Black Water

by Sarcastic Ninja (It_Belongs_In_A_Museum)

Summary

High school. It's difficult enough to navigate on its own. Especially when you were quick-witted, bitterly sarcastic, and emotionally constipated with a bad case of verbal diarrhea. And yes she was aware of the inherent contradiction contained within that phrase.

When Charlie Oswin moved to Beacon Hills after the death of her father, she thought the worst she'd have to deal with was gossip, term papers, and her new best friend Lydia Martin lipsticking her to death in the never-ending quest to make Charlie socially acceptable. Actually Lydia had described it more as avoiding becoming a 'facepalm-inducing embarrassment'. But for a tiny town that was 90% forest with one functional movie theater, a lot of people seemed to be dying. There was something off going on in Beacon Hills.

Enter one Stiles Stilinski. He was a twitchy, sarcastic weirdo, and she appreciated that in a person. He and his friend Scott McCall also happened to be at the center of every strange thing that was going on in this weird-ass town. It was one giant mystery. And she was going to figure out what it was. She just never expected to stop being scary and defensive long enough to start developing actual human feelings along the way.

Notes

I don't own Teen Wolf. Any similarities in content or dialogue originated with Jeff Davis and the show.

PS, I also post on Fanfic.net and Wattpad, so if you have seen this story elsewhere, it was not stolen! I'm just posting it in another venue.
It Has Been 0 Days Since Our Last Shenanigans

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I do not own Teen Wolf. Any similarities in content or dialogue originated with the show.

Also, this has been re-re-re-re-edited seeing as the last write-through saw some alarming sleep deprivation-induced typos.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 1 - It Has Been Zero Days Since Our Last Shenanigans

This day was going on record as one of the worst days of her life. She was making a judgement call. To the outside viewer this might seem to be a premature assessment given that her feet had yet to touch the carpet, sequestered as they were in the tangle of her bedsheets, but Charlie Oswin had never been one for indecisiveness. Nope, she was calling it. This day was going to suck. Because today was the first day of school.

Charlie had never liked the first day of school, ever since she was a kid. Sure the first ever time back in preschool had been moderately exciting, what with the promise of new experiences, unfamiliar faces, and the alluring scent of fresh crayons. Well, that and the brightly colored backpack and superhero pencil case she had gotten out of the deal. Those had been, quite frankly, kickass. But the process had since lost its appeal. The pencil cases were decidedly less appealing these days. And it meant starting everything over again—building from the ground up.

Life was like pancakes. Charlie made the pancakes. She mixed the batter, threw them on the griddle. They came out a fluffy golden brown, steaming like the most gratuitous of IHOP commercials. And as she sat at the table to eat said pancakes, pouring the syrup on top, some asshole stepped in, stole the pancakes, and handed her a box of Bisquick. All the ingredients were in her possession, but she still didn't have any damned pancakes to eat. Just flour and disappointment. All the work, never any reward. A labored metaphor, yes, but it applied.

Plus with each move there was that inevitable moment where she would confuse the layout of the new school with the old one, turn left instead of right, and end up in the boys' locker room. Or worse, the teachers' lounge. Charlie didn't even want to begin to understand what went on in that room. Probably some satanic cult rituals. Maybe a Scrabble game. Either way, she was decidedly uninterested. But the fact remained that with the beginning of each new school year, it was like taking an eraser to a chalkboard or shaking an Etch-a-Sketch. It was obliterated—it might as well not have happened in the first place. The entire process was exhausting and redundant as hell.

Hazard of having a parent in the Coast Guard. Life was always in flux.

There had always been one constant, though. One thing that stayed the same no matter the city or the school. Her dad. Every morning on that first day she would wake up to the smell of banana pancakes—actual pancakes, not metaphorical ones—wander the few steps from her room to the kitchen, and find her dad dancing to The Rolling Stones in the most embarrassing way he could
manage. It usually involved him using a ladle as a microphone and splattering batter on the floor, clad in that novelty apron with the words 'I Fish Therefore I Drink' emblazoned across the front. She would tell him he was an idiot and he would pull her into some weird swing dance step that didn't fit at all with the rhythm of the music. It was a ritual that never failed to make her roll her eyes and she never once admitted out loud that she loved.

That's what made today the second worst day of her life. Because as she fell asleep the previous night, she knew that she wouldn't be smelling banana pancakes in the morning.

A small part of Charlie wished she could pull a Rip van Winkle and sleep through the rest of high school. It was a lovely little fantasy, and the fact that her bed felt like a cloud was giving her a hug did not increase her desire to move in the slightest. She wouldn't have to start her sophomore year, she wouldn't have to deal with any of it—she could just float away on a breeze like a dandelion seed and embrace oblivion. But that little bubble she had built up for herself was quite rudely popped when the jarring strains of 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' came blaring from her phone.

Groaning to herself, Charlie managed to extricate one of her arms from the twisted mess of covers and felt around in the dark until the tips of her fingers found the bedside table. They probed around, accidentally knocking the well-worn Jack Aubrey novel to the floor before finding their way around her phone. Not bothering to look at the name flashing across the screen, she hit random buttons until one of them happened to be the 'mute' key. She probably deleted 'Candy Crush' in the process, but it was totally worth it.

Smiling slightly as the music was cut short, she grabbed hold of her deep purple comforter and yanked it over her head, fully prepared to shut out the universe. The universe, though, didn't seem to be on board with that plan. Or at least one specific part of the universe that happened to have strawberry blonde hair, judgmental green eyes that sat under perfectly shaped eyebrows, and absolutely no concept of 'personal time'. It took less than a minute for her phone to start ringing again. Somehow that ring seemed to sound angrier than the first time around. And so was Charlie.

"You've got to be freaking kidding me."

Charlie flipped over and screamed into her pillow before finally throwing off the covers and sitting up in bed. She grabbed the phone and looked at the little clock in the upper right-hand corner. 6:34 a.m. Un-freaking-believable. Grumbling to herself, Charlie angrily punched the 'send' button and held the phone up to her ear. Before she could get a single word out, a voice chirped through the receiver that was far too energetic for that early in the morning.

"Charlotte Felicia Oswin!" the overly enthusiastic and slightly accusatory voice shouted. "It's time to get your adorable, lazy ass out of bed!"

"That's not my middle name," Charlie muttered into the phone, wiping the sleep out of her eyes.

"Yeah, I really don't care," the voice replied abruptly. "And it doesn't change the fact that we've got a lot of work to do before we head out this morning."

Charlie let out a deflated sigh and collapsed back on the bed, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration. "Lydia, what's my one rule?"

"Don't mess with your Converse or you'll stage a bonfire and use my Jimmy Choos as kindling," Lydia drawled out, her eye roll practically audible over the airwaves.

"Okay," Charlie continued, nodding slightly. "What's my other one rule?"
Lydia let out an overly theatrical harrumph, leaving Charlie with a mental image of her making her 'patronizing' face while dutifully inspecting her fingernails. "Lydia," Charlie prompted, raising her eyebrows.

"Okay, fine," Lydia bit out reluctantly. "The other 'one rule' is not to wake you up before 7:00 a.m. or you'll sneak into my room and shave my head in the middle of the night."

"Exactly," Charlie replied with a perfunctory nod, winding her fingers in the sheets. "You're risking your glorious, silky, strawberry blonde locks by talking to me right now. You're not Natalie Portman and not everybody can pull off bald. For all we know you've got a globular, misshapen skull trying to contain that giant brain of yours. You would probably look like an adult-sized fetus. Or like an accident at one of those children's dolls factories. You know, the dolls they have to throw out to avoid any early-onset childhood trauma?"

"You flatter me," Lydia deadpanned, both with more exasperation and less inherent fear than Charlie would have liked.

"No," Charlie drawled out like she was instructing a small child. "I'm threatening you. You're a smart one, Lydia. You can figure it out."

"You know, they say that violence is never the answer," Lydia sighed loudly.

"Yeah?" Charlie shot back. "The person who said that was probably bullied as a kid. I'm pretty sure the violence worked out just fine for the bullies. They got free lunches. And everybody likes free food, Lydia. Everybody."

"Well today is the exception to your thinly veiled anger management issues," Lydia sniped, steely determination coloring her voice. "It's the first day of school, and you've got to make a good first impression. The first day sets the precedent for the whole year and I, for one, would rather keep my position at the top of the social pyramid, thank you very much."

"That's all fine and good," Charlie mumbled into the receiver, "but I'm tired and I could give exactly half of two shits about first impressions."

"You haven't even picked out your clothes for today yet, have you?"

"No, I have not."

With the next sigh, Lydia seemed to have leveled up in her degree of exasperation. "Well that attitude is all fine and good if you want to be one of those weird, arty kids who smoke weed behind the bleachers during lunch," she said through a musical scoff, "but believe it or not, Charlie, this day isn't just about you. Seeing as I have been so magnanimous as to take you under my wing, you are now a reflection upon me. And my reflection had better look good."

"You might want to be careful using the big words like 'magnanimous',' Charlie said dryly. "Otherwise one of these days somebody might figure out how decidedly un-stupid you are. Though, my two cents here, you might want to stop inhaling so much hairspray if you want to stay that way."

That quip was followed up by a short pause during which Charlie imagined herself on the receiving end of a 'melt-your-face-off' death glare. "I'll be over in half an hour with scones and coffee," Lydia replied bluntly. "Make sure you're out of bed by the time I get there." Charlie opened her mouth to argue, but before she could get a word out she was confronted with an unceremonious clicking noise as Lydia hung up on her. Well that settled that. She should have known better than to even
attempt arguing with Lydia. Once that girl set her mind to something, all obstacles to the desired result were systematically and efficiently destroyed. Or just plain ignored.

Swearing under her breath, Charlie threw back the covers and flopped out of bed, nearly face-planting on the floor as one of her feet got caught in the sheets, and flipped on the lights. The harsh fluorescents hit her face, making her groan and blink rapidly as the surrounding landscape was washed out. Slowly her eyes adjusted and she glanced around to for all the tools necessary to prepare herself for the day. If she had been in Lydia's room, she would have been confronted by an aggressive neatness—bed already made and curtains thrown wide open to allow in what little natural light was available, a closet organized by clothing type, style, and color, a jewelry box overflowing with the newest designs, and a freaking assembly line of hair care products and makeup placed in a neat row along her vanity.

Charlie's room, though...that was a different story. She wasn't quite sure what her room said about her yet. She had moved from San Diego into her Aunt Melody's apartment a little over a month before. The room used to serve as design studio—small though it may be—filled with fabric swatches, dress forms, and design sketches, but Melody had cleared out all the tools of her trade. In the space of a weekend it had been filled with the most pleasing designs IKEA had to offer. The woman was nothing if not efficient.

Since then it had been made to look like her room. Charlie found the perfect paint color and put up her posters—The Who, The Black Keys, the original Tron movie, and some random Casablanca one that had made its way into her collection. Mel had bought some beautiful vintage curtains with a twisted, elaborate vine design covering them that were now hanging in the windows. Charlie had even unpacked her mom's old 1967 Gibson J-45 guitar—the only tangible evidence her mother had ever existed other than that pile of stamp-covered birthday cars under her bed she couldn't quite bring herself to throw out. All the elements were there, but the room still didn't feel like it belonged to her. Maybe it was that one box that remained unopened. The one with her dad's things. She hadn't been able to make herself unpack that yet.

Moving to that IKEA desk that had incited the only curse words Charlie had ever heard slip from Mel's lips, Charlie flipped open her laptop and booted it up. She rummaged around in the drawer until she found those Bose speakers her dad got her last Christmas—one of the few indulgences that came from before her move to Beacon Hills—and connected them to the laptop, cranking up the volume until she could practically feel the vibrations through the floor. Quite the feat for such tiny technology, but she needed the music loud. Anything to wake her up before Hurricane Lydia made her landing. She shook her head, slapping herself on the cheeks to bring herself to something vaguely resembling awareness.

