught me staring so I looked away, but he kept going—kept breathing and I could just feel his eyes on me. I couldn’t look at him the next day, I was too—embarrassed, I guess. Like I did something wrong by waking—by looking. I shouldn’t have looked!” He said the last word harshly with a shake of his head.

“I wish I hadn’t… The next day he didn’t say anything, I thought, I thought maybe he hadn’t realized I was up or maybe he was embarrassed too. But that night, he—he told me it was okay to be curious or something and he—he started doing it again! He told me to watch but I didn’t want to, I know I tried not to. I think, I think he grabbed my head to make me look at him, at what he was doing, and then he made me—” He took a deep breath. “He made me tou—touch him too.”

The words were whispered, but Derek heard them as if they were spoken clear as day. The ice forming in his veins hardened around his lungs, making it difficult to breathe. Not that Derek would have had anything to say even if he was capable of taking in air at that moment. He was rendered speechless by Stiles’ admission.

Stiles, whose eyes hadn’t left the depths of the lake, was ignorant to Derek’s frozen predicament. He continued on to describe the slow and methodical process in which he was groomed by his stepfather. What started with inappropriate touching of an eight-year-old quickly spiraled into a controlling, abusive and wildly dominant relationship between an adult and a child. Derek did his best to keep his emotions in check. What Stiles was saying—He doubted he’d ever thaw from this conversation.
In truth Stiles himself, was handling the whole affair much better than Derek was. He spoke evenly; his only hesitations were small reactions that displayed his personal disgust with what was being described. It was like the words were right there on the tip of his tongue this whole time, begging to be let free.

Perhaps even worse than the acts themselves was listening to Stiles describe how isolated he became. He admitted that he wasn’t really sure how wrong it all was until it was too late. Simon blackmailed and bullied him to keep silent. With his mother’s passing, no one thought twice about his grades slipping or lowered attendance. He spent less and less time with his group of friends and recalled watching them grow closer without him. There was no one left for him to trust. Derek felt the ice shatter at that and found himself overwhelmed with a need to swallow the smaller teen in a hug, but held himself back as he didn’t want to interrupt.

As Stiles got to the part where Simon, a grown man, pinned an eleven year old to the ground to beat on him after running away, which had earned them a visit from CPS, Derek’s restraint finally broke.

“That bastard!” He yelled, startling early morning birds in a nearby tree.

“Shhh!” Stiles hushed him as he looked around frantically.

Sometime during Stiles’ monologue the stars had given away to a lightening sky. It was too risky to continue and as much as Derek wanted to go immediately to John, Stiles said he had to finish, had to tell Derek first, so the two made plans to sneak out after curfew again that evening.

Except, they didn’t get the chance.

“Thank you all for meeting with me, as I mentioned last week, you’re ready for your solo trips!” Melissa exclaimed with a bright smile.

Not sleeping the night before meant that Derek’s school day had moved by at a snail’s pace and in a hazy daze at the same time. His mind whirled with the information Stiles had told him. His reaction time was lacking. Only after hearing the words did he realize he wasn’t with the rest of his group; that Stiles wasn’t with him. The younger student was probably on the lacrosse field or—
something, but he certainly wasn’t standing at the edge of the woods with an overnight bag packed on his back and looking to their counselor for guidance.

Erica smiled brightly at the reminder of the milestone and Allison clapped her hands in excitement. Jackson wore a smug expression on his face, unable to hide his self-pride even if he tried. Isaac, while less visibly ecstatic did seem eager in his stance, leaning towards Melissa to find out more about what they would be doing. Lydia’s backpack was still on the ground but her annoyance with nature seemed overshadowed by everyone else’s enthusiasm.

“—three mile hike to your individual camp grounds, you’ll need to know the path back to my cabin in case of an emergency—” Melissa’s words broke into Derek’s thoughts and he realized the gravity of the situation, that he was about to embark on an over night trip even though he promised he’d meet Stiles again that evening.

“I can’t go!” He interrupted. “I’m sorry Melissa, but can’t I do this some other time?”

Melissa halted in her explanation of what qualified as an emergency to give Derek a searching look. “What do you mean you can’t go? It’s not really optional, it’s a part of the program and a requirement for graduation,” she reminded him.

“I know, but can’t I do it another weekend?” Derek pressed the question.

His group mates looked curious and Melissa was more than a little flabbergasted by the request too.

“Why?” She asks slowly.

And Derek faltered. His eyes darted around for a non-existent Stiles. What could he say? Stiles wanted to tell him first, and it wasn’t really Derek’s secret to spill. “…Stiles—” He said in a meek voice, knowing the one word response wouldn’t cut it.

Melissa’s confused features morphed into one of understanding. “He’ll be busy tomorrow with community service and John will have a counseling session on Sunday with him. Don’t worry, he’ll be well monitored in our absence. We’ve all noticed how quiet he’s become since…” She let her voice trail off.
Derek tried to protest but failed to come up with a reasonable excuse. Eventually Melissa won the stilted argument and led her group off on the well worn trail.

Several minutes into their walk the bushy haired counselor came up beside Derek who had yet to join the others in their musings about what the weekend would entail.

“It’s only two days, we’ll be back on Sunday for dinner,” she reminded Derek as she slung a friendly arm over one of his shoulders. “I’m worried about him too, but John will contact me right away if he experiences another…emotional episode.” She seemed to be choosing her words carefully. “I’ll come get you right away if something like that happens, I promise.”

As she said the word, Derek felt flooded with guilt over the promise he made to hear the rest of Stiles’ confession. He found himself unable to say anything to Melissa in return.

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Stiles hadn’t realized most of his group mates left for their solo trip until he arrived in the common room for cleaning duty prior to dinner that evening. Scott came in with a bucket of water followed closely by Kira carrying a couple of mops. Boyd was already dusting the school’s large assortment of mis-matched photo frames. Each held a previous student’s bright smile, and many were accompanied by counselors or adoring parents. Boyd’s gaze lingered on them with an expression of longing, and Stiles just knew that the older boy’s photo would be a part of the collection soon.

“Where is everyone?” Stiles asked as he accepted the mop Kira gave him.

“It’s just us. The others are all with Melissa soloing it up in the woods,” She informed him.

“I think we can probably slack off on the floors and no one would notice…” Scott added, looking thoughtful.

“They’ll know,” Boyd said. “Just because Melissa’s not here doesn’t mean we can take it easy, we’re still her group and still representing her!”

Scott and Stiles shared a look that silently communicated just how little they took Boyd’s warning to heart. Before long the pair had quickly tackled more than two thirds of the room and declared themselves nearly finished while Kira was still working diligently on her designated area. Scott had
a noticeable wet spot behind him and Stiles’ floor showed streaks of dirt in places he had missed. Boyd meanwhile had moved on to replacing the quilted blankets with fresh ones from the laundry. Stiles had just announced that he was done when John interrupted them.

“Wow you four have made decent time! I’m impressed.” The head counselor scanned the room with apparent approval. “I was going to offer a hand since you’re down so many people…”

“Nope, we’re just about finished,” Scott said. He didn’t notice the line of dirty water trailing behind him in his haste to return the mop to the bucket. “Kira just needs to hurry up and then I think we’ll call it a day. Almost done, right Boyd?”

Boyd paused in his attempt to fluff up a couch pillow. “I knew there’d be less hands to help out, so I arrived early and pretty much did everything aside from the floor,” he explained to John.

“Well once your done with the pillows I’d say you’re free to go,” John said as he took in the spotless room. “Place looks great!”

“I’m not quite done, I need to do from here to the back door, but I finished the balcony,” Kira said brightly as she continued to form small circles.

John nodded and held out his hand to take her mop. “I can take it from here, why don’t you change the water bucket and then get a head start on your homework!”

Kira’s eyes grew wide and she hastily handed her mop over not wanting to let the offer pass by.

“Great so we’re done here?” Scott asked as he headed for the door with his still sopping wet cleaning utensil.

“Done?” John question, smirk sliding into place. “Come here.”

Scott obeyed and reluctantly Stiles followed when it became clear the order was for both of them.

“Look at the floor boys, does it look like either one of you are finished?”
Forty five minutes later the common room floor had never sparkled more and Stiles was dumping the water bucket out for the last time.

“Excuse me,” a high pitch and oddly familiar voice startled him. “I was told I could find the camp’s director this way, would you be so kind to point me in the right direction?”

Stiles turned around and came face to face with a tall, thin middle-aged woman with pin-straight auburn colored hair. He froze. Despite the added crows feet since their last interaction, he knew who she was.

“Mrs.— Mrs. Compella?”

The two stared at one another for half a minute before Stiles’ gaze shifted and he fully took in the individual who stood next to her. He was a lanky gentleman in a cheap suit who narrowed his eyes at Stiles’ apparent recognition but even more alarming than that was the circular object he held in his hand.

Stiles’ eyes lingered on the ankle monitor. He was vaguely aware of the adults talking, perhaps to him, but Stiles was unable to comprehend any of it. His mind started whirling. While mopping the floor for a second time, he had thought long and hard about what he was going to tell Derek when he returned from his solo trek and they had a moment alone. A part of him was almost relieved at the prospect of getting to finish his story— his secret no more, and he figured with Derek’s help he’d tell John and Melissa next. And then from there, who knows, maybe the police or a proper case worker despite his distrust of them. All of those plans vanished as he stared at the little metallic device he had grown to fear over the past several months.

“Stiles!” Mrs. Compella snapped. “Where is your warden? What are you even doing outside? Answer me!”

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“Is there a problem?” John asked as he open the back door and was startled to see more than just
Stiles standing there.

Stiles was taking too long to return with what should have been an empty and light mop bucket. The last thing John expected to see when he opened the common room door was a group of strangers antagonizing his student. Stiles’ entire posture had changed within the few minutes he had been outside. Just moments ago, he’d volunteered, jovially, to empty the bucket when John had said they were done. He practically bounced out of the common room. Now, however, Stiles was hunched in on himself with his head bowed and eyes averted.

“Ah, maybe you can help. I’m looking for a Mr. John Stilinski,” the woman said, her attention turned fully towards John now.

“You’ve found him,” John informed them tentatively. He was still assessing the situation. “That’s me.”

“Ah, good. We have some things to discuss. I’m Judy Compella and this is Detective Anthony Wilton, Hillsborough County Sheriff’s department.”

“You can call me Tony,” the detective said offering his hand. “And, if this is Stiles, he should come with us, too.”

Stiles appeared defeated and didn’t even attempt to object. Ignoring the detective’s suggestion, John asked Stiles go back to his dorm and work on homework instead. Tony looked skeptical, but did not protest.

Once back in his office, John learned that Mrs. Compella was the woman dating Stiles’ step father who was scheduled to be released from the hospital over the weekend. The doctors were sending him home with orders to take it easy, with lots of bed rest. He also had a complicated medicinal schedule. Mrs. Compella wasn’t entirely comfortable with taking on her boyfriend’s full-time care in addition to her two sons and it was recommended that Stiles return home to act as care taker. Of course, this had to be arranged with his case worker, but all the papers were signed, and all Stiles needed was an anklet and he could return to Florida— under house arrest.

John’s mouth hung open as he was simply told what would be happening without being given any choice in the matter or opportunity to oppose.

“As Stiles’ current legal guardian, I can’t stress enough how toxic that environment is to him.
There are reasons he has attempted to run away from home as much as he had—"

“It was my understanding that he ran away from here as well, correct?” Detective Wilton interjected. “Well regardless, his custody has already been rearranged, I’m here to escort him home where he will be placed under house arrest until the day of his eighteenth birthday.” The man pointed out the legal document which stated that fact.

“Well, no. I’d like to appeal—"

“Mr. Stilinski,” Judy said sharply, sufficiently cutting off John’s argument. “I took time off work and had my mother drive several hours to babysit my children and even arranged this flight out of the goodness of my heart, so Stiles would be given the devastating news of his step father’s situation in person. And, as a nurse, I wanted to ensure that he is more than capable of the task of care giver. But the fact remains the man is leaving the hospital tomorrow and Stiles is needed at home. I’m sure they can work past their differences, and frankly, I’m not going to be able to return to fetch him on another day. We’ve talked with his case worker and they agreed and therefore expedited his case for this exact reason. By all means file an appeal, but either way Stiles is coming with us and we need to be back at the airport in less than an hour so if you’d like him to have any time to pack, I’d suggest you refrain from arguing.”

It was obvious she was accustomed to getting her way because her mouth dropped open when John blatantly disagreed.

“He cannot live with that man and he won’t be leaving these grounds, we will appeal and I refuse to subject him to any more abuse in the meantime,” John used every ounce of self control to keep his voice steady. “And as nice as that detective badge is, Tony, you are outlandishly far from your jurisdiction.”

“Abuse?” Judy questioned. “The cops have been dragging him back home for years. He’s had hundreds of caseworkers and the one time there was a legitimate complaint, it was looked into and proven false. You forget, I’ve known both Simon and Stiles for years and that young man is a delinquent, a liar, and bad influence, hence the reason I stopped our sons from seeing each other when they were still in grade school. Simon has told me about Stiles’ claims. Do you know what that could have done to **him**? Simon would still be in jail!” She shrieked. “I’m afraid you’ve fallen into Stiles’ web. And that’s another reason he shouldn’t remain here.”

John was fuming. He knew if he opened his mouth now his temper would show, he was half way to counting to ten in his head when the detective interrupted.
“While I am out of my jurisdiction, this ruling is still legally sound. I can return with the local police department, if you’d prefer,” Detective Wilton offered.

“I suppose you’ll have to, because I refused to let my student off this campus otherwise,” John replied with false confidence.

Mrs. Compella continued to argue her point, but John couldn’t to be swayed. In the end it took the pair over half an hour before they left, with Google Maps pulled up on one of their phones giving them directions to the local precinct. John immediately called the sheriff’s number and gave the man a run down of what to expect. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much the local police would be able to do legally but he promised to hold them up long enough to guarantee they’d miss their flight.

Next, John visited Stiles.

The student was already halfway done packing, despite Scott, Boyd and even Kira’s protests. John chose to ignore the fact that she was in the boy’s dorm for the time being and turned his attention on Stiles instead.

“When do I leave?” Stiles asked John’s shoes as he failed to look up.

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The outbursts from Scott, Boyd, and Kira were so loud Stiles hadn’t actually caught what John had said. Reluctantly, he let his eyes meet the head counselor’s, ashamed that his were without a doubt bloodshot and puffy.

“I said you’re not, if I can help it,” John repeated. He then asked the others to give them some space. Boyd and Kira had to practically carry Scott out of the room.

As soon as they were alone, John explained the legal aspects and his plan to delay them long enough to get ahold of the case worker and have this sentence overthrown. Stiles listened and felt his rising hope drop with every word. Maybe. Hopefully. Should understand. These people weren’t going to just suddenly get it, they didn’t care, they never had. It sounded like Stiles needed a miracle and he had learned long ago that miracles only happen in fairytales.

While John spoke, he started placing Stiles’ shirts back in the dresser. As if the action alone would
somehow help keep him at Beacon of Hope. Once the counselor moved on and started folding pants, Stiles stopped him.

“Listen,” he said, his voice coming out gravellier than expected. “Please try, but if you can’t stop this from happening— just promise me you’re not going to make a scene, don’t get in trouble with the law for me. And, let me tell the others. Let me decide who I want to tell and how I want to do it, let’s not— let’s not make this harder than it has to be.”

“The others? Melissa’s not even back yet, and Derek…”

“Don’t bother them. Please, let them have this, their solo trips, that’s more important. I’ll— I’ll write a note.”

John frowned. “This isn’t over kid. Like I said you’re not going anywhere if I can help it,” he added, his forced smile not quite reaching his eyes.

In the end Stiles halfheartedly agreed if only to get John to leave him alone. The counselor had several phone calls to make after all, and Stiles, well, he had letters to write.

***

It had been a little over an hour since Melissa dropped off the last of her students at their individual campsites. She hadn’t explained much aside from recommending they put up their tent and gather firewood while there was still daylight out. She figured they had stewed in their confusion long enough and it was time to go back through and properly explain the reflecting portion of the weekend.

Derek’s site was closest to her and she immediately felt bad about showing up there, because as soon as the tree branch she stepped on gave her away, he was by her side asking if Stiles was alright.

“Yes, yes he’s fine. I’m here to give you this.”

She passed him a notebook filled with questions and plenty of space to go off script. In the past she had had students fill out the book, every page, front and back. She had also had some who gave the minimal amount of acceptable answers. In addition to the notebook each student was sent an object
from their past, something positive with a happy memory.

Derek’s item was particularly fragile, and she took great care retrieving it from her bag. It was a picture of his family. Nearly everything was destroyed in the fire but somehow this photo survived. Melissa explained that Laura sent it for him and that she had made herself a copy. Derek was speechless. It was with trembling hands that he accepted the laminated object.

The reactions from the rest of her students varied.

Jackson was given a baby’s onesie. It was his and was the only thing his birth mother had bought him as he was given up for adoption in the hospital mere moments after he was born. He acted uninterested, but Melissa caught him writing vigorously before she had even left his clearing.

Isaac was difficult, but they had managed to get ahold of his grandmother’s sister who had a recipe book that had once belonged to his mother. The tattered pages looked shabby, but each page had handwritten notes in his mother’s and grandmother’s handwriting and some were adorned with crayon scribbles. Isaac’s eyes were tearing up when he saw it.

Erica’s mom sent a beaded bracelet. The note said Erica had made it for her for Mother’s Day and she wore it religiously until the string broke and then it was kept in her Jewelry box. Erica’s mouth dropped open when she saw it and she told Melissa she couldn’t believe her mom had kept the ugly thing. Despite her harsh words, Erica accepted the bracelet with a smile on her face.

Chris had several items picked out for this event and with Melissa’s help narrowed it down to Allison’s mother’s pendant. It was a family heirloom, one her mom never took off. Allison smiled brightly as she traced her fingertips over the unusual animal design. Melissa offered to help her with the clasp before she moved to the next campsite.

Lydia was the last one on her walk through and even though the redhead usually complained until someone did it for her, her tent was erect and properly secured. She gave off an air of nonchalance as she sat in front of the roaring fire. But Melissa knew the girl was proud of herself, hell, she was proud of her too. Her eyes lit up at the notebook and she didn’t even bother to hide how bored she was. That smile grew tenfold, however, when she spotted the teddybear Melissa pulled from her backpack. Lydia’s father had bought it for her when he was returning from a business trip. It always stayed in her bed. She openly admitted she couldn’t believe her mom had thought to send it for her. Melissa suggested she reflect on that fact in her notebook.

With her six campers set for the night, Melissa made her way back to her cabin and couldn’t help but think about what her other four students were up to as she hoped they were at least being well
behaved.

***

Mrs. Compella and the detective didn’t return that evening, but they did the following day before most of the school was awake. Scott was still snoring while the running water indicated that Boyd must have been taking a shower when Stiles crept in and out of their cabin, his duffel bag hanging over one shoulder on the way out. A series of letters tucked under his pillow were all that was left to show Stiles had ever lived there.

He made his way towards the front office but didn’t even get that far. Joe’s mom and John were practically in a shouting match on the lawn while several officers that stood around them were failing to get the pair to keep their voices down.

“At least the boy has some sense, I see you’re packed?” Mrs. Compella asked loudly to get the attention away from herself.

John was ready to disagree when his eyes landed on Stiles. His face fell instantly.

“How did you—”

“Saw the cars pull in,” Stiles replied quickly.

“From your dorm— never mind,” John shook his head. “We’re fighting this Stiles, you don’t have to go with them.”

“I’m afraid he does,” one of the police officers said. “At least for now,” he amended at the look of incredulity John shot him.


“Don’t give up hope, Stiles. This isn’t over. You’ll always have a place here,” John said stubbornly. “We’re going to get you back, I promise.”
Stiles couldn’t bring himself to agree but he allowed his bag to fall, and held his arms out for a hug, regardless. He’d never initiated one before and yet had still received a handful from the head counselor over the past several months. This one though, this one was different because as much as it was a promise from John it was a goodbye from Stiles. That aside the two still clung onto each other for an extraordinary amount of time. Stiles was willing to bet that John would have never let go, if given the choice.

“Come on kid,” Detective Wilton’s gruff voice interrupted the moment. His suit from yesterday was wrinkled, and Stiles was willing to bet he hadn’t anticipated this being an overnight trip.

Stiles wasn’t sure who pushed him towards the car door or what was said as he allowed himself to be shut inside, but John’s call of ‘Don’t give up hope!’ was the last thing he made out before he found himself in the silence of the cab.

***

Derek woke at his own pace, taking in the crisp mountain air. It was like his brain switched on and all at once he was flooded with memories from the day before. All the things Stiles told him in confidence, breaking his promise, worrying about what Stiles would think or say or do when he saw him next. Momentarily forgetting all of that when Melissa gave him his family’s photo. His family’s photo…

Derek picked up the object and traced his finger tips over the faces of the people he loved the most; people he would never see again. His vision blurred. Knowing that no one was around to see, Derek let the tears fall, harder and faster than he had ever been capable of before. He cried and cried until he wasn’t able to do so anymore.

And then Derek screamed. He let loose a primal roar as he thought about Kate and her actions. The tent was suddenly suffocating him. In a panic he tore at the zipper until he was free from the enclosure. His dwindling fire from the night before mocked him. He tossed a log onto the pitiful flames causing embers to fly up. The sparks got his attention and he pictured it clearly; his parents and little sister choking on smoke until they passed out from lack of oxygen.

The image twisted in his mind and it hit him, they were gone and would never return. He looked back at the floor of his tent and snatched up the photo Laura had sent him. He shuffled over to the renewed flames and held the photo tightly in his hand just out of reach of the fire’s grasp. So easily he could just let it go. Watch them burn. It would serve him right, they had practically died by his hand…
Derek sat there breathing deeply, contemplating his choices, when a voice startled him.

“I wish I’d thought of that…” Jackson’s blasé tone interrupted Derek’s inner musings. “Hell, I still might when I get back to my site…”

“What?” Derek snapped. He was confused and annoyed by Jackson’s presence.

“Burning my little token from the past,” Jackson answered as he invited himself to sit down. “You have a better view, I think,” he said as he took in his surroundings. “I knew Melissa liked you more.”

“What are you even doing here? This is a solo trip,” Derek emphasized the word. He ducked into the tent to safely stow the photo and in the process hastily wiped his face on his sleeping bag.

“I’m sure the whole forest heard you getting in touch with your animal side,” Jackson replied lazily. When Derek didn’t react, he added, “I came to make sure you were alright.”

Derek pulled on a sweatshirt and allowed the hood to block his face from view when he rejoined Jackson by the fire. He didn’t say anything.

“My— adoptive mother sent me the onesie I came home from the hospital in. She told Melissa my birth mom bought it for me… it’s so plain, just grey with a little duck on it. I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel when I look at it but mostly, I just feel pissed off. I’ve seen my baby pictures, full head of blond hair, bright eyes— I was gorgeous, even in that cheap little shirt, I’m sure of it…”

Derek took a moment before he told Jackson about the photo. He even vaguely mentioned Kate and her involvement. Jackson didn’t say anything, just nodded along as if he expected as much. Which maybe he did, with Kate’s trial being constantly mentioned by the counselors.

The two sat like that for a long time, until Jackson stood. He squeezed Derek’s shoulder as he turned to leave.

“Don’t,” Derek grunted out without looking up.
“What?” Asked Jackson, stopping in his tracks.

“Don’t burn your baby outfit.”

“Don’t burn your family photo,” Jackson replied.

Neither one verbally agreed, but Derek knew they both would refrain from the extra kindling.

Once he could no longer hear Jackson’s footsteps, Derek pulled out the notebook Melissa gave him and read question one: List all the emotions you’re currently feeling. He took a deep breath and began to write.

***

John was asked to hold, again. He’d been through the loop with the school’s lawyers, the Department of Children and Families, and the Hillsborough County Police Department. So far, he’d gotten nowhere. They couldn’t even tell him if Stiles had landed safely in Florida yet.

His anger over the entire situation meant that he kept himself far away from his teenage wards’ eyes. He didn’t want to set a bad example and was struggling with keeping his voice down. How many times had he told students not to resort to physical violence, but boy did he really want to punch something… or someone. The call clicked over, and he heard a dial tone. He was hung up on! He couldn’t help it as he slammed the palm of his hand down so hard on his desk the cup of pens tipped over. At just that same moment his office door opened, and Chris poked his head inside. Behind him was Scott, Boyd, and Kira.

“They’ve asked me multiple times why Stiles left for community service so early, why his stuff is gone, and if he went with that— lady,” Chris said quickly, not giving John the time to ask them to leave. “You need to talk to them, it’ll be good practice for what you tell Melissa.”

“You haven’t told Melissa!” Boyd exclaimed.

At the same time Scott asked, “Where is Stiles? Did he go home?”
John looked at his upset students and sighed. “Take a seat.” He wasn’t entirely unsurprised when Chris lingered in the doorway waiting for the explanation on Stiles’ whereabouts as well.

***

It was remarkable how quickly the five and a half hour flight flew by. The detective saw him safely to his mother’s home and as soon as he was there the little green light on his ankle monitor clicked on. Stiles had less than thirty minutes to himself before Joe’s mom showed up with a wheelchair bound Simon and a grocery bag full of different medications. She made sure Simon was comfortably sat in the living room before going through the schedule of each. She taught Stiles how to separate them into the weekly pill box and even set up an alarm on Simon’s phone.

Stiles swallowed down any questions he might have had simply because he didn’t care for her condescending tone. Mrs. Compella left abruptly after that and they were alone. Stiles in the kitchen staring at the counter top filled with medicine and the monster, watching Jeopardy by the sounds of things, in the living room. They hadn’t spoken a word to each other.

A rumble in his stomach forced Stiles to move and searched the cabinets and refrigerator for food. The fridge housed beer, expired milk, and an old pizza box, but luckily the freezer offered a variety of other items. Stiles settled on a chicken stir fry simply because of its simplicity. He wondered if he’d be allowed to leave his house to walk to a grocery store.

Last time, which was less than a year ago, Stiles was on house arrest during the summer, he had no exceptions. But, he knew now he’d be allowed to leave the house to attend school and he idly wondered if purchasing food would be okay too? Where would he get money for the grocery shopping? Simon had never shared before and from the sound of things he was going to be out of work for at least the next month. Perhaps they’d both starve…

Stiles had just sat himself at the kitchen table, dinner in hand, when Simon spoke first. He made a pained sort of grumble that Stiles recognized as his name. Stiles gripped his fork tightly and considered ignoring his stepfather but then the man rang a bell. A bell!? That must have been Mrs. Compella’s doing.

Reluctantly, Stiles went to the living room. The monster was sitting in his favorite recliner and the wheelchair was stowed nearby. The man looked so incredibly weak. It seemed to pain him just to turn his head a little bit. Stiles was hit with a sick satisfaction at the thought; Simon wouldn’t be able to do a thing to him, not the way he was now, post surgery, and maybe not ever. Some people have to have multiple stints put in, in their lifetime…
His stepfather was practically bed ridden and completely dependent on him. The idea of doing anything for the man churned Stiles gut, but at the same time, he was in control— of everything. That fact was made clear when Simon muttered out that he would like something to eat.

Stiles stood there considering his options. He really wanted to walk back to the kitchen, bell in hand, sit down at the table and completely ignore the man. He also considered returning with his plate of food and eating dinner right in front of him just to be spiteful. He chose rather to serve Simon a plateful of the stir fry and a glass of tap water, along with his evening pills.

Stiles stood in front of the man with his hand shaking a little as it gripped the plate. He hadn’t said anything to his stepfather yet, not one word. And this moment, this would set his resolve, set the tone for their life together going forward so in spite of his anger and nerves, he did his best to speak evenly.

“I don’t owe you a single fucking thing, remember that, and maybe I’ll keep you alive.” Stiles forced his eyes to meet Simon’s cold stare. Then he stepped closer and offered the plate of dinner.

Simon had always had the upper hand. Stiles was always the child being manipulated. This time however, would be different. Stiles was nearly sixteen, and this man wasn’t going to be his monster again. That part of his life was over, and a weight of security settled somewhere deep within Stiles at the thought. It strengthened his resolve.

The monster shattered it just as quickly. Simon moved as if to reach out for the plate, but his hand went lower and cupped the back of Stiles’ thigh instead, pulling the teen closer in the process. “Don’t be like that, kiddo,” he purred in a raspy voice. His other hand plucked the plate from Stiles’ frozen grasp easily. “I missed you.”

Stiles felt nauseous. Simon’s hand lingered and started to caress his backside. Nothing, not even a damn heart attack, was going to change the monster. The realization made it difficult for Stiles to breathe. He gulped desperately and wrenched himself away from the man. He tumbled into the kitchen clinging to the counter for support. Simon was laughing at him from the other room.

Soon, his stepfather’s laugh gave way to a garbled cough while Stiles continued to struggle to take in air. He slid down to the kitchen floor and realized he couldn’t force his lungs to work properly. That thought brought on more panic and he looked up at the kitchen’s fluorescent lights above him. His vision blurred and darkened at the edges. Nothing he did seemed to work and Stiles continued to fail to breathe until his body slumped over sluggishly.
It didn’t take long for Derek to answer all the questions in the notebook. He got burnt out writing about his emotions and took a break only to realize that he was alone and had nothing else to do and would end up opening the book again. As a result, he was done before nightfall and found himself sitting by his campfire thinking about his family again.

His dad would have loved this school with all its outdoorsy activities. He’d often say he wished they went camping more. His mom also enjoyed the family time away from other obligations and would readily agree with her husband. It became difficult, however, as they grew older to keep up on the yearly camping tradition.

Laura was a natural born leader and ruled the school in her day. Her summer was often spent meeting with the school council and planning fund raisers. Derek excelled at sports at a young age and would travel to play basketball in tournaments. Cora was less sociable but loved horses and one year missed the family vacation because she attended an equestrian summer camp instead. The last time everyone had actually went camping together was three years ago, and his mother invited the whole family, so it turned into a Hale family reunion. Even Peter had shown, which was saying something because it was rare to see him outside of his office. That week was wonderful.

He hadn’t seen some of those cousins, aunts, or uncles since. Derek idly thought about what they must think of him with the trial being so public and Peter shipping him off to a boarding school. He missed being a part of a large family and now that he thought about it, he felt like he’d lost even more of them to the fire than he had realized.

He missed Laura. The last time they had spoken was on his birthday when he called to wish her a Merry Christmas. They’d emailed some since then but not enough. Reluctantly, Derek pulled out a piece of paper from his notebook and decided to write her a letter. It’s not like he could have emailed her at that moment anyway.

Melissa decided that no news was good news and spent her isolation doing some personal reading. The wind howled outside but the sparsely furnished cabin was cozy and warm, and she did not envy her students who were only given a tent for protection.

Prior to the sun setting, she decided to do a walk through each of their campsites just to check on how they were doing. Derek was bundled up next to a decent-sized blaze while writing in his notebook. She didn’t disturb him.
Jackson was— missing. Melissa squelched down her initial panic, it wasn’t the first time a student chose to ignore the solo part of the trip. After confirming that he wasn’t in his tent or anywhere near his campsite, she moved on to Isaac.

The curly haired student was glaring daggers at the no longer missing Jackson. Jackson said he’d finished his reflection and simply was coming to see what the others had received.

“At least Isaac’s learning to bake! This is no fair, why’d I get a stupid baby shirt?” He complained once Melissa made her presence known.

Isaac held a stick out defensively and pointed at Jackson. “I didn’t invite him, I swear, and he won’t leave me alone!”

“Don’t worry, I’m just coming around to check on you guys, you’re not in trouble, Isaac,” Melissa informed him. “How’s the writing coming along? Do you have enough firewood to keep warm tonight?”

Isaac sighed. “No, probably not, and I’ve barely even read through the questions, because I’ve just been reading this,” he held up the cookbook. “I remember so many of these, my mom used to make cookies from scratch and we’d try new recipes together, licking the bowl, me coloring in her cookbook when I would lose focus…”

Melissa smiled. “You get to keep it, you know, it’s yours now. Jackson and I will get out of your hair and then maybe that will help you to focus. And don’t forget the firewood!”

Reluctantly, Jackson went with Melissa to visit the rest. Erica was struggling with the writing portion too. Her notebook was virtually empty. Melissa chatted with her for a bit and then helped her get some of those answers on paper. Jackson was clearly bored but waited patiently.

Allison, like Jackson, was already finished with the writing and reflecting portion. She showed Jackson her necklace. The two talked for a bit while Melissa observed. Allison was so adamantly happy to have something that once belonged to her mom that she just might have turned Jackson’s negative view on his onesie around a little. Allison very flatly asked if he’d rather have nothing, to which Jackson didn’t have a response.

Lydia was deep in thought and writing away. Melissa suspected her notebook would probably be
full to the brim. She was recently on silent restriction and filled up multiple books in the process. Jackson started to advance, but Melissa held him back. The two made their way back to Jackson’s campsite where Melissa emphasized that he had better stay put, should she do another random check. She was just about to leave when Jackson spoke up.

“Why didn’t my mom— my birth mom want to keep me?”