It did not work. Definitively, it did not in any way work.

Yawning for what felt like the twentieth time in the space of five minutes, Charlie wandered over to her closet and wrenched out the first things she could find—an artfully ripped-up T-shirt for The Clash, a pair of simple black shorts, a black leather jacket, and her green Converse. Lydia was probably going to throw a fit, but that would have happened under pretty much any circumstances. After chucking the clothes on the bed in a crumpled heap, she made a beeline to the bathroom and hopped in the shower.

A few minutes of frantic scrubbing later, Charlie turned off the water, pulled the curtain aside, and wrapped herself in one of those magnificent, fluffy white towels. Moving to the mirror, she wiped away the layer of condensation the steam had left behind and stared at her reflection. The face staring back was long and thin with a straight nose, thin lips, and pale skin covered with a light splattering of freckles, all framed by a tangle of long, dark brown hair left stringy by the water still
clinging to it. That wasn't what Charlie focused in on, though. She dwelled on the eyes. They were big and green with flecks of brown, surrounded with thin but dark lashes, and they held a sort of hollow look to them. Empty. They used to have small lines in the corners from smiling, but those had smoothed out over the past few months. She hadn't been inclined to smile all that much lately. But then again she hadn't cried since it happened either. How screwed up was that? But no, all in all the girl looking back at her didn't look happy or sad. She looked resigned. She looked broken.

Clearing her throat awkwardly, Charlie took a step back from the mirror and began vigorously drying her hair with the towel. The mirror was a liar. She was fine. Really, she was. A small, nagging voice in the corner of her mind reminded her that her dad used to say 'fine' was a four-letter word, but that was irrelevant. Because she was fine. And she wasn't broken, she was mending. What was it that they said about broken bones? When they heal they're even stronger than they were in the first place. So she might as well be made of adamantium at this point. No, that made her sound pitiful. Weird that putting herself in the same category as Wolverine would make her sound that way, but it did. She was made up of perfectly average bone. And now her metaphor was totally getting away from her and the internal monologuing was reaching a new level of absurdity. Shit. This day was starting out more awkwardly than she would have hoped.

Charlie moved towards the bathroom closet and wrapped herself in a robe so plushy, she was ninety percent certain Mel stole from a bed and breakfast before padding down the hallway to the kitchen.

"Good morning!" an impossibly cheerful voice declared as Charlie rounded the corner. "You're up awfully early."

Charlie gave an absent nod, rubbing at her eyes again. She grabbed a stool from the corner of the room and pulled it towards the small kitchen island that rested at the center of the room, keeping her eyes trained on the floor. Facing Mel's radiant, perfect smile in the early hours of the morning required some degree of emotional and psychological preparation. "Yup," she muttered, leaning forwards and resting her cheek against the cool, ceramic countertop. "Not my fault. Lydia called. Apparently I need help getting ready for school."

Mel gave a small noise of understanding. "Coffee?"

"Is that even a question?" Charlie grunted with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. Of course she wanted coffee. Her body was calling out for caffeine. Her aunt might be a shit cook, but she had a glorious coffee maker. That shining copper espresso machine was probably her best friend in Beacon Hills. Within a few moments a mug appeared in her line of sight, hitting the counter with a satisfying clunk. The rich smell soon filled her nostrils, giving her the energy or at least the incentive to lift her head.

Letting out a sigh, Charlie curled her hands around the mug, clutching at it desperately like she was Gollum getting his hands on the ring of power.

Note to self: she had to get all of the Lord of the Rings references out of her system before Lydia showed up. There was no way she'd be able to fully eliminate all nerd references, but she needed to at least moderate them in the redhead's presence.

Charlie held the mug up to her face and breathed deeply, savoring the smell, and took a comically large gulp. This was immediately followed by an excess of coughing and spluttering as it scalded the roof of her mouth. The sound of a restrained guffaw reached Charlie's ears and she lifted her gaze to glare at her aunt. The woman was the antithesis of Charlie when it came to mornings. The clock had yet to hit seven and there she stood, soft blonde hair brushed back into a neat bun,
attentive brown eyes set off by immaculate makeup, and already clothed in a sleek dress and heels. The only thing compromising her appearance in any way were the pinched lips, fighting back the laughter at Charlie's expense.

"Sorry," Mel said, grinning that simultaneously apologetic and radiant grin of hers and grabbing a paper towel to mop up the splash zone. "It's hot. Probably should have warned you about that."

"I'll survive," Charlie grumbled. She blew on the contents to cool it before taking her second sip, burnt tongue be damned.

"I can't believe you drink the stuff black," Mel said, wrinkling her nose slightly. "It's so bitter."

Charlie made a face as she gulped the coffee down. "Dad always said it gave strength of character."

"And here I was thinking it just gave you stained teeth and a dependence on legal stimulants," Mel replied cheerfully.

"Nah," Charlie said, shaking her head. "It's the same principle as going to the gym. Do something uncomfortable and acclimatize yourself to it, and you win. I never knew what the hell it was that I was winning and honestly it sounds kind of idiotic, but I did it anyway. Dad likes sounding wise and humoring him is easier than watching him pout."

Mel let out a light, musical laugh and nodded. "And what your father didn't tell you was that every morning he'd stop at a Starbucks drive through and get a mocha frappuchino before work."

"Oh I knew," Charlie said, a small smirk covering her face. "He would always forget the cups in the car. And they always had 'Charlotte' written on the side. Because apparently men can't like sweet coffee. I never understood why he did that—he used to buy me tampons all the time."

"That's because nobody would ever assume the tampons were for him," Mel replied sagely. "The coffee on the other hand—"

"Men and their indecipherable egos," Charlie sighed, rolling her eyes to herself. "I never told him I knew about it, though. I'm not sure if he'd care more about being caught with the coffees or being caught acting all macho about the coffee. Either way he'd have died of embarrassment."

Aunt Melody winced slightly and turned back to making her breakfast smoothie, bringing Charlie to immediately regret the turn of phrase. In some ways this whole thing was harder on her than it was on Charlie herself. Not only had Mel lost her big brother, who had essentially raised her, but she had also gotten stuck with his socially maladjusted, possibly crazy offspring.

Mel would never say a word about it, but it was pretty easy to see that she had had to carve away a part of her own life to make room for Charlie. The room she slept in was evidence enough of that. Every so often Charlie would unearth another scrap of fabric or spindle of thread, reminding her what that room's last purpose was, and what Mel had given up. For someone on the younger side of thirty who had only just opened her own high-end boutique and launched her first clothing line the year before, that the change was a lot to deal with. Still, Mel had managed it with style, sincere kindness, and effortless grace. Half the time Charlie thought the woman was a reincarnation of one of those glamorous 1940s actresses like Greta Garbo or Ingrid Bergman. Charlie had missed out on that little genetic gem. She was more prone to bitter sarcasm and general misanthropy.

"Do you want some of the smoothie?" Mel called out over her shoulder. "All the articles I've read say that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. If you want to be able to focus in your
"The frosted mini-wheats commercial is not a scientific article," Charlie replied drolly, taking another inelegant gulp of her coffee. "Plus I'm pretty sure they skew those results. Like, a lot."

Mel sighed and turned around to look at Charlie with a chastising expression. "Look," she declared, brandishing a stirring spoon in Charlie's direction. "I know that sarcasm is one of your basic personality traits—you share that much with your father—but I'd appreciate it if you waited until at least 10 a.m. to get started."

"I'm at school by 10 a.m.," Charlie shot back. "If I wait till then to get started you won't have to put up with it until seven at night at the earliest. That kind of feels like a cheat." The unamused look she received in return made her throw her hands in the air in submission. "Fine. Sarcasm-free zone. No sarcasm here."

"I know you were a straight A student back in San Diego," Mel said, fixing Charlie with a serious stare. "I just want to make sure that nothing slips while you're adjusting to a...new living situation. This is a big transition for you, but your grades are important. I just don't want them to suffer as a result."

"I have no intention of letting my grades suffer," Charlie replied with equal seriousness. "I'm academically paranoid, remember?"

Mel pressed her lips together in a thin line and gave a single, approving nod. "Good. So do you want any smoothie or not?"

Charlie shook her head, sending her still-wet hair flying until it hit the side of her face with a resounding thwack, sticking in place. "No thanks," she replied, pulling the hair away. "Lydia's bringing scones and that satchel of medieval torture devices she calls her makeup kit to make me presentable."

"Oh, that's great!" Mel replied brightly. "You know, I'm so glad that you have such a good friend already. She'll be a great help while you adjust to school here."

"I have done this before, you know," Charlie mumbled into her mug. "I've switched schools like seven times in the past six years. Hell, I've moved twice in the past six months."

"Yes, but this is the last time you're going to be starting a new school before you head off to college," Mel continued in a reasoning tone. "I think it's fantastic you have Lydia here to introduce you to new people. It's good for you."

Charlie bit her lip and nodded, gazing absently into the mug of coffee as the steam danced in front of her face. She knew that Mel was ecstatic about her finding a friend in Lydia. And she was also pretty sure that was because it meant that Mel and Charlie might be able to relate to each other better than either of them initially thought. The two of them had so little in common, Charlie being able to bond with someone interested in fashion, current styles, and that kind of thing might mean something for the parent-child dynamic they had been forced into. Not that her and Lydia's relationship could be described as your typical friendship. They hardly agreed on anything and bickered all the time, but they entertained each other. It had been that way since pretty much moment one of their relationship.

Thinking back to that first meeting with Lydia, Charlie was forced to hide a smirk behind the rim of her mug. It had been a little over a week after Charlie arrived in Beacon Hills. She had mostly kept to herself, moving in her stuff, reading that list of classics her English teacher had given her as
prep for a new school, plucking out some compositions on her guitar—all the basic hobbies that could be performed on your own. It wasn't that Charlie was anti-social, she just didn't tend to actively seek people out. Moving around as much as she did, she tended to view most relationships as temporary. But admittedly that initial isolation had been more intentional than not. Mostly because the wanted to avoid 'The Conversation'.

'The Conversation' was a staple of all moves. The concept was fairly simple—there was no maliciousness or ill intent behind it. It was a straight-forward explanation of why she had moved. Military brat. New town. Story over. A LinkedIn profile in verbal form. But with her current change in circumstances, 'The Conversation' had adopted a more morbid significance. As per usual it would start off with a 'hello' and 'how are you' and then it would move to the typical 'why Beacon Hills?', and now what was her response to that supposed to be? Would she just smile toothily and say 'well it turns out my dad had a massive aneurysm he didn't bother telling me about, it exploded like an over-filled water balloon, and now I live with my aunt #sadface?' That was a lovely introduction, because all the best conversations are forged on pity.

Anyways, apparently it wasn't up to her to initiate said conversation. There she was one day, minding her own business, manning the counter at her aunt's boutique and skimming 'The Onion' headlines on her phone, when all of the sudden someone dropped a pile of clothes on the counter resembling a scale model of Mount Everest. The loud clunk had made her look up from the screen and she found herself staring at a perfectly manicured red-head, green eyes narrowed curiously and face displaying a wide smile. The smile itself came off as slightly cold and calculating—all teeth—leaving Charlie wondering if there weren't rows upon rows of pointed incisors hiding behind that grin, like a shark. It faltered and tightened into something false when the girl looked Charlie up and down. The worn, faded jeans, purple T-shirt that simply read 'People Like Grapes', lack of makeup, ragged fingernails, and messy hair clearly failed to meet some as yet unknown, preordained criteria. Charlie had furrowed her eyebrows at the scrutiny and began ringing up the purchases.

"Is there something else I can help you with?" Charlie remembered asking as her fingers nimbly folded a frilly chiffon top.

The girl leaned an elbow on the counter, propping her head on her hand and regarding Charlie with the same intensity and pitying disapproval she might grant to a pair of out-of-season Marc Jacobs heels. "You're new here," she had declared—not a question, a statement of fact.

"Um, yeah," Charlie had replied, blinking back in bemusement. "Been here about a week. Why?"

Apparently no response was deemed suitable. One thing about Lydia that had appeared both very clearly and very quickly was that she preferred to pose the question—usually ones she already knew the answer to. Which, to be fair, was most questions. "Ah!" she had chirped knowingly, and maybe with a little disappointment. "You're Charlotte Oswin. Melody's niece. Last time I was here she mentioned you would be coming."

"Yeah, that's me," Charlie had replied hesitantly. "I go by Charlie, though."

"Of course you do," the girl then sighed, her voice high-pitched and judgmental. The smile of hers stayed in place, and she cocked her head to the side in a way that made her look like a robot. A very fashionable robot that had almost learned how to mimic human facial expressions. "Well anyway," she had barreled on, "I'm Lydia Martin, and I'm in this shop all the time. Welcome to Beacon Hills." She extended a hand which Charlie took reluctantly, giving it a firm shake. Then Lydia stood there, staring at Charlie appraisingly as she finished ringing up the clothing and giving her the distinct impression that she was an amoeba under a light microscope.
"I'm assuming credit card," Charlie had muttered, waving a hand absently. The look she received in response was a mixture of amusement and disdain—pursed lips and raised eyebrows. After a few moments of narrow-eyed staring, Lydia reached in her bag and pulled out a shiny gold rectangle that somehow felt heavier than any other card Charlie had handled.

"You know," she had drawled out, wagging a finger in Charlie's direction, "having met your aunt I expected you to be a bit different."

Charlie let out a loud scoff and raised her eyebrows. "Different how?"

"Well..." Lydia continued, "to be honest I was expecting something not quite so 'alternative'. A little less Virginia Woolf on the proverbial bookshelf, if you will. Your aunt's pretty glamorous. Great shoes. You...you kind of look like you should be off protesting social injustice somewhere. You know, with a sign that doesn't quite rhyme, but is kind of clever and gets the message across."

"Really?" Charlie demanded, shoving the clothes along with their receipt into one of those custom-made paper bags her aunt had had made for the store. "And what exactly would I be protesting?"

"Based on that outfit?" Lydia replied, her eyes flicking up and down Charlie's ensemble. "Probably something women's rights related. Or maybe the environment. I mean honestly it doesn't matter all that much as long as there's a pithy chant and an overabundance of flannel."

"Okay," Charlie then shot back in a sarcastic tone, nodding to herself passive aggressively. "So I look like a protester and you look like the female cast of 'Mean Girls' had a freaky four-way and produced a bizarre, hybrid baby. What the hell does that matter?"

Normally Charlie would have expected the person on the receiving end of her angry, sarcastic outbursts to get all offended and storm off in a huff. That's how things usually went. Not this time around, though. This time around, Lydia had stared at her evenly a few moments—less robotic and more curious—before her face split into a giant smile.

"You know what?" she had said, pointing a finger at Charlie. "I kind of like you. We're going to be friends." And then, without another word, she snatched up the bag, spun on her heel, and marched towards the front doors of the shop.

"I'm pretty sure I get a say when determining that status of our relationship!" Charlie had shouted after her.

She was met a gleeful and mischievous laugh. "It's adorable that you think that."

And that had been that. Afterwards Lydia had shown up at the shop again, dragging her out for froyo and things pretty much snowballed from there. It had become the girl's mission to turn Charlie into the most socially acceptable version of herself possible, or at least as close as Charlie was willing to get to socially acceptable. Apparently it was okay to look like you didn't care about your appearance as long as it was carefully orchestrated and you were willing to pay a crapload of money to do so.

Then there were the introductions. Charlie had felt like a puppet, being steered around and presented to half the lacrosse team like she was on auction. Lydia did kind of give off the auctioneer vibe, talking so fast Charlie's brain had to buffer and play mental catch-up whenever she paused for half a second. And the lacrosse players? It was a pretty safe bet that they had names, but for the life of her she couldn't remember most of them. Other than Jackson—Lydia's boyfriend—and his best friend Danny. Honestly most of them just stood there with dopey smiles. Which was fine. If they had nothing worth saying, she sure as hell didn't want to hear it. Except for Greenberg.
The fact that he didn't have anything worth saying didn't stop his lips from flapping like a life-size Pacman. He talked more than the comic relief sidekick in horror movies who always bit it fifteen minutes before the end credits.

If Charlie was being honest, she was glad she had met Lydia—not that that was something she'd ever admit to out loud. At first she had thought Lydia was that typical shallow, entitled, pretty, rich girl stock character that seemed to exist in every city she'd lived in. And in many ways that assessment was accurate. That Lydia was both pretty and rich was a fact, completely indisputable. That she was entitled was a byproduct of those first two characteristics. The sticking point was in the assessment of her shallowness. Because in many ways she was shallow—her preoccupation with clothing and social status was evidence enough of that. But if you were paying the slightest bit of attention, it would become quickly apparent that Lydia was also quite possibly the most insanely intelligent person Charlie had ever come across. Not that Lydia wanted people to notice that, and most didn't because they didn't bother looking for it. Which, in Charlie's opinion, was a shame.

All of the sudden, a sound knocked Charlie out of her reverie. The muffled strains of music leaking from her room were suddenly intermingled with the characteristic beeping of FaceTime.

Shit. She should have expected that.

Downing the rest of her coffee and slamming her mug on the counter, Charlie darted out of the kitchen, leaving her aunt calling after her. Her bare feet slapped loudly against the hardwood floors and she shuffled back into her room, finally collapsing in front of the computer. Sure enough, she saw that face in the corner of her screen—wide, mischievous smile, dark brown skin, close-cropped hair, and eyes that tried to look suave but failed miserably in repressing that spark of almost gleeful enthusiasm. Well, that and the blatant use of finger guns, because apparently he was already the awkward, chummy dad at the neighborhood barbecue.

Muting the music, Charlie scooted to the edge of the seat and clicked the 'answer call' function. "Hey, Donald."

The face that filled the screen was pixelated and shaky and the lighting was shoddy at best, but familiar all the same. And for some reason it was in front of a backdrop of old, dingy grey tile. That face leaned in, occupying even more of the screen, and squinted at her. "Awww, Oswin," he drawled out, that almost insufferably confident in tone. "You didn't have to go and make yourself all pretty just for me. Nice robe. They'll love it. Great first impression."

"Why are you calling now?" she demanded, sending him the obligatory eye roll and altogether attempting to appear like she was not relieved to be hearing from him.

The boy let out an almost offended scoff. "Come on, Oz!" he exclaimed. "Did you really expect me to bail on tradition just because we were cast across the country by the cruel winds of fate? It's the first day of school, right? We Bratz gotta stick together."

Immediately, Charlie let her head fall, hitting the surface of the desk with a heavy clunk. "I wish you would stop calling us that."

"Why?" he demanded. "That's what we are. You Coast Guard. Me Air Force. We are the Bratz. Hell, I think they should make us some of those dolls."

"Nope," Charlie snapped, shaking her head with her forehead still resting against the compressed particle board. "No. Do not reference those dolls. Those dolls terrify me—you know this. Their eyes stare into my soul like they want to consume it."
"Wait—you have a soul?"

"Donald!"

"Say it, Oz," he continued, his voice adopting a sing-song cadence.

"No."

"You know you want to say it."

"I really don't."

"You know I'm just going to keep bothering you until you do," Donald replied, that sly smirk eating waiting its way into his voice. "Seriously, I might even start chanting."

Charlie yanked her head from the desk and narrowed her eyes at him. He just tilted his head to the side and raised his eyebrows expectantly. Almost coy. Like he knew she was going to cave and he knew that she knew she was going to cave. It was freaking infuriating. It made her wonder how, of all the cities she'd lived in and all the people she'd met, Donald Price was the one who had managed to stick with her for any length of time. The two of them hadn't even been in the same state since they were twelve years old and her dad was stationed back in Galveston. Well, she did know the reason. Solidarity. Military brat to military brat, they got stuck in the same shitty situations year after year. Eventually the shitty situation became a shitty joke. And the two of them? Well, they had become the Bratz. How would she describe their friendship? It was more along the lines of intermittent mutual harassment. And reminding each other that they weren't actually alone in everything. Not that either of them would ever put something that sounded that deep into words.

"Fine," Charlie finally grumbled, scratching at her forehead with her middle finger and subtly flipping him the bird. "We're the brats."

"No, no, no," he chided, wagging an overly judgmental finger at her. "You gotta say the 'z'—I can hear the 'z'."

Charlie let out a bitter harrumph and collapsed back in her chair with enough force to make it roll away from the desk. "We're the Bratzzzzz," she mumbled under her breath, drawing out the last sound until it sounded like a giant swarm of wasps had invaded her room.

"Now that's better," Donald replied in a voice usually reserved for when he was patting someone on the head. "And members of the Bratz, if you remember correctly, are supposed to call each other on the first day of school. Though I seem to remember you ditching me last week."

Sighing loudly, Charlie reached up and twisted her hair like it was a rope, ringing out the excess liquid and letting it drip onto the blue-gray carpet. "Dude, we had that tradition when we were in the same time zone," she shot back. "You're in Providence freaking Rhode Island and I'm in Cali. Seven in the morning for you is four in the morning for me. I tried to stay awake long enough, but I fell asleep watching Mythbusters."

"You clearly lack commitment," Donald deadpanned.

"I called you during lunch!" she protested. "You didn't answer."

"Yeah, that's because I was busy eating," Donald replied. "The lunch selection they have here is pretty awesome. And they have a cereal bar. I have complete access to an unlimited supply of Cinnamon Toast Crunch now. I mean suburbia is no New York—that's for damn sure—but they
"I know how to feed a man."


"I made it work."

"Yeah—how exactly did you manage that?" Charlie demanded, shifting in her seat and angling the laptop towards her to get a better image. "It's what, 10:00 a.m. for you? Shouldn't you be in math class or something? Where are you?"

"Algebra II if you wanna get all technical about it," he replied, waving his fingers at the camera like he was taunting a cat. "But I, unlike you, prioritize my time. Right now I'm—"

His words were abruptly cut off by a dramatic flushing sound, which was immediately succeeded by his widest grin yet. Yup. Donald and immature toilet humor were very close friends. The best of friends. In fact, if he ever got one of those Japanese talking toilets, Charlie highly doubted that he would leave the bathroom at all. He would have pizza delivered through the window and watch TV on his phone there until he died.

"Well that answers your question, I guess," he said cheerfully. "Let me show you around my office." His face quickly disappeared from the screen, replaced by a swirl of gray tiling that almost made her seasick. "This is the handicapped stall on the second floor of my prestigious high school. As you can see it's very roomy. And here—" he focused on what looked like a series of numbers, but was too blurry to make out "—here is the phone number of a lovely lady named Amy. I'm just gonna—"

"Donald," Charlie growled in warning.

"Relax, Oswin," he drawled out. "I was gonna say I'm going to scratch it out. I am what they call a gentleman."

"Okay, I wouldn't take it that far."