What a difficult question to answer. Melissa swallowed hard before fixing Jackson with a piercing stare. “I don’t know. I’m afraid that’s one of those things you may never know for sure, but Jackson,” she paused to make sure his full attention was on her. “I can tell you that it has nothing to do with you or who you are as a person. It was a decision she made when she was pregnant, maybe she couldn’t afford a child, or she was too young or in some other sort of situation where raising you wouldn’t have been beneficial to you, and she thought, hoped, probably prayed, that someone else would be able to offer you a better home. You are not defective, or unworthy, I can promise you that.”

Jackson looked unsure.

“Listen, I know you’ve had your difficulties with your adoptive parents, but they do love you.” Melissa nudged his shoulder lightly. “They even pretended to get along so they could both visit you! And, we love you too.”

The last statement seemed to put a smile back on Jackson’s face. “Thanks Melissa.”

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“You need to radio her! Scott’s right, Melissa is going to be very angry, but she’ll be far more likely to find fault in you if she comes back tomorrow night to learn that Stiles has been gone for two days already and no one thought to tell her,” Chris said calmly.

John hadn’t left his office, he was still waiting on several phone calls that were highly unlikely to come so late. It was well past curfew and usually Chris would have left by then, but he claimed he spotted the office lights still on and figured he’d check on the occupant. John wasn’t fooled, but he was also grateful for the company.

He’d hoped that Stiles’ case worker would have gotten back to him, although it seemed the man didn’t work on the weekends if the radio silence from the other coast was anything to go by.
However, even more alarming than that was the fact that Stiles hadn’t called despite John’s request he do so once they had landed. Tony seemed compliant with the request, so he wasn’t sure why neither one of them had called. John even checked on their flight number to ensure they had indeed landed safely.

“Are you listening? Have you even eaten anything? John, you can’t afford to fall apart now. Stiles will need you at one hundred percent, and Melissa is going to have questions,” Chris continued to berate.

“I— I can’t tell her over the walkies,” John said eventually, his mind elsewhere, replaying the events and once again trying to figure out how this happened so quickly.

“Well, how do you—”

“Can you stay here, tonight?” John interrupted.

“Well sure, yeah, I’ve used that spare cabin of yours in the past, but—”

“No, I mean here, in the office just incase he calls,” John explained.

“It’s nearing midnight, I don’t think anyone will be calling, and where are you planning on going so late?” Chris asked, suddenly suspicious.

“To Melissa,” John replied simply. “And, I can’t—I can’t leave the phones, what if Stiles calls…”

Chris nodded although he still looked doubtful. “You’re going to hike in the dark? That’s like the first thing we teach the kids not to do!”

“I was thinking of taking the dirt bike, for the headlight, but you’re right, I should hike, I’d probably scare the kids— and Melissa.”

“No, what you should do is call her on the radio or wait ‘til morning,” Chris said as he folded his arms. “You need to get some rest and eat something.”
John wasn’t listening anymore as he started to mentally pack a bag for the hike. He knew he could do the three hour trip in half the time and might even catch Melissa before she falls asleep if he left right away.

He looked up suddenly and eyed Chris. “So, you got this here? We can always cancel your classes tomorrow so you can rest.”

“Tomorrow’s Sunday, are you even listening to yourself?”

“Good, that’s great, I’ll give you the day off then, thanks for staying. I’ll be back in a few,” John said with a wry smile.

“I already have the day off,” Chris answered quickly. “This isn’t a smart decision, you’re not thinking rationally! What would you tell a student in this situation; to take sometime and get clarity before reacting—”

“You’re the one who told me I need to tell Melissa and you’re right. Boyd, Scott, and Kira will all be pounding on my office door first thing in the morning,” John sighed. “There isn’t much I can do, but this, this is something, right?”

It was obvious that Chris didn’t quite agree but he allowed John to manhandle him out of the doorway. Ten minutes later John took off jogging with a flashlight bobbing up and down, illuminating his pathway.

***

Stiles woke, dazed and confused, on the linoleum floor. He had no idea how long he had laid there but his dinner was ice cold and the sky peaking through the kitchen window was an inky black, so it must have been a while.

He tossed out the meal without thought, knowing he wasn’t capable of eating very much at that moment anyway. The dirty pan and utensils from cooking taunted him in the sink. Sighing, he moved to cleaned them and chose to ignore the artificial laughing coming from the other room. His stepfather was without a doubt watching a sitcom now and had no clue Stiles’ panic had led to him passing out. Although would the monster even care? It wouldn’t look good for the man had Stiles died on his first night back... Can you die from a panic attack? Would that be like being scared to
Stiles was grateful, sometimes, that his mind could go off on such a tangent. He now had plenty to look up and the research would certainly lead to more questions, all of which would distract him from his current predicament. The only downside was the age of his laptop. It was outdated years ago and would surely need to run a few updates before he’d be able to completely loose himself to Google.

To get to his bedroom, Stiles had to pass through the living room. He hated himself for even hesitating to do so. Simon, as it turned out, was falling asleep in his recliner. The TV lit up the otherwise dark room. Knowing he wasn’t at risk for being groped did nothing to settle Stiles’ nerves. He slipped through to his bedroom almost silently and as soon as he closed the door, he pressed his back to it in relief.

Opening his eyes Stiles came face to face with where his nightmares all began. The desperation to just cut his anklet and run was overwhelming. Stiles tried to focus on breathing instead. He hadn’t been in the room for some time, but it had hardly changed at all in his absence.

His computer was right where he left it. Locating the charging cable, however, took a little more work. The thing was completely dead and would need some time before he could properly boot it up.

Should he attempt to email Derek? It was the first time since Stiles stepped foot on the airplane that he allowed himself to think of Beacon of Hope and its occupants. The distance hit him all at once. Derek wasn’t even in the same time zone anymore and then there was the fact that Stiles didn’t actually know his email address. Although, they’d shared enough time in the media room that Stiles was sure he’d be able to find him on facebook. But should he? That place and those people were in his past now; nothing more than a little vacation away from the Hell he had found himself in once again. His heart clenched painfully at the thought.

John had promised that they’d get him back. Stiles wasn’t so sure. Metaphorically speaking he fell so far down the mountain’s side he doubted even John could scale the cliffs to save him now. Stiles was back in the land of monsters and couldn’t afford to wait for a rescue that may never come.

His resolve solidified as he hit the button on his laptop and nothing happened. Of course the ancient device would fail him too. Flopping back onto his box spring mattress the full weight of defeat crashed over him all at once as Stiles realized how truly alone he was again.
He stayed liked that; fully dressed and clinging to his childhood blanket for hours. How many nights had he fallen asleep in a similar position, just staring at the door. Simon had long since removed the lock and Stiles had grown used to watching the knob, waiting for it to turn.

He must have fallen asleep at some point, because the next thing Stiles knew he was being woken by the shrill ringing of a bell and the gruff calls of his stepfather from the living room.

***

John tore his jeans and scraped his shin on a particularly vicious log that his flashlight failed to highlight. He also stumbled over a rock and cut up his palm as he grabbed a nearby tree to stop himself from face planting. But by far, the worst injury his nighttime sprint through the woods inflicted was on his right knee. John was getting up in his age and the old joint just couldn’t keep up with his pace. By the time Melissa’s cabin came into view, he was limping and knew he was about to be lectured on the importance of properly stretching. He instantly dismissed any remorse at the thought and steelied himself as he knocked on the cabin door.

Melissa answered almost instantly. Her panic was evident; the blanket she was probably bundled up in was haphazardly laying on the wooden floor and the paperback book on the table was still in the slow process of closing, as if the spine was recently curled back. Melissa probably lost her place in her haste to see which of her students came to her so late at night. John felt a second wave of guilt as he took in the scene.

“John? Wh—What is it?” Melissa’s brow knitted together with the question. She stepped aside, allowing John to hobble in after her. He heard her gasped once he had made it fully into the light and knew he must look as horrible as he felt. “What happened?”

John took a deep breath. “Don’t worry about me, I have something to tell you and it’s not the kind of news you should hear over the radio. Why don’t you take a seat,” John suggested, waving at the wooden rocking chair.

Melissa stood her ground. “Spit it out, what could possibly have happened that led you to— this,” she gestured to all of him.

John gulped. “It’s— it’s about Stiles.”

Melissa wavered on her feet. “What— what about him?” She managed to ask, her face growing
John wasn’t sure what his facial expression showed but it must have been grim, because Melissa clapped her hands over her mouth as she backed up and collapsed in the chair before he was even able to respond.

“John, no— not Stiles,” she muttered out weakly.

John limped over to the small table and occupied the only other chair available while keeping his gaze locked on Melissa’s. It felt amazing to be off his feet, and he choked on his words as shame flooded him over his own relief. It took him a minute to reform his thoughts and Melissa’s impatience was obviously growing.

“They took him, came with paperwork and police officers, he’s— they have him under house arrest until he turns eighteen,” John explained. “His stepfather came home from the hospital and needs to take it easy for a while and Stiles is expected to help out, act as caretaker. I don’t know what we can do legally to get him back…”

Melissa looked stricken. “The lawyers—”

“Have already been informed. They’re on it but making a case against his safety in that house is difficult, virtually impossible without Stiles’ accusations, and he hasn’t admitted to anything. Right now, we have it documented that he came to us underweight, but that’s it.”

Melissa’s eyes harden. “You know it’s more than that! Definitely mental abuse, if not— He’s terrified of the man, lashes out when he’s mentioned, and justifies his actions on the street as better than being in that house without even a second guess…”

“I know, I agree, that place is the worst for him, but—”

“No buts! We have to get him out of there, now!” Melissa practically shouted.

John couldn’t help but agree. He dug through his backpack and pulled out Stiles’ folder. All the reports the two counselors have ever made after their sessions with him. He passed half the papers over to Melissa. “Let’s figure out how we’re going to bring him home.”
Melissa nodded as she accepted the highlighter John held out for her.

***

Simon needed help getting up as he wanted to use the restroom and it was morning, so he was hungry.

Stiles assisted the man that abused him.

Stiles cooked and served breakfast for the man that abused him.

Stiles portioned medicine and delivered a glass of water to the man that abused him.

And now, Stiles found himself sitting across the table from the man that abused him.

Simon ate his once frozen waffle with contentment. Stiles stabbed his with unrelinquished hate for his life. Neither one of them talked.

Their silence was interrupted when the kitchen door swung open revealing Mrs. Compella carrying a reusable shopping bag full of groceries in one hand and holding the arm of a small boy with the other. Stiles stared at the kid.

“Don’t just sit there, help her out!” Simon barked.

Stiles jumped up at the command and made his way out to the car. There were two more grocery bags sitting in the front passenger seat. Joe, his friend, wasn’t there. Knowing that he was probably given the option and chose not to come stung a little. But then again, his mom wasn’t exactly fond of Stiles, so perhaps he wasn’t given the chance.

The tension in the air was palpable as Stiles returned to the kitchen. Mrs Compella refused to meet either Stiles’ eyes nor Simon’s as she talked lightly about the different foods she’d brought over, and the simple meals Stiles would be able to cook from them. She also kept her son close and the
kid had yet to speak. Stiles tried to rack his brain for his name, but his memory failed him.

Simon acted grateful for the charitable groceries, but something was off between him and his girlfriend. The realization that the monster’s relationship was crumbling, probably due to his heart attack and helplessness, solidified the fact that Stiles was in this alone. Sure, Joe’s mom gave them food now but what about the future?

The woman attempted to continue the small talk as she gradually brought up Stiles’ schooling. “So, your paperwork will need to be transferred for it to be official, but I know how these things work. Joe took an eClass last semester because I wasn’t a fan of his Chemistry teacher. It’s easy to enroll in the Florida Virtual School,” she passed a piece of paper to Stiles with the information. “Just go to that website and click on high school and from there it’s really self explanatory.”

“Wait, what?” Stiles asked a little dumbfounded. “I thought I’d go to Hillsbor—”

“While your dad is sick, you’ll need to be here full time, and I think it would be better for you. Kids can be so cruel and with your—” she gestured to Stiles’ ankle where under his jeans they all knew was his electronic monitor, “I’m sure it’s for the best, Joe liked his class— said it was easier.”

Stiles mind whirled with the information. Was he expected to never ever leave this damn house? He couldn’t even finagle grocery shopping if Mrs. Compella volunteered to continue to take care of that and once Simon was fully capable of getting around on his own, he knew there would be no excuse to even go outside. The prospect was bleak. Stiles slumped over in his chair in defeat.

“Wait!” Stiles’ head snapped up. “I can’t, my computer wouldn’t turn on last night. It’s really old, I think it’s broken.”

“Well, your dad has one, right? I guess you two will have to share. Maybe it will be good for both of you,” her eyes landed on Simon. “Perhaps the first step in getting along? I know you’re mad about a lot of things, Stiles, but your dad almost died and—”

“Stepdad,” Stiles interrupted by correcting her. “He’s my stepfather, not my dad. I’m going to my room…”

Stiles fisted the paper Mrs. Compella gave him and stormed off as quietly as he could manage. He doubted Simon would do anything to the nameless, silent child in front of his mother and the
Stiles couldn’t even go to school!? He enjoyed a challenge in the classroom and if online school was easy, he knew it wouldn’t hold his attention… Plus he’d be at Simon’s mercy, having to borrow his laptop. It just wasn’t fair, but then again, life never was.

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Melissa forced herself to reread the paragraph she was on again. It was one she had wrote, and it expressed concern over Stiles’ behavioral changes after his stepfather’s visit. Her eyes welled up, if only she had realized then how damning that trip would be. A light snore jogged her from her concentration.

John had fallen asleep with one paper in each hand. He had arrived with his hair being a sweaty mess, Melissa had never realized it was long enough to stand on end. His clothes were filthy, and jeans were ripped. She chuckled to herself over the mess he was as she got up and poked him.

“Come on Mister, let’s get you in bed,” Melissa said as she attempted to get the fully grown man up.

John grumbled out a sleepy ‘You coming with me?’, which caused Melissa’s face to heat up. John didn’t seem to notice but did support himself enough to make it to the full-sized bed in the corner of the room. The two could fit, but there would be very little space between them…

The thoughts were pushed from her mind as Melissa took in John’s entire appearance. From this position she saw clearly how one of his knees was twice the size of the other even in his jeans!

She tutted to herself, “John Stilinski what did you do…”

Melissa got an ice pack out from the Cabin’s first aid kit and cracked it to activate the cooling sensation. They were only meant to be a temporary fix, so John needed to get back to the school or maybe even an emergency room to have the appendage looked at.

Melissa wanted to be upset with the sleeping man but couldn’t find it in her heart to do so. She’d lost Stiles to the system. Each of her kids held a place in her heart and it felt like the organ wasn’t whole with him gone. She didn’t have it in her to scold this man who was clearly just as upset as
she was over the situation.

Instead, Melissa called Chris on the radio. John had checked in with him shortly after his arrival and Chris promised to stay in the office, just in case someone called, as John was extremely worried that Stiles hadn’t contacted them yet. To Melissa’s surprise, he answered right away.

“I don’t think John’s going to be able to make it down this mountain on his own. His knee is really swollen. I only just now noticed, I’m sorry, of course he didn’t say anything…”

Chris’ voice came through garbled with distortion. “That man! I told him to wait til’ morning, or you know just use the radio to tell you, but no, he insisted it be in person!” Melissa thought about what she might have done had she been told of Stiles’ exit and then given nothing to do to help. It would have been a long night. Perhaps even she would have rounded up the soloist as soon as the sun broke. “Okay. I can head that way with a gulf cart now. It’s still pretty early, I’d get their around six maybe. I’d probably wake the kids and they’ll have questions.”

“No, it’s still dark. I’ll keep rotating the temporary ice packs on him until morning. John’s asleep anyway,” Melissa suggested. “Come after the sun rise, and could you inform Marin that my remaining three students will be without a counselor. I’m not sure if John did before he left so late.”

The pair talked a little about Stiles and some about Allison, and whole lot about John and his stupidity after that. Melissa really needed the laugh.

She looked at the highlighted papers and just hoped that they would have enough to make a strong case for why Stiles should come back to Beacon of Hope. She sighed heavily when her mind wondered to Derek and how she’d have to tell him about this as soon as possible. He wasn’t going to take it well.

***

Once their visitors left it didn’t take long for Simon’s bell to ring. Stiles really needed to throw that thing away.

The day passed in relative muteness for Stiles. The monster talked. He’d ask for something or make a sly comment and Stiles did his best to ignore him. It became a game to Simon, if Stiles was within reaching distance, he’d purposefully lay his hand on an inappropriate body part.
Stiles idly thought about burning his flesh off to remove the grimy feeling from his skin. It was only day two and it was already hell. He wanted to cry but couldn’t force the tears to come. It was like even his eyes had given up and accepted the situation as fate.

Stiles made sandwiches for lunch and Simon had the gall to ask for a beer with his! After a pointless back and forth argument, Simon won and Stiles delivered a beer with his medicine. Hopefully mixing the two would cause a deadly reaction. He escaped to the kitchen after that and found himself looking at the amber colored bottles in the fridge. Stiles never did care for the taste of beer, finding it to be too bitter for his liking.

He had been known to down half a bottle of Jack on occasion during his time on the streets however. He used to use the stuff to loosen up and most of his regulars knew his preferences and were more than happy to oblige. Simon had a rarely used liquor cabinet above the fridge…

Inside, Stiles found a nearly empty bottle of some coffee liqueur, which was interesting and probably Mrs. Compella’s doing. But behind that was several old bottles of Scotch in an assortment of pricy brands and surprisingly, a dusty bottle of wine. There was a handwritten note in his mother’s handwriting which gave the date of her marriage with Simon.

Suddenly, Stiles was overcome with the need to smash the bottle, but he chose rather to drink it. At least that way he’d get drunk and maybe wouldn’t realize where he was anymore. Maybe he’d pass out and Simon wouldn’t get his medicine and the whole nightmare would end with murder charges. Oddly the thought brought a smile to his face. The realization was alarming.

Stiles didn’t bother with a glass as he used an old fashion corkscrew to pop the top. The liquid tasted vile. He had heard that wine was supposed to age well, but this one certainly hadn’t. He glanced at the pill boxes on the counter and found he didn’t care so much about the taste and took another two gulps to prove it to himself. Maybe if he got drunk enough, he’d be able to accidentally mix up the meds… He was sure there had to be a combination in there somewhere that would at least land Simon in the hospital again. Perhaps they’d decide he wasn’t such a good caretaker and send him off to Juvie.

Half a bottle of wine later and the medicine boxes laid untouched while Stiles found himself sitting on the linoleum again.

Then the bell rang.
Stiles was furious. In a speed he didn’t think was possible even without alcohol, Stiles jumped up and marched into the living room.

“Give me that God damn bell!” He demanded.

“Oh, would you look at you,” Simon taunted. “Did you grow some balls? Why don’t you come over here and let me check.”

The look of surprise that flitted across Simon’s face was worth it when Stiles stormed across the room straight at him. Stiles gracelessly reached for the bell. At the same time Simon snatched it up and attempted to hold it out of his stepson’s reach which was difficult to do as he was laying down in a recliner. Rather than to go around however, Stiles dove right on top of the chair and its occupant, sending a knee to Simon’s gut in the process. The twisted pained noise that escaped Simon’s throat was like music to Stiles’ ears.

Stiles’ hands encircled the wooden bell handle and he easily overpowered his stepfather as he tore it from Simon’s hand. He chucked the bell across the room causing it to ring loudly. As it landed the noise stopped and Stiles smiled to himself at the thought that he would never have to hear the thing again.

The smile vanished instantly when his step father’s hands palmed his backside. Drunkenly Stiles squirmed and attempted to pull himself free. He was essentially laying on the man he despised, and Simon wasn’t going to let that go quite as effortlessly as he did the bell.

In a wheezing pant Simon managed to say, “If you wanted some, all you had to do was ask. You know that.”

As he spoke one hand trailed the line of Stiles’ jeans along his lower back in an attempt to enter. Thankfully, Stiles’ pants were buttoned and zipped tight and Simon wasn’t able to get more than two fingers past the waistband. Stiles’ flailing turned more violent and he attempted to punch and push off the man he hated more than any other.

Eventually Stiles got free from the scrimmage, landing hard on the floor. He was sure he’d bruise but as he scrambled to his feet and darted across the room, he snatched up the bell.

“Worth it,” he announced as he straightened his clothes. “Don’t bother looking for it either!”
And with that Stiles turned from the room, passed by the garbage pail, opened the kitchen door, and tossed the offending object clear across his lawn and well behind the house of their elderly neighbor. The bell was sure to be rusted out by rain long before it was discovered again.

Reentering the kitchen Stiles came face to face with a beet red Simon. He suddenly felt extremely sober. As if reading his thoughts, Simon’s eye landed on nearly the empty wine bottle.

“Let’s get a few things clear,” Simon huffed out. Stiles was pleased to see that despite the man’s apparent ability to stand and walk unassisted, talking was still a struggle. “You’re here for me, to help me. You got that? You like to play at being unwilling, a tease, I get that, but we both know who you really are, why you really ran away. You can’t escape that, and I don’t care what they told you at that mountain school, you’re nothing more than a whore with a pretty mouth, a couple of holes that need filling, and when I’m good and ready I’m going to do just that.” The impact of Simon’s words were lessened just a bit by his tight grip on the refrigerator door handle. His surgery obviously still pained him.

Stiles felt no relief however and he cursed himself for how his legs wobbled at the threat. He might be able to out run Simon now, but he could only run so far while trapped inside this house.

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The second morning of his isolated retreat Derek woke in far better spirits. His mind was clearer and in some small way he felt like he had finally properly mourned his family. A weight settled in his gut at that thought but for once it felt secure, like it was a part of him and not something he would carry from now on - rather than fight that fact or freak out, he accepted it.

He held a lengthy letter in his hand addressed to Laura in which he expressed some of his revelations and fears of them drifting apart. It felt good to get that down on paper and he was actually looking forward to returning to the campus simply to mail it off.

Derek paused in his action of roasting a sausage link over the fire to serve as his breakfast when he heard footsteps approaching. Would it be Jackson again? Or perhaps Melissa was coming around to check on them. They only had until noon to finish their notebooks before it would be time to break down camp and head back to Beacon of Hope for dinner. Despite all the rest he had gotten over virtually having nothing to do he felt exhausted mentally and he wondered if Stiles was going to want to sneak out that evening. He would do it in a heartbeat, because Stiles’ confession was simply that important, but it was going to make for a painfully long day of school on Monday, he just knew it.
Even though he knew someone was coming, Derek couldn’t help but drop his sausage when he looked up and saw a thoroughly beaten up John hanging onto Chris for support with Melissa on the other side. In the school’s hierarchy John was top dog, and it was obvious he favored Melissa and her students. It always seemed Chris was something of a right hand man to John, someone who stepped in where John couldn’t. Regardless, seeing all three approach him set off an alarm bell in Derek’s head.

He wanted to stand but felt his body tense up and was unable to move. That seemed okay with the counselors and Chris, because the three helped themselves to the log Jackson had sat on yesterday. It was comical seeing them squeeze together so that they could all fit.

For a moment no one spoke. John winced as he straightened one of his legs and then began. “I came out here because we need to tell you some—”

“Is it Stiles? No wait, Kate? The trial - is it over?” Derek’s mind was racing with possible implications and John was simply taking too long to spit it out.

Melissa sighed. “You were right with the first one, I’m sorry,” she sniffled, “Stiles situation has changed…”

John interjected, “I want you to know that we are doing everything we can to get him back, for the time being—”

“Get him back!?” Derek stammered and suddenly felt incredibly chilly. “Get him back? Where did he go?”

“He’s— they changed his sentence to house arrest. He’s in Florida with his stepfather,” John managed to say, it looked like the words pained him.

“That— monster!” Derek yelled, his eyes bulging dangerously. “He can’t, he can’t live with him!”

“We know, we have the same suspicions, but—”

“There’s no suspicion. He told me! He told me what that monster did to him and he was going to tell you, we were going to tell you both, that’s why I didn’t want to come on this stupid trip!” Derek’s anger rose with each word. He knew he should’ve fought harder to stay at the school.
Melissa and John shared a look before John tentatively asked, “What did he tell you?”

Derek eyed Chris for a second before he decided that he would just admit it. In a small voice he said, “Stiles’ stepfather has been sexually abusing him for years. It started even before his mom died, she being gone just allowed it to escalate. He— he won’t survive there for long, he hates himself for allowing that monster to use him.”

Whatever Chris was expecting to hear, it clearly wasn’t that. He choked and coughed a little. Melissa and John however shared another one of those knowing glances.

“Do you think if Derek reports it, it would work?” John asked Melissa.

She looked contemplatively at Derek. “It’s a tough position that you’re in, Derek. We’re filing an appeal, but would you be willing to—”

“Yes, anything! I’ll do that video thing again, like I did for the trial! I’ll tell you guys or the police or whoever everything Stiles told me if you’ll just get him out of there!”

Melissa’s worry was still evident. “Derek, that still puts you in a difficult position. I want you to know that even your word might not change things and I can’t possibly stress enough how much that none of this is your fault, okay, even if they dismiss your claim.”

“And, despite how pressing the matter is to us, sometimes the system is slow. Although I’m hoping to get to talk directly with his case worker tomorrow, if not today,” John added.

“Okay,” Derek quickly agreed. “Anything, let’s go!”

John turned to Chris. “I’d hate to ask this of you after I said I’d give you the day off, but—”

“I already had the day off,” Chris quickly interjected. “And of course I’ll stay here and make sure the rest of the kids get home safely. My daughter might not be too pleased about the three hour hike back in which we will be doing some bonding, but we’ll have a good time of it. Should I keep the conversation away from the infamous secret notebooks or are they allowed to discuss it now that they’ve completed them?”
“Definitely let them talk and share. The kids actually like to keep the solo trip thing a secret, like a right of passage; you can’t know about it until you’ve experienced it. The air of mystery has helped to fuel their enthusiasm so we’ve never discouraged it…” Melissa explained.

Derek couldn’t even remember what he wrote in his notebook, all he thought about was what Stiles had told him early Friday morning, just two days ago, and yet it suddenly seemed like a lifetime away.

John and Melissa as it turned out, had a gulf cart to ride in. Melissa drove and John iced his suspiciously large knee. Before they even broke out of the shelter of the woods, Melissa was making several calls too, arranging, it would seem, transportation to get John to the hospital, which John protested.

Derek had questions but kept them to himself. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about what happen to John, it was that he only had enough room in his brain to focus on Stiles. Before they even made it to the front office, Scott, Boyd, and Kira ambushed them with questions of their own about where everyone had been. What was Derek doing with them? What happened to John? And how were they going to get Stiles back?

Melissa had the chaotic scene under control within minutes. “John you get in that car, or so help me! Kira, honey, I’m working on bringing Stiles home and Derek here is going to help me with that. Scott, you watch your mouth, young man, language like that is not permitted and only serves to escalate these types of situations! And Boyd, please be so kind as to inform Marin that I’m back, Derek’s with me and Chris will be returning with the others on schedule. Thank you!”

It was with determination that Derek followed behind Melissa into the front office. He tried to ignore the way his group mate’s eyes lingered on him with curiosity. Once inside however, Melissa’s sharp leadership softened, and she asked Derek to take a seat in John’s office. She fiddled with a couple of drawers before pulling out a tape recorder.

“If it’s okay with you I’d like to record this interview simply, so you won’t have to repeat yourself. Is that okay?” Melissa asked gently.

Derek nodded.

Melissa pressed play, acknowledged the tape recorder, and asked Derek to confirm his cooperation. “Thank you, now Derek, could you please tell me about the conversation you had with Stiles in as
much detail as you can remember.”

Derek took a deep breath and began.

*To be continued.
Chapter 18

Episode 17

Using Simon’s computer to register for school was difficult to say the least. For one thing, it was password protected and Simon wasn’t willing to let go of that information lightly. He made Stiles stand next to him while he typed one handed as his other trailed up and down his stepson’s body without permission. The taste of bile in Stiles’ throat grounded him through the experience.

The monster also told Stiles that he wasn’t allowed to leave the room with such an expensive device, forcing him to sign up for classes on the living room couch. Stiles hated being in the presence of his stepfather so much so that it was actually the first time since his return that he had sat of the outdated furniture. Simon took advantage of the situation by palming himself obscenely through his sweatpants the entire time that Stiles was in his presence.

Surprisingly, Stiles found the action easy to ignore as he relished the feel of the keyboard beneath
Physically completing his registration, however, was another issue. Despite how easy Mrs. Compella claimed the process was, Stiles found himself unable to actually view the modulares without his transfer papers from Beacon of Hope. In order to do that he’d have to call his former school and have them send the information to the website.

Which meant that Stiles needed to ask Simon for permission to use his phone, as well as having to call the one place he had been trying (and failing) to ignore existed. He felt more than a little sick at the prospect. Who would pick up? What would they ask him? What if Derek answered the phone? Was the older teen mad at him because he didn’t say goodbye— again? Were his former classmates still out camping in the woods and unaware of Stiles’ departure yet? Did Melissa even know that he was gone?

The questions swirled in Stiles’ mind causing a knot of uncertainty to form deep in his gut. He couldn’t make the call just yet. Instead, he hastily wrote down the information and gave Simon his laptop back mere minutes after asking for it to be unlocked. Stiles was out of the room a second later, pleased to see disappointment flicker across his stepfather’s features.

After Simon’s display in the kitchen earlier, in which the older man had successfully managed to move around the house on his own, albeit at a snail’s pace, Stiles didn’t really feel secure anymore. Not that he ever really did in his childhood home, but now, even the relative safety of his bedroom no longer existed. Thus, Stiles found that he preferred the kitchen where he could at least escape through the side door. Plus it was getting late.

He busied himself preparing dinner for his abuser and hoped the obvious sounds of pots and pans moving would deter Simon from attempting to check on him. The last thing he wanted was an awkward conversation in which his stepfather actually pretended to be a parent and scold him about not doing any school work. It was rare, but occasionally it happened. The sound of the TV clicking on quickly squashed that fear and Stiles’ eyes drifted to the counter where the piece of paper with the transfer information sat looking innocent, despite the anxiety it was causing.

Conveniently, Simon’s cell phone laid untouched where Mrs. Compella had left it, next to the stash of medicine. Eleven o’clock, Stiles decided, he’d make the call late at night his time. It’d be close to curfew at Beacon and that would mean that the occupants in the office would be limited— at least he hoped that would be the case.

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John returned from the hospital with a knee brace visible for all the world to see and a prescription for Oxycodone hidden safely in his pocket. He was up front with the doctor and told her about his past addiction issues regarding alcohol and stressed his concern over accepting the pain medication. She appreciated his honesty and as a result only prescribed him enough to last the remainder of the week. Should he need more, he’d have to return to her office and the two would have a discussion about possible dependency triggers. She seemed confident in this approach, but John’s doubt still lingered.

The concern was pushed from his mind once he returned to his school, however. Melissa and John sat held up in his office replaying Derek’s statement all afternoon, preparing for the conversation he was hoping to have with Stiles’ caseworker the next day. Melissa left John that evening for a Sunday night group counseling session, as the rest of her students had returned from their solo trips with Chris. When she reappeared after curfew it was with glistening eyes.

“They barely even talked about anything aside from Stiles. Lydia is livid with us, expect the silent treatment from her for the next few weeks. Isaac looked— betrayed. This isn’t going to blow over quickly with any of them. Even Jackson was concerned…” Melissa let her voice trail off.

John opened his mouth to speak but he was interrupted by the shrill ring of the school’s landline. He quickly snatched up the device, answering it as he always did: a greeting stating his name and the name of the school. There was a pause on the line in which heavy breathing told him someone was there. Melissa raised an eye brow as if to ask who it was. John was just about to repeat himself when a timid voice spoke.

“— John, it’s me— uh, Stiles.”

John pressed the speakerphone button so fast that Melissa heard the tail end of the shaky response.

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Stiles paced the tiny kitchen noiselessly. Simon was snoring idly in the other room and he didn’t want to wake him. Stiles bitterly wondered if the man would ever sleep in his own bedroom again or if the recliner (and eventually Stiles’ bed) were the only places unlucky enough to be graced with his presence from here on out.

The time above the stove told Stiles that it was half past eleven; he’d already missed his self-appointed deadline. He had half a mind to just put off the phone call until tomorrow, or better yet, forgo finishing his registration for school altogether and see how long it took for someone to
notice. If he called now, maybe no one would answer and then he could at least say he tried.

Stiles’ resolve continued to waver until it was well past midnight and he finally picked up the cell phone and dialed the number he had unintentionally memorized months ago.

“Hello, this is John Stilinski, director of Beacon of Hope. How can I help you?”

Stiles froze. John was without a doubt somewhere near the top of a shortlist of people he really, really didn’t want to talk to. In fact, it couldn’t have been much worse than the head counselor answering the phone himself.

“H— ”

Before John could repeat himself, Stiles stuttered out a greeting while he tried to remember the plan he’d made to keep this call quick and concise.

“Stiles!” Melissa’s shriek of surprised sounded a little further away and Stiles knew he had been put on speakerphone. Just great! Melissa was probably the only counselor higher on the ‘please don’t pick up’ list than John.

“It’s late, Stiles, is everything okay?” John asked quickly, his concern evident.

Stiles faltered. So much was not okay that it wasn’t comprehendible. Rather than admit that however, he found himself saying, “Yeah, I’m fine —I just need to give you some information so my transcripts can be sent to the right place and I can attend school here.”