"Oh ye of little faith!" he protested loudly. His hand—holding a black sharpie—began to color over the number, squeaking faintly against the dull metal of the stall. "Anyways, the tour continues," he barreled on. "It's pretty damn clean in here. I mean it's impressive. Like girl's bathroom level of clean. Oooh, and if you look over here you will find a depiction of male genitalia. Oh, look! There's a smiley face at the en—"

"You now shit like this is why we don't talk more often," Charlie said through a grunt of exasperation.

"And you have no appreciation for art," he quipped back. "That was an early 21st century masterpiece. A million years from now archaeologists are gonna put that shit in a textbook."

"You think humanity is still going to be around in a million years," Charlie muttered. "Your optimism is adorable."

The camera swung back around to face Donald. As soon as she was in sight, Donald leaned in, peering curiously at the screen. "You look disturbingly conscious right now. I've never seen you do anything but zombie-walk before nine in the morning. There's not even any drool."

"A friend woke me up earlier," she replied through a conspicuous yawn. "She wanted us to get ready for school together. Which is apparently a thing people do."
"A friend?" he demanded, his nose wrinkling up into an expression of complete confusion. The level of disbelief written across his face would have been offensive if it hadn't been so accurate. He let out a cough and scratched at his nose before continuing. "You know...pardon me if I'm wrong or whatever, but you don't really 'do' friends. You do...how did you put it...temporary acquaintances of convenience? Hell, you keep calling me your 'drunk uncle'."

"That's because you started calling me your 'vodka aunt'," Charlie replied.

"Yeah, because it applies," he shot back. "You're loud, sarcastic, you scare small children—"

"I do not scare small children."

"And I mean now that I live in the suburbs..." He let out a low hiss, shaking his head at her. "Can't take you anywhere. You were not made for dinner parties. Or, you know, people."

"Are you liking it there?" she queried. "It's a pretty big change from New York."

Donald made a face and shrugged. "It's okay, I guess. My mom likes it here, and so does Jade. Dad misses the city, but he's getting used to it. We've got a house instead of an apartment, so that's pretty sweet. There's enough room to do sock slides. You don't hear people swearing at three in the morning and there's no asshole cabs leaning on their car horns. You know, suburb stuff. We could get a dog."

"You could get a dog?" Charlie replied drily. "Donald, you're allergic to dogs. Your throat would literally swell up."

"Ugh, don't remind me," Donald grumbled, his shoulders slumping in a pout. "I know my throat would literally swell up—that's why I phrased the statement as a hypothetical. We could hypothetically get a dog. A hypothetical golden retriever. Which I would hypothetically name Chewbarka."

"Dude, you have to accept the things you can't change."

"Not happening," he said with a shrug. "I'm not accepting that. I deserve a dog, and it will happen one day. The dream is real. Nothing can stop me."

"You're immune system is gonna stop you," Charlie drawled.

Donald narrowed his eyes at her. "Are you actively trying to wound me emotionally? Stop it. I'm getting a dog—end of discussion." Then he cleared his throat theatrically, making his voice sound all stately and official, lapsing into that oddly formal tone adult relatives always use when you haven't seen them in a while. "Anyways, as your drunk uncle with a vested interest in talking about topics you don't want brought up—for example, a handsome and charismatic protagonist's inability to find canine companionship because of his goddamn allergies....how's your love life going?"

"That's a question with the shortest answer ever. A two word answer, actually. It's not."

Charlie stuck out her tongue, but before she had the opportunity to offer up a scathing retort, a third voice intruded upon the room. "That's a question with the shortest answer ever. A two word answer, actually. It's not."

Charlie's head snapped around to find a redhead standing in her doorway clad in a royal blue top tucked into a plaid miniskirt, thigh-high socks, and a pair of high-heeled ankle boots, purse
situated in the crook of her elbow and bulging paper bag clutched in her hand. She let her head sag forwards on her shoulders, preparing herself for the drama that would ensue. Because with Lydia there was always drama, whether it came in the form of a strong breeze of a freaking tornado.

Extending out a hand, Lydia dropped the paper bag on Charlie's dresser as she breezed into the room. She cocked her head to the side, adopting that same robotic look she had used when she first met Charlie—analyzing all of the variables and adding them up into an opinion. Her lips quirked upwards into a coy smile as she approached the desk. "Well, hello," she said, her voice coming out as oddly seductive. "Who are you?"

The expression on Donald's face changed almost immediately, shifting from goofy, immature idiot to 'most interesting man in the world from the Dos Equis commercial' face. "Me?" he declared, pointing to himself. "I'm a handsome, wealthy bachelor who's ready to take you on a tour of the world in the yacht that I definitely own."

"Oh," Lydia chirped back in a disturbingly flirtatious tone. "Is that so?"

Charlie's eyes immediately fell shut, mentally face-palming. Lydia and Donald on their own were a handful. Put them in a room together and they would probably cause a swath of destruction rivaling that of Bonnie and Clyde. And Charlie absolutely refused to be responsible for that degree of carnage. "Lydia, this is Donald," she announced, waving at the screen. "Donald, this is Lydia. And this is the last time the two of you will be seeing each other for a while because the idea of the two of you comparing notes on me is terrifying as hell. Bye, Donald!"

"Hey!" Donald interjected. "We're just getting to know each other!"

"You're supposed to be in math class. I will not have your education being compromised."

With no further warning, Charlie grabbed the top of her laptop and slammed it shut, abruptly cutting off the offended protest of 'heeeeyyyyyyyyy'. Blowing out a breath of relief, she looked up at Lydia whose eyebrows still possessed an arch worthy of early Roman architecture. "He was cute," the redhead declared, both in accusation and with an alarming degree of suggestiveness. "Who was that?"

"That was just Donald," Charlie replied with an absent shrug. "He's my drunk uncle."

Lydia planted a single hand on her hip, leveling Charlie with a blank look for a few moments before waving her hand dismissively. "Okay, I'm not even going to ask you to clarify that for time management purposes." She casually brushed her hair over her shoulder and looked Charlie up and down, eyes lingering on the damp hair and unmade face. "Yeah," she breathed out, patting Charlie on the cheek. "We've got some work to do."

Doing an about-face, Lydia sashayed towards the bed and stared down at the rumpled pile of clothes Charlie had tossed out for display. She pursed her lips, glancing between Charlie and the clothes a few times with her eyebrows creased in a look of intense concentration. It was an expression one could typically find in war and/or football movies, when the commander/coach is sizing up the soldiers/players. Only, in Charlie's opinion, this assessment would be far more ruthless. "Okay," she said with a special sort of determination. "Okay, I can work with this."

"We're not brokering a Palestinian-Israeli peace treaty, Lydia," Charlie said, rubbing absentely at her forehead. "We're choosing clothes. Let's calm down."

"The clothes make the man, Charlie," Lydia chided. "Naked people have little or no influence on society."
"Oh, come on," Charlie whined. "Don't go quoting Mark Twain at me. It's way too early for that."

Lydia threw one of her hands into the air, cutting Charlie off. "Silence! Let the master do her work." With two swift steps she was at the closet, yanking the door open. "I always forget how tiny your closet is," she muttered, flipping through the hangers. "And your organizational system is questionable at best."

"I don't have an organizational system," Charlie mumbled back, scooting her chair towards her dresser until she could grab the bag of scones.

Lydia's hand stilled and her head turned on her neck, leveling Charlie with a look that was mostly alarm, but at least 30% contempt. Slowly, and miraculously without comment, she turned back to the closet, though her movements did seem rather more violent. She yanked out a few different articles of clothing, holding them up and judging their appropriateness. Charlie sat in her chair and nibbled on one of the scones, watching the entire process. Or at least as much of it as she could catch as she continued to spin the swivel chair in circles. What she did see vaguely resembled a wildlife documentary where the mother lion forages for food as her infant watches helplessly.

More than a few articles were thrown to the floor—casualties of the battle—but eventually Lydia moved to the bed, arranging those last pieces with care. "Alright," she declared. "Come and take a look at this."

Sighing heavily, Charlie stopped spinning in her chair and hauled herself to her feet, stumbling slightly as the dizziness left her off-kilter. She shook her head to reorient herself and meandered over to observe the outcome. Lydia had kept the Clash T-shirt and leather jacket, but paired it with a waist-high black leather skirt, gray tights, and a pair of ankle boots. "There," she said, waving her hand over the ensemble like she was blessing it with a magic wand or sprinkling it with holy water. "You get to keep your pseudo rocker chick, 'I don't really give a crap' vibe, and I don't have to be embarrassed by you."

"That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me," Charlie mumbled, shoving the rest of her scone in her mouth and chewing it in a way that did not fit the technical definition of 'polite'.

"You're welcome!" Pleased with her work, Lydia spun on her heel to face Charlie. "Now what were you planning on doing for makeup?"

Charlie groaned and rocked back on her heels. "Shit, Lydia, I don't know. Mascara?"

Lydia gaped at her, mouth opening and closing like a dying fish. "Mascara?" she demanded, eyebrows raised in disbelief. "Did you actually just say 'mascara'? As in 'just mascara'? Have you learned nothing from the time we've spent together?"

"I gained a new appreciation for imaginary numbers," Charlie replied, raising a finger for emphasis. "They're just so misunderstood. They need more love."

"You know that's not what I mean!"

Charlie blew out a long breath and shrugged her shoulders. "What do you want from me? I was raised by a single dad."

"By a single dad! Not by wolves!"

Charlie rolled her eyes and bit down hard on the inside of her cheek. "Look, I can play pool, fix up my car, and I kick ass at Ultimate Frisbee. I didn't exactly get a ton of makeup tutorials, and honestly the last time you came at me with an eyelash curler, I thought you were trying to extract
my eyeballs to sell them on the black market."

Pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration, Lydia let out the sigh of a parent trying to deal with a child on a sugar rush. "You are unbelievable." She cleared her throat and turned to Charlie, seamlessly slipping into her 'teacher mode'. "Okay, Charlie, I'm only going to explain this to you once. I'm going to teach you how to be a girl."

"Great!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together in feigned eagerness. "Be my Yoda."

"Okay, one," Lydia said, holding out a finger. "No more Star Wars references. Take Yoda, Harrison Ford, and the big furry thing that yells all the time and lock them in a closet at the back of your mind."

"I'm going to ignore that one, but keep going."

"Alright, two," Lydia continued, ignoring her interjection, "School is like a battlefield. Makeup is our warpaint. When we put it on, it hides our flaws and displays our assets. It makes us strong. It makes us fearless. It makes us a force to be reckoned with."

"I really think you might be over-stating that," Charlie deadpanned.

Scowling slightly, Lydia placed her hands on her hips and looked at Charlie like she was a rebellious puppy that had yet to be housebroken. "Which one of us knows what she's talking about? Oh, right, it's me. So you're going to put those clothes on and I'm going to show you how to do this one last time. Do we understand each other?"

Muttering darkly, Charlie grabbed the clothes and moved towards the bathroom to change. "Fine," she called over her shoulder, "but if you come at me with that eyelash curler again, I'll have you know I have six years training in Krav Maga and I will not hesitate to end you."

"You're cute when you know I'm right and are in denial about it!" Lydia called after her.

What happened next was approximately twenty minutes of being poked and prodded, having an assortment of brushes and combs yanked through her hair, and a variety of powders sprayed on her face. The experience left Charlie with one definitive conclusion: This would not be happening every day. From that day forward, Lydia would not be permitted access to her apartment between the hours of 4 a.m. and 9 a.m. But when Lydia pulled Charlie in front of the mirror, the girl couldn't help relinquishing a reluctant smile.