Stiles thought he kept his response steady, but somehow Melissa saw right through it.

“Stiles, honey, we’re doing everything we can to get you removed from your stepfather’s custody. Do you hear me?” she said firmly. “Are you alone right now?”

Stiles’ mind blanked at the question and he stammered out that Simon was asleep in the living
“Good,” Melissa continued. “If he’s harmed you—or done anything else against your will. I want you to hang up with us and call the police immediately, do you understand?”

“No,” Stiles replied quickly. “It’s fine, he can barely walk, it’s—it’s not that bad…” The lie was obvious, causing Stiles to wince. “Listen I just need you to email my transcripts, I have the information for you right here.”

“Stiles” It was John this time “I—I don’t want you to be upset with Derek, but he told us.” He paused, letting the weight of those words hang heavily over the phone line.

Stiles felt it; the implication. It wasn’t as freeing or illuminating as it had been when he had told Derek. There was no relief knowing that the counselors knew the truth about the years of abuse he had suffered. On the contrary, it suddenly became difficult to breathe as the air around him grew thick. His next lungful came in sharper than expected, leaving a dull throbbing in his chest. It took Stiles a moment to give a title to the pain; betrayal or was it regret? How many people did Derek tell? Who else knew Stiles’ darkest secret? Then he realized that it didn’t even matter, it was too late, Simon had already won…

“—It’s grounds for immediate removal. I should be able to contact your caseworker tomorrow and —” John had started talking again, but Stiles couldn’t register the words beyond the whooshing sound of his own heartbeat reverberating somewhere deep in his ears.

“… Stiles?” Melissa’s higher pitch jarred him. “Did you hear us?”

“Just forget it, everything I said to him— no one will believe me, or— Derek…” Stiles felt his heart plummet, knowing it was true. “There isn’t any proof or anything— and Simon, he’ll just get really mad, like really mad! That’ll be worse, please just— don’t say anything!”

Stiles momentarily forgot the man in question was sleeping in the other room and found his voice rising with each plea. A loud snore snapped him out of his panic and grounded him in the situation once again.

“He can’t get away with it,” Melissa tried to reason. “What he’s done, it’s illegal. The authorities will—”
“They’re the ones that sent me here,” Stiles interjected. “Marched me through two airports and confined me in this house with— him. I’m sorry Derek told you, I really am, but it doesn’t change anything, just forget about it. What he said and, just— just forget about me too.”

“We can’t. Stiles, we care about you.” John’s voice sounded softer than Stiles had ever heard it. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of your caseworker all weekend and once I explain everything to him, I’m sure they’ll remove you from your stepfather’s house. But, if you call the emergency line right now—”

“And say what exactly?” Stiles snapped, losing his patience. “My stepfather, who is currently recovering from having a stint put in his heart and can barely move, has been molesting me for years and I figured I was finally sick of it all, so I decided that now would be a good time to call and see what the operator could do? And then they’ll look up who I am and realize I’m just some delinquent trying to cause trouble or get out of having to take care of my stepdad and they’ll hang up on me, or worse, they’ll send someone out to the house and it’ll wake up Simon and then when they leave me here with him— which they will because there is no proof, and again, I’m a kid with a bad track record— what am I suppose to do then, huh? I can’t even leave this house! If I run, they’ll track me down and send me right back! There’s no point, so just forget about it!”

Melissa was definitely crying when she spoke next. “They won’t leave you in that house with him, they’ll have to take your complaint seriously. Just as John and I have to, we can’t ignore something like this, it’s the law.”

“They already have!” Stiles could have kicked himself as he had shouted that time. He held his breath making sure Simon was still asleep.

“What do you mean?” Melissa asked.

“Didn’t Derek tell you?” Stiles whispered, hoping the action would convince the counselors of the gravity of the situation. “I did tell the cops once and all it got me was a couple of bruises.”

The line was silent for a minute and Stiles used the opportunity to quickly ask again about his transcripts. He was honestly surprised he remembered to do so.

John ignored his request once again as he continued to spout off words of encouragement. “Stiles, I’m sorry it’s taken us all— the police, your caseworkers, and even Melissa and I, so long to realize the abuse you have been living with. I know it’s difficult to have faith in a broken system that has already failed you, but please believe us. We’re going to get your abuser sent to jail. We’re going to
“Stop!” Stiles said the word on an exhale, his eyes squeezing shut. “Just stop trying to give me hope, I have no room left for it.” A commotion from the living room told him he had already pushed his luck far enough.

Stiles considered just hanging up, but he still needed to complete his registration for his online classes. He quickly rambled off the email address that he needed the paperwork sent to and pleaded with the counselors to do so.

Melissa argued against Stiles’ despair and John flatly implied that transferring would be pointless as he fully intended to get his student back. Stiles tried to speak with as few words as possible, but it was to no avail. Simon’s feet were scuffling closer to the door.

“Look—I have to go,” Stiles rushed. “Please just send my transcripts, I’ll check tomorrow to see if the registration is complete, if I can.” He hung up immediately afterwards, but Simon wasn’t fooled as he entered the kitchen.

“Who were you talking to?” He barked.

Stiles gulped. It didn’t matter that his intention behind making the call was simply so that he could attend his new school. It was too late at night and it didn’t look good at all.

Taking a deep breath, Stiles settled on honesty. He explained why he had chosen to wait until the office would be nearly deserted before he had called. He even admitted that his former teachers were concerned, which was why they hadn’t immediately taken down the information pertaining to his transfer papers.

As Stiles spoke, Simon grew steadily closer until they were within touching distance. Stiles eyed his stepfather warily, uncertain of what would happen next.

Earlier that day when they were in similar positions, Simon’s anger over the bell evaporated surprisingly quickly. He had nearly fallen once he no longer had the counter to support him and Stiles’ fear tempered off in to something more like pity mixed with disgust. Simon ordered Stiles to help him sit at the kitchen table and Stiles flatly refused for a whole minute while the two engaged in an intense staring contest.
In the end Stiles caved and assisted the man and Simon for his part never did bring up the bell nor repeat his vulgar remarks. Stiles had served them both water as he needed the liquid to counter his alcohol intake and neither of them talked until hours later when Stiles asked to use the laptop. Simon had already returned to the comfort of his recliner by then and had replied in his usual taunting tone.

Now however, it was different. Simon’s anger over Stiles calling his former school and the way his counselors had obviously been fishing for information caused a dangerous glint to sharpen in his eye.

The monster had a handful of different personas. He was usually the bully: tearing Stiles down and insulting him into submission. Sometimes however, he was the ‘not so bad guy’ in which his actions weren’t his fault; he couldn’t help it, he just loved his stepson so much, was it really so wrong? He’d buy Stiles clothes or a birthday present and guilt him into doing what he wanted as penitence. On rarer occasions he’d play the victim: poor Simon with such an awful, misbehaving stepson. Where had he gone wrong with Stiles? Mrs. Compella obviously fell for that version of his stepfather.

But by far the worst of Simon’s personalities was his Hulk-like unabashed anger. That was the man who didn’t hesitate to kick a twelve-year-old repeatedly in the ribs. The guy who threaten to suffocate a child with a pillow while raping him if he didn’t knock off the tears. It was the absolute core of the monster, the one that made up Stiles’ nightmares and it was those eyes that pinned him to his spot now.

Simon let go of the counter and swiftly trapped Stiles forearm. Prior to his stay in the hospital, that grip would have surely bruised. Now however, all it did was startle Stiles enough to loosen his hold on the cell phone. Simon plucked the device easily from Stiles’ hand.

“This will be staying with me from now on.” Simon’s tone left no room for argument.

His other hand came up to cup Stiles’ chin tightly, forcing the two to stare at one another. In previous years there was always such a height difference, now however, it was merely half a foot that separated the two. The lack of distance felt dangerously intimate and so— wrong. After having experienced something similar with Derek, Stiles couldn’t stomach the way the monster looked at him now. He broke eye contact first.

“No,” Simon said. “Look at me. I don’t care what those people told you, this is the only face you’ll ever see again, do you hear me? You’d better get used to it.” As he spoke his pointer finger brushed along Stiles’ lower lip, tugging on it slightly and forcing its way inside. In an attempt to bar the appendage from entering, Stiles darted his tongue out but the taste he was met with made him cringe while his stepfather chuckled at the sensation of rubbing the pad of his finger across the
tip of Stiles’ tongue.

All at once Simon collapsed on Stiles as he physically could not remain standing on his own any longer. The motion jarred them both, causing Simon’s hand to drop back down to the counter behind them for support. Stiles pushed back against the added weight that enclosed him and felt exactly how turned on his stepfather was from the interaction. Panic took over and Stiles felt a renewed spark ignite within him and he fought back kicking and screaming.

Simon didn’t have the strength he once did and wasn’t able to pin Stiles down. He was, however, more than capable of delivering an echoing slap to Stiles’ face. The hand that still held the cell phone crashed against Stiles’ cheek, effectively quieting the teen.

The stinging pain whited out everything else for a solid second and Stiles found himself shocked still. A moment later and Simon’s nails dug into his arm bringing his mind right back into the situation at hand.

“Recliner, now,” Simon huffed out, voice strained.

It wasn’t that Stiles actually assisted his stepfather so much so that he was dragged and used as a counter weight to get Simon back in his chair. As soon as the claws in his arm relented Stiles spun away and out of reach. He ignored the calls for him to come back and stumbled off to the bathroom where he stared at himself in the mirror. It was stunning how little he recognized his reflection. His eyes were lifeless and dull, his hair was long and unkept, and across his right cheek was a pink rectangle the same size of Simon’s phone. Stiles attempted to rub the enflamed skin soothingly but flinched back from the tenderness he felt there. He was sure the mark would bruise in a day or two.

Stiles ran the water from the faucet until it was as cold as it would go and splashed some on his face. The droplets clung to his eyelashes and hid any evidence of his tears. He thought about ignoring the calls from the other room demanding he come back out and simply locking himself next to the toilet for the rest of the night. Drying his hands on the hand towel brought his focus to another injury he had sustained. His forearm had four crescent-shaped indentations from Simon’s fingernails sitting adjacent to a small bead of blood from where the thumb nail had dug in too deeply.

The fact that Simon was so willing to physically assault Stiles didn’t bode well, at all. Did that mean that Joe’s mom wasn’t going to be stopping by again? How would Simon explain Stiles’ bruised cheek?

Simon’s calls gradually transitioned into a coughing fit. Stiles took the opportunity to flee from the
bathroom to his bedroom. Simon had not so clearly asked for water in those few seconds, but Stiles threw up his injured arm, middle finger and thumb extended, flicking off his stepfather should he choose to look.

The bedroom brought with it a sort of quiet reprieve that he couldn’t quite achieve in the bathroom or perhaps it was because he didn’t have to stare at himself any longer, but either way Stiles collapsed on his bed and rolled over, wondering how many days he’d actually be able to live like this before it would become too much.

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Waking up on Monday to Stiles’ neatly made bed reminded Derek of the time the younger teen had run away with Lydia. Except that this was so much worse because instead of wondering if Stiles was okay, Derek knew he wasn’t. He was in Hell, and it was incredibly surreal that no one seemed to be able to do anything about it.

Derek actually considered calling his uncle because if there was one thing Peter was good at, it was getting his way and even his uncle’s Grinch-sized heart would bleed for Stiles’ situation. The rest of the boys were getting dressed and ready for their day, but Derek couldn’t pull his eye’s away from Stiles’ bed. Stiles’ bed that had a piece of paper sticking out from under the pillow.

Flipping the pillow over revealed that there were actually several pieces of paper, all in the form of envelopes addressed to an array of students— and Melissa. Lydia, Kira, and Scott each got one, a last memento from Stiles. Derek did not. Scott picked up his immediately, opened it and began to read out loud. Derek flipped the other pillow over, tore off the sheet and blanket, and was seconds away from flipping the mattress before Scott’s letter got to a sentence that halted the action.

‘Tell Derek that I’m sorry.’

What did that mean? Why was he sorry? Why didn’t he tell him himself? Derek sat stunned on the edge of Stiles’ disheveled bed. Boyd quickly read the situation, picked up the other notes, gave them to Isaac with clear instructions to leave the dorm, and knelt down in front of his shocked friend.

“Why?” Derek muttered after the silence dragged on between them.

“I don’t know, man, I’m sorry.”
Derek narrowed his eyes at Boyd. Sorry. That one word wasn’t enough.

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He wasn’t sure if it was the ache from his knee or the constant round about responses he was receiving from everyone on the east coast, but John absentmindedly found himself reaching for his prescription pain killer for the second time that day. Or was it the third? He was losing track with every time he was placed on hold.

When he finally did get through to Stiles’ actual caseworker the man seemed doubtful of the claim and assured John that he had met with Simon and his ‘lovely’ girlfriend himself. He did propose a surprise CPS visit and told John that his office would handle the claim from there.

That wasn’t good enough for John who now spent his afternoon trying to get in touch with the Department of Child and Family services in Tampa, so he could emphasize the urgency of this case. Perhaps he’d be able to talk to the social worker who would be conducting said visit. That would be ideal.

Melissa periodically came into his office under the guise of updating John with the happenings of the rest of the school, but it was really just to ask when Stiles would be coming home. After the fifth interruption, John snapped at her. He immediately regretted it, but Melissa’s curls bounced out of his office before he was able to get his apology out and since then the only interruption he had had was the ringing of his phone followed quickly by the rattle of his prescription bottle.

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Monday morning Stiles stayed in his room and completely ignored his stepfather until almost noon when the TV remote went flying against the wall that separated the two. Simon was furious, claiming that he was going to get sick without his medicine and that his blood thinner was a life and death situation. Stiles had half a mind to ask him why he didn’t go get the pills himself, but instead he merely found the batteries, placed them back into the remote, turned the TV up, and walked into the kitchen.

Stiles stared at the counter with the medicine for a long time. He contemplated overdosing Simon every time he reached for his stepfather’s pills. Every single time. He wondered what that said about himself as a person; evil breeds evil and all that. Was there any hope for Stiles if he thought about committing murder on a daily basis? Should he do the world a favor and take out both the monster and himself in one foul swoop?
Stiles didn’t bother asking for the computer that day. He didn’t want to risk being within touching
distance of his stepfather again while his cheek still smarted from their last physical interaction.
And if he was honest with himself, he couldn’t stomach finding out whether or not Beacon of Hope
had sent his transfer papers yet.

And if Stiles’ heart stopped for a second or two every time he heard distant sirens growing closer,
well no one else had to know.

Tuesday, Simon was a little nicer, probably having realized that his threats and intimidation would
only keep Stiles afraid for so long. Stiles, for the most part stayed away regardless. He actually
found himself going through old boxes in the tiny one car garage simply for something to do. He
came across his T-ball bat, a light, aluminum thing. For reasons he couldn’t quite explain, he stored
it near the Kitchen’s side door.

He was never more than an average player, but Stiles enjoyed the game as a child none the less.
Thinking about baseball brought up the more recent memories of running the field with a lacrosse
stick in hand. He had missed Beacon of Hope’s first game yesterday. He wondered how they had
fared without him.

On Wednesday, Stiles finally stopped pausing in his actions every time a police car was heard in
the distance. Just as he thought, nothing was going to save him. It sucked, it truly did, that Melissa,
John and even Derek all knew what his home life was like.

He knew Melissa would feel guilty as if she had failed him in some way, and she really, really
hadn’t. She had taught him to climb mountains and gave him the best months of his life. The
confidence Stiles felt when standing on the top of a cliff he had just scaled was a feeling no one,
not even the monster, would ever be able to take away from him.

It was difficult for Stiles not to have a little heat towards John, though. The head counselor was so
confident that he’d get him back and Stiles wanted to believe him so much, he just couldn’t help it,
and it was soul crushing having to accept his fate time and time again. But in that regard, John had
treated him like an equal, he had earned respect from his students and staff because he gave respect
in turn. That was unlike anyone else Stiles had ever met. Not that he particularly felt like he had
much of a future, but if he was to grow up and become a man someday, he hoped it would be a man like John Stilinski.

And then there was Derek.

Stiles felt guilty for what he had unintentionally done to the older teen. He should never had shared his secret. Knowing the truth, knowing what Stiles was living through again, was sure to eat Derek up inside. It was poison, just as Stiles had told him, and now they were both infected. He thought about what he had written in Lydia’s letter about making sure Derek moved on. He had been so stupid to fall for him in the first place. It was selfish of Stiles, and yet, he couldn’t quite bring himself to write that. It felt like cheapening their - whatever they had - to say he regretted it. In the end all he could manage was a pathetic apology…

It was Thursday after lunch that Stiles asked to borrow the computer again. Simon offered it in exchange for a hand job, the most he was able to physically endure at the moment. Stiles declined.

Hours later, once Simon had fallen asleep, Stiles was able to snag the computer for himself. Simon had rather noisily settled his urges earlier by jacking off to porn, and luckily or not for Stiles, he had left his computer open afterward.

Tapping the return key brought up Simon’s desktop, which oddly enough was a picture of Stiles’ mom, but regardless of seeing the woman he held a mix of emotions over, he was glad he was able to use the computer. Stiles snagged the charging cord and carried the device off into his bedroom. Maybe he’d be able to stay up all night doing school work and would be too exhausted to wake in the morning.

His hopes plummeted when he realized he still couldn’t access the modules on the online school’s site. It was so frustrating.

Stiles checked his messages next. There wasn’t any from anyone at Beacon of Hope, and that stung a little but it had only been a few days, so maybe his former group mates just hadn’t had any time in the media room yet. Honestly, he wasn’t social media friends with most of them, just Scott and Isaac, but he thought he’d have a few more requests by now…

Debating between sending the requests himself or not, Stiles bit the bullet and did just that, starting
with Jackson of all people.

It was midnight again according to the time stamp in the lower left hand corner of the desktop. Stiles found himself wide awake despite the late hour and couldn’t help his curious mind from wondering what it was that Simon kept on his precious device. He idly browsed through the nearly empty game folder, disappointed by the lack of a selection there. He looked up his stepfather’s financial holdings and was sad but not surprised to see that not only was his mother’s home now in Simon’s name but that he had refinanced the place too, and definitely owed more than it was worth. Stiles was about to give up and shut the computer down after deciding that every document it housed was more boring than the last, when a number jumped out at him as strangely high.

The kilobytes next to the photo symbol seemed rather large for a man that had barely taken a family portrait, even when his wife was still around. Claudia was not one of those mothers who was glued to her phone. Simon had never shown much interest in reminiscing and the walls of their home reflected this, as they were mostly bare. The only exception to this rule was an occasional elementary school photo on a bookshelf and a mantel piece with a handful of wedding shots depicting Stiles as a toddler.

So why did Simon have such a large amount of photo files stored on his computer? Stiles secretly hoped that the man was a closeted landscape photographer, something he could poke fun of in passing, especially if the angles were cliché and his work mediocre at best. He didn’t even consider another possibility as he clicked on the file eagerly.

The click brought up hundreds of corresponding folders, all labeled by dates and some accompanied by a dollar amount too. Was his stepfather paying for other’s works or selling his own? Stiles frowned at the implication that meant that the man was actually a talented photographer. Thinking he’d have to judge for himself he clicked on the first one, a file that conveniently was already marked as being opened that same day, and instantly regretted the action.

The file contained twenty or so obviously edited photos of himself. Stiles as a nine or maybe ten-year-old boy all in extremely inappropriate positions. Child Stiles shaking as he undressed, large eyes peering off behind the camera. Stiles on his back, being penetrated first by fingers, then plugs, and finally by a sorrowfully familiar cock. It looked huge compared to the tiny body it was entering. This particular shot had several different edits, including a close up. The scene went on, cataloging Stiles’ distress in black and white detail, a single tear rolling down his cheek finished off the set.

Stiles wiped frantically at the corresponding brother of said tear. He racked his brain and tried to remember if a camera had ever been involved in their foreplay. He couldn’t think of one instance and yet the computer suggested otherwise. Honestly, Stiles had tried to block out those memories as much as he could, but had he really failed to realize that the monster had recorded them?
Angrily, Stiles clicked on the next set and the one after that and so forth going down the line, time stamps be damned. Each click plummeted him into memories he had tried so hard to forget, many of which had actually slipped his mind completely. He never remembered being tied up like that or blindfolded! And yet there he was at eleven, twelve, thirteen, and fourteen. Fear and tears slowly replaced over time with sorrow and resignation.

Numb. Hours later when Stiles would ask himself how he was able to keep going down the list, how he was able to continuously point and click without losing the contents of his stomach, he wouldn’t have an answer. Instead, he’d reflect on his sheer inability to feel anything at that moment as he just kept going.

That was until he clicked on a file near the middle of the list which showed Stiles in a completely different light. It was him on his knees staring up at the camera with a smirk in place. This one he remembered. The man, who was not his mother’s husband, had paid a large sum of money to take private photos of him, something Stiles was hesitant to agree to at just thirteen but the guy came prepared and had offered to get him high first. Plus, it wasn’t sex he was asking for, only—looking. Stiles recalled his nerves over accepting the offer and he knew that he had begged for those photos to stay private. Feeling relaxed from the chemical-induced high, he had relished the camera and played up to it, delivering on his end of the bargain. He was praised that night and paid handsomely. He remembered thinking he’d actually be able to get out someday after that; out of Ybor, out of the lifestyle, away from it all…

And yet, those photos had ended up on his stepfather’s laptop. Did that man know Simon? Had the monster paid for the photoshoot back then or did he buy them somewhere online? Did Simon sell his private collection too? Is that what the dollar signs were for? Was Stiles floating around in the dark web somewhere serving as source material for pedophiles everywhere? It made Stiles sick to consider all the possibilities. He desperately wanted to slam the computer shut, go grab his bat, and smash the thing to bits. He also was hesitant to even go near it again, but something caught his eye. A date. A file near the bottom had a different sequence than the rest and was dated only three months ago. Swallowing the dread along with his bile, Stiles hesitantly clicked and felt his eyes prickle instantly.

The first photo was an artfully done black and white of a small child with pale skin and a nose scattered with freckles eating an ice pop. The child’s eyes were lit up with delight over the treat and had that picture been on any ordinary parent’s computer, it would have been a great capture of the joy of the moment. But on Simon’s laptop, followed by inappropriate shots of Joe’s little brother running around the living room in only his briefs, sitting in a bathtub while playing with toy boats, and being coddled by his mother while looking extremely frightened at the camera behind her back, this could only be labeled as one thing. It was documentation of Stiles’ replacement being groomed in his stead.
Stiles wasn’t aware of the action, but he found himself standing, struggling to breathe, and backing away from the device all at once. He had promised. If Stiles didn’t tell, the monster wouldn’t harm anyone else… He had promised…

Without fully thinking through his plan, Stiles ran to the kitchen door and scooped up his old baseball bat with one intention: to destroy the evidence. If he could just remove those pictures from existence, make it so the world could go back in time by mere minutes, to a place where Simon was a monster, always a monster, but just Stiles’… Because those photos were months old now and anything, anything, could have happened since then. It was all Stiles’ fault. If he had he just told John or Melissa…

Stiles gripped the bat tightly, the added weight in his hands grounded him some, enough to let the tears fall, blurring his vision. He had left to climb mountains and the monster had found new prey. He even teased Stiles and taunted him over it with meaningless threats. Meanwhile, Stiles stayed quiet, succumbed to the monster’s will, and by doing so this other little kid’s life was possibly ruined. Stiles could have stopped it, but didn’t— it was all his fault…

Stiles was a monster too.

That thought played on repeat in his head as he returned to his room, unsure of what to do next.

Then a loud snore interrupted his personal turmoil and Stiles paused with his free hand on the door handle leading to his bedroom. He turned his head slowly to stare at the sleeping figure in the armchair. Simon looked almost peaceful in his slumber, completely unaware of Stiles’ midnight revelations. He crossed the room in a few strides and gazed down at the man who had taken everything away from him.

Stiles swallowed thickly as he thought about just how much he had lost. Every memory of his childhood— of his mother— was tainted by the monster’s sheer existence. Stiles’ self-hatred and lack of worth all stemmed from what was done to him. He would never be enough, not for anyone, and certainly not for Derek, because so much of him was missing— broken.

“I should kill you,” Stiles whispered aloud. “I should kill you for what you’ve done to me, for breaking your promise. You don’t deserve to live.” He held the bat dangerously high, all it would take was a swing and he could end it, stop the first monster and turn himself in to cage the second.

Stiles’ arms were shaking. Just a simple downwards swing, he had done the motion countless times
while chopping wood. His heart beat loudly with the anticipation. It shouldn’t have been so difficult.

And yet it was.

Stiles dropped the bat and slumped in defeat. He couldn’t do it. He stared down the monster who haunted his nightmares and he was unable to go through with it. His whole body trembled while he sobbed over his inability to rectify the situation. It was his beast to put down, and he couldn’t do it.

Simon coughed a little in his sleep pulling Stiles’ attention back up. His stepfather had one eye winking open, staring at Stiles carefully. The man seemed to take in the gravity of the situation all at once as his eyes trailed from the bat on the floor, to his stepson, to his missing computer.

Before Simon could open his mouth to ask, Stiles demanded, “Where is your phone?”

“Phone?” Simon croaked out. “It’s the middle of the night, who would you call—”

“The police. I’m going to call the police, and they are going to arrest you,” Stiles cut him off in a surprisingly even tone, given his shakiness.

“Don’t be—” Simon coughed roughly, “don’t be ridiculous. Why would you do that, they’d never believe you.”

“Where is your phone?” Stiles repeated as he rose to a standing position once more.

“We have a deal and—”

“Deals off,” Stiles interrupted. “You broke your end of the bargain and now I’m going to break mine. Where is your phone?”

Simon laughed. He actually laughed in the face of Stiles’ newly found determination. “And why would I tell you that? Where is my computer? Your room?” He rasped out the questions as he rose unsteadily to his feet. He may have asked but Simon’s eyes lingered on Stiles’ bedroom door knowingly.
Stiles didn’t wait. He acted on impulse and took off for his room, scooping up the computer and darting back out of it before the older man could even hobble his way to the door.

“Hand it over,” Simon demanded.

Stiles didn’t respond as he ducked out of the way and towards the kitchen.

“Where will you go? You can’t escape me in this house, and your anklet stops you from leaving,” Simon taunted dangerously. “You’ll have more than just a bruised cheek by the time I’m through with you this time!”

Stiles paused at that, knowing he could outrun his stepfather given their current distance. All the same, he glanced at the bat on the floor and half wished he hadn’t left himself unarmed. “I have proof, years of proof,” Stiles stated calmly holding up the laptop. “I’ll probably run all the way to the station, if they don’t pick me up first.”

And with those parting words Stiles dashed off towards the kitchen door.

He didn’t make it more than four steps before a crashing sound from the living room had him cautiously turning back around. Simon must have pursued him as quickly as the older man was capable of and in doing so, he most likely tripped over Stiles’ discarded bat which was still rolling away in the opposite direction from the commotion. The side table broke Simon’s fall, glass lamp and all. It appeared to have been Simon’s head that took the brunt of the impact as he had several small cuts and scrapes marring one side of his face. The amount of blood was alarming however, surely due to his blood thinners.

Stiles froze for a second, torn between offering to call for help and his initial plan of just leaving. Suddenly he didn’t feel quite like running. Stiles was overwhelmed with the realization that he didn’t want to run ever again.

Simon was lucid enough as he looked up at Stiles with a dazed yet angry expression on his face.

“Where is the phone? I’ll call for an ambulance along with the police,” Stiles offered, preparing to keep with his first plan should Simon refuse to answer.
“Top—top drawer, with your mother’s belongings,” Simon rasped out. He seemed unable or unwilling to stand as he cautiously moved one hand to brace himself enough to sit up.

Stiles wouldn’t have believed it possible for his stepfather to deal another mind-altering blow after his discovery of the incriminating pornographic pictures on his laptop, but of course the monster never did fail to shock or disappoint.

Stiles’ mother’s belongings had dwindled pretty quickly after her death. Most were sold, some still lurked in the attic, and a small number of her most personal items found a home in the top drawer of her shared dresser with Simon. Her jewelry was stored in there along with other knickknacks that were valueless in nature, but sentimental to Simon, if not to Stiles.

Stiles had been forbidden from looking in the drawer shortly after he had been found crying over one of the few photos in there. Simon was uncharacteristically nice about it but had basically told him he’d keep the belongings safe for when he was older. Over the years it was made explicitly clear that the drawer was off limits, along with the room in general, not that Stiles had ever volunteered to go in there given some of the events that had taken place on that bed.

Keeping the laptop open and secured under one arm, Stiles entered his stepfather’s room, finding that the place had barely changed at all. His mother’s dresser was right where it had always been. Opening the top drawer however, was a different story. The older belongings of the drawer looked like they had long since been shoved together to make room for an array of cameras. An assortment of miniature and standard sized film equipment was stowed neatly, complete with replacement lenses. Simon’s phone was indeed among them. Stiles had no room left for surprises and felt the shock over the discovery leave him just as quickly as it came.

Instead, he fondly eyed the jewelry that had once belonged to his mother. He had nearly forgotten the pretty necklace she had worn on her wedding day; Stiles had fastened the clasp himself. This he knew to be true because of the photographic evidence of that event laid next to it. He let his fingers trail the white cuff of an off-brand watch he suddenly recalled she had worn almost daily before she started to get sick.

A gruff cry from the living room interrupted his trip down memory lane and without thinking too hard about it, Stiles pocketed the watch for later before pressing the emergency call button on Simon’s cell phone.

“Nine one one operator, what is your emergency?”

Stiles took a deep breath. “My stepfather has been sexually abusing me for years and I have proof,
As per the operator’s request, Stiles removed himself from the house to wait for the ambulance and police in the driveway while making sure he kept the laptop with him at all times. The police were initially skeptical of the entire situation. Simon’s shouts about how his stepson attacked him were surprisingly loud and since Stiles bruised cheek was fading, Simon certainly appeared to be the victim. The police argued with Stiles who tried to refuse being brought down to the station for questioning. Meanwhile, Simon was led cautiously out of the house and he was treated with care as he was placed gingerly on the gurney, with several EMTs fussing over removing glass and applying pressure on his cuts in turn.

Stiles had to fight to be heard over the demands that were being asked of him. The main one was for him to handover the computer.

“No, stop!” Stiles argued as an officer attempted for a second time to take the laptop from his hands. “He abused me! He— he raped me! I have proof, just look!”

Stiles held open the computer who’s screen still showed Joe’s little brother. Annoyed with himself, Stiles quickly closed that file and pulled up another one that showcased a much younger Stiles being pinned down during an indisputably graphic act. The cop dared to eye Stiles for a second before glancing back to the screen. Two of the EMTs who both snapped their heads in Stiles’ direction when he demanded they look quickly shot disapproving glances towards Simon. Their gentle hands turned more clinical in the glass removal process. The other officer took advantage of everyone’s stillness as she plucked the computer from Stiles’ grasp.

“As we were saying, please come with us to the station where you will get an opportunity to present your side of the story. We will, of course, be confiscating this laptop as evidence…”

Stiles dared himself to look up, to watch as Simon was rolled away, cuffed to the portable gurney. He seared everything about that moment into his memory.

Nearly twenty-two hours later, Stiles was sitting on a hard bench in the hall outside the
interrogation rooms with nothing to do. Sleep seemed like a foreign concept by this point and he wondered idly what it was he was supposed to feel. Should he feel vindicated or relieved? He mostly just felt wrung out, like he had been squeezed and twisted for information until he’d run dry. The questions were invasive and also not nearly enough, the officers kept saying things like ‘wait for a court appointed guardian’ or ‘ward of the state’ and they seemed wholly uninterested in Stiles’ request to contact John. Unimportant - if he had to give a name to what he was feeling at that moment, that would be it. He was thoroughly exhausted both in mind and body and unable to rectify that situation while he sat (possibly forgotten?) in the cold hall.

Stiles’ inner musings were interrupted when Mrs. Compella came out of one of the rooms, visible tear tracks on her face. She hesitated to do so but eventually she met Stiles’ eyes. It seemed like she was struggling with what to do internally and Stiles stayed quiet while he waited, unsure of what she would say, if anything at all.

A female detective followed her out of the room and paused as she seemed to understand the gravity of the situation.

“I can give you a minute, if you’d like,” she offered to Mrs. Compella. Stiles tensed, not sure if he really wanted to be left alone with the mother of the other child Simon had hurt.

“That’s— okay,” Joe’s mom replied slowly.

Stiles flinched on reflex, expecting her words to be sharper, accusatory.

“I have a few things I need to say, but you don’t have to give us privacy,” Mrs. Compella continued in that strangely soft tone, devoid of her usual higher pitch. “Thank you, Stiles, for coming forward. I’m— I’m positive that my sons haven’t endured any lasting damage. I’ve never left either one alone with him during our time together, but even still, knowing what he was thinking, what he was planning— seeing those— pictures of my little boy… I can’t thank you enough for saving him. And, I’m sorry,” her breath hitched on the word. “I— I never left my sons with him, but I did leave you, I— I wasn’t there for you when you were a child, and worse, I sent you to live with him again once you were safely out of his reach.”

Stiles wasn’t sure what to say. He had never seen Joe’s mother cry, not even at his own mom’s funeral. It was surreal.

“I don’t expect you to forgive me,” she whispered. “I just want you to know, that I am truly sorry.” With those words she nodded at the detective who continued to escort Mrs. Compella out of the station.
Stiles didn’t have long to dwell on Mrs. Compella’s apology because he was suddenly asked to come with yet another officer. During his interviews he had talked with a handful of different detectives, including Detective Wilton, and even a child psychologist who was very obviously called in given the state of the situation. Everyone was—nice, if a little distant, but none of them had Melissa’s warmth or John’s ability to naturally probe a response from Stiles’ mind. But regardless, Stiles had tried to be cooperative and answer questions honestly while withholding his own personal distaste over the matter. He did feel like he was being bounced from one agent to the next and it was because of that, that he snapped at the uniformed officer as he stood.

“Where am I going this time?” Stiles questioned a tad aggressively.

“I’m taking you home, kid,” came the young man’s reply, causing Stiles to raise a brow in surprise.

The police cruiser pulled up to a large old home which stood out from its’ neighbors due to the broken fence and flickering porch light. The officer left Stiles locked in the back seat of the squad car while he knocked on the front door. An elderly lady answered after the third attempt. Stiles didn’t blame her, it was a little past one in the morning after all. The two seemed to talk for a while.

Eventually, the officer came to let Stiles out. “You’re staying here for a few days at least, until the system can find a more permanent home for you,” the young man explained.

“But I have a home!” Stiles protested. “Why can’t I just go back to school?”

“Look kid, I don’t make the rules, alright?” The officer said automatically. “You’re what fifteen? No parent or guardian? This is a boy’s home. It’s my understanding that you won’t be here for long, at least. I think they have a more permanent foster house for first time residence but if you mess up, you’ll be right back here, so pay attention, learn the rules, and make the most of it. Do me a favor and stay out of trouble and none of us will have to make this trip in the middle of the night again, alright?”

Stiles stared at the man in confusion. What was he talking about? Stiles didn’t do anything wrong, well—this time. Why couldn’t he go home? He didn’t even have any clothes or belongings! And what was this talk of a foster home? Why couldn’t he just go back to Beacon of Hope?
Up close the older lady was definitely younger than she had first appeared. Her face was drawn and covered with premature wrinkles. She was even less informative than the police officer, choosing to go over house rules rather than explain anything.

“Currently I only have three other young men staying here but I’m certified to house up to six of you at a time,” she paused at the top of the stairwell. “That would be three in each room, but right now I’m going to place you in Theo’s room. He’s been with me the longest, so if you have any questions you should ask him in the morning. I’ll be around at eight o’clock to unlock the door.” As she said this, she pulled out a long, old fashion silver key. “I keep the windows locked too, so don’t even try them,” she added as she saw the look of incredulity Stiles gave her over realizing he was about to be locked in this room. “Just can’t trust you guys,” she said knowingly.

Stiles’ protests were stuck in his throat and before he knew it, he was staring at a closed and locked door with no one to complain to. He turned around and took in the small bedroom. A set of bunk beds took up the expanse of one wall and a third occupied bed sat adjacent. There was a shabby and carved up desk that sat under a tiny window with a padlock. There was no chair, not that there would have been much room for one anyway. The small closet appeared to already be occupied with someone else’s belongings, so it was probably for the best that Stiles didn’t have any of his own.

Feeling a little bit defeated, given the circumstances of his night, Stiles sat down on the bottom bunk staring out the window. The moon was already on its descent now, and he idly wondered if he should even attempt to sleep. He pulled his mom’s watch from his pocket, thinking back to hours before when he had snagged it from her belongings. What would happen to all her stuff? His things? How long would Simon be in jail? Stiles glanced at the window that surprisingly wasn’t barred and wondered how long he’d be locked up too.

“You’re so lucky I’m back already,” a threatening voice said.

Stiles’ head snapped around and he came face to face with his new roommate, Theo. The boy looked about Stiles’ age, maybe a little older, with impressively styled hair for someone who was supposedly sleeping just a minute ago. He didn’t say anything.

Theo kicked off his blanket revealing jeans and a collared shirt. He stood up and dug through his back pocket to pull out a pack of cigarettes.

“What’s your story? Do you smoke?” Theo asked as he crossed the room and entered a code on the padlock to open the window. He sat on the desk and eyed Stiles suspiciously. “Do you want a smoke?”
Stiles shook his head, still unsure of the new guy.

Theo blew out a puff of smoke before continuing. “You can speak right? God, they had this mute kid in here once, and it was so annoying. He’d like, have to write stuff down and we’d have to read it while he refused to speak. I don’t have time for that shit, you know.”

“My name’s Stiles,” Stiles said hesitantly. “You’re Theo, right?”

“So, Anne told you about me then. Did she mention that I’ve been here a time or two, pretty much a permanent member of the household now,” Theo took another drag of his cigarette. “Where’s your crap?”

“Don’t have any, I guess,” Stiles said.

“Ah new to the foster system? You’ve got to keep a go bag ready, especially if you’re in the bouncing from house to house stage,” Theo replied knowingly. Then his eyes narrowed, “What’s that?”

Stiles was still holding his mother’s watch and on instinct he pulled it out of the stranger’s view. “It’s nothing, just my mom’s old watch.”

Theo’s face softened just a bit. “Orphan then? My parents are in jail, personally. One is serving a life sentence, the other child endangerment, so she won’t be able to get me back even when she is out… ”

Stiles wasn’t sure if he was supposed to find this news intriguing or not, but Theo seemed to fall in on himself a bit when he didn’t start asking questions.

“I’m tired,” Stiles said instead. “I’m going to bed.”

Theo’s expression darkened rather quickly after that. “Let’s get a few things clear, I’m the boss here, you’ll go to bed when I say so, not the other way around. You came crashing in here tonight, if I wasn’t back yet, and Anne discovered me missing again? It took me nearly six months to figure out the new code on the pad lock after last time!”
Stiles ignored the empty threat and pulled the covers over himself, idly hoping they were washed since the last occupant had slept in the bed.

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It was the seventh time that day that Derek had stopped by the office to see if either his uncle or sister had returned his call yet. He decided on Monday, once answers from Melissa were short on information and John’s presence was wholly lacking, that he would reach out to his family for help.

He had complained on numerous occasions to both about being sent to Beacon of Hope and had begged for either to pick him up for weeks after he’d first arrived. That was over a year ago, so his renewed pleas were at least gaining Laura’s attention, especially after she had received his two-page handwritten letter in the mail on Tuesday. She had promised to call him back as she was working with her own lawyers on his custody case now. What she didn’t understand was her brother’s insistence that she help this other student out as well. Derek was frustrated with having to explain everything again.

He requested that they talk in person instead and was still waiting to hear back from her. He didn’t even ask Melissa if that could be arranged. Either way, one thing he knew for certain was that he couldn’t stay at this school if they refused to help Stiles. And if no one was going to do something about it, he was going to go to Tampa and save Stiles himself, Lydia’s half-hearted request for him to move on be damned.

Stiles had officially been home and living with that monster for a week now. That was a hundred and sixty-seven hours too many, if you asked Derek. His anger over everyone seemingly not doing enough was spreading to the rest of the students too. Wednesday nights group session was just as silent as Sundays, resorting in all of Melissa’s students losing out on their media room rights for a second time. He didn’t care. Derek was still calling Laura and Peter every chance he could.

Nothing was more important than getting Stiles back, why did it seem like no one else understood that fact?

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As promised, Stiles was let free at eight in the morning. The knock on the door was jarring and he felt like he had barely slept at all.
Anne liked structure. She was also paranoid about the boy’s leaving her sight, so she preferred to supervise. She liked supervised structure. As it was Saturday and they didn’t have school, they had chores to do in the morning.

Then they were given free time, in that they were free to sit in the living room together where Anne could keep an eye on all of them at the same time. The entertainment center housed an old Nintendo Wii, but the power cord was missing, so the boys, Theo, Shawn, Marshal and Stiles, sat quietly and watched what Theo wanted to see on the cracked television screen. They were supposed to be taking turns picking the program, but after watching both Shawn and Marshal relinquish their choice, Stiles figured he was expected to do the same. Theo liked Ridiculousness, and while the first thirty minutes managed to squeeze the occasional chuckle from Stiles, he could only take the stupidity for so long before he found the program repetitive and boring.

As a result, he was completely zoned out and missed the knock on the door. Anne had answered and returned to the room followed by Detective Wilton. This garnered everyone’s attentiveness, except for Stiles who was still staring unseeingly at the TV screen.

Theo kicked him painfully to get his attention. Stiles jumped, taking in the room’s added occupant.

“I was saying that I’m going to escort you back to that school, your case worker has already revoked the house arrest sentence, and while your custody is up for debate, you’ll be allowed to stay there. They have some students who are permanent residence, I think that’s their plan for you as well,” the detective said briskly. “Are—are you wearing the same thing as you were yesterday?”

“I don’t have a change of clothes here,” Stiles admitted annoyed. The rest of the detective’s words hadn’t fully registered yet.

“Wait! What school?” Theo asked. “He just got here!”

“Some mountain school, what’s it called?” Wilton addressed the question to Stiles.

“Beacon of Hope!” Stiles exclaimed, his hope rising with each word. “Really?”

“Yes, but suppose we’ll stop by your old house first, because you had a whole suitcase last time.”
“What? Where is this school? Why does the new guy get to go? He just got here! He didn’t even have a go bag ready, he’s so new to the system!” Theo protested.

“Judge ruled on it months ago, he was a repeated runaway,” The detective replied giving the impression that the questions would end there.

Anne had a few more, however, regarding her payment, stating that she technically housed Stiles for two days and wanted credit for both. Shawn and Marshal wished Stiles good luck, and Stiles stood ready to leave, not having anything to go and get of his own.

He was nearly near the door when a cry of outrage stopped him.

“Wait! My watch! My watch is missing!” Theo shouted in a panic. “I— I think Stiles stole it, I saw him looking at it this morning. Please Anne, you have to stop them!”

“I didn’t steal anything!” Stiles was quick to defend himself. “I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“It’s white, it was my mother’s!” Theo continued the charade. “Look in his pockets!”

Stiles felt the color drain from his face. Not his mom’s watch, he had just gotten it back! After everything that had happened in the last forty-eight hours, there was no way he was going to lose it now, to this foster kid with issues.

Anne looked between the boys. “Turn out your pockets ah— Stiles.”

Stiles couldn’t believe it, this woman who barely remembered his name would never side with him. He refused.

The detective was looking annoyed. “Do it,” he ordered.

Stiles looked between both adults before he begrudgingly pulled the watch out of his pocket.
“It was my Mom’s,” he said bitterly. “Not Theo’s.”

“Give it back,” Anne ordered, exasperated. “These boys are all the same,” she added to Detective Wilton, “little thieves and hooligans, the lot of them.”

Stiles refused to hand over the watch, so Theo plucked it out of his hand with a triumphant smile.

If he hadn’t spent so much of the last few days crying, Stiles was sure he would have shed a tear or two as he was steered out of the house and towards the unmarked car. As it was, the best he could do was rub his forehead somberly in an attempt to stifle the headache he was sure was coming.

Stiles was awoken when the plane landed.

Detective Wilton didn’t have much to say on the drive from the airport to Beacon of Hope and Stiles hadn’t forgiven the man anyway. So they drove in silence, forgoing even the radio. Stiles sat in the back seat watching the trees flicker past. He recalled his trepidation and lingering hope from the last time he had made this drive, when Simon had been reluctantly delivering Stiles to the school. Back then the anticipation was building as they climbed in altitude. This time, however, it didn’t seem real.

Stiles half thought that perhaps he had finally lost it, that this was all some elaborate dream. Maybe he would wake up and find himself back in that stranger’s bed at Anne’s group home. Or perhaps he’d come to and realized that Simon had caught up with him and he had dreamt up everything, that he was really just suffering from taking the baseball bat to the back of his head.

Stiles rubbed his head just in case. He even looked at his fingers afterwards to make sure they weren’t coated in blood that his self-consciousness was stopping him from feeling. Just for a final measure to put to rest the idea that this wasn’t just a dream, Stiles counted his fingers, having had heard that you had extra fingers, more than ten, in your dreams on some teen drama he had watched long ago.

Ten fingers, they were all there. Then the car rolled to a stop and Stiles peered out timidly at the cabins that formed Beacon of Hope. A place he had thought for sure he would never see again.
It was dinner time. Stiles knew because the grounds were nearly deserted. A light in the office, however told him that someone, probably John, was still working. Detective Wilton didn’t wait for an invitation as he walked up the front steps, a large folder in hand.

No one greeted them at the desk and John’s office door was closed. Wilton knocked and then knocked again before a disheveled John appeared. He took one look at the detective before his eyes slid past and rested on Stiles. John half limped, half ran to engulf his former student in a hug.

“What did you do to yourself?” Stiles asked into the counselor’s shoulder from his tight embrace. “You look awful.”

“Losing a student will do that to you, you know,” John replied easily. “We missed you, Stiles, glad to have you back.” He didn’t wait a beat before he picked up the radio on his hip and called for Melissa to come immediately.

“That’s cruel!” Stiles chastised. “Tell her it’s not an emergency.”

“But it is!” Melissa called from the opened front door. “I have a student who I haven’t been able to see for an entire week and that is what I call an emergency! I saw the car pull in,” she answered John’s unasked question. Melissa encircled Stiles in a hug of her own.

“You are so incredibly warm,” Stiles mumbled.

“Let me get a good look at you.” Melissa pulled back a little but refused to let go of her hold completely. “This bruise?”

“Days old, and healing,” Stiles answered. “Other than that, I’m fine. I promise.”

“You are not fine,” Melissa said sternly, “But there will be plenty of time for that later, first let’s get you fed, and to see the others, and then I’ll take care of your physical. Oh Stiles! I’m so sorry we let them take you away, and I’m so happy you’re back.”

Detective Wilton cleared his throat, clearly over the welcoming and wanting to move on.
“Right,” John said knowingly, “the paperwork. I’ll handle that, Stiles you go with Melissa.” He sent the student one last fond look before inviting Wilton into his office.

The mess hall was busy as it always was during a meal time and Melissa’s group usually sat at the table that was along the back wall, so it wasn’t surprising that none of them noticed Melissa or Stiles enter. Lydia spied the pair first with her keen eyes. Erica took in Lydia’s open-mouthed expression and quickly snapped her head around to spot Stiles. Her shriek of giddiness was enough to alert the rest of the table, everyone except Derek who somberly poked at his food and seemed completely oblivious to what was going on around him. Scott and Kira even jumped up from their seats to greet Stiles without Derek so much as glancing up.

Everyone quickly welcomed Stiles back; a head nod from Jackson to Kira’s attempt to pick him up and spin him, which worked much more than Stiles would care to admit. A moment later and the group grew silent all waiting in anticipation for Derek to catch on to what everyone was saying around him.

It was the quietness that alerted Derek to the fact that something was up.

Slowly he raised his head and came face to face with Stiles, who held Allison in a sideways hug while staring intently back at Derek.

Derek sprung out of his seat so quickly it tumbled back, gathering the attention of most of the rest of the room. Several shouts of ‘Stiles!’ were heard after that but Stiles himself tuned it all out as he only had eyes and ears for the boy running towards him.

Derek reached straight for Stiles’ face, as if he had to check to see if he was real. He caressed both of Stiles’ cheeks, one thumb slowly circling the bruise beneath it.

“It’s really you?” Derek questioned, breathlessly.

“It’s m—” Stiles attempted to reply but he was cut off as Derek swallowed his response in a kiss. Nearly the entire room erupted over the action, but Stiles didn’t care and neither did Derek as he continued kissing Stiles senseless. Not even Melissa’s warning was enough to break the two of them up.

Oddly enough it was Finstock’s cry of, “Stiles! You missed the last game, you owe me twenty
laps!” That got the two to stop and breathe.

Stiles beamed at the room around him. “I’ll come early to practice tomorrow, Coach!” He called out before Derek took Stiles’ hand and led him back to the table he hadn’t even realized he had missed. Boyd and Isaac both moved down a space giving Stiles the center and the group continued with dinner, not even questioning it when Melissa joined them.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Edited by fairyfey July 2019. I owe you all and fairyfey an apology for how long it’s taken me to post the last three edited chapters they have been done for months and for making you all wait, I’m sorry.

Big thank you to supernatural_lover01 who gave me the push to not give up on this even though I sort of desperately wanted to. Back in January I had some iPad issues and lost my first draft of this chapter. I also lost the final chapter which was only 6k or so and is pretty clear in my mind so neither one of those were all too troublesome. But I lost several Sterek fic outlines, including everything I’ve written for this sequel. It had love triangles and jealousy and uggg I’m just so upset that it’s gone. It won’t keep me down for good, but it definitely had me shying away from Microsoft word as I was so disappointed... but ehh that’s life. Side note, I’m not a fan— at all of the touch screen on my new iPad, it’s like a nightmare for typing. The number of (the)s that have been shortened to (he) is ridiculous, so sorry about the greater than usual typos from here on out.

Episode 18

Closing his eyes did nothing to mitigate the pulsating throbbing in John’s head. He had spent so much of the last week hauled up in his office that just sitting under the gazebo in the bright sunlight while listening to the constant chatter from his students was becoming too much too quickly. Marin was patient with him however, and had already shifted her scheduled activities around so that John could attend this group session. It was important for him to be there. Her students were due to graduate in two month’s time, and these last few counseling sessions were key in insuring their success during the transition back into the real world. They would soon be faced with temptations and influences from their past and it was important for them to form a solid foundation under their feet prior to making that leap.

John had said on multiple occasions that the most important counseling session would be their last and he meant it for more than just sentimental reasons. Knowing all of that however, did little to help him focus on what the young ladies in front of him were actually talking about. He knew
some had mentioned their ideal college location and a few were planning on taking the military route instead, but truthfully all he could concentrate on was the pounding taking place in the region of his brain that sat just behind his eyeballs.

He must have done a worse job at hiding his discomfort than he realized because suddenly a cool hand was placed across his forehead. John blinked his eyes open to see a very concerned Marin staring back at him.

“Are you feeling alright?” She asked hesitantly. “You’re not clammy, want me to call Melissa and have her work her nursing magic on you?”

“No, no I’m fine,” John replied instantly. “Why don’t you all finish up without me and I’ll join in on next week’s session, promise?” He didn’t wait for a response as he stood.

Marin agreed readily and a few of the students wished him well as John trotted off towards his office. On impulse he patted his pants pocket as he walked, looking for that familiar rattle, but unfortunately the refilled prescription bottle was left in his desk drawer. Just knowing he would soon get relief from the migraine from hell was enough to put a smile back on his face.

“Oh good!” A voice called as John rounded the corner, mere feet from the confines of the office walls. “I was hoping I would catch you now, since I missed you during breakfast. I— I was um, thinking we could talk while some things are still fresh in my mind. I uh— I actually have some questions too, about what will happen now. I wrote them all down.”

Stiles was standing there in his typical plaid over-shirt, holding up a notebook that appeared to be covered in his minuscule handwriting. The page held more than just a few questions and was that a venn diagram? That would surely take some time to go through. John sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He wanted to say no, to run to his office and take one of the pills that would undoubtedly put an end to the pounding in his head, but how could he? Stiles looked timid about his request as it was and if John refused him now, it very well might set him back even further.

Unable to stand the sunlight for a moment longer, John flung open the door and rushed inside. It wasn’t until he was all the way in his office that he realized Stiles hadn’t followed him. Annoyed that his student hadn’t taken the initiative to come in on his own, he called out, “What are you waiting for?”

Stiles hesitantly entered the room, glancing at the light switch that John had purposely left off, before he made his way to sit on one of the chairs. John waved for him to talk while he fished through his desk drawer, looking for the pill bottle. Once he found it, he opened it quickly and
popped a pill into his mouth without even considering that Stiles was watching his actions as he spoke.

“— And I talk to their psychologist while I was there, He was okay but he didn’t have any real answers for me either, and the number of times I was told I would need a parent or guardian present while I was just trying to make my statement was ridiculous. Like I was trying to tell them the actual crimes my stepfather committed, I’ve looked it all up and gave them counts and everything and it seemed like whenever I said anything of that nature the detectives would look at each other and ask if that information could be used in the court of law. I don’t get it, why wouldn’t it be? I’ll testify, I’ll do anything— as long as they keep that bastard in jail!”

John opened his eyes and saw the eagerness in Stiles’ features. A wave of relief washed over him again for simply being able to have him here. Truthfully, they were very lucky Stiles’ caseworker even allowed his return at all. It was one thing for him to be court-appointed to Beacon of Hope as a punishment in his running away hearing, Florida and other states have used the school as a way to deter troubled youths from continuing a lifetime of crime for years now. It was another thing entirely for the state to send him here just to keep him out of the foster care system. According to Detective Wilton, his custody was still questionable. The only thing that was certain was that Simon’s right would be terminated. Simon had legally adopted Stiles when he had married Stiles’ mom. John wasn’t sure if Stiles was even aware of that fact, but for all intents and purposes Stiles was an orphan now. John had become the court appointed guardian for several of his students over the years and he instantly thought of Isaac and how one of the officers involved in that case had recommended his school as an alternative for him given how easily frightened the boy was when he woke up in the hospital. That case was far simpler, with Isaac’s maternal aunt agreeing with the placement almost right away.

In the last twenty-four hours, the folder in John’s cabinet under Stiles’ name had quadrupled in size. John had actually spent most of the night re-reading all the legal jargon Wilton had left him. Stiles’ stay here was temporary at best while they hunted down any remaining family members and if that couldn’t happen, if he was to become a permanent ward of the state of Florida, would they send him back into the foster care system? It was a definite possibility. One thing that was certain was the fact that John wasn’t getting paid enough to act as lawyer and caretaker in this particular case, that was for sure. But Stiles was worth it, they were all worth it. John flinched guiltily as he needed that mental reminder as he tried to pay attention to Stiles’ mounting concerns.

Stiles must have picked up on John’s inability to follow along with what he was saying because he allowed his sentence to taper off and shot John a quizzical look.

“I used to be a cop, Stiles, you know that right?” John asked as he leaned back in his chair while rubbing a temple with one of his hands. “Do you mind if I talk candidly with you? From the law’s perspective?”
Stiles nodded quickly.

“Good,” John continued. “You’re smart and I’m sure you’ll understand most of the legal jargon. Every explicit photo on that laptop is a separate count of owning and distributing child pornography. Every photo they can prove he was in will be a further charge for child molestation. Including other charges of child endangerment or — worse, and he will be locked away for a long time. The amount of distribution and the fact that these were source photos means this case will undoubtedly be handled on a federal level. In cases like this where the defendant is obviously guilty, a plea deal is typically offered. His lawyer will most likely take it to avoid going to court. Even with a plea, I wouldn’t be surprised if Simon was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole, all of that without your testimony.”

“But what if— what if I want to testify?” Stiles interrupted, looking panic stricken over hearing that. “I just— I want them all to know — I feel like he should know — that what he did to me didn’t break me— even if it did. I just don’t want him to think that he won, in any way. And what do you mean by distribution? Is there— is there proof of that? Am I all over the internet?” The last word was said with a faint squeak.

John sighed heavily and to his horror, Stiles flinched back at that and straightened up.

“I’m sorry,” Stiles rushed out, before John could say anything at all. “I shouldn’t complain— not to you anyway, it’s not your fault, maybe if I had said something sooner, before I was sent back there —”

“Stiles, none of this is your fault, okay, none of it!” John replied quickly. “The official charges haven’t been released yet, but we will keep you informed, and we can arrange for your testimony, too. The prosecution can argue on your behalf and ensure your voice is heard before any deals are offered. I’ll speak with Detective Wilton today and make sure it is clear that you want to be involved and we will do whatever we have to to make that happen.”

Stiles still looked doubtful.

“Did you have any—”

“Are you okay?” Stiles blurted out. “It’s just that— yesterday you looked like you hadn’t slept in a week and today you’re rubbing your head a lot and—” Stiles let the sentence trail off, but his eyes flicked to John’s desk.
John didn’t have time to register the genuine concern he was receiving from Stiles, as a knock on his door grabbed his attention first. The pounding in his head was just beginning to dissipate but it seemed like the knocking renewed the headache’s effort.

“John! Are you in there? Marin said—”

“Mel, come in,” John replied, scrunching up his face in the process.

Melissa opened the door and was visibly surprised to see Stiles sitting there in the dark too. Stiles, for his part, held up his notebook and pen but remained quiet as the two counselors greeted each other.

“Marin said she thought that maybe you were coming down with something.” Melissa finally concluded her sentence as she too placed a hand on John’s forehead.

John ducked away from the contact however and mumbled that he had taken a Tylenol already, sending a pointed look towards Stiles, hoping that perhaps that would ease the fear he saw steadily growing in the student’s eyes. It didn’t. If anything, he was sure Stiles had picked up on the lie instantly from the way his features morphed into that of someone who was seconds away from saying something accusatory. Melissa didn’t pick up on any of the nonverbal conversation and instead continued to fuss over John in a motherly fashion.

“I just need to get some rest,” John snapped eventually causing Melissa to freeze in her attempt to stick a thermometer into his mouth. “I’m sorry,” he quickly amended. “I’m fine though, just operating with no sleep and a pounding headache, you know how it is.”

Melissa seemed hesitant to agree but nodded slowly. “Well, I should let you two be. Stiles, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” she added to her student, a little crestfallen.

“No, it’s okay,” Stiles said as he stood. “If you’re not feeling well, I’ll bug you about the legal stuff another time. Get some rest, John.”

Before John could form a response the two slid out of his office, shutting the door with a soft click. He knew he should have felt guilty for lying about what medicine he had taken. He should have felt badly about pushing Melissa away and snapping at her—again. He definitely shouldn’t have let Stiles leave when he was still so confused and uncertain. But the silence he obtained by sitting there in the quiet room was golden and a part of him was quite relieved to be alone so he could bask in it.
Then his phone rang and without thinking about the consequences he snatched it up and briskly asked, “What?”. Which was followed quickly by yet another apology, this time to Deucalion.

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Derek found Stiles and Melissa talking animatedly with one another on the front steps of the office. He didn’t want to interrupt, he really didn’t, especially because Stiles was writing down everything Melissa was saying as if he was interviewing her for a school report or something, but he couldn’t help it as his feet carried him closer. Melissa was the first to notice his shadow and looked up to wave him over.

“Take a seat, Derek,” she called. “Stiles is just brushing up for the bar exam, which I wholly expect you to be taking in say six or so years,” she added with a teasing glint to Stiles while tapping on his notebook for emphasis.

“Am I interrupting?” Derek questioned, hesitantly.

Melissa turned to Stiles for his answer.

“No, no it’s fine. I was just curious about, well— about a lot of stuff really, now that I finally had a decent night of sleep,” Stiles told them both. “Thank you, Melissa.”

Melissa must have taken that as her dismissal because she stood, offering Derek her spot. “We have a group counseling session tonight at seven in the commons, don’t be late. And, Stiles, if it’s okay with you I’d like to have a real discussion about how you’re feeling afterwards. I’m happy to answer all these questions for you but I’d like to know a little more of what’s going on in that mind of yours as well. We can even go down to the lake dock if you like; rumor has it that the fish miss you!”

Stiles nodded, looking a tad less sure of himself than he did just moments before. It was enough for Melissa, however, as she bid her adieu before she jogged off towards the running trail.

Derek sat. It was incredibly frustrating that he was here again in this world of uncertainty, not knowing what Stiles was thinking or feeling. He peered at the younger teen curiously. Stiles’ gaze didn’t quite meet his eyes.
“I know we all said it yesterday, but I really am glad you’re back… So, what happened exactly?” Derek decided he’d cut straight to the heart of the matter.

“You guys don’t know?” Stiles queried. “I just figured since the counselors definitely seem to, that you all knew what had happened too.”

“I don’t know anything. The rest didn’t even know why Melissa, John, and I were so upset that you were sent home to begin with, besides well—you obviously not wanting to go. Except for maybe Lydia, she might have guessed correctly, she’s really smart and was seriously mad at the counselors…”

“You didn’t tell them?” Stiles questioned. “I thought you—I don’t know what to think.”

“I told John and Melissa and sort of Chris too, but I had to! I couldn’t let you stay in that house with him. And then John started spending all his time in his office and Melissa had these perpetually red-rimmed eyes and neither one of them said anything about what was going on with you. So I called my uncle and my sister and asked them both to go rescue you, too.”

Stiles was staring at Derek with an opened mouth expression. “I’m—I’m fine,” he said eventually. “They umm, they arrested my stepdad. I found these photos,” he grimaced, “and I called the cops myself, actually.”

Stiles said it so plainly, but Derek knew that that wasn’t an easy feat.

“So, he’s in jail and you’re staying here?”

“Yeah, John seems pretty confident he won’t ever get out, and I guess I’m here for now,” Stiles shrugged. “I can’t wait until I’m eighteen and I can just make these decisions for myself, you know. Like, I’ve pretty much been on my own since my mom died, making adult choices everyday, but according to the law I can’t choose anything for myself! I can’t even testify without a guardian’s approval first!”

Derek shuddered at the memory of his VATE recording. If given the choice, he would not do that again. But he supposed it was different for Stiles, he could see it in the fury that flared deep in his amber eyes. And, he knew then, that the fight that was building within Stiles wouldn’t ever be squashed so readily again. Something had changed in the core of Stiles’ soul, he had been freed.
from the monster, from the burden of his secrets, and he was a different person because of it.

“Are you okay?” Derek asked eventually as he continued to admire Stiles’ tenacity.

“I’m fi— I will be,” Stiles answered honestly. “Are you?”

“Yeah.” Derek found himself unable to reply without a smile creeping across his usually stoic features. “Now that you’re back— and safe.” He knocked their knees together. “Did you see that they found Kate guilty? On Tuesday. It was one of the reasons I was allowed to call Peter, even though we all lost our media room privileges…”

Stiles hadn’t heard, so Derek told him all about the lackluster response from his uncle. Laura was apparently in the courtroom when the verdict had been delivered and was interviewed on the steps of the courthouse immediately afterwards. Melissa had let Derek watch the newscast, gripping his shoulder tightly as the two saw his sister’s emotional declaration that justice had been served. At the time, Derek was numb to the proceedings and was just categorizing all the differences in Laura’s appearance. She looked older, wiser, —harder than he remembered. He paused after relating all of this and Stiles seemed to understand, as he didn’t push or question any further.

Eventually Stiles asked about what else he had missed in his absence. Derek was grateful for the change in topic. He went on to tell Stiles about all the trivial things that had happened over the past week at Beacon of Hope. The juniors were gearing up to take their first college placement tests the very next day, and the lacrosse team had lost their game although the basketball team had won their third straight one in a row. Allison was caught sneaking into the boy’s dorm by her father of all people, and Isaac was now worried he’d fail English. He told Stiles about his solo trip and the photo of his family as well as what the other students had received.

“It’s supposed to be a secret I guess so, um I don’t know, maybe don’t broadcast that you know.” Derek tagged on as an afterthought. “What about you? What else happened at your stepdad’s? How’d you get that bruise?”

Stiles blanched and then took a deep breath and spoke. He told Derek about the night he had called John and Melissa and how it ended with him locked in a bathroom, terrified and alone. Derek found himself leaning towards the mark unconsciously wanting to wipe it away, but Stiles kept going, saying that he had to cook and clean and do everything for the monster and meanwhile Simon got handsy with him whenever he could reach. It turned Derek’s stomach just thinking about it.

“I had to give him medicine, you know because he was recovering from having a stint put in his
heart or whatever and it was my responsibility,” Stiles paused, “I wanted to— I wanted to kill him. I could have so easily, just given him too much or not enough or something— I thought about it a lot actually…” The admission was whispered with terrified eyes boring into Derek’s, looking for understanding, reassurance, or even just acknowledgement.

Derek gulped. He was pretty certain he’d never hated anyone more than he did Stiles’ stepfather, not even Kate. “I would have,” he said at last. “I can’t believe they expected you to just comply and take care of that— that asshole! I don’t know how you did it— I probably would have killed him on the first night, refused to give him his pills…”

Stiles offered a weak smile at that. “Do you think— is there something wrong with me, that I thought about it? Or maybe because I didn’t do it, that I just let him— let him have his way with me…”

“No,” Derek said the one word response with such finality that Stiles sat up a little straighter. “You did what you had to— to survive, to— come back here— to me,” he added faintly. “I mean, I know this school has it’s fair share of troubled youths and all, but— had you done that, I doubt they would’ve let you come back…”

Stiles whole being melted into Derek’s side at those words, the tension seemed to dissipate immediately. “Thanks,” he said plainly.

The pair sat in amicable silence for a while after that, before it was interrupted by Boyd and Erica who seemed surprised to see the two of them blocking the entrance to the front office.

“I figured you guys would be off making out in the woods or whatever it is that you guys do out there,” Erica said as she approached.

“We don’t make out!” Stiles quickly shot back, his cheeks turning a slight shade pinker. “Derek’s not even sure if—”

“You certainly did yesterday.” Erica cut him off with a knowing smirk.

“We’re here for John,” Boyd quickly interjected, having clearly picked up on how uncomfortable Derek felt. “Well actually, I’m here for John but my meetings usually go quickly so Erica came too, is he in there?” He eyed the dark windows doubtfully.
Stiles visibly tensed next to Derek. “He’s in his office, but uh, I don’t think he’s feeling well. Maybe you should ask Melissa first,” he suggested.