Lydia was right—a sentiment she didn't intend to fell very often, but this time it couldn't be helped. The makeup had transformed her face slightly—it made her look softer and a little harsher at the same time. If she had any doubts or insecurities, they would be hidden behind those light layers of powder. She let out a low whistle and turned slightly in the mirror, shoving her hands deep in her pockets. "I look—"

"Hot," Lydia supplied, draping a proud arm over her shoulder. "You look hot."

"Yeah, well don't go getting any ideas," Charlie said, nudging Lydia in the ribs and sliding out from under her arm. "My Converse and T-shirts aren't going anywhere. Tomorrow the phone is going on silent and I'll be embarrassing the shit out of you. On purpose. Actively. I will wear overalls and chew on a piece of straw."

"Oh, Charlie," Lydia breathed, cinching her arms around Charlie's shoulder until it almost hurt. "My dear, sweet Charlie. If you do that, I will be forced to kill you."
"And how exactly will you do that?"

A smile as sweet as cyanide pulled at Lydia's lips. She stepped forwards, between Charlie and the mirror, and yanked the leather jacket straight with more force than was probably necessary. Her eyes stared up at Charlie all innocence, but that smile still screamed murder with enough authenticity to give Charlie pause. "Don't you know, Charlie?" she chirped far too happily. "You're never supposed to reveal your secrets."

Clapping one hand on Charlie's shoulder, Lydia stepped to the side and made a beeline for the scones, leaving Charlie alone in front of the mirror. This one was telling her a bit of a different story than the bathroom mirror had earlier that morning. She didn't look resigned or broken—she looked hard. She looked steady. She looked prepared.

This was good. Today Charlie wasn't the girl whose dad had just died. She wasn't obsessively thinking about the smell of banana pancakes and the sound of 'The Rolling Stones'. Today was her first day at a new school and she was going to kick its ass. Hard.

Chapter End Notes

CHAPTER 1 SOUNDTRACK

Waking up, not wanting to get out of bed, and talking with Lydia on the phone.

7:30 am - Slothrust

Charlie gets ready on her own, goes down to the kitchen to talk with Aunt Melody.

Paradise - Wild Yaks

The first encounter with Lydia.

Repetition - The Willowz

Lydia goes through Charlie's things to find her an outfit, does her makeup, etc.

Over & Over - Hot Chip

Charlie looks in the mirror and prepares for the first day of school.

Whats on My Grave - Mt. Royal

References: I decided to do a full reference count for the chapter for funzies and because I was curious how many I make. Apparently I make a lot of them...It will include 'director commentary' and entertaining anecdotes. I've decided to do this for each chapter.

1) Rip Van Winkle, my homie, my spirit animal. Aka a dude who really knows how to get his nap on.

2) Jack Aubrey is a character from a series of Patrick O'Brian novels about life at sea
in the English navy. I decided to add it in, because in my head Charlie's dad read the series and now she's reading it to be close to him.

3) Golumn and the one ring! That's 'Lord of the Rings', obviously...

4) The frosted miniwheats commercial with those talking CGI bits of cereal. That ad creeps me out, man. Like, you give the thing a face and a voice and then they expect kids to eat it? What's up with that? Plus they sit in that bowl of milk like it's a hot tub, when they're essentially basting themselves before someone eats them. Weird marketing choices, guys. You can make a mascot for your product without the implication that you're going to eat it. I mean, we don't eat the Pillsbury Dough-boy.

5) The 'People Like Grapes' T-shirt is a reference to one Gavin Free of Rooster Teeth. That boy is a daft genius and I love him to death.

6) Mean Girls, because I'm still heartbroken that 'Fetch' never happened.

7) 'The clothes make the man, naked people have little or no influence on society' is a Mark Twain quote! Because of course Lydia has an index of Mark Twain in her mind.

8) 'Be my Yoda' is a reference to Stiles Stilinski. Wait, no. Star Wars. Definitely Star Wars.

9) Bonnie and Clyde.

10) 'Dos Equis commercial face'! Not quite the 'Blue Steel', but close competition.

11) Bratz dolls. These things freak me the hell out. They look like Voldemort had a three-way with Barbie and her inflatable cousin.
According to Lydia, the first day of school set the tone for the rest of the year. It served as some bizarre type of audition. Style your hair, make sure you have nothing but good angles—primped and polished. God help you if there's something stuck in your teeth. The way she spoke, Charlie had expected to find a TV crew stalking the student body in search of the next big reality show. Would it air on MTV or TLC? That didn't matter. Charlie's hypothetical reality TV show persona had no bearing on her first day of school.

The point was, according to Lydia, your wardrobe had to be stylish, your makeup immaculate, and your heels needed to meet or exceed the mandatory two inches. The higher the heel, the more serious the contender. Thanks to Lydia's tireless efforts—some of which may or may not have violated the Geneva convention—Charlie had lived up to those high standards. Unfortunately, that was about as far as she managed to get. The next 'suggestion'—arrive in style—wasn't exactly going to plan.

Charlie hunched over the wheel of her car, twisting her keys in the ignition. "Come on girl, you can do it," she whispered. "I believe in you—here we go." The combination of spluttering and groaning that issued forth from the engine offered her little encouragement. The goddamn spark plugs were breathing their last. Apparently the quick fix she had used a few days back—electrical tape on the arcing wires—wasn't lasting quite as long as she had hoped.

All signs pointed to the fact that she should let that car go, but she couldn't. It was just too damn pretty. It was her freaking vehicular soulmate—had been since she saw the posting on eBay: 1966 Chevrolet Impala, black, needs engine and body work. One look, and it had been love. She bought it for cheap and fixed it up with her dad—car up on cinderblocks in the sweltering summer heat. Sweat and rust, the smell of sunscreen and copper. After a few months of work, the hood gleamed and the engine had started to sing.

No, that was a lie. The hood never gave off anything more than a dull sheen. And that engine? It sounded like a Scooby Doo episode in there, the interior haunted by a bitter old ghost wielding clanking chains. Sure the car worked, but there always seemed to be one small extra project—one last thing that needed fixing. The passenger door stuck, the back seat belts didn't work, the fenders rusted through, and now the spark plugs were dying on her. Charlie preferred to think of it as the car forcing them to maintain a relationship. As long as she took care of it, it would take care of her. Symbiosis. And despite the multitude of issues, 'Gertrude' had never let her down before. The old
bint sure as hell wasn't going to start today.

"Come on, baby," Charlie cooed soothingly. She twisted the keys again only to receive a pitiful clunk in response. All of the sudden a pissed off Lydia entered her mind, smoke coming out of her ears and making it look like her head was on fire. The image was haunting. "Alright," she whispered again, "unless you want me to be beheaded by a freakishly intelligent social climber, you're going to start right...now."

On cue, the spluttering gave way to a loud, confident roar. Charlie smiled to herself and mouthed a silent 'thank you', running her fingers over the cracked leather covering the steering wheel. A couple of punched buttons and cranked levers later, music was blaring out the speakers, the windows were down, and she was backing out of the driveway. Gertrude would never let her down.

As Charlie drove down one of the infinite supply of heavily wooded roads that cut through Beacon Hills, her eyes fell on the tiny silver ornament that dangled from the rearview mirror, catching the sunlight. It was a Saint Christopher's medallion—the patron saint of travelers. She and her dad had never been religious—she couldn't remember the last time either of them had been to church, and she had probably been wearing pigtails at the time. Still, though, the first time she had climbed into that car on her own, her dad leaned in the passenger-side window and hung it there 'just in case'. He called it 'hedging his bets'.

"You're gonna need it, kid," he had said. "Because you're going places."

She chose to ignore both the loud bang of the car backfiring and cloud of smoke issuing from the tailpipe that immediately followed that thought. It kind of cast a shadow on the sentiment.

By the time Charlie pulled into the Beacon Hills High School parking lot, Lydia was already there. She leaned against her gleaming black VW bug, arms folded across her chest and eyebrows raised in reproach. Charlie rolled her eyes and pulled into the empty spot next to hers, the brakes squealing faintly as she came to a stop.

"I've been waiting here ten minutes," Lydia sniped as Charlie clambered out of the car. Her voice came out in a strange, high pitched growl. "We left at the same time. You were supposed to be right behind me. What the hell took you so long?"

"Jesus, Lydia, untwist your panties," Charlie mumbled, reaching into the passenger seat and grabbing her faded green canvas messenger bag.

"My panties are not the topic of this conversation," Lydia shot back, pointing a well-manicured finger at Charlie. "If we want to get the year started right—"

Charlie headed off the imminent lecture with a loud groan, slamming her car door shut behind her. "Yeah, I know," she groused. "Punctuality is key, grand entrance, swagger, strut, walk, walk, fashion baby, blah, blah, blah. I had car trouble—there's not really a way of getting around that."

Lydia flipped her curtain of glossy, artfully curled hair back over her shoulder and let out a loud scoff. "Well we could have gotten around that if you just got a ride with me like I wanted."

"Oh, no way," Charlie replied, shaking her head definitively. "I am not walking into a situation
"You say that like you don't trust me," Lydia whined, her lower lip jutted out in a pout.

An indelicate snort forced its way out of Charlie's nose. "When it comes to you versus my ability to exercise my own free will?" she shot back. "Yeah, I 100% do not trust you. Not at all."

Lydia just narrowed her eyes and flicked her hair over her shoulder again. "You sound like one of those crazy survivalist types who build bunkers out in the woods to prepare for the apocalypse."

"Be nice to me or I won't invite you to my bunker when the end of days is nigh," Charlie deadpanned. "You'll never survive on the surface. You don't have any training or practical footwear. Also, I have Chef Boyardee."

"Oh, wow, a personal chef," Lydia drawled, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Forget the Ritz, your bunker is the place to be!"

"Yup," Charlie nodded. "We're gonna party like it's 2099. Which is when the radioactivity of the earth will have faded enough for us to walk on the surface again."

Lydia stared at her blankly for a few moments, probably evaluating Charlie for potential indications of one grave mental affliction or another. "Whatever," she snipped, brushing the topic aside. "Just don't come crawling to me when you need a ride. That rust bucket of yours belongs in a junkyard anyway."

"Do not talk like that in front of her!" Charlie hissed angrily, placing a protective hand on the hood of the car and stroking it gently.

At that, Lydia's lip curled and she looked at Charlie like she was a lunatic. "It's a car," the red-head replied, derision coloring her tone. "It can't hear me. Calm the hell down about the car and get excited for the school year."

"Oh, I'm excited," Charlie drawled, waggling her eyebrows. "I'm all kinds of excited—school spirit has taken up residence in the very core of my being. Go Direwolves!" She pumped her fist in the air theatrically and brought her fingers to her lips for a loud wolf-whistle.

Lydia's hand shot up, fingers closing around Charlie's wrist and yanking the offending hand out of the air. Her eyes darted around the parking lot, desperate to see if anybody had noticed the display. "Put your arm down," she growled. "What the hell is a Direwolf?"

"Team mascot," Charlie shrugged. "Or are we the Timber Wolves?"

Lydia's mouth dropped open and she let out an offended scoff. "Cyclones," she corrected. "We're the Cyclones." She paused for a moment, studying Charlie's face in the hope of finding some flicker of recognition. Needless to say she was disappointed. "Ugh. You are seriously hopeless—you know that, right?"

"The Cyclones?" Charlie repeated, scrunching up her face into an expression of distaste. "Seriously, the Cyclones? What the hell kind of mascot is that? How is that going to amp up the crowd. It has literally zero charisma."

At that, Lydia blinked, wordlessly spun on her heel, and marched towards the school, abandoning Charlie in her perfumed wake. "I'm serious!" Charlie called out, jogging to catch up with her. "I mean what kind of costume would it have? A giant swirl of wind? It can't emote."
Lydia shook her head. "I refuse to acknowledge this conversation."