“Oh,” Boyd considered this. “Yeah he has been kind of absent lately, canceled a few of his classes even. I guess I’ll go talk to Mel—”

“Nonsense,” Erica said with a wave of her hand as she strode past the boys on the steps. “He always has time for us! If he has the flu or something we can just make sure to wash our hands afterwards.”

Boyd and Erica disappeared into the office doors only to re-emerge ten minutes later.

“Oh, yeah,” Erica concluded. “He is definitely not feeling well.”

“You shouldn’t have woken him up!” Boyd chastised.

“It wasn’t good for him to have fallen asleep with his neck at that angle,” she countered. “He’ll get over it. So, do you guys know where we can find Melissa?”

Derek and Stiles both pointed in the direction their counselor had disappeared in.

“What was that about?” Derek asked absentmindedly once Boyd’s and Erica’s backs rounded the corner.

Stiles didn’t respond as he was too busy chewing his bottom lip nervously.

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Aside from his growing worry over the head counselor, Stiles fell back into the mountain school life seamlessly. After spending most of his Sunday morning getting some much needed reassurance from Melissa and subsequently Derek, he dropped a pile of books on the picnic table next to Lydia. The strawberry-blond didn’t even bat an eye as she started going over everything he had missed academically. It was— nice. She didn’t poke or prod him for information. As a matter of fact, aside
from the occasional explanation of an equation nothing could be heard apart from the scratching of pencils on paper. This continued until it was time for lacrosse practice and as promised, Stiles arrived early.

Coach seemed to think that Stiles’ absence was the sole reason behind their defeat last week and now that they had a complete team again, they would fare much better in their upcoming game. That logic was flawed tremendously however because Stiles wasn’t first string, he wasn’t even second string, he was mostly used for tackle practice. Today, however, Stiles found he had a lot of pent up aggression and side-checking his classmates was a surprisingly fun way to get it all out. The morale of the team seemed high towards the end of practice and Stiles and Scott walked off the field together, both sweaty and sticky and enthusiastically dreaming up the looks of disappointment they were expecting to see on the Davenport lacrosse team’s faces. Scott even admitted that he was a little sad that Liam would miss it.

All in all, Stiles felt—normal. His conversation with Derek had gotten a tad more emotional than he would have liked but other than that it was as if he had never left. His towel and toiletries were still in the same cubby hole in the boy’s dormitory bathroom. Scott took the far left shower stall as he always did after practice and Stiles grabbed the one next to him. The water, while hot, never did get to the proper scolding level that Stiles’ preferred but he was used to that, it was expected — routine. Seven days had past and yet everything was still just the same.

Or was it?

Stiles glanced a look at himself in the foggy mirror after his shower. Instantly he was transported back in time to just a few days prior when he locked himself in Simon’s bathroom. Stiles watched as the smile fell off his own face to be replaced by something more haunted. Try as he might to ignore his past, it would always be there, a part of him that he would never escape. He saw it in his reflection; those scared round eyes; eyes that possibly countless others had paid to see cry. It was a chilly realization. As he continued to look at himself, he tilted his chin up, and chose to own it. His past was there and always would be, but it was also his past, no longer his present and certainly not his future.

“Come on Stiles! We’re on serving duty, didn’t you check the chart?” Scott yelled for his friend to hurry up, causing Stiles to blink away any reservations.

Stiles swallowed thickly as he pulled a shirt over his head, the action forced him to break eye contact with himself. “I’m coming!” He yelled, nearly tripping over his jeans as he pulled them on while exiting the bathroom at the same time.

A moment later Kira caught up with the pair, freshly showered herself, and the trio made their way into the mess hall to serve dinner. Some things hadn’t changed at all and as Stiles breathed a little
easier, he decided that some of the things that had, were for the better.

***

Melissa was worried for John, not only because of his mood swings lately, but also because he had missed dinner again. She warmed up a can of condensed soup for him and grabbed a bottle of Gatorade - for the electrolytes - and made her way to his office. The lights were still off when she entered, and she half expected to find the man asleep. On the contrary, he was wide awake and reading through a stack of papers, a red pen in one hand and a highlighter in the other. John Stilinski was not ambidextrous. He also didn’t seem aware of the intrusion.

Melissa watched him mutter to himself for a full minute before she flipped the light on with one hand while carefully balancing the tray of food with the other.

“How can you possibly read in the dark?” Melissa asked, her voice betraying her concern. With the light on she was able to take in all of John’s appearance. He was covered in sweat, his collard shirt sticking to his torso and thinning hair smashed down on one side. “What— what are you doing? You should be in bed!”

“I can’t, I’m fine!” John dismissed her concerns with a wave of his hand. “I feel great actually, and I think I have a solution!”

“A solution to what?” Melissa asked, seriously confused. She walked over to the desk to place the tray down, but it was covered in various papers.

“To get Stiles back— I mean to keep him here,” John replied without looking up. “The problem really is his case worker; the man never calls me back! I must have called him fifteen—”

“John!” Melissa placed the tray down in a position that cover the least amount of papers as possible. “Stiles is here, and if you keep bothering the guy, he might change that! As a nurse I’m telling you, you need to rest. I think you’ve become delirious!”

“I’m fine,” John scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous!”

“You are not fine!” Melissa replied under her breath as she left the office to go retrieve the first aid kit again.
Upon reentering she found John meticulously pulling out each of the covered papers. Despite how slow he was going he had already splashed the soup tremendously.

“I’m not hungry, I don’t need this tray in my way, why’d you bring it in here anyway?” John asked sharply.

“Because I’m pretty sure you haven’t eaten a damn thing all day!” Melissa retorted, losing her patience.

She dug through the first aid kit and pulled out a penlight. Since flicking on the lights, John was noticeably squinting, and Melissa was concerned his eyes might be dilated. It was a bit of a struggle, which resulted in Melissa practically sitting on John’s lap because John refused to set the page he was reading down, but eventually she was able to get his head tilted up at her. The penlight revealed quite the opposite of what she feared however. Rather than dilated pupils, John’s were pin-prick small and sluggishly reacting to the stimuli.

“See, I’m fine. Are you satisfied?” John asked annoyed but finally placed the paper down to give Melissa his full attention.

Melissa felt his cheeks while she was so close to him and tutted to herself. “You’re not warm, despite the sweating. You said your knee was feeling better and there were no concerns from your last check up, right?” She asked out loud but was mostly running through possible reasons for John’s unusual behavior and symptoms to herself. “How many hours of sleep did you manage last night? I know this past week was particularly stressful…”

“Melissa, you’re kneeling on me. Seriously can you get up, I’m fine, just not that hungry, and I had a horrible headache this morning so I was behind on work all afternoon and I’m still playing catch-up. I’m fine though, I promise,” John held Melissa’s gaze as he said it that time.

She made sure to keep the eye contact and was a little disappointed when John broke first, his gaze dropping in an almost shameful manner.

“I think you need to rest, a proper eight to ten hours at least,” Melissa concluded as she backed off. “And you need to eat something, at least nibble on the crackers— for me,” she pleaded.

John nodded his agreement, reluctantly.
“Can I walk you to your cabin, just for my own piece of mind?” Melissa continued to ask, now that John seemed a little more lucid of the situation.

He agreed, although she knew he did it simply to appease her. John held the Gatorade, taking an occasional small sip, while Melissa carried the tray of lukewarm soup. The papers were left stacked neatly in the office, all but forgotten as the two marched through the grass towards John’s personal cabin.

Before Melissa joined her students in the commons she went and informed the other counselors that John was a tad overworked and would be resting the following day. Chris agreed to help out by combining their classes again, which wouldn’t be too bad as the majority of the Juniors would be testing with Harris for most of that Monday morning. Marin assigned a few of her seniors to cover the office phones, so no important calls would be missed, and Parish took the liberty of rescheduling any counseling sessions John had set for the day. Feeling a little better about the situation, Melissa jogged off to meet her students for group.

“Thought you bailed on us!” Jackson shouted as soon as Melissa came through the door.

She was three minutes late. She also didn’t get a chance to point that fact out because a pillow was already flying towards Jackson’s face and hit him square between the eyes a mere second after he completed the statement. Melissa followed the line of trajectory and saw Isaac and Scott sitting next to one another, both pointing at each other while looking guilty. Allison, who usually was on her way home with her father by then shoved a pillow behind her back quickly as Melissa entered. Erica had one too from where she was ducking behind the couch while Kira was poised and ready to throw yet a fourth pillow that would have surely landed on the back of Scott’s head.

“It would seem you guys didn’t miss me too much,” Melissa shook her head. “Are you alright Jackson? I’m assuming the pillow fight was a group effort. Next time, I better be invited!”

With those words everyone who wasn’t already doing so, took a seat and tilted their heads in Melissa’s direction. Allison looked hesitant, but she took Melissa’s cue and sat on the floor next to Lydia. Melissa scanned the room happily taking in the fact that all of her students were together again at last; Isaac and Scott were joined by Kira who sat on Scott’s armrest; Erica vaulted over the back of the couch and landed between Derek and Boyd; Jackson was by himself on the chair, but Allison and Lydia were right in front of him and on Lydia’s other side, sitting on a pile of pillows
he was no doubt hoarding was Stiles who leaned casually against Derek’s shins.

“Good, let’s begin.”

Since every counseling session last week had been a disaster, Melissa thought she would keep the evenings topics light, for now. She focused heavily on her Juniors and whether or not they were prepared for their exams the next day. Jackson whined at the reminder. She also talked about lacrosse and basketball as five of them were on one of the two teams. Jackson grumbled at that as well, he still wasn’t over not getting to play in last week’s lacrosse game despite how many times Melissa had told him he wasn’t on the team. Melissa announced that they were exactly a month away from Parent’s Weekend and that it was time for each of the students to start preparing for that. This caused Jackson to groan yet again. And lastly, she finished off the session by going around the circle and asking how everyone felt and why.

To no one’s surprise, Jackson went first as he announced that he was annoyed because he was clearly the best lacrosse player on the practice field and still wasn’t allowed to play. Allison glanced around the circle and then announced that it was nearly two years since her mother had passed and admitted that she felt a little guilty because she thought about her less and less each day. As she spoke she clutched her new necklace absentmindedly. Lydia went next saying that she was content and felt at peace as she squeezed Allison’s hand, sending reassurance to her friend. A few of the eyes turned to Stiles next and he seemed to be thinking through his response. At last he said that he felt like he could breathe again, and he pointedly left it at that, clearly not willing to state why. Behind him, Derek stilled as he too thought through his response.

“I’m feeling better,” he settled on.

“Why,” Melissa prompted.

“My family can rest knowing that the arsonist who took their lives is locked away for good, that’s one of the reasons,” Derek said boldly.

“That’s good, man,” Boyd interjected.

“Well, it’s hard to follow that but I’m super excited to see my parents next month!” Erica exclaimed.

Boyd sent her a genuine smile before he stood up and faced the entire group. “I’m a little scared,”
he admitted. “You know I placed my flag on Triskelion Point and, well, I’ve been talking with Melissa and John and they think I’m ready—ready to go home…”

All at once everyone started to congratulate or tease Boyd. Except Erica, she was uncharacteristically quiet.

“I know we all sort of talk about wanting to go home, well most of us,” Boyd corrected with a glance in Stiles’ direction. “I really didn’t think I could when John first mentioned it last year but I’ve been talking with my mom and dad a lot lately and I know they want me to give it a try. One last year at home before I go off to college… I’m nervous, though,” he grabbed his girlfriend’s hand. “Do you think we can survive the distance?”

Erica thought over the request and slowly perked back up. “Of course, babe, if anyone could, it would be us,” she said sweetly.

This earned a few awe’s from amongst their peers and Melissa chose not to break up their close proximity. Isaac, Kira, and Scott finished out the declaration of feelings by telling Boyd they would miss him, or that they were sorry to see him go. Scott said he was a little jealous that Boyd would be going home, something he doubted he’d ever get the chance to do.

After Melissa dismissed the group, most of the students bolted out of the commons, eager to spend their remaining hour before curfew out of the watchful eyes of their counselor. As promised, Stiles stuck around, Derek slyly holding his hand as the two of them mumbled to each other.

Melissa approached the pair optimistically. “Care to elaborate on how you’re feeling?” She asked Stiles pointedly. Most of the time Melissa could gage pretty accurately how a private counseling session would go. Stiles was initially rather closed off and even when he did start to share, it was never about the abuse he had suffered at home. She held her breath in anticipation of his answer, knowing that forcing him to talk about it wouldn’t be beneficial to the healing process.

“—Yeah, yeah okay. Can Derek come to?”

The three made their way to the lake dock just as the last dregs of sunlight left the evenings’ sky.

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Monday morning brought with it a nervous silence from some of the Juniors and anxious anticipation from the rest. Jackson’s fuse seemed shorter than normal and in general the breakfast table was fairly quiet. Stiles watched Derek peel an orange and guiltily wondered if the older teen’s lack of speech was fully attributed to the nerves he felt over having to take his first college placement tests in less than an hour or if it had something to do with what Stiles had said the night before.

The previous nights’ lakeside confessional had left Stiles feeling raw and exposed. He had stumbled into bed on autopilot while his mind whirled with the information he had dared to share. Melissa and Derek were mostly quiet and allowed him to talk— to ramble and spill some of his darkest secrets. Once Stiles opened his mouth it was like he had no filter, no way to stop the words from just tumbling out. Had he shared too much? Probably, most likely. There were tearful hugs and promises of protection and then Stiles found himself mutely being escorted back to his dorm where Melissa hugged them both again before wishing them a good night.

As if that was possible when all Stiles wanted to do was curl up under a hot shower and let the water wash away the grimy feeling of phantom touches. Derek seemed less willing to let Stiles go once the pair found themselves on the foot of Stiles’ bed. It was with gentle reminders that it was past curfew and that Derek had an important test the next day that Stiles was finally able to wiggle free from his embrace. Derek himself seemed almost incapable of forming words of protest, but his actions spoke louder as the grip on Stiles hand had grown tighter. The reluctance was felt— and appreciated.

Now Derek was sat next to Stiles with his leg bouncing up and down. If his nervousness was attributed fully to his pending college placement test, that would be great, truly. Stiles was happy for him, but he was also worried that perhaps he had broken Derek just a little, pushed him too far, burdened him with too much.

Stiles found himself idly glancing at the staff table. Melissa was there, keeping a watchful gaze on the students, so of course she caught his eye. The counselor sent Stiles the most heartfelt smile he had ever received and something in the way her eyes crinkled settled the building guilt in Stiles’ stomach just a bit. She was okay, she was at least just the same and that was great because her maternal presence was comforting and needed. She had this way of controlling a conversation to keep it calm and flowing, but what Stiles really wanted was someone he could let loose on, someone he could get his anger out with, someone he didn’t have to worry about offending or scaring away.

He needed to talk to John.

The man was missing again however from amongst the teachers and counselors perched along the staff table. A whole different type of dread washed over Stiles at the realization. He glanced at Derek more so out of habit than anything, but it seemed like the teen hadn’t followed Stiles’ gaze
at all. He didn’t come to the same realizations.

“Ten more minutes.” Boyd broke the temporary silence with his announcement. He had several times already, as he kept glancing at his watch. Unlike Derek, it was obvious that Boyd’s anxiousness was solely from having to take the college placement test.

“So you keep reminding us!” Jackson snapped. Although it wasn’t true because Boyd’s last statement announced that there was twenty minutes left of breakfast.

“I’m just jealous you all get to take it, it’ll be a whole year before I can and I’m in all the same classes as you, it’s really not fair,” Lydia piped up. “Even Erica’s taking it!”

“I’m taking a practice test, so Melissa can gauge how I do and make some insane schedule for me to work on everything I don’t already know so I can practice for the real thing next year. Plus I am seventeen, by all rights I could take the real thing if I wanted to.”

Lydia humphed and Allison gave her a sympathetic pat on her shoulder.

“I, for one, am super excited about not spending the next four hours inside the same four walls,” Scott announced enthusiastically.

“Yeah, I hear they keep the rest of the students outside to keep the hall quiet for the testers,” Isaac added.

“Aannnd,” Scott dragged out the word as he turned to face Stiles, “I have something for you! You’ve been away for a whole week dude, I forgot that you don’t know yet!”

“Know what?” Stiles asked, unable to suppress his curiosity.

“Oh, you’ll see,” Kira piped up. “The storage container was all my idea!” She smirked proudly.

“Speaking of, we better go now, before it’s obvious,” Isaac pleaded.
“Be careful, you guys!” Allison looked pointedly at Isaac with her request.

“Danny has another order for you guys, too,” Jackson helpfully informed the table. “You better hurry before we’re all on lockdown in the classrooms.”

Isaac groaned. “Why’d you wait until now to tell us?”

“Come on,” Scott said as he stood, “we’d better go.”

“See you outside,” Kira added to Stiles and Lydia before wishing the rest luck on their exams.

Stiles’ eyes flicked between everyone at the table. “Okay, what was that about?”

Derek’s lips twitched just a bit as he answered, “Oh, you’ll see soon. It’s a good thing—well, it’s a good thing for us, anyway. Those three better hope their luck doesn’t run out.”

“Yeah,” Allison agreed. “I really wish Isaac wouldn’t push it, we just got in trouble for well, you know…”

“No, I don’t. Are you guys officially a thing now?” Stiles asked. He was both genuinely curious and also a little proud of Isaac for making a move.

Allison’s blush was an answer enough but she didn’t get the opportunity to reply as Boyd announced that it was time for the Juniors (and Erica) to go. His face was grim and determined, as if he was about to head off into battle. Stiles wished them all luck too, letting his eyes bore into Derek’s just a bit longer than the rest. Lydia reluctantly joined in and offered words of encouragement by yelling out how to properly use Laranges’s Notion at their retreating backs.

“—Not to be confused if the function is linear, then use Y equals M X plus B!”

“I think you’re only going to confuse them,” Stiles said sympathetically as he pulled her towards the gazebo where they would meet the rest of Chris’ students who weren’t spending the day inside testing.
It turns out Chris didn’t have many students who weren’t Juniors in his English class, so Stiles and Lydia were left with two seniors that they had barely spoken to. That was until a group of sophomores made their way over, led by Scott.

“Ah good the rest of our group has made it. As you can see, John’s students will be joining us again today as he’s still a little under the weather, but not to fret, I have a simple enough project for us all to partake in and the good thing is it can be done together in groups or individually, as you see fit or whatever you’re more comfortable with,” Chris announced with a little too much enthusiasm for the first class of the day. “I have a series of riddles and word problems for you to decode, each answer will be a native plant or wildlife. Hidden around the campus are several signposts each with a detailed description of one of the items. They are numbered, so next to each answer you’ll have to write the corresponding numbers. When that is all done, I’d like a one page paper about what you’ve learned from the experience. It can be as simple as listing interesting facts about oak trees or as detailed as naming the local fish population and their expected trade outcome for the following year.”

“That seems easy enough,” Lydia said loudly causing a few disbelieving heads to turn her direction.

“Ah, and one last thing: each sign will have the source of the information listed,” Chris scanned the assembled students to make sure they were still listening to him. “I’d like all of your work to be properly cited in the MLA format that we discussed last week, thank you.”

“It still doesn’t seem that hard,” Lydia said as she turned to the rest of her group mates passing out a packet of riddles to each of them.

Isaac shrugged. “At least we can work together.”

Kira’s face slumped. “There’s thirty questions here!”

“Yeah but—” Scott was about to say.

“Oh! I know the first one!” Lydia exclaimed.
“—We have Lydia,” Stiles finished Scott’s sentence. “So, are you guys going to tell me what all
the secrecy was about at breakfast?” He added on, still not even bothering to look at the paper.

Scott’s face broke out into a wide grin as he looked around the group of students shiftily. “Yeah,
but not here dude. Lydia what’s the first answer? Where are we going to find the sign post?”

“Nemophila menziesii,” Lydia replied easily.

Scott choked.

Isaac sputtered, “What’s that?”

Kira looked dumbfounded.

Stiles simply shook his head. He was sure it was a scientific name but knowing that really didn’t
help narrow down where to look for the sign.

Lydia scoffed at them all, the blank looks she was receiving. “Nemophila menziesii! Come on guys
it’s a wild flower! A blue little wild flower! The answer to the riddle is Baby Blue Eyes. Sheesh.”

“Oh, are they really small? I think there are blue flowers in the overgrown grass behind the girl’s
dormitories,” Kira squeaked with anticipation.

“Yeah they are, let’s go check it out,” Lydia agreed.

“Perfect, you guys lead the way.” Scott told the ladies and as they walked ahead, he reached into
his pocket and pulled out a Reese’s peanut butter cup. “For you, man.”

Stiles’ face lit up. “You did it!”

“Yep and the candy is one of our top sellers!” Isaac announced happily. “That and the condoms.”
Scott nodded seriously. “I mean it’s a school full of teens, they’ve always been around, but it’s cool that everyone’s coming to us now for the hook up.”

“We have soda too! Coffee and tea— all the caffeine and sugar John thinks we don’t need,” Isaac added.

“Wow.” Stiles said impressed, he looked forlornly down at the candy in his hand. “I can’t— I don’t have any money. I’m sorry man, but I can’t pay you for it.”

Scott quickly shook his head, “I’d say that one was on the house but Derek, uh, had me buy you a whole bag for when you returned, he seemed pretty confident you were coming back.”

Isaac nodded his head along with what Scott was saying.

“And now that you are, you can make some money too, if you want that is,” Scott offered. “Isaac works for me, he gets connections, makes the sales and delivers the product. I pay him thirty percent of the profit on any sales he handles directly. I also pay Kira a storage fee, but her payment comes in the form of instant coffee every morning.”

Stiles thought about it. The whole affair sounded well thought out, logistically speaking, but he had so much going on in his life already and he was sure he’d have Melissa’s eyes, if not John’s, on him for awhile now that his past traumas had been revealed, and honestly, Stiles just wanted less stress in his life. So as much fun as it could be and as nice as having some cash to his name sounded, partaking in an underground condom and candy ring just wasn’t a good choice for him at the moment. Reluctantly he declined Scott’s offer.

Scott’s smile faded a little. He clearly wasn’t expecting the rejection.

“But, hey, how is Kira storing everything?” Stiles asked jovially in hopes of cheering up his friend.

“She’s so smart!” Scott’s new dopey grin was even wider then the previous one. “She has a box that she keeps rotating between the pantry and the fridge. She’s done a fantastic job of keeping it moving so nothing appears suspicious. Right now, it looks like a spare box of canned tuna and you know how many of those we have! Although it was nicer when she kept it in the walk-in behind the parmesan cheese because then the soda was cold.”
Stiles nodded impressed. “You better hope another student doesn’t catch on to you three always jogging off to the kitchens, or then you might have competition and you’ll have to lower your prices,” he pointed out.

Scott looked like Stiles kicked his puppy before he schooled his face into one of great determination. “We won’t,” he promised.

“Guys this is it,” Lydia called. “We found the first sign!”

***

Melissa wished each of her testing students’ luck, taking a brief second to soothe the fears on the more frazzled looking ones as they filed into Mr. Harris’ classroom. Once the door was shut and proper attendance was confirmed she moved onto her own classroom which held three bright young students who notoriously struggled when it came to test taking.

Susan was a quiet girl, whom Melissa would never had believed had issues with standardized tests because in her own class she excelled wonderfully and seemed to enjoy learning about the human anatomy, but apparently she had such bad panic attacks that she had actually passed out in the middle of two major exams prior to her attendance at Beacon of Hope. Rodger struggled with reading due to his dyslexia and had left entire tests blank or ‘Christmas treed’ his answers in the past. It was a habit of his that Melissa hoped to break. And lastly, Erica; she had been progressing well as of late and seemed to benefit greatly from the one and one academic approach. Melissa hoped that by taking a few practice exams before she took the real thing next year would be enough for her to succeed.

For all three, simply learning to stay calm and focused throughout the three-and-a-half-hour test would be beneficial. Unfortunately, neither the ACTs or the SATs offered a dyslexic alternative, so learning to pace themselves was necessary, even for Rodger. Today they would be given a full practice exam and from there each would work individually on the areas of the exam they struggled with, with their perspective counselor. Melissa was already researching ways to keep Erica from feeling overwhelmed.

The first hour went of without a hitch. Halfway through the second hour, Rodger threw his exam paper across the classroom shouting that he couldn’t do it, that it was too difficult and that he was too dumb for college anyway. To Melissa’s surprise and delight, it was Erica who disagreed with his statement and suggested that the pair do a few Yoga poses to calm down before they got back to reading. While they stood and stretched, Melissa retrieved Rodger’s test and offered to Susan to move further away from the other two as she kept glancing at them nervously.
To Melissa’s glee, the students finished taking the test right on time and while none of them seemed confident that they had aced it, they were all pleased to have completed it. While that was true, they were all eager to run off to the mess hall for lunch as soon as they were able to.

Melissa, herself, was looking forward to checking in on John and headed straight to the kitchen to fix him another bowl of soup.

John’s cabin was quiet, just as Melissa expected. While she desperately wanted to check on his condition, she definitely didn’t want to wake him if he had finally managed to sleep for a decent amount of time. She had had a spare key to his place for years now, most of the staff did in case of an emergency, and so Melissa let herself in to the petite entry space which functioned as both a living room as well as a dining room. The kitchen was visible too due to the open-floor plan and John wasn’t in sight. Off one side of the room was a conjoined laundry and storage space and on the opposite side was the bedroom. Attached to both the bedroom and the kitchen was the cabin’s only bathroom and all three doors were shut.

Melissa assumed that this meant John had taken her advice and slept in; a luxury they as full time counselors could only dream of. She was absolutely alarmed when John entered the living space through his front door, whistling as he came in.

Melissa jumped about a foot in the air. Not a good thing to do while she was holding a tray full of soup and crackers.

“Saw you from the office window,” John greeted brightly. “What brings you out to my cabin in the middle of the day?”

“I was— I was going to check up on you,” Melissa replied honestly while scrutinizing John’s appearance. “You look better,” she said slowly.

“I feel better!” John exclaimed. “I feel great even, like I could climb all the way to Triskelion point in one day!”
“Did— did you get some sleep, then?” Melissa asked slowly, a tad disbelieving of John’s quick turn around.

“I sure did, and I got an early start on all that backed up paperwork, too. It was fantastic not having to teach this morning! No headaches from the students, it was so nice, so thank you for that!” As John spoke, he quickly moved around the room, tidying up things that were out of place. “Oh, let me take that from you,” he reached for the tray of food. “Take a seat, take a seat!”

Melissa hesitated before she acquiesced John’s request. John noticed the downward pull to her lips.

“I can cook for us, anything you’d like, my dear,” John offered enthusiastically not wanting to upset her further. He opened his refrigerator door and frowned. “Okay, I can cook us anything as long as it’s made with milk— and cheese. Let me check that expiration date.”

Not wanting to disappoint, he continued and opened his pantry and sighed. It contained a canister of coffee, a box of Cheerios (because their supposedly good for his heart), and nothing else.

“Okay,” John spun around to face Melissa. “I confess, I lied,” he said dramatically. “I can make you a bowl of cereal and a cup of coffee. Care to join me for breakfast?”

Melissa’s face screwed up with confusion. “Are you sure you’re alright?” She countered his question with one of her own.

John felt the first pang of annoyance over having to repeat himself, again. “I’m fine,” he said sternly.

Melissa’s frown deepened.

John wanted to rectify the situation. In his mind, he pictured exactly how to go about doing just that but it seemed like every time he opened his mouth, Melissa’s scowl only grew bigger. Before he knew it, she was excusing herself from his cabin.

John gaped at the open doorway. Did she really just walk out on him? He had just poured two bowls of Cheerios! Was it something he had said? The coffee was already brewing…
John sat there for a full minute trying to figure out where he went wrong. All he had done was suggested that they take the evening off, just the two of them for some much needed alone time. He understood now what Kali had meant by needing to expand the staff. But Melissa didn’t even properly respond to his inquiry before she left muttering about enjoying her job and loving her students as if each and every one of them was her own.

The steaming sound of the coffee pot sputtered indicating it was nearly finished bringing John back to reality. The pot contained steaming hot, crystal-clear water. He had forgotten to add the coffee grinds.

He stared dumbfounded at the coffee pot. Was that why Melissa left? Knowing his temper was growing, John sat at the kitchen table, hand automatically going to his pocket to check for the rattle of his prescription bottle. It sounded light, perhaps he would have Chris take over his classes again so he could schedule another doctor appointment soon.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

*crawls out from under rock to post*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Episode 19

There was nothing quite like spring-fresh mountain air. Melissa reminded herself of that fact when she took a deep breath and pasted a smile on her face as she continued welcoming the visiting team’s entourage. She waved vehicle after vehicle past the already packed parking lot and had them lining up their cars in neat little rows on the grass in front of the office. With Davenford Prep being as close as they were she had expected a large crowd, but the lawn was quickly becoming alarmingly full. It would seem the lacrosse team had doubled, if not quadrupled the amount of spectators that the basketball team usually brought in.

Keeping a watchful eye on all of her students would be difficult but it was proving to be even more so because John had happened to have had scheduled a doctor’s appointment earlier that day. So far, the head counselor was not amongst the incoming traffic yet and that fact had Melissa a little worried, too.

Of course that was when a flustered looking Parrish jogged over. “Mel, where gonna have to start parking them along the east side fence, like we did during the marathon, there won’t be enough room for the cars to back out if we add another row here.”

“Sure, sure,” Melissa sighed. “I’ll start sending them that way.”

She turned back around and squinted through the dust that was kicked up by a new set of vehicles filing in. John wasn’t among them and with a heavy heart she started to direct the traffic towards the eastern fence.

A black Camaro tried to break past the line of redirected cars but Melissa, who’s patients were wearing thin, was quick to stop the enthusiastic young lady from forming her own parking spot. She wished she was more prepared for this situation, or better yet, that John was here, as she was sure he would have had a plan of action for hosting such a large crowd…

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“Good morning.”

“It’s like six p.m.”

“In less than an hour, aircraft from here will join others from around the world. And you will be launching the largest aerial battle in this history of mankind.”

“What?”

“Mankind -- that word should have new meaning for all of us today. We can’t be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interests.”

“—Uh, Coach, you okay?”

“Perhaps it’s fate that today is the 4th of July— ”

“It’s like April…”

“—and you will once again be fighting for our freedom, —not from tyranny, oppression, or persecution -- but from annihilation. We’re fighting for our right to live, to exist.”

“Coach?”

“And should we win the day, the 4th of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day when the world declared in one voice.”

“Coach, the ref just blew his whistle.”

“Shh. This is the best part.”

“We will not go quietly into the night! We will not vanish without a fight!”
“Just— go take the coin toss Kira,” Jackson said with authority. Somehow he worked himself into a pseudo assistant coaching spot since Melissa wouldn’t let him officially join the team.

“We’re going to live on! We’re going to survive!”

“Okay first line, get out there and take your positions,” Jackson called over Coach’s speech.

“But wait!” Scott protested, his eyes going wide with trepidation.

“Today we celebrate our Independence Day,” Stiles rushed out quickly before Coach Finstock could finish his speech, giving Scott a slight shove towards the field and a thumbs up for encouragement in the process.

Scott tried his best to look confident.

“You got this!” Stiles said enthusiastically before he turned around to take his spot on the bench only to be met with a crossed-armed coach.

“Don’t interrupt my speech.”

Stiles opened his mouth to protest that he wasn’t the only one when the crowd erupted behind them with cheers.

“Isaac just passed Kira the ball!” Jackson narrated the action. “It’d be nice to score first, set the precedent.”

Stiles craned his neck around Coach Finstock just in time to see Kira dodge a rather large Davenford defenseman as she sprinted towards the goalie. Scott was running parallel with her on the other side of the field, another defenseman headed him off while two midfielders cornered him from behind. It was clear they thought he was the real threat and expected Kira to pass him the ball. She feinted, playing right into their assumption, which caused the last defenseman to trip up just enough that if she threw the ball just right, her only opposition would be the goalie, who unfortunately didn’t fall for the trick. The large teen was staring her down.
Kira side-stepped and crouched, significantly lowering her scoring range but at the same time she swung the crosse around and snapped her wrist with the built up momentum. The ball sailed through the air. All movement on the field ceased for just a second. Everyone stopped, everyone except for Davenford’s goalie who correctly guess the trajectory of the ball and dropped to his knees as Kira was aiming for the lower right corner of the goal. He was fast and Stiles had to hold his breath for a second before he could correctly see where the ball had landed.

Unfortunately, the goalie stood back up with the ball cradled in his crosse net. A blink of the eye later and the white ball was halfway across the field in the possession of a Davenford midfielder. It had flew right by Isaac in the clearing process. With his mask on it was impossible to see the goalie’s smug expression, but Stiles could tell the teen was overly pleased with himself. The midfielder passed successfully to one of his attackmen and just like that the action switched to the other side of the field.

Danny had a successful save himself, shortly thereafter. The back and forth continued until twenty-four gameplay minutes of heart-pounding action had passed and the first half was over with neither team putting up a score.

***

Derek hadn’t managed a spot in the stands, but he stood beside Allison who lucked out by claiming the last seat available in the third row. She wasn’t too lucky however, as Lydia had decided she would just sit on her lap. Erica only had to bat her eyes once before Boyd offered his shoulders and therefore Derek found himself cheering for his classmates surrounded by an overly tall and loud blond and also an extremely bouncy Lydia as Allison couldn’t sit still beneath the redhead. It seemed like the entire town of Davenford had made the drive up the mountain for this match and even the most lackluster of Beacon of Hope’s students had come out of hiding to see all the action. Derek couldn’t imagine the pressure the lacrosse team must be under with that many people watching the game. He was secretly grateful the basketball crowd was never so large.

Fortunately, Beacon of Hope had held their own out there so far however and once the buzzer went off signaling it was finally half time it felt like the entire crowd breathed a collective sigh of relief. The mass of students surrounding Derek thinned considerably as some people went off to the mess hall where cups of water were free and other refreshments and healthy snacks were being sold. Boyd shrugged Erica off his shoulders and immediately started to rub a crick in his neck. Allison stood too, pushing Lydia to her side, in an attempt to wave at Isaac— and Scott and Kira, all three of whom returned her grin despite the fact that both Coach Finstock and Jackson were talking to the team on the bench. Derek let his eyes wonder down the line of players, as he was looking for Stiles’ jersey, when a completely unexpected sight caught his eye.

Clad in tight-fitting jeans, ankle boots, and a remarkably familiar oversized leather jacket was a
silhouette Derek hadn’t seen in person in over a year. His sister looked a little lost as she rearranged her sunglasses so as they would hold her hair back. She moved slowly with the direction of the crowd, clearly trying to peer over them as she searched for something in particular.

Laura’s gaze met Derek’s only a second after he spotted her and her face broke out into a wide, welcoming smile. A few “excuse me’s” later and she had managed to make her way over to him. Derek knew his group-mates were all excited as they were rehashing the first half of the game but he hadn’t heard a word of it from the moment he spotted Laura.

“There you are!” Laura greeted him with an embarrassingly long hug and hair ruffle. “I tried to ask what’s her name? Your teacher, but she didn’t realized who I was and sent me along with the crowd. It seems all of the school’s staff is quite busy keeping the guests away from the rest of the grounds and I didn’t want to interrupt them, but when I tried to spot you in the bleachers, well I just couldn’t, there are so many people here! I didn’t know lacrosse was such a popular sport, but boy was that one hell of a game! Will they go into overtime if no one scores in the second half? Do they do shootouts, like in hockey!?”

“Lau— Laura,” was all Derek could manage in response. He was completely thrown off by his sister’s sudden arrival.

One by one his friends stopped their lacrosse related talk and Derek quickly introduced or reintroduced everyone to his sister. Lydia looked her up and down, “I like your boots,” she settled on before turning back to Allison to point out that while Isaac definitely redeemed himself in the second quarter that he totally missed an opportunity in the first. Boyd politely offered to get drinks for everybody while Erica joined Allison in Isaac’s defense.

And just like that, the significance of Laura’s sudden arrival was lost on everyone. Derek turned back to his sister with a small shrug, “sorry.”

Laura waved off his apology. “It’s good to see them so excited— I think that may even be a half a grin creeping up your face too. Its been so long since I’ve seen you smile though, so I’m not quite sure…” She playfully grabbed at his chin in an exaggerated manner.

Derek stepped out of her reach causing Laura to stumble forward to keep up. “Jesus Derek! Look how tall you are now too!” She cooed. “Did you grow an entire foot! Damn, you might just get to be as tall as dad was…” Laura let the sentence trail off.

Derek’s good mood quickly sobered at the comment and he sent his sister a piercing look. “What exactly are you doing here?”
“What? Do I need a reason to come visit, now? You used to beg me to come get you all the time!” Laura said teasingly, obviously hoping to brighten the soured mood.

“Yes, I’m pretty sure you do— They are kind of strict about that type of thing here…” Derek informed her. “But, it’s good to see you,” he added sincerely.

Laura took that as her cue and she started telling Derek about college and her recent visit to their hometown. The ‘for the trial’ went left unsaid. She focused instead on telling Derek about all the little things that had changed in their absence.

“Did you know Sam’s ice cream parlor closed? They are supposed to be getting an After’s, so I guess it will be alright but in the meantime, if you want ice cream, what are you supposed to do?” Laura posed the question with utmost seriousness.

“After spending nearly two years stuck up here in the mountains, I’d be more than happy to settle for an In-N-Out milkshake,” Derek admitted, unabashed.

Laura opened her mouth to retort but her response was drowned out as the crowd around them simultaneously booed and cheered together. Derek hadn’t even noticed the game had continued. His head snapped around to peek at the old fashioned score board and frowned. It was Davenford that finally managed a goal.

“Is there anywhere we can go that’s a little bit quieter?” Laura asked once Derek turned back to her. Behind her, Allison was standing and screaming about the injustice of the play.

“Sure,” Derek agreed, eyeing Lydia wearily as she looked disgruntled over loosing her seat again during Allison’s tirade.

Derek led Laura to the school’s common room, hoping that it would be nearly deserted as most of the students seemed to be watching the game. Chris greeted them at the door. He explained that he was keeping an eye on the place while the grounds hosted so many potential threats to the students and their safety. As he said that he eyed Laura suspiciously.

She picked up on the hostility and quickly introduced herself as Derek’s sister, reminding him pointedly that she had visited the school once before. “I spoke to John, just yesterday, he okayed this visit, I promise you. Where is he? Perhaps he can vouch for my presence?”
Chris warmed up considerably after that, saying that it wouldn’t be necessary to radio him as he was pretty sure the head counselor was off campus at the moment. “Anyway, how’s the game going?” He inquired instead. “I’m sorry to be missing it.”

“It’s a close one, Davenford just managed to score.”

Chris nodded in somber understanding before stepping aside to let them pass.

***

Coach was obviously getting frustrated. Beacon of Hope had let in back to back goals five minutes into the second half. Everyone on the bench had long faces and while Danny was obviously blaming himself, Jackson was shouting his head off at the defensemen out on the field.

“Send in Lahey for defense and move Kira to his midfield spot,” Finstock barked to Jackson, signaling a timeout.

“What! Kira’s our best attackman!” Jackson argued. “And just who will take her position? Unless — ” His face lit up, “you’re going to let me play?”

Jackson looked wholly ready to go out on to the field sans protective padding and all. His eyes glazed over and Stiles just knew he was picturing himself making the game winning goal.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Coach turned to the bench were Stiles was sitting next to two seniors, both of whom were twice his size and holding ice packs to their respective injuries. “You, you’re going in!”

“Me!?” Stiles questioned, still not quite sure as he looked over his shoulder.

“Stiles!?” Jackson asked in disbelief.

“Yeah get out there, get the ball and pass it to what’s his name, your friend, who trails behind Kira
at every practice. Or better yet pass it to Kira if she’s open, but I’m hoping by pushing her back the
defensemen will continue to guard her, giving the rest of you some room to make a play or two.
Now get your helmet on and let’s go!”

Jackson was still shaking his head as Stiles trailed behind him out to the team’s huddle. Scott
immediately offered Stiles a fist bump when he spotted him and Isaac gulped audibly when he was
told his new position. All three of their starting defensemen had already been benched the rest of
the game after being sent to Melissa with various injuries. Kira wished Stiles luck and a moment
later the time out was over and Stiles found himself taking the field during a real game for the first
time—ever.

Davenford took possession of the ball and the next minute of gameplay was another stressed filled
one for Danny. Luckily he stopped the play and cleared the net pretty quickly with an unexpected
pass to Isaac who immediately shot the ball to Kira. After the first quarter, anytime Kira had the
ball, the goons from the other team would quickly have her pinned. However, she just changed
positions and fortunately it through off all of Davenford’s midfielders. Kira was fast, she did her
feinting trick again and then quickly spun to the left tossing the ball to Scott in the process. Stiles
had only a second to breathe a sigh of relief that she had chosen Scott who was definitely more
prepared than he was before Scott took that moment to hurl the ball at the net. All game long
Davenford’s goalie had had lightning fast reflexes, shutting down every attempt Beacon of Hope
had made. This one was no different, the ball sailed towards the top right corner of the net. Stiles
moved in for the attack as it appeared like the ball just might nail the post should the goalie miss
his catch. He raised his crosse, ready for the rebound but nothing happened. The goalies’ stick was
empty, the ball didn’t bounce off the post, and the referee blew his whistle.

“One point, Beacon of Hope,” the ref yelled loudly before jogging to the center of the field for the
next face off.

There was an explosion of cheers from the surrounding crowd that made Davenford’s celebration
earlier look minuscule in comparison. Stiles had just enough time to send Scott and enthusiastic
thumbs up from across the field before the ball was back in play again.

Davenford scored once more, making the game three to one going into the last quarter. Stiles spent
his entire two minute water break trying to congratulate Scott properly, but it seemed as if half the
school’s population had already beaten him to it. People Stiles didn’t even know were crowding
around the bench, not to mention, Allison, Lydia, Erica, and Boyd were all shouting out their
praises.

“Okay, enough, enough!” Jackson called out over the crowd. “If you’re not on the team, get away
from the bench!”
“Alright, Scott, Kira, two more! You can do it!” Finstock said with not-so-gentle helmet slaps.

“Ahh, Coach, three more, two will only take us to a tie,” Stiles interjected. “And we can’t let anymore in either or else…”

Half the team turned towards Stiles slowly as he spoke up, faces all falling in the process.

“What?” Stiles questioned.

“Well then, you better just put up goal number four for us, huh?” Coach replied with a tad too much menace in his voice.

Stiles felt his eyes go round.

***

John left for his appointment at two. It was nearly seven thirty now. Melissa checked her phone for what felt like the hundredth time. She had already radioed Marin who was watching over the front office twice, just in case the head counselor had decided to go straight there.

There were less than ten minutes to go in the lacrosse game, John was going to miss the entire thing. He had already missed both of Scott’s amazing goals, Isaac’s unbelievable pass to Kira for goal number three, and even Danny’s dropped saved which prevented Davenford from retaking the lead. He missed it all and if he didn’t arrive in the next—eight minutes and forty-three seconds he was going to be absent for the lacrosse team’s first ever tie or possibly even victory of the season, because Beacon was going to win, damn it!

Half the crowd were on their feat now cheering for their individual team to win. Davenford had quite a runner on their side who was responsible for their second goal and possibly even third and unfortunately for Beacon, he had managed to take possession of the ball four times in the last five plays. Melissa feared her kids were getting tired out there and she found herself quite literally biting her nails with anticipation.

As official medic for both sides of the field, she tried to keep her cheering to a minimum in hopes that she appeared less bias, but who was she kidding, she wanted Beacon of Hope to win. Just as she mentally scolded herself for celebrating another great save by Danny, Melissa found herself
throwing her hands up once again as Kira won the ball in the face off. Over a minute of intense passing between Beacon’s players and the ball was sailing across the field to— Stiles! Melissa covered the lower half of her face quickly to hide her excitement. Of all her students on the team, Stiles had seen the least amount of action so far and had in fact sat out the entire first half the game. Currently he was pretty opened too, which was probably why he tossed the ball, but that little runner of Davenford’s was quickly closing the gap.

Stiles stumbled. It was clear he was trying to find a player who he could pass to but everyone was currently block, except for perhaps Scott who was sailing towards the goal on the opposite side of the field. If Stiles could find the perfect opening and get him the ball, that would lead to Scott scoring a hat trick, which would be quite impressive indeed. But unfortunately it would seem that that was exactly what the goalie was thinking too, as the young man (because he certainly wasn’t a teenager and Melissa had every intention of looking into his age after the game) positioned himself to block Scott rather than Stiles.

“Oh god, please do something quick,” Melissa said to herself as Stiles pivoted back and forth trying to find someone to pass to. The Davenford player was almost on top of him now. She would hate for Stiles to get tackled, he so rarely had the ball as it was… Just— “Go for the goal!” Melissa yelled although she knew she was too far away to be heard.

Stiles, panic clear in every step made his way towards the net, he raised his lacrosse stick up readying himself for either the pass to Scott or shot on goal it wasn’t quite clear yet when—

Ring, ring

Melissa’s phone rang. She only took her eyes off the field for a second, not even enough time to actually answer the phone but just years of ingrained reaction to the sound caused her eyes to drop to her pocket. When she looked back up Stiles was laid flat out on the field, the Davenford player pinning him to the ground. Melissa’s eyes darted around for the ball. It didn’t look like Scott had caught it, if that was Stiles plan. Both he and the goalie’s lacrosse sticks were empty.

The ref blew the whistle.

“Beacon of Hope— four, Davenford— three!” The referee’s call was drowned out by the loudest eruption from the crowd yet.

Melissa answered her still ringing phone without even looking at the caller. “What?”
“Mel!” John’s cheerful voice came through the line. He sounded way too upbeat to have suffered from a car accident or any of the hundreds of other unimaginable things Melissa had been worried about. “I was just calling to see if I should bring back some din— where are you, it’s so loud in the background?”

“Where am I? Where are you!?” Melissa quickly countered. “You know what, I don’t even have time for this, there is only a few minutes left in the game. Are you hurt or otherwise incapable of driving back to the school and need a ride for some reason?”

“What? No, why would— ”

“Okay good, see you when you get here.” Melissa didn’t wait for a response before she hung up. She watched Stiles gingerly get back up before both teams lined up for the next face off.

***

“I can’t believe we won!” Scott said for the tenth time that evening. “It was great, that first goal, man, it was so perfect, Kira passed me the ball and bam, in the net before the goalie even knew what happened!”

Stiles nodded his agreement. The school had celebrated well past curfew before the counselors had successfully rounded up the students and marched them off to bed. Half the lacrosse team, Stiles and Scott included, hadn’t even managed to make it back to their dormitory for a post game shower yet. The site of their cabin was quite welcoming, indeed.

“And your goal!” Scott went on. “That was fantastic, you had us all fooled! I thought you were going to pass to me, you kept giving me that look, but then,” Scott mimicked a swinging motion, “and gooookaal!” He threw his hands up. “Game winning goal at that!”

Stiles stopped walking. “I was trying to pass to you.”

“What?”

“I was going to pass you the ball and then that douche tackled me and he messed with my throw and it— accidentally went in the net,” Stiles explained seriously.
“Really dude?” Scott asked in disbelief. “Maybe— Maybe you should just keep that to yourself, you’re like the hero of the school right now…”

Stiles huffed out a laugh. “I just hope Coach doesn’t get any ideas about moving me to first line…”

Scott shook his head at his friend before bouncing jovially into their dorm room. If the occupants of the cabin were in way, shape, or form actually trying to go to bed they would have been woken immediately.

Jackson and for some reason, Danny, were already in there both loudly going over every play with one another. Isaac, who was still in his uniform too, was full on making out with Allison pressed up against the wall beside his bed which Erica had sprawled herself on. Boyd came out of the bathroom while still brushing his teeth to see who had entered and promptly turned around when he realized it was just Scott and Stiles.

“Where’s Derek?” Stiles cringed at himself, as he had already asked his group mates that when they had rushed the field after the game. “—and Lydia and Kira?” He belatedly tacked on.

Allison pushed back against Isaac, freeing her lips. “The girls are in their dorm, where we are supposed to be,” she added to Erica. “My dads letting me spin the night since it’s already so late.”

“You should just move in with us already,” Erica rolled her eyes. “Your dads so overprotective.”

“It’s just the two of us now, imagine how lonely he would be in the house without me, though.”

“He can live here too,” Erica replied. “He’s already pretty much taken over John’s job anyway, when was the last time any of you guys had a counseling session with him? And he keeps canceling his classes…”

Erica had a point and the room fell into an uneasy silence at her proclamation.

“Either way, you two better get over to the girl’s cabins before the teachers come around for bed checks,” Boyd suggested as he came out of the restroom fully ready for bed. “Isaac, they just let you back on the team, and I’m sure Allison getting caught in here for a second time is not the way
to go about getting her to stay at the school full time.”

Erica conceded the fact but made sure to get a good night kiss of her own before tugging a reluctant Allison away from Isaac. As soon as the door closed both Scott and Isaac darted off toward the shower in a dash that became a race, which was ridiculous as there was more than one.

“So— where’s Derek?” Stiles tried again, sounding just as obsessed and concerned as he actually felt.

Boyd chuckled at him. “Told you, his sister showed up out of the blue halfway through the game, he’ll be here just as soon as Melissa straightens out that mess.”

Straightening out that mess must have taken another entire hour because Stiles was fully ready for bed himself by the time the cabin door opened again, this time with Chris and Derek making their way inside. The former didn’t even hide the fact that he was checking the closets and under beds for any signs of his daughter.

After thoroughly satisfied that the dormitory didn’t house any of the fairer sex, Chris called out, “Mahealani, get to your own cabin, now. The rest of you get some sleep.”

Derek shuffled in as quietly as he could, wearing a leather jacket that Stiles had never seen on him in the entire eight months that they had lived together. Stiles didn’t hide the fact that he let his eyes trailed the new article of clothing questioningly.

“It was my father’s,” Derek whispered sitting down on the end of Stiles’ bed. “I have so much to tell you.”

Derek explained how his sister had showed up completely unexpectedly. Apparently Laura had taken the semester off from college for the trial and was wrapping up their affairs in their home town. Peter had handled the financial side of things after the fire but other aspects such as the future of Cora’s horse, or making sure their mother’s charitable foundations were all still properly managed seemed to have had fallen on Laura’s shoulders. The Hales apparently had two vehicles in storage and a slew of other belongings that had survived the fire too. Laura went through everything. Which Derek seemed extremely thankful for. As he spoke about his sister and his town his face slowly lit up.

“Man— I didn’t even realize how much I missed her, it was such a nice surprise.” Derek sighed
“Is—is the horse okay?” Stiles asked once it seemed like he could do so without interrupting.

“What? Oh yeah, yeah, it wasn’t like abandoned or anything it was kept at the stables with other horses and stablehands who take care of them. And Peter ensured its fees were paid in full, but get this, Laura donated the horse to the stable so kids can take riding lessons for free. It’s all in Cora’s name too. They put a plaque up and everything, and Peter will continue to pay for its housing of course.”

“Oh, that is nice.”

“Laura wants to show me in person, she said the lady who runs the stables was terribly worried about us, of course she heard the news and everything— but still. Apparently half the town sends their condolences to both of us and a lot of people asked about how I was doing… But enough about Laura. What happen with the game?”

“Oh? Did you— did you catch any of it?” Stiles asked tentatively. “We won!”

“I saw the first half, so many close calls! Danny gets a lot of action as goaltender, you guys need a backup and rest him maybe in the third or something.”

Scott took that as his opportunity to jump in and do a better job than simply telling Derek that they had won the game. He explain in greatly embellished detail how each and every goal was made in the second half. If he was to be believed the other team’s goalie was seven feet tall and their quick-footed midfielder was faster than Usain Bolt. Occasionally Jackson commented on what he would have done if he was on the field like he should have been. By the time Scott got to the last goal of the game he made Stiles out to sound like a bonafide war hero which had Derek wanting to check him for injuries rather than properly congratulate him for a job well done.

“Anyway,” Derek said as he stood to go to his own bed, “you’ll get a chance to meet Laura in the morning, you’ll love her!” It was a weird segue but his sister was still on Derek’s mind so Stiles agreed readily before letting his overwhelming need for sleep wash over him.
Stiles did meet Laura at breakfast, as promised. She was tall and flawless and downright gorgeous. The last one must be a family trait, as she’s the third Hale he had met and the last of the immediate pool to sample. Laura had more than just good looks going for her as well. She was friendly and sociable too. She could have easily clashed with Lydia as alpha female of the table, but the two found themselves talking about the latest fashions instead. She made a point of including everyone in the conversation too.

Stiles wasn’t ready to give his opinions on fashion trends, however, so he had very little to offer. After a long exposition on appropriate use of leather and animal prints and how to do them properly, Derek was asked, or more rather ordered, to wear their father’s leather jacket again to demonstrate her point to Jackson. Ten minutes later and Laura burst into tears seeing her brother walk back into the mess hall with it on and the conversation quickly turned into a show and tell about how much Derek looks like each of their parents. Derek was a tad less forthcoming with the new topic.

Both John and Melissa were absent from the staff table, so Stiles inquired about their whereabouts and this brought on an entirely new conversation with everyone’s speculations. It was surprising how quickly the group accepted John’s strange distance as allowable. Boyd repeatedly stated that the man was sick and that everybody, he looked directly at Stiles, needed to back off and give him some space. Ironically, that was when Laura excused herself because she still needed to go talk with said man. It was more than a little bit comical because despite Derek’s unobtrusive ways, he obviously didn’t want his sister to leave and it appeared like it physically pained Laura to go, as well.

“I like her!” Lydia immediately declared, once Laura was no longer within hearing dance. “I can see why you want her to adopt you, she’s nice and way better than that uptight uncle of yours. Living with her while she’s going to college in New York! That would be like some adorable sibling sitcom!”

Derek grinned at the thought. “It has been way too long since I’ve seen her in person and our family was so close too, it’s weird, like I had forgotten what I was missing. Anyway it’s not official yet or anything, but that is actually why she is here. She told me last night, now that the trial is over Peter okayed the adoption.” Stiles didn’t even know Derek’s smile could get that large. “This might be my last year at Beacon of Hope too, man,” he added to Boyd.

This sparked a whole new topic all about how quiet they both used to be. Apparently Allison once arrived to class early and only Boyd and Derek were in there and for ten entire minutes she had to sit in complete silence. Boyd remembered that, and confessed that he literally was psyching himself up to greet her because he was still shy around her back then and by the time he had built up the courage to say something, Lydia and Jackson bounced in and they were both so loud that Allison didn’t even hear Boyd’s squeaked out, ‘hi Allison’.
Derek laughed. “I do remember that! It wasn’t funny at the time, I actually was thinking at least you had managed to say that, I was a little proud of you. All I could do was grunt when Allison entered.”

Allison’s eyebrows rose, she obviously missed the acknowledgment.

Erica brought up how instrumental Derek was to her and Boyd actually dating. Derek had encouraged Erica to just ask Boyd out already because it would take years for him to overcome his nerves and ask her.

“You used to cover for them a lot too!” Isaac supplied. “Remember when you chopped wood so Boyd could meet Erica in the art classroom!”

“Dude! You do other people’s punishments? How come you never helped me out?” Scott asked with indignation.

“Derek couldn’t stand you back then!” Lydia reminded them. “You were constantly getting in trouble and Derek was ready to strangle you!”

“You didn’t listen,” Derek defended himself. “You basically did the opposite of everything I warned you against!”

“That was until you guys had to do that buddy hike back together,” Jackson said with a flourish. “You came back with some sort of unspoken agreement to get along after though. Lydia, Allison, and I were kind of left out of the loop for a while there too. Like you five had some sort of pack we weren’t apart of yet.”

“We didn’t even sit together at this table back then,” Lydia added. “Jackson sat with Danny and me and I instantly brought Allison along with us, she didn’t have much of a choice.”

“You mean you guys had the cool kids table and the rest of us lowly padawans weren’t good enough to join you,” Erica countered.

“Well either way,” Derek cut in. “I’m glad we came together, I’m really going to miss you guys…”
Kira and Stiles were both largely quiet throughout the reminiscing simply because they weren’t there but Derek’s last sentence jarred him out of his stupor.

“So you really are just going to leave in like a month?” Stiles couldn’t help but ask in disbelief. It would have been funny how quickly everyone found somewhere else to be. Had Stiles not been entirely focused on Derek and his response he would have laughed at their scramble to leave the table.

“Don’t worry, Stiles, unlike you I’ll say goodbye before I go,” Derek said seriously. “And it won’t be in some letter to Scott or Lydia telling you that I was sorry either, I’ll give you a proper farewell.”

Stiles felt slapped by the words. And maybe it was rightfully so, he had chicken out on writing Derek a letter after all. But still, he thought— he thought they were good, great even. Stiles didn’t know what to say to that. Slowly he closed his mouth. Derek must not have had anything else to add either because the two sat in uncomfortable silence until it was time for class.

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“Hey Derek! There you are!” Laura called from her perch on the top of a picnic table.

Lydia and Allison were with her but both quickly waved their goodbyes telling Derek to have fun as they made their way to their first class.

“So, good news! John gave you the day off! He said we can go into town and do some shopping, grab lunch even.” Laura’s eyes lit up. “I may have, err, complained about the food. He said he gets that a lot, but come on, they might not have an In-N-Out, but I bet we can stille get you that milkshake somewhere!”

“Yeah, of course! You don’t have to ask me twice! Let me go get changed and I’ll— ”

“Keep the jacket on, it looks good on you, Dad would— he’d want you to have it.” Laura told him sincerely. “Now the rest of those clothes! When was the last time you bought jeans? Those are like an inch too short for you, Derek.”

Derek blushed with embarrassment. Peter had given him clothes for his birthday or for Christmas,
it wasn’t wrapped so he wasn’t sure. But Laura was right Derek was seventeen now and literally outgrowing his pants. Plus his shoes had taken quite a beating with all the hiking trails, it would be nice to get some new ones.

Laura drove fast and carefree down the mountain. They had the windows down and music blaring. It was fun. While shopping, Laura quizzed her brother on his basketball career. She was shocked and disappointed to find out that he had missed a couple of games in the beginning of the season.

“Well, there are a lot of good schools in New York,” she said as she tried on new sunglasses in the dusty convenient store mirror. “You’ll have more opportunity next year to get noticed.”

Rather than excitement or pride as Derek usually felt when talking about his basketball prowess, he winced at the words. Stiles reaction to his announcement earlier that morning was— less than supportive, perhaps just shock, but it certainly wasn’t great and it left Derek questioning himself and the decision.

Laura huffed with annoyance. “Doesn’t this town have any real department stores?”

Derek shrugged unhelpfully.

After scouring the few stores that weren’t labeled as outlets, it was obvious that Laura was ready for a change of pace. She checked her watch. “We could go for an early lunch or— she looked around the mostly abandoned street. I could give you a few driving lessons. What do you say?”

Derek’s mouth hung open. “Re— really?”

The truth was his dad snuck in a few premature lessons himself when Derek was a freshman, but he wasn’t allowed to do more then practice parking and backing up back then. He remembered thinking how jealous his friends would be. He had told Kate the very next day in fact. She— didn’t seem to understand what the big deal was about being able to back the car all the way out of the driveway…
Laura explained everything, occasionally Googling things such as which way to turn the wheel when parking on an incline, just to make sure she was getting it right. In the end, Derek successfully drove down several streets, used his blinker well in advanced at every turn, and even managed not to panic when driving through a roundabout. All he had left to do was park in front of the diner Laura had pointed out.

“You— you missed it,” Laura said a little unsure.

“I was looking for a parking lot,” Derek told her as he put his blinker on to turn right and loop back around.

“There isn’t one,” Laura told him. “You have to parallel park in the spots in front of the restaurant.”

Derek's grip tightened on the wheel. “What.” It wasn't actually a question.

Laura explained the process several times as Derek chickened out on his next drive past the building too. Once they were nearing the diner for the third time, Laura explained again.

“Okay slow down, you have no one behind you, take your time, and even if you did, what’s the worst they can do? Honk? This little country place is far too nice for that and honestly in New York you’ll be honked at for going too slow when you’re already doing ten over the speed limit, so you’ll have to get used to it.”

Derek tried to focus on what Laura was saying but for some reason his breathing was suddenly extremely loud— and rapid, it was definitely too quick. What if he passed out while driving!?

“Okay, blinker on,” Laura’s calm voice penetrated Derek’s thought. “Good. Now pull in. Slowly, slower, good, good.”

Derek immediately threw the Camaro into park as soon as he felt like he was situated behind the car in front of him.

“Okay, you’re not done yet. You pulled in successfully, but you have to back up some now too. Give the car in front of you room to back out without hitting your bumper.”
Derek gave Laura a death glare but with shaking hands he moved the gear shift from park and into reverse. A second later Laura told him he was good enough and that he could cut the engine. He did so without putting the car back into park, causing Laura to scream ‘break!’ at him. Flustered, Derek pulled up on the emergency parking break instead and Laura, calmer now, moved the gear shift in to park.

Laura explained that the car was okay and even said the keys wouldn’t have come out of the ignition until he parked properly. Derek was still hesitant to actually move his foot off the break however and only did so after much coaxing from his older sister. Once out side of the car the siblings both looked at Derek’s crooked parking job with their head cocked to one side in unison.

“Well, think of it this way, you had to start somewhere and I’m pretty sure we won’t get a ticket for being too close to the road. In New York some street parking spaces aren’t so wide, so you won’t be able to leave it as crooked.” She then beamed at Derek and clapped him on the back.
“You did great though, our parents would be so proud!”

The diner was family owned and operated and therefore offered the best burger Derek had ever had. Or perhaps it was simply because he was so accustomed to Beacon of Hopes standards, or rather, lack there of. He did order a milkshake too, just as Laura promised. It tasted divine. Or at least that’s what Laura declared after she snagged a sip or two or three for herself. Derek could hardly protest however as he’d had the best day so far. It was truly great. Would living with Laura be like this all the time?

Derek’s anticipation at the thought dropped however as soon as Laura spoke next. “So, you really did it huh? You actually slept with that— with her?”

Derek froze with a french fry halfway to his mouth. What was he supposed to say to that? Guilt flooded him instantly.

“You did, didn’t you? I really didn’t believe Peter when he told me, but I can tell by the look on your face, it’s true. I thought— I don’t know what I thought. Maybe that your teacher was delusional, well she was obviously, but— how could you?”

As soon as she spoke the words Laura immediately started to backpedal but the damage was done. Derek dropped the fry and shoved his chair back. He didn’t have anything to say that could defend his actions. It was stupid of him to get involved with Kate. He hated himself for it every single day. It cost them both of their parents and their little sister. A million apologies would never bring them back and it was all his fault. Laura was right.
Sometime during Derek’s mental berating of himself Laura came around the table and crouched in front of him.

“I’m sorry,” she pleaded. “I shouldn’t have said that, it’s just— it’s a lot to accept. They were, they were my parents too and Cora was so young, and—”

“I can’t,” Derek interrupted to say. “I can’t— live with you.”

“What!? No, I won’t— I won’t bring it up again, I swear. We’re all we have left, Derek, we have to stick together. Mom would—”

“That’s just it,” Derek cut her off. “I’m not ready— it’s still hard to— I can’t talk about them freely, the way you do. Just mentioning Mom or Dad or Cora— it’s too much. I can’t explain it but it’s— guilt. I am guilty, just as much as Kate is.” Laura gasped at the name. “I ruined everything and so what if I was only fourteen when it started, she still— I just let her…”

It didn’t matter that the pair were causing a scene. This conversation was long overdue.

Laura was speechless.

“I think Peter got it right, by sending me here. Melissa, she’s—”

“John told me your counselor said you weren’t ready to go home with me, but that he disagreed, he said you improved a lot since you first arrived. That you talk again, which I mean you obviously do, but its just he made it sound like you were better— fixed.” Laura spoke solemnly.

“I’m not— something that can just be fixed. Melissa likes to say we’re all a work in progress, and it’s true. The fire happened nearly two years ago now, but I didn’t even know that Kate was the cause until December. I thought— I thought she loved me. I thought—that she really was the first love of my life. Yeah we had to hide, but I figured when we were older that we would—” Derek couldn’t finish the sentence.

“You— loved her?” Laura’s tone didn’t hold contempt or disgust. She sounded merely like she was digesting the concept.
“Yeah I did. I’m not ‘fixed’ as you said, I’m still working on it. How does anyone accept the role they played in the death of their family? To be honest, I barely talk about it still, I could never reminisce with you about what it was like before, last night and this morning when you were comparing me to dad— ”

“Okay,” Laura stopped Derek from trying to find the words. “You’re right, I think we’re at two different places in the recovery process. And I don’t— blame you. I saw that tape in the courthouse. I didn’t want to believe it. And when you didn’t deny it, I just— I overreacted just now and I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry too, Laura, I’m so, so sorry. Your right, it was my fault.”

“No, no I was wrong to accuse you like that. The only person to blame for our family’s death is Kate.” Laura reached for Derek’s hand. He allowed her to take his reluctantly. “If you’ll reconsider, you could keep seeing a therapist in New York. We could go together.”

Derek appreciated the sentiment, he really did. But when he declared that he wasn’t ready to leave it felt right and he knew it to be true.

Letting his sister down gently was difficult. She was persistent but after several more rounds of apologies from both parties, Laura seemed okay with his decision to stay.

Laura drove back to the school. Derek was just too emotionally drained and had she offered, he would have declined. Despite all the things they talked about both good and— difficult, Derek had failed to update Laura on Stiles, which he had meant to once they were out of earshot from his classmates. He knew she had met Stiles that morning, but he wasn’t sure she knew he was the student Derek had begged Laura to rescue. He bit his tongue on that tidbit of information during the drive back. The radio seemed less upbeat now, but somehow that was appropriate given the circumstances. It was nice, just spending the afternoon quietly watching trees fly past as Laura drove him home.

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Stiles didn’t even bother to knock as he barged into John’s office. “I don’t care if your high or whatever, Derek’s missing. Allison and Lydia said that he left the campus with his sister with your permission. But I asked Melissa and she had no idea.”
With those words, said counselor came jogging in after Stiles. “I told him I would radio you about it, but Stiles just took off.” Melissa looked sheepish. “I had to get Chris to cover my class so I could chase him down. He seems to think you let Derek leave the campus? But you wouldn’t have done that without talking to me first, right?”