"Be real with me Lydia—is the mascot just a guy holding a leaf-blower?"

"I am actively not paying attention to you."

"I'm just gonna keep calling them the Direwolves," Charlie mused absently.

"No you will not," Lydia trilled. "You absolutely will not."

Charlie shrugged innocently and began walking towards the school through the side entrance to the courtyard, dragging her feet with each step. The sound of her heels against the asphalt was grating—the dynamics of stilettos and Converse were completely different. She did not like it. Working theory: stilettos were a tool that, with each scrape against the ground, were digging a massive hole that brought you slightly closer to the fiery pit of hell.

A few moments later, Lydia's arm snaked through Charlie's and she felt herself being yanked along, steered in a completely different direction.

"We don't enter at the side gates," Lydia instructed wisely. "There's nowhere near enough exposure there. If you want to make a good entrance, you have to go directly up the front steps. That way everyone has to look at you."

"Again," Charlie sighed, "I can not fully express to you how little I care."

Lydia flashed her a wide, calculating smile. "Well then," she chirped, "I guess it's a good thing you're not making the decisions here."

"It does take a lot of pressure off," Charlie muttered dully. "So are you deciding what I'm having for dinner too?"

"You can't have nachos again," Lydia replied. "Three times a week is just too much."

"Ugh," Charlie groaned, stomping her feet petulantly as she walked. "Way to suck the joy out of life."

Soon enough Charlie found herself standing at the beginning of the walkway that cut a straight line to the front doors. She glanced at the red-head standing next to her. The frustrated scowl of the morning had miraculously been replaced by a coy, sultry smile. Lydia unlinked her arm from Charlie's and reached in her black leather Gucci purse, pulling out her compact and a tube of light pink lip gloss. She liberally applied it until her lips glistened almost aggressively and then blew a kiss at her own reflection.

"Gearing up for battle, are we?" Charlie murmured.

Lydia snapped her compact closed and turned to face Charlie, her smirk shifting from superficial to genuine. "So you do listen, then?"

Charlie blew out a long breath and shrugged noncommitally. "You talk so much, something's bound to sink in. Involuntarily, of course. And I'll forget it soon enough."

"Yeah?" Lydia quipped back, arching an eyebrow mischievously. "Well let's see if this finds a way to sink in. This, my dear Charlie, is how you make an entrance."

With one last flip of her hair, Lydia stomped down that concrete sidewalk like it was a freaking cat
walk—hips swaying side to side and handbag neatly poised in the crook of her arm. The sun cut through the clouds, illuminating her path as if she had somehow bartered with Mother Nature for flattering lighting. Charlie snorted and trailed after her, messenger bag sagging on her shoulder, hands shoved in her jacket pockets, heels still scraping reluctantly against concrete, and generally emitting much less 'flare' or 'sparkle' or whatever the hell it was the magazines called it these days. But she was perfectly content positioned in Lydia's shadow. Smaller likelihood of a sunburn.

Given the swagger-filled entrance, more than a couple of eyes made their way towards Lydia. None, however, more enthusiasm than one guy—close cropped hair and wearing a 'The Who' T-shirt. His eyes tracked her every move. "Hey Lydia!" he called out in a voice that sounded equal parts glee and desperation as she passed by. "You look li—like you're going to ignore me!"

Lydia brushed by the guy without so much as a second look, and he turned back to his friend with a face scrunched up in frustration. Chuckling to herself, Charlie took a little time from her own 'grand entrance' and paused in front of the pair. "Don't take it too personally," she said in a conspiratorial whisper.

The two of them blinked at her, staring stupidly with wide eyes and mouths hanging open. Up close she could see a splattering of moles dotting the first guy's pale face. His huge, light brown eyes were highlighted by a pair of bushy eyebrows, which were currently furrowed in extreme confusion. His friend appeared equally if not more alarmed by Charlie's sudden appearance. His surprised, brown eyes hid behind a mop of dark hair and that strong, slightly uneven jawline served only to accentuate his gobsmacked expression. The first guy—the Who T-shirt guy—looked her up and down before spinning around, ensuring that they were, in fact, the ones she was addressing. "Wh—what are you talking about?" he stammered, glancing at his dark-haired friend like he was seeking confirmation that he should speak.

Charlie raised her eyebrows in amusement and tried to suppress the smile threatening to form on her lips. "Lydia," she prompted, jerking her head in the red-head's direction. "When she goes into 'strut mode' she's pretty much dead to the world. I like to imagine she's playing 'Whip My Hair' in her head on a loop. That or the 'Imperial March' Darth Vader theme. She's kind of stuck in the moment." His mouth opened and closed a few times, staring at her in complete bemusement, and that smile she had been struggling against fought its way to the surface. "Well, have a good day then!" she chirped happily, giving him one big pat on the back before continuing on her way.

"It was nice to meet you! Wh—whoever you are!" he called after her, his voice thick with confusion.

Without turning around, Charlie lifted her hand into the air and gave a single, perfunctory wave before ascending the stairs and slipping through the front doors.

The inside of Beacon Hills was the same as pretty much every other school she had attended over the past few years—built like a prison, but with more windows, less barbed wire, and worse food. Charlie often wondered if there was an agreed upon set of guidelines that all schools had established while nobody was looking, each rule carefully orchestrated to suppress creativity whilst simultaneously pretending to encourage it. They all had those checkered, laminate floors, the oppressively beige walls, and those ridiculous cork boards covered in colorful paper and bordered with those weird wavy, crafty things. And then there were the inspirational posters—those were her favorite.

"The best preparation for tomorrow is doing your best today"

"Genius' is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration."
The bare minimum of encouragement. Those posters were meant to make the students think—to incite deep thoughts—but their superficiality canceled out any positive intent. Students were already too busy falling asleep and drooling in their textbooks, either from lack of interest or from overwork, to take note of them. Last year Charlie had snuck into her old school early in the morning and covered each of those deep, thought-provoking posters with the 'Hang In There' kitten. Their complete ineffectiveness was revealed with that decision. Literally nobody noticed the change—not till after lunch. She had to pointed out. Which, of course, meant she got caught, and was subsequently given two weeks of detention. Worth it.

Charlie readjusted the strap of her messenger bag on her shoulder and made her way towards the main office directly inside the front doors. Once inside, she walked up to the front desk and tapped the bell. The older woman sitting there look up at her through thick-framed glasses. "Hello," she murmured in that standard bureaucratic tone. "Can I help you?"

"Hi, yeah," Charlie replied. "I'm Charlotte Oswin. My aunt contacted the the offices a week ago to register me as a student here—sophomore year. I was told to stop by the office for my schedule and other information."

"Just one moment," the woman said, holding up a finger and rifling through the papers on her desk until she found her way to a manila folder. "Ah, yes, Miss Oswin," she continued, squinting at the small print on the pages. "I've got your information here. If you'll just have a seat in one of those chairs over there, the Vice Principal will be right with you."

Nodding to herself, Charlie collapsed into one of the overstuffed chairs indicated. She stretched out her legs in front of her and crossed her ankles, leaning back on the head rest so she was staring at the ceiling. She closed her eyes and settled in for a short nap, ready to reclaim some of the precious minutes of sleep Lydia had denied her earlier. That plan didn't last very long, though. After about three minutes somebody sat down in the chair next to her and started bouncing their knee up and down nervously.

Slowly, Charlie cracked an eye open and observed the person sitting next to her. It was a girl about her age, pretty, with long, dark hair, high cheekbones, light brown eyes, and flawless pale skin that for some reason was tinged slightly green.

"You're going to be fine, you know," Charlie mumbled.

The girl jumped in alarm. Given her look of surprise, she hadn't registered she wasn't alone in the seating area. "Oh!" she squeaked. "I—I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Charlie smiled softly and straightened in her seat. "I said you're going to be fine. Every time someone talks to you, just smile and nod and it'll work itself out." The girl's eyebrows pulled together in a confused frown, making Charlie's smile widen. "You're new here, right? First day?"

She let out a light laugh and nodded. "Yeah. How could you tell?"

Charlie let a serious expression cover her face. "I'm psychic," she whispered dramatically.

"Really?" the girl asked through another laugh.

"Absolutely," Charlie replied with a grave nod. "Also you're in the front office holding a piece of paper that says 'TRANSFER' in big bold letters across the top."

The girl stopped nervously twisting the ends of her hair around her fingers, and her eyes flicked down the the page clutched in her hand. "Yeah, I guess I'm a bit out of it today," she chuckled. She
unwound her fingers from her hair and held out her hand, flashing a grin that managed to be simultaneously brilliant and uncertain. "Allison Argent."

Charlie accepted it and gave it a firm shake. "Charlie Oswin."

"Good," Allison sighed. "At least I know someone now. I was so freaked out that I'd end up eating lunch in the bathroom like in Mean Girls and go home without meeting anyone. Are you a new student too?"

"Yup," Charlie replied, popping the 'p'. "Fresh-faced and ready to pack my brain full of knowledge, discover its irrelevance to my life as a whole, and then forget it as soon as holidays start."

"Really?" Allison blurted out in surprise. "If you don't mind me asking, how are you not totally freaking out right now?"

Charlie shrugged and gave a noncommittal jerk of the head. "I've been here over a month, so I've gotten used to the town. Met a few people. Plus I guess I've just gotten used to it. My dad was in the coast guard, I've been in like seven schools over the past six years—we moved around a lot."

"Oh my God, same here!" Allison gushed, losing some of that nervous energy. "My dad moves around all the time because of his job."

"Ring leader at a carnival?" Charlie demanded. "Traveling vacuum salesman?"

Allison shifted in her seat and tucked her hair behind her ears, giving a small shake of the head. "None of the above," she said. "He's in sales—he doesn't talk about it much. But we were in San Francisco for almost a year and a half, and that was the longest we stayed in one place. I never managed to get used to it, though. I hate being the new girl. You always end up feeling so helpless, walking around and needing help finding things, because by the time you actually figure out what's going on, it's time to take off again. Then you have to find new friends and...it's just so exhausting."

"Yeah," Charlie nodded. "I think the worst bit is Facebook. You take a look and it's like hey, Greg from New Orleans just ate a peanut butter banana sandwich. Good for you, Greg. Party on, man, thanks for closed captioning your life for us. And then you realize, these people were my friends. It's like...I held your hair back when you drank too much lite beer and started puking at that party, and now I don't know you."

Allison gave her a strange look. "You had to hold Greg's hair back while he was puking?"

"Oh, yeah, he was a hippie," Charlie said, waving a hand dismissively. "His hair was longer than mine."

"Huh," Allison mused to herself. "Do hippies even drink lite beer? I feel like Budweiser would be way too commercial of them."

Charlie wrinkled her nose in contemplation. "That's a good point. It's entirely possible that he just drank his weight in kombucha."

"Right," Allison replied, nodding sagely. "That makes perfect sense. I mean, who wouldn't be nauseous after that?"

"Exactly. But like, now the only interaction I have with Greg the kombucha-drinking hippie is writing 'lol' on his feeds every once in a while."
"It does make it feel kind of pointless sometimes, doesn't it?" Allison mumbled quietly.

"Oh, I've developed a solution for that," Charlie quipped, holding up a single finger to emphasize her point. "I just decided to be an antisocial weirdo with no friends who constantly posts to Twitter in order to feel connected to the outside world and keeps a ton of cats as a substitute for love. You get to skip over all of the exhausting bits."

Allison bit back a laugh and raised her eyebrows questioningly. "How's that working out for you so far?"

Charlie winced theatrically and shook her head. "Not so well. The first bell hasn't even rung yet, I'm already having constructive conversations with new people, and enjoying myself in the process. I'm pretty disappointed by it all. You've ruined everything."