John’s gaze flickered between Stiles who’s entire posture screamed ‘ready to pounce’ and Melissa who was the picture-perfect image of wided-eyed innocence. It must have taken him too long to form words because Melissa asked again, “well? Would you?”

Would I what? Oh right let Derek off campus for lunch. Yes, that sounded vaguely familiar…

“I— I did. I told his sister that they could go.” John admitted weakly.

“His sister? How come I wasn’t informed?” Melissa quickly asked.

“Derek said that Laura’s going to take him with her. That he— that he’s leaving!” Stiles said sadly.

“What do you mean?” Melissa countered. “He’s not ready for that, there is Triskelion Point for one thing, but he only truly started opening up in counseling sessions recently. He has a long way to go…”

John sighed. “Close the door,” he told Stiles.

The student did so with himself inside which was the opposite of what John had meant, but he responded to Melissa’s concern regardless. “Derek wants to go. He’s beg for his sister to pick him up from the moment he got here. Hell, half the kids here are looking for a way out. You even ran!” He pointed his finger at Stiles. “What the hell am I doing here? Who am I helping really? I just— I need a break.”

“So what?” Melissa’s voice wobbled. “So you’re just going to give up? You’re just going to send them all home? Stop caring? These kids are here because their home lives weren’t working out for them!”

“No,” Stiles spoke next. “No way. I need this! What about— Isaac or— or Scott, his dad hasn’t
called since the holidays, we need this place. We—we need you!” With those words Stiles slammed his fist down on John’s desk causing both adults to jump. “We need you to get out of this slump and start— start counseling again.”

John opened his mouth to argue, but Stiles cut him off. “I’m yelling at you right now and I just came in here without knocking and you aren’t doing a thing?! How could you just— give up on me? Didn’t you see the game last night? This place— these people, they’re great, they really are. I would, I would be dead if it wasn’t for this school.” And while Melissa was full on bawling by the end of Stiles speech, Stiles himself was radiating pure anger.

“Stiles I’m ti— ” John tried to say but Stiles interrupted.

“No! No more excuses! Fuck you John for telling me to hang on, to trust you, and not give up. Because that’s exactly what you’re doing. You’re giving up!”

With those words Stiles turned around and left, slamming the door for a second time, causing several pictures to rattle. Melissa appeared torn between following her upset student and trying to understand her long-time friend.

“John Stilinski, I don’t know what has gotten into you lately, but telling Stiles— telling any of our students that you need a break from them!? That is unacceptable. Derek is my student, my responsibility, he shouldn’t have left without my knowledge, not to mention you okaying his early dismissal from the program. Have you even consulted with his uncle about this? He is Derek’s legal guardian, after all. I’m so disappointed in your actions or rather lack of actions lately that I have no choice. I’m going to talk with the other counselors about this, and we will sequester you away from the kids until we all can make a decision because what just happen can not happen again, I don’t care how well you’re not feeling.”

Melissa left too. Presumably to go after Stiles. The echoing silence after all the raise voices was like another scolding in itself. John swallowed the lump in his throat which contained all the half-ass excuses he was planning on feeding Melissa. She was right. They both were right, even if Stiles was out of line with his language. John had to do something. He failed them. Not just Melissa and Stiles, he failed them all.

With a heavy heart he pulled up a word document and started to type.

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The Camaro pulled back into Beacon of Hope’s parking lot with both of its occupants remised that the afternoon was over. Laura was out of the car first and halfway around to Derek’s side before her little brother could manage opening the passenger door. She scooped him up in another awkwardly long hug, just as she did so when she greeted him the day before.

“I love you, little bro, I do,” she whispered with the embrace.

“Glad to see you made it back okay,” Melissa’s clipped tone called out to them from the fence post she was leaning up against. “Derek, I spoke with all of your teachers and they were gracious enough to put together a homework packet of the assignments you missed while you were out on your little excursion.”

Something in the way Melissa was addressing the two of them told Derek that she wasn’t entirely on board with his morning shopping trip.

Laura must have picked up on the tension too. “I asked John if it was okay. Last time I visited I was allowed to take him off campus for lunch too, I assure you we went with his permission.”

“Oh I know, I’ve spoken with him.” Yes. It was official, Melissa was upset. “Laura,” she offered her hand. “It’s been awhile. Hope your journey wasn’t too bad. All the way out here from New York.”

“I drove in from California, actually, only a few hours.” Laura was willing to trade pleasantries.

“John also told me you guys spoke about removing Derek from the program early and I have to advise— ”

“Wait,” Derek interjected. “We talked about it, Laura and I, and I’m not ready. I’m getting there, but I’m not ready, not yet.”

Melissa’s entire demeanor softened.

“Oh! Oh, well then, I’m glad we’re in agreement, not that you haven’t made strides, because you have especially as of late, but— ”
“I know, I know I’m a work in progress…” Derek grinned. “That’s what I told her,” he playfully nudged his sister.

“Actually I’m glad you brought it up, could we go to your office and discuss some things.” Laura tentatively spoke up. “I think it might be good for me to see someone too, maybe when I go back to college, and then perhaps we can do a group Skype session or two, if you’re okay with that of course. I think it would be good for me to perhaps learn better ways of handling myself when I’m with my brother.”

“Yes— yes of course, that would be wonderful for him, I think, actually. But I have to ask, did something happen?” Melissa glanced between the siblings.

“I’ll tell you about it. Derek, you probably should go start on that homework,” Laura winced. “Sorry for that.”

“I had a good time, I really did.” Derek tacked on the last part because of the doubtful look Laura shot him. “I’ll get to see you before you leave, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, I can probably manage one more saltless meal,” Laura teased.

Derek waved off his sister before beginning his search for Stiles. Aside from that painful conversation with Laura Derek kept thinking about what he said to the younger teen earlier that morning. It really wasn’t fair, the situations weren’t the same. Plus he had to tell him he was staying.

He found Stiles swinging an axe with more force than was necessary, splintering a pretty innocent pile of wood. Derek hesitated to move closer.

“Stiles,” he called from a respectably safe distance.

“What!” Stiles snapped. First Melissa and now Stiles, it seemed like everyone was in a bad mood today.

“What are you doing?” Derek asked, still unsure if he should even persist.
“Melissa suggested I take my anger out by cutting a few logs.”

“Oh. Well the splinters will certainly be lighter to carry.” Derek tried to sound positive. Stiles next swing down embedded the axe in the tree stump that they used as a platform for log splitting. It looked rather stuck.

“What do you want?” Stiles turned his full attention towards Derek with the question. He had his over-shirt unbutton and sweat-soaked the one underneath. His hair, longer now than when he first arrived stuck to his forehead and a little bead of perspirant trailed down his neck to pool at his collarbone. The irritated crinkle of his brow did lesson however once his eyes locked with Derek’s. “Glad to see you’re back.”

Derek couldn’t really hold off from telling Stiles that he was staying. The words burst from his mouth instantly. He then rewound a bit and explained about what led to the choice. Stiles was happy for him and obviously relieved. After that, Derek launched into how Laura let him drive and Stiles was very jealous. The jealousy became even more apparent once Derek described in great detail how amazing his burger and fries were. Stiles shamed him for not going with the curly fries and settling for the more standard option.

“So this is who you are now? Some leather-clad, sports car driving man who makes his own decisions, no matter what they say?” Stiles teased as he allowed his eyes to roam Derek up and down.

“Why, do you like it?” Derek asked flirtatiously. He stepped closer, no longer in threat of bodily harm or decapitation.

“Maybe,” Stiles smirked.

Derek was close enough now. He trailed a stray bead of sweat delicately with his thumb as he placed his hand on the back of Stiles’ neck. Stiles visibly shook from the touch. Derek couldn’t suppress his smirk of satisfaction over the reaction. He leaned forward for a kiss. It always surprised Derek just how soft Stiles’ lips felt and despite their chapped or bitten appearance this occasion was no different.

Stiles pulled back first. “Thanks for staying,” he whispered.
After the disastrous encounter in John’s office the day before, Melissa was more than a little nervous to enter that morning. She steeled herself for another argument as she turned the nob to come in. What awaited her, she wasn’t expecting.

John was standing, not listlessly or erratically as she had come to expect as of late, but just stood there as if he was patiently waiting for her. He held a piece of paper in one hand and a prescription bottle in the other. Her eyes narrowed in on the object.

Without saying a word he passed her the paper and Melissa read. She didn’t even make it to the bottom before she asked in a hushed voice, “what the hell is this?”

“Melissa, I— ”

“It’s a resignation letter. So that’s it huh? You just give up? What, you make a mistake, have a setback, so you just give up on all of them? On me?” Melissa promised herself she wouldn’t cry again, and failed.

“You were right, Stiles was right, the kids deserve someone— ” John tried to explain but Melissa didn’t let him finish.

“The kids deserve someone who cares about them and their well being. And that man is you, John. They deserve you! You’ve helped countless students through the years. And yes, that,” she pointed to the prescription bottle, “is a serious issue. But we will get through it together, don’t give up on the kids. What sort of example would that be, huh?”

“Example? I’m not the type of person— ”

“You are exactly the kind of person they need. You’ve earned their respect, that’s a huge thing for most of those kids out there. This is a real life problem, the same sort of problem that some of those kids have dealt with themselves. What better example of perseverance could there possibly be than for you to come back from this? Yes, you made a mistake,” Melissa took John’s free hand and squeezed tightly. “A grave misjudgment. But you’re human, we make mistakes, we have to learn from them, learn to live with them, and accept ourselves for who we really are. That’s the core of what we teach here. And this,” Melissa shook the letter in her hand, “this is running away. Exactly what you shouldn’t do in a situation like this.”
John surprised Melissa by bursting into tears of his own. He cradled the woman in front of him and ducked his face from her view.

“It’s just— Brandon, it’s what he did— and with my alcohol dependency issues. I should have known, I did know better and I took them anyway.” John took a few deep breaths in a failed attempt of regaining control of his emotions.

“Listen, I’ve helped you pull yourself out of a bottle once, I can do it again. I’m here for you, we all are. And you can overcome this. It’s a setback, not a complete change in direction.”

“It’s not just that, this isn’t something I can hide.” John forced himself to look up. “Stiles knows, he— he accused me of being high before you joined him in my impromptu intervention yesterday, and he was right, I was.”

“Well he would have figured it out when you tell the rest of them anyway. You need to rewrite this letter into an apology to the staff and students. Come clean and then get clean. Do it for them, set the example, but more importantly, do it for yourself.” Melissa encouraged.

“I— I can’t do it alone,” John admitted to the floor. “I— I need help, I need you.”

“You have me, John,” Melissa assured, as she brought her free hand to rest on his cheek. “I’m yours, I always have been.”

John nodded, still unwilling to look her in the eye and passed over the prescription bottle.
So there are definitely some plot issues that I will go back and fix in previous chapters eventually. So much of this was already written or planned at one point or another that I’m not sure what has been repeated and therefore contradictory. Such as Laura teaching derek to drive. Did I already mention that? Did I say it was his father? I’m not sure. Also I’m pretty sure Isaac didn’t make the team because he was injured during tryouts? But well he’s on it now because he needed some action, so I’ll fix that too...
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Slight warning for excessive food talk. Just going through a self edit this morning made me break my mid morning snack timing...

Chapter Notes

Unbeta’d at this time.

Anyone else interested in a fic reading club? Specifically Sterek but I think it would be nice for an occasional out side suggestion too, just to expand ourselves.

Here’s what I’m thinking. After doing some research, Facebook groups seems to be the best for online meetings. I don’t like that, it takes away our anonymity. Most writers use tumblr, so a lot of you guys go there for fandom love and that would be ideal. But their commenting ability seems lacking. Can people post comments and view comment threads easily on tumblr? If so I need help setting it up there, like perhaps I shouldn’t be an admin for such a project. I’m looking at you Supernatural_lover01.

So here is it what I was thinking as an alternative to tumblr and I’d love to know what you guys think. We are all already here. Most of us with accounts and familiar with Ao3. What if I created a new account (solely to keep the messages away from the ones regarding my actual works) and used it to create a “work” titled: Sterek fic club. The first ‘chapter’, would be rules regarding the club and people could post their suggested fic recommendation and three or four questions or topics related to it in the comments. I would then post a new ‘chapter’ with the fic recommendation link and questions, thus starting the conversation about said fic. We could keep it going and I’ll add at the bottom of every chapter what fic we will be reading next. Occasionally perhaps, I’ll throw out a ‘chapter’ with questions regarding the fandom or other fandom suggestions as well.

I put some thought into this. I feel like it would be different from just reading the fic and commenting on that fics section because it would be an open discussion amongst readers rather from reader to author. It could be fun. To start I would probably post a new fic weekly but we could always add more posting days in over time. The cool thing is, the discussion won’t close we go on. We could be on week 33 and a newcomer could go talk about their favorite work from week 4 if they so please.

Also, I’d have the ability to delete the entire chapter, thus removing anything less than nice posted. Or should the author request that we not talk publicly about their work. Although I think it would be an honor to be chosen as a recommendation, personally...

Tell me what you think. If you are interested in something like that. It would probably be best if we had a few “admins” running it along side me, in case I get distracted or overwhelmed. And Ao3 let’s you have multiple authors and I’m hoping that everyone has equal posting rights if set up like that... So if you’d like to help run the show, let
me know that too.

Edit: If you are interested in the fic club please feel free to share your thoughts or ideas in the second thread in the comment section under JusticeBanana's post. Thank you!

Episode 21

“How long are you going to keep this up?”

“….”

“It’s been over three weeks already Stiles.”

“…”

“I know it’s on me, my fault, but d— I’m sorry! Okay?”

“…”

This was the sixth counseling session John had had with a completely silent Stiles and once again the teen sat with his arms loosely crossed and shoulders slumped down in his seat. The only time he perked up was when John spoke about his stepfather’s arraignment.

The— sorry excuse of a man pleaded guilty to the multiple counts of child pornography and distribution which was indisputable given the evidence. The prosecution didn’t offer a deal and as a result the defense team claimed to be not guilty in the child maltreatment case. Fortunately Simon will continue to serve time until the trial can take place. And more importantly for Stiles, the prosecution requested a victim impact statement to be included in the sentencing, should the judge find the man guilty. John couldn’t imagine any judge would dare to deny Stiles the right. Choosing to confront one’s perpetrator is a very brave thing to do indeed. It’s something that many victims are too terrified to even consider and given these circumstances could be quite cathartic for Stiles’ healing process.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have anything else to add in the case of your stepfather’s trial but I will continue to keep you updated, as you originally requested.” John paused. “You do still want to be involved, correct?”

Stiles narrowed his eyes, unwilling to break his vow of silence to answer the question.

“Stiles— I— please, it’s been nearly four weeks.”
His student raised an eyebrow.

John blew out a deep breath. “You remind me so much of him, you know, my— son. He was stubborn, too.”

Stiles still didn’t say anything.

“—And he would have been incredibly disappointed in me as well. I—um, I wasn’t at my best, when he—” John swallowed thickly as he considered his wording. “My wife left me— left us both but that’s not an excuse, and— I wasn’t home a lot, it was just the two of us, Brandon and me, I told you all how he— died. But I didn’t really go into the details. While my son was struggling with his addiction to opiates I spent nearly every night drowning my own sorrows in alcohol. I missed all the signs, I was a police officer, and yet I couldn’t see that my own son was addicted to narcotics. Looking back— it was so obvious. I should have known…”

“Melissa— bless her, she— she was a nurse. She’s had countless ER patients coming in looking for a prescription to settle their fix. Had she considered it, she probably would have realized what my behavior indicated… But, sometimes— sometimes it’s really difficult to see what’s right in front of you, when, in your heart you don’t want to accept it.” John searched Stiles’ eyes to make sure the student was following along despite his refusal to speak up.

“You knew though, right away, you didn’t buy my lies, and you called me on it— Thank you,” John said sincerely. “My son, he tried to get me to get help after the divorce, and when I didn’t— when I continued to pick up extra shifts— he fell into his own demons— and I didn’t see it and that cost him his life. —So, thank you. This time, you made me see that I needed help. That I was in over my head. Lately I often find myself wondering what could have been different if I had taken Brandon’s concerns to heart before it was too late back then.”

John took a minute to steady his breathing before he choked out, “anyway, I’ll see you in class tomorrow. Go join your teammates on the field before coach sends Jackson to retrieve you again.”

And for the first time since John had stood at the podium in front of his collective staff and students to humbly apologize for his actions, Stiles acknowledged him with a nod of his head as he stood to leave.

***

“Okay, before we go, I just want to run over some basic rules of etiquette for this weekend. I need you on your best behavior please. Think about the consequences of your actions. We will have an influx of outside stimuli and many of you have parents or guardians who will be here. For those of you who are unaware, John has asked the local PD for help in monitoring the grounds as he typically does for Parent’s Weekend and I just don’t want anyone to be alarmed by the presence of the police officers and also, I can not stress this enough, please no funny business. The uniformed men and woman monitoring the campus are here to ensure your safety, but they have keen eyes
Melissa took a moment to look at each of her students directly. Several, Scott and Isaac in particular, shifted guiltily.

“Furthermore, in preparation for your families’ visit we will be conducting a thorough cleaning of our dormitories and you guys are extra lucky because I’ve signed you all up to clean the classrooms as well. Group bonding! I’ve assigned each of you a partner and list of classrooms to cover, they are already posted in your cabins. And, as a special reward for working so hard to ensure our campus is pristine, classes are cancelled on Friday! That should give us all plenty of extra time to get the work done!” This message was met with several rounds of groaning.

“Scott, Isaac, and Stiles, I’d like to talk to each of you a bit more, the rest of you can go. You have ten minutes until curfew,” Melissa said with a smile. “Oh! And while you do have Friday off, might I suggest getting started on those dormitories after class tomorrow, I hear the weather will be gorgeous Friday and anyone who finishes their extra chores early will be welcomed to join me in a midday hike!”

Lydia raised a incredulous eyebrow at the suggestion as she followed Erica and Kira out of the common room. Jackson leaned in towards Scott and said, “told you your father wouldn’t show,” before he too left the room. Derek looked a little torn but with Melissa’s nudging he joined Boyd at the door. Leaving just Isaac, Scott, and Stiles left on the overstuffed furniture.

Melissa sat on the coffee table as she wouldn’t have to raise her voice to speak to just the three of them. “Typically, the students who will not have parents coming up for the weekend are given other tasks to ensure everything runs smoothly. Scott, I’m afraid Jackson is correct although I’ll talk to him again about speaking appropriately, but your father is working on a big case at the moment and is unavailable this weekend. We spoke about possible alternatives and there is a chance he might visit early in the summer. I’m sorry.”

Scott scoffed at that but otherwise didn’t interrupt.

“I have both you and Stiles assigned to the kitchen for Saturday and Sunday’s evening meal. Typically parents will bring their child’s favorites and not too many op into partaking in our meal plan. So it will be a lighter duty then usual, but you’ll be both cooking and serving, which means a late dinner for each of you, so eat a big lunch.” While both boys looked unimpressed neither voiced their complaints.

“Isaac, John asked for you specifically to be a greeter, so you’ll be working the front office most of the weekend. Offering some of the newer parents a tour of the grounds, that sort of thing. It’s a big responsibility, for some this will be their first visit to our school, and you’ll be their first impression. Do you think you’ll be up for the task?”

Isaac nodded shyly.
“You’ll do great, don’t worry,” Melissa encouraged with a smile.

The three teenagers simply blinked back at her until Melissa shooed them off to bed. As soon as they thought they were out of her ear shot however, Scott started to complain about his dad, Stiles grumbled about the extra chores, and Isaac asked in a disbelieving voice why anyone thought he would be a good tour guide.

Melissa sighed quietly to herself.

***

“I’d rather be in class right now!” Kira yelled from across the hall where she and Allison were currently scrubbing graffiti off of the science desks.

“Well, technically you *are* in a classroom,” Stiles called back.

He was currently trying to out throw Scott in their trick-shot game of trashcan basketball. It was made especially difficult because the recycling bin had a smaller opening. Unfortunately for Parrish, they had long since run out of actual trash and were now creating ‘basketballs’ from the lesson plan he had left out on his desk.

Two doors down Boyd and Isaac were cleaning the media room, judging by Isaac’s playlist blaring from the open door and across from them Lydia and Erica were probably nearly finished with Marin’s classroom. Poor Derek was paired with Jackson and was assigned the art room! There was no way the two of them would be joining Melissa on her hike…

“Man, I can’t believe Melissa has us doing all this extra work! It’s not like our parents are coming, we should be exempt from the chores,” Scott whined as he missed his shot for the third time in a row. “And they’re not even feeding us tomorrow night!?”

“We get dinner, just late, and besides you complain about the food all the time!” Stiles reasoned.

As he said that Scott nodded and pulled a Sneakers bar out of his pocket and started to unwrap it while Stiles attempted to mimic his shot.

“It’s just— if my dad— didn’t want to be a dad— he should have just let me— live with my mom,” Scott said in between gooey chocolatey-caramel bites. “Like why even have a custody hearing?”

“Do you ever get to see your mom?” Stiles asked.
“He’s a FBI agent, my mother never stood a chance, it’s like he had to win for winning’s sake.”

“Well, there are plenty of fancy-smancy preparatory schools he could have shipped you off too, and he sent you here instead,” Stiles tried. “To help you, with—you know, that pesky drug selling issue?”

“They sent me here because of the trafficking on school grounds charge and having to properly arrest me would have been too embarrassing for my dear old dad. It was an option and my dad jumped at the opportunity… But it’s cool or whatever, I like it here.” Scott’s face lit up into a dopey grin as he stared longingly at the open door across the hall. Kira’s colorful language streamed in again. She was dead set on reading every single scribble before she set on the task of removing it. Allison could be heard giggling occasionally.

“Yeah, I bet you do, buddy.” Stiles shook his head. “For what it’s worth, I think all this fuss over Parent’s Weekend is overrated, but well, it’s not like I’ll have visitors either, so what do I know. Any chance you have one of those Reece’s cups on you too?”

“You mean one of these?” Scott dangled the candy teasingly above his head.

“Scott! What in the—where did you get that?” Melissa stormed in through the open doorway, huffing. “That’s—How?”

“Ahh—” Scott left his mouth hanging open as he struggle to form an excuse.

“Is that the only one?”

“Yes?” Scott glanced at Stiles, eyes pleading for help.

“Scott!” Melissa admonished.

“I gave it to him,” Stiles rushed out. “John, you know how I’m ignoring his very existence, well he tried buttering me up, got it from the mini fridge in the office, and well—I couldn’t cave, so—” He gestured wildly back at Scott who was failing to look like this story wasn’t news to him.

“Well—Scott—you’re grounded!” Melissa proclaimed.

“Grounded?”

“Yes, from candy,” She said as she held her hand out for the treat. “And from the media room, and—” Melissa looked around the mostly untouched classroom. “And from Stiles!”
“What?” Two voices said in shock disbelief.

“Did either one of you even bother to grab a broom or a mop from the supply closet? What have you been doing all day?”

Stiles sputtered while Scott gaped even wider.

“You have two more classrooms to clean! So I’m separating you, Scott grab a broom and go next door. Stiles you stay here I’ll get your supplies. I need to see sparkling surfaces, let’s go.”

Stiles opened his mouth to protest but before he was able to properly argue his point Melissa held up the candy. “And while I was joking about grounding you guys, don’t forget that I have a reason to search your entire dorm room right here, so you two better separate and get the job done before I change my mind, come on. Chop, chop.”

Those words were all Scott needed to bolt out the door. Stiles didn’t know exactly what else his friend had hidden in his pockets currently or what wrappers were discarded under Scott’s bed so he chose not to disagree and set instead on retrieving the missed paper ball and properly recycling it. Melissa helped him straightened desks and even sprayed down the white board before she excused herself to check on Scott. Within an hour nearly everyone had passed by the room announcing they were done cleaning for the day or teasingly asking what was taking him so long. Stiles tried his best to ignore their gleeful tones while he tightened his grip on the mop.

Derek popped in just when Stiles was moving on to their third and final classroom. Scott could be heard occasionally muttering to himself angrily next door. It sounded like he wasn’t going to be joining Stiles anytime soon.

“Why does it look like you haven’t even started in here yet?” Derek asked.

“Because I haven’t,” Stiles replied honestly, holding out the broom handle for Derek to take. “You sweep, I’ll start on the desks?” He fluttered his eyelashes in an overzealous manner with the question.

It said something about how great Derek was that he didn’t even protest. That’s when Stiles looked at him properly. Derek’s clothes were dusty and had paint scattered about them. His shirt sleeves were wet and rolled up as high as his forearm muscles would allow. His hair had a thin layer of lime green chalk to it and as he turned around to start sweeping in the far corner, Stiles
noticed faded chalk hand prints all over his back with one in particular strategically placed on his butt.

“How are you finished already? It looks like you rolled around on the art room floor” Stiles queried as he appreciated the roughed up look. Derek was typically very put together.

“Jackson’s worse, trust me,” was all Derek said in response.

“Oh yeah? Did he have a sexual awakening while you two were in there?” Stiles raised an eyebrow, smirking.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing, never mind,” Stiles laughed to himself at the thought of Jackson questioning his sexuality mid wrestling match with Derek. “Thanks for helping! As you can see Melissa separated Scott from me a while ago.”

“I don’t know why she ever put you two together in the first place,” Derek admitted. “But if we move quickly we might be able to catch the others on that hike!”

Stiles groaned.

***

Melissa stood proudly on the front steps with one arm slung over Isaac’s shoulders and the other on Allison’s. “Thank you again, both of you, for agreeing to be apart of the welcoming party. I know it’s early, but don’t worry. Usually the first round of parents are super excited to be here. It’s the late ones we have to keep an extra eye on.” As she spoke a rental car rounded the corner. “Looks like you’re up!” Melissa gently pushed Isaac forward.

Isaac adjusted his shiny new name badge and wiped the palm of his hands on his jeans nervously. Once the car was safely parked two people exited from it, both with matching wide smiles as they approached.

“Greetings and welcome to Beacon of Hope!” Isaac said, a tad rehearsed. “May I ask— I mean, my name’s Isaac and may I ask who you will be visiting with this weekend?” He spun around to face Melissa. “It doesn’t make any sense if I already know whose parents they are? That’s Erica’s mom.”

Melissa nodded reassuringly. “You don’t have to follow the script exactly, adjust accordingly.” She turned to Mr. and Mrs. Reyes. “And if you two would just follow me inside we will get you
signed in and then I’ll walk you over to the mess hall, Erica should be at breakfast right now. So glad to see you again! Hope the flight wasn’t too bad!” She added warmly.

Allison sent Isaac an encouraging thumbs up just as another car approached the school’s parking lot.

***

“Mr. and Mrs. Boyd, good to see you again, please come on in, I’ll get you sign— ”

“Mr. Stilinski, before you take me to my son, I’d like a word with you,” Mr. Boyd’s tone left no room for an argument.

Shaken by the serious expressions John faced, his smile slowly fell as he escorted the parents into his office. Allison quirked a curious eyebrow from behind the office counter but knew better than to say anything.

“This is in regards to the letter you sent us last month,” Mrs. Boyd explained once the door was shut. She sent her husband a meaningful look before she continued. “We were— concerned, naturally, for our son’s safety. But— we didn’t want to pull him from school so close to the end of the year.”

“How could you think that was okay? Huh?” Mr. Boyd cut in, clearly holding himself back from raising his voice. “We trusted our son to your care!”

John bit the inside of his cheek to resist the urge to sigh. They certainly weren’t the first parents to express concern over the abuse of his prescription medication last month, and they wouldn’t be the last. And some did in fact decide to pull their kids from the program. John had an hour long discussion with the Mehealanis deciding what would be right for Danny the very next day after the letters were sent as a matter of fact. It was understandable to feel that way, justifiable, and John told the Boyds so.

In the end, John hoped that they had a better grasp of the situation and felt Mr. and Mrs. Boyd were a little more reassured that their son was in good and capable hands. This was mostly do to the fact that Melissa now officially oversees John in all decision making regarding the students in her care. The same could be said for the other counselors too. Where as before conversations would have been had between John and said counselor and jointly they would have agreed on a student’s progress. Now it was more of of a sign off on John’s part. This gives John a little less authority over the students, true, but it ultimately lighten his work load and stress level significantly. The Boyds were happy to hear about the procedural changes. And John was glad to see a quick turnaround in their attitude.

He radioed Melissa and asked her if she could send Boyd to the office to collect his parents. Melissa responded promptly saying they were on her way to greet them together. Mrs. Boyd
nodded approvingly at the statement.

***

The day was progressing nicely. Melissa had yet to have a Parent’s Weekend go off without a hitch however, so she wasn’t holding her breath. As long as she didn’t have a duplicate of last year’s incident with the Whittemores she’d be happy. And that was not too likely to happen as Mrs. Whittemore decided that she would visit her son this weekend and her ex-husband could come up in a couple of weeks after school was out. John had worked out everything with Mr. Whittemore, acting as the go between for the two adults.

Kira’s parents arrive next.

“Oh, hello Mrs. Yukimura, and— ”

“Ken— Yukimura, but you can just call me Ken, I’m Kira’s dad.”

Melissa smiled warmly. “Oh! We’ve spoken on the phone. Kira’s really mellowed out since we started the vitamin supplements. I’m her head counselor, Melissa. I’ll get you signed in and then we can go track down your daughter together.”

“You don’t know where Kira’s at?” Mrs. Yukimura asked skeptically.

“Well it is a little past lunch time, and many of the students who aren’t showing their parents around are working on homework under the gazebo. So, I think we should check there first.”

Isaac opened the office door for them. He had just returned from showing the mother of a somewhat new admit the grounds.

“It looks like this young man is waiting patiently for his parents to arrive. Why isn’t my daughter here as we discussed on our last phone call? Punctuality is important. What are they teaching here?” Mrs. Yukimura questioned her husband in a loud whisper as if he would have any insight as to where their daughter was or why she wasn’t standing by the office doors.

Melissa glanced nervously between the pair before she explained that Isaac was helping out at the office today because he didn’t have parents to entertain or wait patiently for. She clasped the young man on the shoulder and reinforced what a wonderful job he was doing so far too. Isaac took the comment from Kira’s mother in stride and even volunteered to take them to their daughter. Melissa politely thanked him for the offer but felt it was best that she handle this particular set of parents herself, as the tension she felt in the mere minutes since the Yukimuras arrived had her on edge.

Fortunately, Kira was exactly where Melissa thought she would be. Along with her— Scott, Stiles,
Derek, and Lydia had all managed a spot on a bench in the shade of the gazebo. They seemed to be joking around more than actually studying, but there was at least a math book present in Kira’s hand, so hopefully Mrs. Yukimura wouldn’t be too hard on her daughter. The laughter died down as Melissa approached.

“Mother.” Kira greeted instantly. “Dad— I didn’t think— it’s— it’s been awhile.”

“Come on now, Kira, we talked about this, you need to apologize properly,” Mrs. Yukimura scolded. “The sooner we can move past this— incident, the better.”

“I’m— I’m sorry da— father.” Kira said more to the ground. Melissa had never seen her cave so quickly to a request— from anyone.

Ken eyed his daughter apprehensively but then nodded. “Let’s do as your mother says and move on, now come, I’ve missed your smiling face, and your colorful hair, we have so much to catch up on!” He held his arms out for a hug and to almost everyone’s surprise Kira accepted the embrace. She even returned her father’s smile with a beaming one of her own.

Mrs. Yukimura didn’t seem to comprehend the uniqueness of the situation. “Now how have you been doing in school?” She asked as she tried to steer her husband and daughter away from prying eyes.

Kira launched into an explanation of each class.

“Dude, I thought Kira hated her parents?” Scott whispered as they watched the teen lead her parents away.

“Yeah, didn’t she stab her father or something?” Lydia asked.

“She hit him with her sword,” Stiles informed them. “There’s a difference, but still…”

Melissa didn’t know what to say to her curious students. She was just as perplexed as they were.

***

“Oh my god! Even Isaac is out there!” Scott bemoaned as he forcefully dropped a scoop of the questionable stuffing on a tray. The splatter covered the sliced turkey that was next to it. A man in a business suit who was visiting his daughter gave Scott a reproachful glare.

“I think it’s kind of sweet,” Stiles piped up. “Allison cooked for both her father and Isaac! And now they are having a family dinner together! Look how straight his back is! He’s terrified!”
Scott kept his eyes on their classmates and he missed the tray that was passed to him. Stuffing landed on the counter with a thud.

“Can you imagine what they are talking about?” Stiles thought out loud.

“Can I have another scoop please?” An older student asked Scott pointedly.

“No,” Scott automatically replied. Then he turned to Stiles and in a deeper voice said, “what are your intentions with my daughter, Isaac? Have I introduced you to my gun collection yet?”

Stiles laughed.

“Seriously, I want another scoop.” The male student demanded.

“Seriously, I said NO!” Scott finally tore his eyes away from Allison and Issac’s table to look at the person requesting more stuffing.

Stiles shook his head and lightly bumped his friend aside to get the guy his scoop. Scott whirled around and for a split second Stiles thought he was going to go off on him instead, but Scott’s eyes dropped in that same instant.