"Oh," Allison said, her lips quirking into a sardonic smile. "That's just...tragic. I guess your disappointment is my gain."

"Yeah," Charlie sighed. "It wasn't a total waste. Plus the cat hair gets everywhere. It's a bitch to clean. I mean a lint roller a week is pretty excessive, don't you think?"

Allison grinned widely, revealing a set of dimples that looked like they belonged to someone who smiled often. Her green pallor had subsided greatly, replaced by a cheerful pink flush. "Well," she announced, clearing her throat in an official-sounding way. "Since I think we might be seeing a lot of each other in the future we might as well go and get all those boring, stereotypical questions out of the way. What class are you most excited for?"

Charlie pursed her lips in consideration. "Lunch."

The two girls started laughing. What followed was an easy conversation which concluded in the exchanging of phone numbers and a promise to look out for each other during lunch. Their conversation had veered in the direction of their favorite youtube cat videos when a man came to stand in front of them, staring down expectantly.

"Miss Oswin, Miss Argent, I see the two of you have become acquainted," he said. "I'm Mr. Allen. I would like to welcome you to Beacon Hills High School. I'm sure you're going to find yourselves right at home here."

"It's nice to meet you," Charlie said, Allison nodding along in agreement.

Mr. Allen afforded her and Allison one of those carefully orchestrated smiles people in administration always seemed to have mastered. Something about bureaucracies seemed to give people default expressions. Like emojis, but nowhere near as fun. He pulled out the folder he had tucked under his arm and flipped through some of the papers inside. "Alright, Miss Oswin, it looks like you're actually good to go. Your aunt was quite diligent in getting all of your paperwork in—I got about a dozen calls from her last week to make sure everything was sorted. She even added a list of your allergies which apparently include pollen, weak handshakes, and Dick Cheney."


The expression with which Mr. Allen regarded her was so ambiguous Charlie couldn't tell if the man was entertained, ambivalent, or pissed off. Allison, on the other hand, gave off a highly suspicious cough, making the man turn to her. "Miss Argent, I'm actually going to have to ask you to wait with me a few minutes—we seem to be missing some of your information."

Allison's fingers found themselves once again twisting nervously in her hair. "Oh, yeah," she
"nodded. "Sorry about that. The move was kind of sudden and we didn't have a lot of time to get ourselves established."

Mr. Allen held up a hand in understanding. "That's completely fine. It'll really only take a few minutes. You won't miss a thing. And even if you do, I'm sure Miss Oswin here will fill you in. It looks like you're in the same first period English class." He turned to Charlie and handed her a piece of paper. "Miss Oswin, here's your schedule. If you want I can get someone to direct you to your cl—"

"No, no, that's okay," Charlie interjected. "I think I can figure it out. The rooms are assigned numbers which go in a particular order as you walk down the hallway. Straightforward enough." She turned to Allison and patted her on the back. "I'll save you a seat."

"Thanks!" Allison called over her shoulder.

It didn't take Charlie long to find the English classroom. The class was still filling up as she made her way in. Silently, she approached the teacher. He was a rather portly, balding man with wire-rimmed glasses that hid bloodshot eyes, ruddy skin, and a face that had slackened with apathy. Her brow furrowing slightly, she handed him an admissions form. He accepted it with a single nod of understanding and gestured for her to stand next to the desk, leaving her to stand idly as the rest of the class filed in. Charlie never really liked this part of the process. Not because she particularly disliked standing in front of a room of people, but because she disliked being told to do so. It made her feel like a preschooler.

"Alright everyone," the teacher called out to the class, which was slowly expanding in size. "It looks like we've got some fresh meat here. I'd like you all to say a big hello to Charlotte Oswin. We're all going to be kind and respectful. Basically, don't be yourselves."

During the teacher's rather monotone introduction, Charlie scanned the room looking for free seats for her and Allison. Her eyes came into contact with another set of brown, familiar ones—the guy from this morning. He blinked in recognition and gave an awkward wave, like he wasn't sure whether or not he wanted her to notice it. She just raised her eyebrows, pressed her lips together in a thin smile, and inclined her head in greeting before looking back to the teacher to see what she should do next.

"Alright, Charlotte," the teacher—who according to the chalkboard was named Mr. Hobson—drewled out in a tired voice. "Why don't you tell us a little about yourself?"

Letting out a sigh, Charlie hiked the strap of her bag up her shoulder, looking up at the ceiling and searching her brain for the stock comment she had filed away. "Okay," she replied casually, blowing away some hair that had fallen in her face. "I go by Charlie, I just moved here from San Diego. I'm a Gemini, I like long walks on the beach, and one time I met James Franco while in line to buy a churro. One of those is a lie—it's up to you to figure out which."

There was a small round of chuckling, barely audible over the sounds of chairs scraping against the ground and bags being unzipped. Charlie could have sworn that Mr. Hobson rolled his eyes before turning back to the blackboard and writing out that day's lesson. "Thank you Miss Oswin for that....colorful introduction. Now if you'll please take a seat."

"Fantastic!" she replied with artificial enthusiasm before moving through the rows of seats. The only two desks she could find next to each other were near the back of the room. She plopped down in one of the chairs and dropped her bag on the floor, rummaging around in it till she found a notebook and pen. Ripping out one of the pages, she quickly scribbled out a note.
'RESERVED: If you sit here, I will adopt a horde of ferrets, train them to track you down by scent, and set them lose to attack you in your room in the middle the night. They may or may not be armed with lasers.'

After doodling an oddly menacing smily face in the corner, the note was deemed complete and and Charlie deposited it on the desk next to hers.

In the corner of her eye, something shifted. Glancing to her left, Charlie once again saw that same guy from this morning. His desk was two over from hers, right next to the one she picked out for Allison. He craned his neck until it reached almost giraffe-like proportions, and when that wasn't sufficient he pushed himself up in his seat, almost standing up in his chair to get a look at what she had written. Charlie leaned in towards him, eyes narrowed. "Is there something I can help you with?" she whispered.

At the sound of her voice, he collapsed back in his chair. The desk shook beneath his weight momentarily threatening to tip over and toss him to the floor. He regained his balance and coughed into his fist, quickly constructing a poor imitation of collectedness. "Nope," he said casually, shaking his head. "No, it's all good here—" he began waving his hand around over his desk "—everything's just peachy in this...this general area."

"Okay, then," she muttered back, eyebrow arched skeptically. "That's good to know."

She was interrupted by the sound of a throat being cleared, and the two of them turned to face the front of the room. Mr. Hobson stared at them, displeasure lurking in those oddly exhausted eyes. "Miss Oswin," he droned, "I'm prepared to offer you a little latitude this morning since it's your first day, but this is a classroom. You're here to have knowledge shoved into your pubescent brains, not to expand your Twitter fanbase. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yup," Charlie replied, giving a jaunty salute. "I'm ready to learn and be inspired. 'Oh Captain, my Captain', standing on desks, the whole nine yards."

The man sighed heavily and scratched at his forehead. "Thank you for the sentiment, Miss Oswin, but there will be no standing on desks in this classroom. It's a health and safety issue, and I'm not interested in any additional paperwork." His comment was met with a loud, spluttering laugh that only increased the despondency on his face. "Are there any more insights you have that you'd like to share with the class, Mr. Stilinski?"

"Why does that not surprise me?" Mr. Hobson murmured. "Alright, moving on." He trudged towards the blackboard, scratching 'Kafka's Metamorphosis' across it in big, bold letters. "As you all know, there was indeed a body found in the woods last night."

Charlie's ears perked up at that. This lecture was quickly becoming more intriguing than she had initially suspected. Gruesome murder topped Gregor Samsa's bug-i-fication for sure. And it definitely made the town a touch more interesting. Donald's jealous ramblings already echoed in her ears. She leaned forwards in her seat, eager for more information even if it came in Mr. Hobson's deadly dull monotone voice. Unfortunately the man was a tease as well as a bore, and he seemed determined for the content of his speech to be just as bland as its intonation.

"I'm sure your minds are coming up with various macabre scenarios as to what happened," he continued, "but I am here to tell you that the police have a suspect in custody, which means you can give your undivided attention to the syllabus which in on your desk, outlining this semester."
Grumbling loudly, Charlie slid down in her desk and plucked up the offending piece of paper. Her eyes slid over the list. Kafka's 'Metamorphosis', Voltaire's 'Candide', Swift's 'A Modest Proposal'—she had read half the syllabus already. Perks of switching schools so often. She either ended up crazy behind or she'd already covered the material in another school's curriculum. Well at least that gave her more time to dedicate to chemistry. Fun.

After a few minutes of running through the syllabus, the classroom door opened to reveal Allison and Mr. Allen. Anxiety rolled off Allison, clearly having been smacked by a second wave of the first day jitters. Charlie craned her neck, catching Allison's eye. She pointed to the seat she had saved and a small, relieved smile crossed Allison's face.

"Alright class," Mr. Allen announced to the room, "it looks like we've got another new student. This is Allison Argent. Just do your best to make her feel welcome."

Allison darted away from the man as soon as possible, eager to avoid the collective scrutiny of the class. She walked towards her designated seat with hunched shoulders, making herself as inconspicuous as possible. Dropping into the chair she giggled at the note, turning to Charlie and mouthing a silent 'thank you'. Charlie wagged her eyebrows enthusiastically and turned to the front of the classroom. Allison let out a soft snort and was prepared to do the same, but was suddenly confronted with a pen being held out to her by a suitably adorable looking boy, the second half of the duo from that morning.

"Oh," Allison whispered in surprise. "Thanks."

Charlie bit her lip to restrain the instinctive laughter. Given the expression on the guy's face, he was already smitten. Inside of twenty minutes, and Allison already had some guy crushing on her. Oh, yeah. She was going to be just fine.

At the sound of Charlie's cough/laugh, Allison turned towards her, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "What?" she mouthed. Charlie continued to waggle her eyebrows—this time suggestively—making Allison roll her eyes in response. "Shut up."

Any more potential teasing was cut brutally short as Mr. Hobson returned to the blackboard. "Okay, class," he grumbled. "I'm going to ask you to turn to page 133 in Metamorphosis."

Charlie reached into her bag and pulled out the worn and marked copy Mel had gotten from the second hand book shop on Hudson Street. It flopped open on her desk, the cracked spine allowing it to lie flat, already looking defeated by the school year. She thumbed through the pages until she found the small 133 in the upper corner, a note in unfamiliar handwriting scribbled right next to it.

'Mr. Hobson is a douche.'

Agreed.

Charlie sighed heavily and stared down at the book. "And so it begins."

There wasn't much to distinguish that first day from all of the other ones she had experienced. Everything about it was typical. Absolutely nothing concrete was accomplished, but it was filled with the looming threat of homework and essays, and then those big bolded letters screaming 'EXAM' at her from the syllabus.

The teachers for the most part were 31 flavors of 'pain in the ass'. Mr. Hobson seemed inclined to infect the rest of the world with his dissatisfaction. That son of a bitch Mr. Harris, the chemistry teacher, had already assigned them four chapters to finish by the end of the week. She'd have to
keep her eye on him. The humiliation of his students appeared to inspire a special sort of glee—
your garden variety under-achieving psychopath. But Coach Finstock, the economics professor,
more than made up for it with his hilarious, over-caffeinated rants. If someone got it in their head
to make a muppet version of the man, it wouldn't require all that much imagination.

All in all, it was a fairly good start to the year. But the day ended the same way they always did:
with Charlie tapping her pen against her notebook and watching the second hand tick down. And
three, two, one....