“I’m taking a break,” he announced.

Stiles quickly agreed, for everyone’s sake. Two of Marin’s students were serving with them too. One of the senior girls opened her mouth to protest, but Stiles quickly said he could cover for Scott and they got the line moving again.

Like Melissa had said, most of the people attending Parent’s Weekend brought their own food. So it wasn’t like there were a bunch of people fighting over who would get their knockoff version of the oddly out of season Thanksgiving Day dinner next. But either way the faster they worked through the crowd the closer they’d be to done. So Stiles scooped stuffing with one hand and the off colored gravy with the other.

“Whoa. Looks like you guys might have gone overboard on the mashed potatoes,” Melissa eyed the towering pile of the white monstrosity skeptically.

“Well, we figured you can do that thing you guys do with the mac and cheese when no one eats it and serve it tomorrow for lunch and then we’d be all out of the powdery crap you call a starch and perhaps get some real potatoes on the next reorder;” Stiles answered honestly.
“Or,” Melissa replied knowingly, “John will see how quickly we ran through the mashed potato mix and order twice as much next time.” She quirked a brow and grabbed Scott’s scoop to help out.

Stiles groaned.

“It’s a shame too, because I’m pretty sure he had a treat in store for the hardworking, double duty kitchen crew, but he might just rescind the offer after seeing all these leftovers,” Melissa continued. “I saw Scott leave the line, is he okay?”

“Just upset that his dad is a no show again,” Stiles told her. “Jackson’s all smug, proudly showing off for his mom, and bragging about his dad visiting soon too, you know, the usual.”

“I just had an insightful counseling session with both Jackson and his mom that contradicts the front he puts up.” Melissa told him. “But you know that, we’ve talked about it before, and plus Jackson’s not even in the mess hall yet, so what got to Scott just now?”

Stiles flicked his eyes towards Isaac and Allison. Melissa followed his gaze.

“It’s not really them, though. He’s happy for Isaac, honestly, it’s just— his dad, he should be out there too, you know, maybe sharing a table with Kira’s family.”

Melissa smiled and glanced at the table. The Yukimuras brought rows and rows of chilled sushi, all three of them eating with chopsticks in complete silence. “I’m not entirely sure they are up for the company,” she admitted. “So far they’ve refused the family counseling I offered and aside from quizzesing Kira about her studies, I’m pretty sure they haven’t spoken to each other at all.”

It was Stiles’ turn to raise a brow. He hadn’t noticed. Kira was usually quite bubbly and talkative unless it was before eight in the morning— or if she was hungry— or on the lacrosse field— or in class— or just upset in general… But, watching her flick her eyes nervously between her mom and dad in between every bite of sushi, it didn’t really suit her. Melissa had a point.

Erica’s loud burst of laughter caused Stiles to pull his gaze away. Sitting right in the middle of the mess hall was the Reyes’ and Boyds. Their table was landed down with a wide assortment of food — and people. At the moment Marin was helping herself to a plate full of fried rice. Mrs. Reyes seemed determined to feed everyone within an arms reach, having had already invited other parents to join them. Stiles was surprised to see Boyd handling all the attention so well. But he was, smiling openly at the look of pure glee on Erica’s face. Both of his parents seemed just as surprised by the show of emotion as Stiles was.

“So, Stiles— speaking of John,” Melissa paused as confusion must have flashed across Stiles’ face. “He’s the one who will be ordering twice the amount of powdered mashed potatoes. Anyway, have you given any thought into forgiving him yet?”
Stiles dropped the ladle he was holding and grabbed Melissa’s forearm. She finished the tray in front of her before allowing him to tug her to the corner of the kitchen and away from prying ears.

“Listen, I’ve dealt with addicts before, been friends with them— worked for them,” Stiles whispered. “Sure they get sober for like a day or a week, mostly because they’re broke, but not for long and never for good. And I know that John used to be an alcoholic and isn’t anymore, and that’s great and all for him but messing with— that stuff, it leads to more, and I can’t have— I can’t trust someone who might decide to go and— ” He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Melissa held her hands up placatingly. “I’m not asking you too. Abusing his prescription like that, it was stupid and serious— seriously stupid and he should have known better.” She cocked her head thoughtfully. “Some of the kids here were addicted to narcotics on their arrival. Parrish hosts a weekly meeting and I know that John told you, but he’s been going. Not as a counselor but as an attendee. And I know that you were clean when you first came to us but you’ve admitted to trying some of the harder stuff, that getting high was a welcome reprieve when you were— homeless. And I’m happy for you that you don’t have the pre inclination to become an addict. But, I don’t know, maybe hearing some of their stories, celebrating their successes— perhaps it would be good for you. Will you trust John after just one meeting? No, certainly not. But it could be good for you, to see a less tragic outcome for those that suffer from a vice.”

Stiles couldn’t help the small frown he made at the suggestion.

“Look,” Melissa continued. “John cares about you. You’re not just a student to him, and you’re more than just an update on your stepfather’s case. He asks me every day how you are doing. Do you see all the students we have here, and he asks about you! I know you’re mad. I’m mad too! Just, don’t let this set you back. You’ve come a long way since you arrived. You’re older and taller for one thing,” She playfully held a hand above his head. “But it’s your soul, it’s freer, less burdened, and John was a part of that, but— if you don’t want to continue consoling with him— we can work out a different arrangement. I don’t mind extra sessions personally, but we strongly feel the dual approach is good so I could talk to Parrish or Harris… ”

Stiles shuddered.

“Chris isn’t certified, but perhaps in a friendship capacity, he is already mostly looped in on your home life situ— ”

“It’s okay,” Stiles interrupted. “I don’t want anyone else. I have you and Derek— sometimes, and no one else needs to know about— It’s fine, I’ll— I’ll talk to John, do you know how hard it is to keep my mouth shut for an entire hour anyway?” He tried to laugh, but it sounded weak to his own ears.

“Stiles, I wasn’t trying to threaten you into settling for John,” Melissa quickly interjected. “That was not my intention at all, we can double up on our weekly one on ones. Just you and me. It’s not an issue, honestly. I just was curious where you stood on the whole situation.”
Stiles nodded slowly. “I— I appreciate you seeking my opinion,” he said truthfully. “but— I do want to keep seeing John for counseling. I like his legal perspective and— he’s a little less into discussing feelings and more into picking apart a situation and having me come up with alternatives. No offense,” he tacked on quickly with a wince. “I’m still pissed at him though, how could he do that— what if the school got shut down? Where would I go? And I thought maybe it was okay, everyone kept saying he was sick a lot while I was gone, but he kept on canceling classes, and sessions, and he was never in the mess hall— and then Derek went missing, and— “

“I know— ” Melissa held her arms out for a hug. “I know. It was reckless.”

Stiles didn’t take her up on the offer, choosing rather to step back with a shake of his head. “I’m not trying to be petty by giving him the silent treatment, okay— sometimes I am. But, mostly I just know if I open my mouth I might yell or say something that I shouldn’t— and honestly that’s like exactly what you told me not to do back when Lydia and Jackson were giving me a hard time, you know.”

Melissa chuckled at that. “Do you mind if I share that with John? One of our lessons backfiring so spectacularly?”

Stiles shrugged.

“Okay, for now, we won’t change anything, but if you think you’re starting to grow stagnant in the healing process, you’ll discuss it with me. And I’ll do the same— I promise. And I won’t even ask how that lack of progression makes you feel!” Melissa teased.

Stiles agreed. He appreciated the new approach, talking about this sort of thing with him first rather than just setting a schedule and expecting him to follow it. It was— nice, having a little more say in the situation.

“Oh would you look a that!” Melissa said over dramatically as she reached for an item behind Stiles’ head. “A bottle of olive oil— just think about it. Maybe going to Parrish’s meeting could be the first steps in forming a branch.” She placed the heavy gallon in his hands.

Stiles slumped with the weight of it.

“I better go track down Scott, he still hasn’t returned,” Melissa told him in a concerned tone before leaving him to ponder their conversation.

Stiles thought about it. He’d never even considered attending what essentially was an AA meeting. He also preferred a joint to anything more mind altering and even kicking his short term smoking habit wasn’t altogether that difficult. Although that probably had more to do with the sheer lack of cigarettes on this mountain or the ability to light them than anything else…. But, maybe he should attend one or two…
The mess hall doors opened again. Lydia looked up, with an intake of breath, and exhaled slowly. Derek refused to check. If it was his uncle she would have told him. It was almost eight, if Peter didn’t show soon, they were both going to miss dinner. Stiles and the rest of the serving crew were already packing up the leftovers.

“They’re just— running late. Maybe there was an accident in town,” Lydia tried to sound optimistic.

Derek snorted. “And what, everyone else made it just fine?” He glanced around the crowded room. Boyd had tried earlier to wave him over to their table. Several people had long since filled the open seats and even more had pulled up loose chairs. Despite the overcrowding everyone there seemed to be having a really good time. The parents were sharing and talking with one another as if they were all long lost friends. The teens were laughing or trying to hush their parents depending on the story being told. Derek didn’t doubt for a second that both Boyd and Erica would walk away from tonight with memories made and several new friends to count on from outside of Melissa’s group. He was happy for them.

“It’s Lydia right? Mr. Martins daughter?” Mrs. Whittemore approached the small group of students still waiting for their parents to show hesitantly.

Lydia turned towards Jackson and his mom primly. “Yes. And how has your day been today, Mrs. Whittemore?”

Derek blinked back his surprise at her syrupy tone.

“Wonderful. Just wonderful, this school has been great for Jackson, I think it’s all the outdoor activities, they really keep you guys busy here. I just wanted to say that I’m sorry to hear about your father, and to invite you to our table. We had Steak and Lobsters delivered from town. They ordered the Lobster especially for the occasion, can you imagine living so far away from the coast to not have a proper seafood restaurant in the entire city!? But we have plenty to share, and I’d hate for it to go to waste if you’d like to join— ”

The longer Mrs. Whittemore talked the more visibly uncomfortable Lydia got.

Jackson noticed too. “Mom! Stop it, your scaring her. You’re waiting for your mom to arrive?”

“Yes, she said she would be flying in, in the evening, and I do appreciate the offer,” Lydia thanked Jackson with her eyes before sending Mrs. Whittemore a fake smile. “But, I should wait for my mother, it would be unbecoming of me to indulge without her. Perhaps we will join your table, once she gets here.”
Mrs. Whittemore seemed satisfied by that response and allowed Jackson to pull her away. She commented on what a well mannered young lady that Lydia was. Derek didn’t have to look to know that Jackson’s face was turning scarlet.

“Can you imagine, me bringing my mother to sit with her and having Jackson’s mom start talking about their divorcée lifestyles. My mother would probably faint! Plus it’s still so new and raw I’m sure she wouldn’t have anything to say on the matter…” Lydia trailed off.

“You don’t talk about it much in group. How is your mom doing with everything? With the change in income?” Derek asked conversationally.

“She seems fine in her letters. Usually they are very precise about details she wishes me to know and nothing else. I asked Melissa about possibly writing my father in prison,” Lydia smirked. “That was never a sentence I thought I would have to say. But anyway Melissa tracked down all of his information. I can send one at anytime, I just— I haven’t decided what I should write. The usual stuff of course, ‘I miss you’ ‘I love you’ that sort of thing, but also I haven’t talked to him since Christmas. He’s missed so much of my life I don’t know what to share. And then it’s prison, right, so like other people will be reading these, or at least that’s what I assume. Did you know you can video chat with inmates now? Melissa told me, but it’s sort of expensive and I’m a little worried my mom might question me if she sees the charge on my credit card…”

“He’s your dad!” Derek reminded her gently. “If you want to write to him or Skype him, you should be able to, don’t let your mother take that from you. I mean yeah he’s in jail because of money stuff, but it’s not like he actually hurt anyone, he has never hurt you! And you should tell him everything! What I would give to have a conversation with my dad, to apologize and also to ask him for advice— on Stiles.” He added the last part under his breath but Lydia clearly heard him if the quirk to her lips were anything to go by.

“You know if you want you can talk to me about Stiles,” she offered after a minute’s pause. “God knows we’ve done our fair share of gossiping over you a time or two. I don’t really know what goes on in that head of his but he still seems to think that you’re uncertain of your sexual orientation. As I was at one time pretty certain that you were as straight as a pin we could discuss that?” Lydia’s giddiness came through over the change in topic.

Derek met her suggestion with a cold stare.

“Or we can talk about his flakiness, his need to run away, how his behavior and self doubt leaves you feeling uncertain of your future together?”

Derek felt his heartbeat pick up, although he would never admit to it.

“Vulnerability. That’s the word for it. He makes you feel vulnerable, Derek. It’s new to you because— and I’m only assuming here, but when I was trying to be your girlfriend I made everything easy. I did all the heavy lifting. I put my heart out there, I made all the moves, you just — had to go along with it. There was no action on your part that could have backfired, that was all
on me, as it did when you screamed at me in front of everyone during that blackout.” She gave him
a scathing look. “It wasn’t mutual.”

Lydia took a deep breath before telling the floor in a small voice. “I bet it was the same way with
Kate…”

“You are nothing like— her!” Derek quickly reassured. “But I see what you mean. Stiles is
different. He’s closed off and full of doubt and so incredibly frustrating.” He sighed. “But he’s
funny in a dorky way, and genuine, and I don’t know, I just— I can’t help it.”

“You like him,” Lydia said simply. “You don’t have to fit that into words, least of all to me, but you
like him and you’ve given him apart of yourself, and that makes you vulnerable. Especially when
he runs off without— without so much as saying goodbye.”

“Exactly!” Derek huffed out.

“But—” Lydia paused dramatically. “Stiles has a lot of skeletons in his closet. To him, he’s not
good enough for the affection you show him. He feels— selfish for taking that part of you. He
didn’t want you to change who you are just for him. He’s vulnerable too, just in a different way.”

Derek didn’t have anything to say to that.

“It’s fragile, and breakable, and I think that’s what makes it real. Most of us here don’t know what
love is, we’re teenagers, we shouldn’t, plus if you look at our parents, it’s not like we had the best
examples growing up.” She gestured to the room at large.

About half the students present only had one parent accompanying them for one reason or another.
Of those that had two, many appeared sullen or distant from each other. Lydia had a valid point.

She continued, “I can tell you that what I was trying to make with you isn’t how Stiles feels. And I
don’t think it’s the easy infatuation and acceptance that Erica has with Boyd either. It’s
complicated, probably more so than it has to be because your both stubborn, but just try to
remember that he means well. I don’t know, keep chipping away at those walls, underneath that
harden exterior is the Stiles that you love, the one that’s holding the piece of your heart that you
gave him.”

Derek felt his eyes bug out of his head. Love… he couldn’t acknowledge in words what Lydia had
more than implied. She seemed to understand his hesitation.

“Boys,” she muttered to herself with a shake of her head.
“Hey Derek!” John called as he joined the group of waiting students. “We finally got ahold of your uncle. He said he thought he was supposed to come up next weekend, that his secretary mixed up the dates. Apparently next weekend is no longer good for him either, so he said he will be coming up for graduation instead. I tried to explain that you’re only a junior and therefore wouldn’t be included in the ceremony, but he didn’t seem to mind. I’m sorry man, I know you’ve been standing here all afternoon, just idly waiting…”

Derek shook his head, “Don’t worry about it, maybe I can squeeze in at Boyd’s table still, his mom brought truffle fries and seemed shocked that I had never tried it.”

John clapped him on the shoulder, “way to turn a negative situation around. Make sure to try the garlic dip she made too! It’s homemade.” He suggested before turning to another student to tell him that their parent’s flight was delayed and that they would be arriving in the morning.

Derek faced Lydia, “you should join us. You’ll spot your mom when she arrives. Come on!”

Lydia shook her head politely. “No, it’s okay, I’ll keep waiting, plus all that fried food would make me bloated, and that’s— not a good look for anyone, and—”

“You don’t have to do that, you know, who cares what your mom will think, she’s not even here!” Derek said knowingly.

Lydia searched his eyes. “Thank you. But still, I better wait.”

“Okay but you’re joining us no matter what by nine, there is no way you’re going to go to bed without dinner on the one weekend a year that we don’t have to eat the garbage they serve here.”

She gave him a small smile as a response.

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“Gather around kitchen crew, gather around, curtesy of John, dinner has just arrived,” Melissa announced as she walked into the back door, her hands laden down with styrofoam takeout containers. “Burgers and fries from the diner in town, and yes, he did get curly ones for you Stiles, and no cheese on yours Heather. You all did a nice job out there today, for the most part, and you’ve managed to finish the dishes in record time. Tomorrow night will be much of the same, although some of the parents do have to leave prior to serving time, so we will have the mess hall open all day for late lunches or early dinners. Let’s try to not go overboard on the side dishes tomorrow, though, okay?”

Scott who reappeared not long after Melissa went to find him, wasted no time and claimed the top container right out of her hand. Everyone else helped Melissa unload before they perched themselves throughout the kitchen. Melissa helped herself to one of the containers which held a
chicken salad and said that a few more staff members would be coming by to pick up the rest.

“Oh my god! This is so good!” Scott managed to say with his mouth full. He had steak sauce
dripping down his chin. “Thank you so much!”

Melissa shook her head but smiled appreciatively at Scott’s enthusiasm. “Like I said, you earned
it!”

Some of the girls obviously disagreed, as Scott and Stiles both left the serving line in the middle of
their shift but everything worked out in the end.

“So, you said this was John’s idea?” Stiles asked tentatively.

“Oh huh.” Melissa agreed as she paired the leaves on her fork with chicken and dressing for a
perfect bite.

“So, he knew about my preference for curly fries and thought to order them, just for me?”

“Sure did.”

“Oh. That was— nice of him, thanks for, you know, dinner and all.” Stiles held up his container
for emphasis.

“If it was up to me, I’d be making you guys eat the mashed potatoes, but he said something about
balanced diets and working hard, and having a little fun while you can, or so,” Melissa told him. “I
don’t know how this is considered more balanced than straight starch, but well, he’s right about
the having fun part.”

The girls were laughing to themselves across the room as they tried and mostly failed to catch fries
in their mouth as they popped them into the air.

“I don’t know what it is with you kids and playing with food,” Melissa said casually as she
followed Stiles’ line of sight. “Jackson wasted an entire bag of popcorn doing that during his first
movie night.” She shook her head.

Stiles stopped mid action as he had been bouncing a fry along the counter before he popped it into
his mouth.

“It’s fun,” Scott said, his mouth still full. “You sure all of those containers are taken?”

“Yes, i’m sure,” Melissa told him fondly. “And when you’re done devouring that burger, your dad
has set up a late night call with you. He’s in the office, but gave me the extension for the conference room he’ll be working out of.”

Scott paused. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Scott glanced between Stiles and Melissa as he wiped his chin feverishly. “I— I don’t know what to say?”

“You could tell him about your school work, what you’ve learned recently, that sort of thing. It’s been a few weeks since you’ve last spoken right?” Melissa suggested.

“Try a few months. Last time we talked was right before our first lacrosse game,” Scott said bitterly.

“Well tell him how it went,” Melissa encouraged.

“We lost.”

“I’ve seen kids just sit there and say nothing to their parents, and you’ve never been one of them, what has you so nervous?” Melissa asked gently.

“It’s just, I figured he didn’t want to— to talk about that stuff you know, like if he did, he would have showed up,” Scott admitted.

“Well— you’ve got to tell him about the Davenport game!” Stiles suggested. “I mean both of the goals were epic and our last away game was great too, you totally saved our butts.”

Scott lit up at the reminder.

“Your dad is very busy,” Melissa told Scott matter-of-factly. “But he does love you and cares about you and wants to know what’s going on in your life, don’t put too much thought into it, just— talk.”

Scott still looked like he was doubting his ability to do so, so Stiles held up a fry teasingly. Scott immediately took two large steps back and opened his mouth. To Melissa’s displeasure, Stiles then tossed the fry across the kitchen and due to Scott’s quick feet, the teen caught it.

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It didn’t take long for Isaac, Allison, and Chris to migrate their way over to Boyd and Erica’s table once Derek sat down. Curfew was extended to ten to give all the teens a chance to really catch up with their parents. Some however flew in on long flights and were already heading out so the crowd in the mess hall had died down significantly, which meant the three didn’t have nearly as much difficulty squeezing in as Derek had just ten minutes before.

Erica’s mom talked happily about their new home with Chris. Apparently their old apartment location was of great concern for Erica’s dad. Even with the routine check ups from the police, he still worried about his family’s safety. So with the help of a local church group the Reyes’ were able to relocate to a slightly nicer neighborhood. Her younger sisters were all in a better school system and as a result they were improving, education-wise, at an alarming rate. Mrs. Reyes even interrupted Erica’s conversation with Allison to apologize for not making that change sooner, for leaving Erica to struggle. The woman’s eyes glazed over and Erica told her with a smile that it’s okay and that she’s never been on a better track to succeed as she is now.

Chris sympathized with Mrs. Reyes’ safety concerns and recommended several inexpensive and still reliable security system models. He even pulled up and app on his phone to show her what he uses on his own home since both he and his daughter are up at the school most of the day. Erica’s mom seemed more than impressed by the technology.

The Boyds and Erica’s father however had a happier conversation going about the prospects of their perspective NFL team. While it could have easily gotten heated when Boyd agreed with Mr. Reyes, the tension was squashed just as quickly by Erica calling her boyfriend a ‘suck up’ teasingly. Isaac, who could easily have gone in one of two ways in such a situation as this, chose to talk to Allison and Erica about their respective days. Apparently he had met several of the parents and was able to point them out and was also on a first name basis with most of the officers trolling their campus. Derek took in all the relative small talk surrounding him easily. It was nice— it was normal.

Eventually, Jackson integrated himself too. His mom wished him a good night, stating rather loudly that she loved him. He returned the affection with a simple, ‘okay mom’ which left a short pause of awkwardness in the air until Jackson plopped himself down in one of the recently vacated seats just to announce that both Mr. Reyes and the Boyds were wrong, the Giants would be going all the way next year. The bold statement was met with a new wave of discussion on the matter.

Isaac had just complemented Allison’s cooking skills for a third time when an outburst from across the room halted everyone mid speech.

“How can you take her side again!”

It was Kira and the shriek of distain was directed at her father.

“Kira, honey, lower your voice, you’re causing a scene.” Her mother hissed at her, cheeks reddening by the minute.
“No, mom!” Kira snapped her head around to face her.

“Listen to—”

“You’re mother!” Kira mocked, finishing her father’s sentence as she stood, glaring at them both. “I said no! No means no, isn’t that what you’ve always told me. Well no! I won’t do as she says! I won’t put up with you giving into her every whim. You didn’t want to move to California! You didn’t want to leave your teaching job behind, you thought it was bad for me to relocate mid year! Mid lacrosse season! I let my team down! But we did it anyway because you ALWAYS do whatever she says! She’s a tyrant, just like the time she said I was too young to go to the homecoming dance. That’s what landed me in here to begin with and neither one of you will talk about it because she says so. It’s impossible to live with her, and I know you agree with ME!” Kira slammed her plate down for extra emphasis but as it was plastic so it didn’t break. Clearly frustrated by the lack of result she tipped her cup over, spilling water on the table. When that didn’t produce the effect she was looking for either, she groaned loudly and collapsed into herself, burying her face into her hands.

John, who was only a few tables over talking with a smiling couple, was by Kira’s side in minutes. He completely ignored both Yukimuras, neither of which had moved.

Derek glanced at Isaac to his left. He looked equally as dumbfounded by the situation. While John consoled Kira, Mrs. Yukimura recovered her ability to function, despite the tears which now accompanied her splotchy face.

“Come Ken, let’s go,” she whispered, but as the hall had gone completely silent over the outburst it was easily heard.

“Wait, honey, let’s just give her a minute— ” Mr. Yukimura attempted to plead.

“I said let’s go,” Mrs. Yukimura snapped. That was all Kira’s father needed to be told. He grabbed his wife’s purse and escorted her out of the mess hall.

***

Lydia watched, as did everyone else, Kira’s tantrum. She finally saw it as a good excuse to leave her post by the door, as she should attempt to comfort her friend, even though it appeared as if John was doing a decent job. Kira gave him a shaky nod and allowed the counselor to walk her over to Erica’s table which now mostly consisted of her group mates and their parents.

However, less than a second after the Yukimuras exited through the doors, they opened again. Natalie Martin entered, shoulders back, head held high, hair flawlessly sprayed down. The absolute picture of perfection. Typically Lydia would have appreciated her mother’s color choice and sensible shoes for the occasion, but she was too busy staring at the man who accompanied her.
Walking in with his elbow quirked so as to allow Natalie to clasp it, was a man dressed in a blue suit, Italian tie, and obviously dyed hair.

“Lydia, darling, there you are! Oh it’s been ages!” Natalie leaned in for a quick faire la bise as she greeted her daughter.

Lydia stood still as statue as her mother backed away from the kiss.

“This is my new husband, Charles— the third! Oh it never gets old saying that,” she teased leaning in close to the man. “It sounds so distinguished! I’m glad you two could finally meet.”

Lydia wasn’t sure what expression her face held but she must have been gaping, because her mom followed up that announcement with a hissed, “close your mouth, first impressions are everything!”

“Nice to meet you,” Charles the third said quickly, leaning in with a handshake.

Lydia heard the words, saw the gesture, and still couldn’t do anything aside from count her own heartbeat. As a sixteen year old female her heart should beat an average of seventy to a hundred beats per minute. Ninety-two, ninety-three, ninety-four—

“Offer your hand!” Her mother ordered. “I don’t know what’s gotten into her, she usually isn’t so rude.”

“Teenagers,” Charles said with fond exasperation. “When my Milly was her age, she gave me all sorts of trouble.”

Lydia recovered. On auto-pilot she placed one of her hands in Charles’ and mumbled out a ‘nice to meet you’ before going a step further to inquire who Milly was. It turns out that Lydia now had two older step-siblings; Melinda age twenty-nine, and Marcus, thirty-four. She also had an array of nieces and nephews all of a sudden. Natalie told her about each of them with surprising detail.

As the brief conversation quickly turned away from surprise family members and into Charles’ shareholdings, Lydia interrupted to ask if they were hungry.

“What? No, darling, we had dinner after our flight— that’s why it took us so long to get here, not many options in this town, had to take a detour.” Natalie explained and then leaned in to ask, “you’ve been watching your figure? Late night meals are not permitted.”

Charles opened his mouth, perhaps to share with Lydia where and what they had had for dinner while she had waited patiently for them, but he didn’t even get a word out before Lydia turned around on the spot.
She took the chair beside Allison and politely asked if she could help herself to dinner. Mrs. Boyd quickly apologized, stating that everything was now room temperature, but Derek waved her off and started pointing out his favorite dishes. The ribs looked amazing with seasoning and sauce coating them in equal measure.

Lydia’s mom appeared dazed for a few minutes before she walked herself over. “Darling, we came all this way to see you— ”

“I waited. I’ve been waiting for hours! I was literally the last woman standing over there, waiting for my mother to show. I haven’t eaten dinner yet and I’m hungry, so that is what I’m going to do. You’re welcome to stay or go, but either way, I’m starving and I can’t believe I’m saying this but I’m seriously going to try one of everything!”

To Lydia’s surprise, her mother didn’t have anything to say to that. She cautiously took an open seat across the table. Charles followed her lead. After half a minute when it became clear that Lydia’s only intention was to continue piling food on to her plate, Natalie tentatively introduced herself and her husband to the Boyds.

John, who was standing behind Kira’s chair, told Lydia that Erica’s mom’s cooking was very authentic and that it should be skipped. He then announced that he had two more students to fine and a takeout container with his name on it to track down and that he would be back in a bit.

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John found Stiles and his to-go order in the same spot. Stiles was washing a mound of lettuce, presumably for tomorrow’s meal.

“Getting a head start?” John asked as he crossed the kitchen to the three styrofoam containers left on the counter. It was just a habit, he wasn’t actually expecting a response.

So when Stiles turned the water off to say, “the girls said Scott and I have to because we both left the serving line,” John couldn’t help the surprise that flitted across his face.

“Where are Scott and Melissa? We have the whole pack gathered at one of the tables out there, I was coming to get you stragglers.” He put the first container down as it contained a salad. That was not for him.

“His dad— late night call, in the office,” Stiles replied, draining the lettuce as he did so. “Melissa’s with him.”

The middle box had grilled chicken doused in a glaze of some sort. It was an option, but John
really wanted a burger, he was sure he ordered enough for him too.

“You went to the doctor’s last week. Melissa went with you— we had Chris chaperone our movie night. He separated the girls from the boys,” Stiles continued in the same monotone voice.

“I did. And she did— come with me, although I didn’t know that last bit about Chris. I’ll talk to him, we don’t want to make anyone feel excluded or like they don’t fit into society’s molds. The school’s lawyers had a field day when I suggested group-sanctioned dormitory cabins rather than the male and female versions of that that we have now… They— won that argument.”

“The doctors— ”

“It was Melissa’s idea. Abusing your medication has other affects aside from the lessened cognitive function, mood swings, general irritability— I’m sorry…” John paused, giving his student a chance to acknowledge his apology with a stilted head nod. “She wanted to make sure I was healthy— well relatively so.”

Stiles continued to stare.

“Knees fine. Everything was good aside from my high cholesterol, but that’s been an issue for years now.” John said as he opened the last container; a juicy cheese burger smothered in sauce and fried onions and accompanied by curly fries. John felt his mouth start to water.

“Cholesterol?” Stiles questioned.

“Yes, been an ongoing problem. My father had a tough time controlling his too, right up until a heart attack put a permanent end to his struggle.”

“Well then— no burger and fries for you,” Stiles said as he placed a sopping wet pile of lettuce right on top of the seasoned potato goodness.

John couldn’t form words. And somehow in his hesitation to pull back, Stiles was able to pluck the container from his hand, shutting the lid on the food inside in the same motion, added lettuce and all. Continuing with his intentions, Stiles grabbed the first container off the counter and placed that in John’s outstretched hands instead.

“Salads only until you get your numbers under control, and then we can talk about adding red meat back into your diet.”

John whimpered but didn’t get a chance to protest as Melissa came in at just that moment announcing that she agreed completely.
“It’s about time you listen to someone John! She said his name with affection before telling Stiles exasperatedly, “he’s constantly ignoring my concerns when it comes to his heart’s health. Scott is in the mess hall with the others, why don’t you join them? I’ll make sure John sticks to his new diet plan.”

“Don’t worry about the heads of lettuce,” John added. “They will still be there in the morning.”

Stiles flicked his eyes between the pair before retreating.

“So,” Melissa started. “He’s speaking to you again.”

“Yeah,” John said slowly, still a little shocked by the development.

Melissa leaned against him, conveniently so that she would be between John and the takeout container that still housed the burger. “I’m tired,” she sighed. “Could today be any longer? I mean I’m glad they get to see their parents, I really am, but— remind me to tell you about Scott tomorrow.”

“Remind me to tell you about Kira— and Lydia,” John countered.

“Our girls,” Melissa said with a yawn.

“Well, Erica’s really come a long way, she was a prime example of what our goal should be with each of them today. And Allison’s dinner with her father and Isaac was a big success. Made Isaac feel included in a weekend he otherwise wouldn’t have been.” No answering response followed that statement.

John was going to reach for a fork but when he turned in that direction he noticed that Melissa’s eyes were shut. She looked so peaceful— so beautiful. Without conscious thought or consideration for his actions he placed a hand against her smooth cheek. She startled at the touch but smiled warmly when she saw who it was that disturbed her.

“Is this— is this okay?” John whispered.

Melissa leaned forward, capturing John’s mouth in a kiss. They hadn’t continued, whatever it was they had going on, since Stiles was sent back to his home. At the time, this— becoming a them, it wasn’t important and then John wasn’t in the right state of mind. But now, this felt— right.

Melissa pulled back first, slightly winded. “Look at us, acting like teenagers!” She breathed against his lips.

John didn’t know what to say to that so he pecked her quickly on the lips before tugging her toward
the mess hall door.

“Speaking of teenagers,” he settled on. “They’re all together, relatively happy,” he leaned against the doorframe so Melissa could pass by and see. “I know you’re tired but we don’t get to see them like this often enough.”

Erica laughed loudly with a huge grin on her face over something her father had said to Stiles. Stiles’ own expression of incredulity was priceless. Derek gave Stiles an ‘I told you so’ look with just a simple quirk of his eyebrows. Jackson was in a deeply heated conversation with Boyd and Scott, judging by his expressive gestures. Lydia had one arm around the back of Kira’s chair. The other was holding a fork. Isaac and Allison were both listening with rapt attention to whatever it was that Chris was telling them. Kira wasn’t speaking with anyone in particular but her face held her usual cheerful smile again.

“This— these moments, it’s what makes it all worth it. The tears— the heartaches— the outbursts,” John continued. “You were right! Right here— with you and our kids, our family, this is exactly where I need to be.”

Melissa beamed back at him. “I love you, John Stilinski,” she said quietly but Derek must have had canine hearing because he quickly repeated the phrase for everyone else to hear.

The table broke out into cat calls and whistling from the teenagers while the parents congratulated the pair. Mr. Boyd even said that Melissa would be good for him. John agreed readily before leaning in towards Melissa to tell her that he loves her too.

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