At the sound of the bell, Charlie quickly shoved all her things away and practically sprinted to her
locker, trying her best to get there before the rush hour traffic clogged up the hallways. Alas, she
proved unsuccessful. Getting away from school as quickly as possible was a biological imperative
that all teenagers shared. Between that and one wrong turn that almost brought her into the boy's
locker room, the halls were almost totally vacant by the time she found her way to her locker again.
She fiddled with the lock until it unlatched and began yanking out the books.

Slamming the locker closed, she turned to find Allison a little ways down the hall, standing at her
own locker with her back turned to Charlie and sharing what seemed to be some intense eye-flirting
with the adorable, floppy-haired guy who had lent her the pen that morning. Smiling wickedly,
Charlie snuck up behind her as quietly as possible—quite the feat given the heels Lydia had put her
in.

"Have you returned the pen yet?" she inquired casually.

Allison jumped, holding her hand over her heart. "Jesus, Charlie," she gasped out. "You scared
me."

"Sorry," she replied, wrinkling her nose apologetically. "I looked for you at lunch, but didn't see
you around."

"Oh, that's okay," Allison chirped. "I didn't end up eating lunch in the bathroom. My mom dropped
by and we ate together. She always gets overprotective at the beginning of a move. She called me
like three times this morning to make sure I was doing alright."

Charlie pursed her lips and nodded in understanding before letting a sly grin slip across her face.
"So you didn't answer my question."

"What question?" Allison asked a little too quickly. She turned back to the locker, suddenly finding
her French textbook positively fascinating.

"Did you give him the pen back yet?" Charlie prompted, nudging Allison in the side with her
elbow. "Because judging by the way he's gazing longingly at you, he would be happy to tell you
that he'd be happy to let you keep it. Or he just really, really liked that pen and he's currently in the
throes of separation anxiety."

"I don't think I followed that," Allison murmured into her locker.

Charlie leaned against the neighboring lockers and rolled her eyes heavily. "Yes you did."

Allison bit her lip nervously and bounced up and down on the balls of her feet before stealing a
glance at the boy in question, who was now accompanied by that goofy friend of his. This time the
both of them were staring in hers and Allison's direction. But the potential creepiness of said
staring was mitigated by the fact that she and Allison were staring right back—Allison with smily
doe eyes and Charlie with curious, narrowed ones. Charlie decided to lean into the awkward and
gave a long 'these are not the droids you're looking for' wave and the one with the buzzcut—Stilinski—twitched awkwardly. It was odd, but before Charlie had time to think on Allison turned back to her, leaning in conspiratorially. "You really think he likes me?" she whispered back eagerly.

"And there it is," Charlie sang. Allison widened her eyes and jerked her head in the guy's direction, gesturing for Charlie to continue. "Alright, alright," Charlie acquiesced, holding her hands in the air in submission. "In my experience there are two reasons for a guy to stare at you with that degree of intensity. Reason one: he's into you. Reason two: he's a cannibal trying to find out what kind of appetizers he'd like to eat as he's feasting on your decomposing remains."

"Ew," Allison whined, cringing in disgust. "I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that."

"Hey, it's at your own risk. You were warned."

Glancing down the hall past Allison, Charlie saw Lydia strutting by, her glossy curls somehow still finding a way to shine in the fluorescent lighting. Lydia, catching sight of her, gradually slowed. She came to a complete stop in front of Allison, looking the girl up and down with an expression of intense concentration. "That jacket," she said, gesturing at Allison's ensemble, "is absolutely killer. Where did you get it?"

Allison shot a questioning glance at Charlie, who gave her a small nod, before turning back to Lydia. "My mom was a buyer for a boutique back in San Francisco."

A mischievous smile pulled at the corners of Lydia's lips as she appraised Allison. "And you," she declared, pointing at the severely confused brunette, "you are my new best friend. Sorry, Charlie. You're out."

"That's fine," Charlie yawned. "I never liked you that much anyway. Lydia Martin, meet Allison Argent. Allison, this is Lydia, your new best friend. She's only half as crazy as she seems. And while that is still pretty crazy—"

Lydia let out a scoff and smacked Charlie on the arm, no doubt preparing a scathing barb of her own, but before she had the chance a dark cloud of Gucci cologne and overly stylized hair descended on the trio and landed directly on Lydia's face. Charlie raised her eyebrows at the sudden display—an expression matched by Allison who appeared slightly perturbed by the sudden and aggressive PDA. "Allison," Charlie said, gesturing at the face currently being smashed into Lydia's, "this is Jackson Whittemore. Lydia's boyfriend. If that wasn't already made apparent by the flagrant sucking of faces."

After a sound vaguely reminiscent of the seal of a suction cup being broken, Jackson looked over at Charlie, the usual amount of disdain written into his face—straight nose contorted into a subtle snarl and flashing his gleaming teeth in a hostile smirk. "Sucking of faces?" he demanded, extracting himself from Lydia's embrace so he could glower at her more effectively. "Charlie sometimes when you talk, I swear I'm listening to my mom. Or my grandmother. It's embarrassing."

"Does that mean I can send you to bed without desert or take away your Porsche?" Charlie asked eagerly. "Because I would love to see you weep openly when I do one or both of those things."

"What's it like to be one of the cast of Golden Girls?" he sniped back.

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "I get to hang out with Betty White, so pretty awesome, actually. What is it that your Porsche is compensating for?"
Jackson's jaw twitched, but he rolled her eyes, trying to brush the topic aside while Charlie smirked. That was the basis of their relationship. They barely tolerated each other, but the constant string of jabs tossed between them made barely tolerating each other kind of fun. "I never know what the hell you're talking about," he sneered, waving her off. Turning away from her, he let the sour expression drop and looked at Allison with an air of casual charm and perfect bone structure. "Welcome to Beacon Hills," he said, extending his hand. Allison took it with a little hesitation. He fixed her with that 'winning smile'—the one that always made Charlie want to gag a bit—and held onto her hand just a little too long. "You're going to like it here."

"I love your bracelet!" Lydia interjected. She grabbed Allison's hand and pulling it away from Jackson's, inspecting the jewelry carefully. "That's really adorable."

Charlie lifted her hand to her mouth to hide a snort. "On this week's episode of 'Fashion Police'..." she murmured under her breath.

"Oh, shut up, Charlie!" Lydia said, smacking her arm again. "I was just being friendly. And speaking of being friendly—" she continued, redirecting the comment to Allison while leaning against Jackson, marking her territory "—this weekend, there's a party."

"A party?" Allison chirped, not able to keep the tones of dread from seeping in.

"Yeah," Jackson said, nodding along. "Friday night. You should come."

"Oh, I can't," Allison drawled out evasively, shrinking back against the lockers. Charlie didn't blame her. On their own Jackson and Lydia could come on strong, but as a pair....confronting them was not for the faint of heart. They were all shiny surfaces and hard edges. But Allison seemed to hold her ground. "It's family night this Friday," she said, latching onto an excuse. "But thanks for asking."

Jackson raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "You sure?" he demanded. "Everyone's going after the scrimmage."

"Y—you mean like football?" Allison asked.

Jackson let out a derisive laugh, making Allison shrink back a bit more. "Football's a joke at Beacon," he said, still chuckling. "The sport here is lacrosse. We've won the state championship for the past three years."

"Because of a certain team captain," Lydia proclaimed loudly, reaching up to play with Jackson's hair.

Charlie scoffed and rolled her eyes at the display. "It's true," she piped up, folding her arms across her chest and leaning back against the lockers. "The other nine guys have nothing to do with it. They just stand on the sidelines and let Jackson do his thing. They're more like glorified cheerleaders really."

Allison worked hard to hide a smile behind her hand while Jackson glared evilly. "Ignore Charlie," he said bitterly. "She generally has no idea what she's talking about."

"He's right, I don't," Charlie threw in. "Like those three championships. You're a sophomore, right? So did you get held back twice or were you only there for one of those?"

Jackson looked like he was preparing to bite her head off, but before he got the chance, another voice intervened. "Guys," Lydia interjected, staring them both down with the look of a kindergarten teacher. "We talked about this. Be nice. At least in public."
Jackson's face heated up to the point she thought the fumes from his hair product might cause his head to spontaneously combust. His teeth gritted in a forced smile. "Come and see for yourself," he said, turning to Allison once again. "We have practice in a few minutes. That is, if you don't have anything else...."

Allison glanced around, searching for some form of escape. "Well I was going to—"

"Perfect!" Lydia declared, cutting her off. "You're coming."

The redhead grabbed hold of Allison's hand and dragged her a few feet down the hall before glancing over her shoulder to find Charlie rooted solidly in place. "Charlie, come on! You don't want to miss out on any hot lacrosse boys running around in their gear do you?"

"Oh, no, I'm sitting this one out," Charlie replied, waving Lydia off. "I'm going to the library, getting some homework out of the way."

Lydia gaped at her. "Seriously? It's the first day of school—how much work could you possibly have to do? Don't be ridiculous. You're coming."

"Nope," Charlie said, popping the 'p'. "I'm pretty sure Mel has a truancy officer on speed dial to make sure I'm not turning into a drugged up dropout. It's time for me to occupy the 'ideal teenager' niche. I'm going to the library where I will do a month's worth of chemistry homework and show it to her so she can calm the hell down."

Lydia narrowed her eyes and stuck her lower lip out in a pout. "You're no fun."

Allison was left glancing back and forth between them, eyebrows knitted together in confusion. "Who's Mel?"

Charlie didn't get a chance to answer. Flipping her hair over her shoulder, Lydia began to stomp down the hallway, dragging Allison along with her. Watching them go, Charlie cupped her hands and brought them to her mouth to shout after them. "Remember, Allison! If you start enjoying yourself, you're probably suffering from Stockholm Syndrome!"

True to her word, Charlie made her way to the library, found a comfortable spot, and hauled out her chemistry book. Like the copy of Kafka, it had a worn look to it—frayed cover corners, doodles in the page corners, warped pages from being dropped in a puddle at one point or another. Luckily for her, the past owner seemed to have been a bad student as it remained untouched by highlighters. She grabbed her own and set to work on chapter one. Of all the classes she was taking that semester, chemistry was the one most likely to kick her ass.

Everything she had said to Lydia was 100% true. Aunt Mel was freaking out. A lot. Of course she still carried herself with that calm, composed exterior, but beneath it she was scrambling. Hell, parenting books had replaced the issues of Vogue and Vanity Fair on her bedside table. Food, finances, discipline, school, college—a giant mountain of crap had just been dumped on her lap. This was the best way Charlie could think of to stop the crazy train before it jumped the tracks.

Anyways, if Charlie was being honest, she didn't mind spending her first day holed up in the library. She found libraries oddly soothing. Particularly school libraries as they had a habit of being completely empty. And they smelled of old books. That smell always got to her—the smell of knowledge and imagination. And there was the added bonus she wouldn't have to watch Jackson and his ridiculous male posturing. He struck enough poses, the team might as well be mounting a high school production of 'Zoolander'.
By the time she left the library, Charlie's car was one of the last in the lot. The sky had faded to a
darkened grey and the chemistry book in her bag had an index card wedged in the fifth chapter,
marking her spot. She clambered into the car and crossed her fingers as the key slid into the
ignition, softly chanting 'please, please, please' under her breath. With some coaxing the engine
revved to life, wrenching a small cry of victory from her lips. A wide smile painted her face as the
car pulled out of the parking lot, windows down and blasting 'AC/DC' out of the speakers. She was
ready to be home, showered, with a good book and a heaping serving of ice cream. Unfortunately,
the universe seemed to have other plans.

**BANG!**

The noise was accompanied by a violent lurching of the car. The seatbelt bit into Charlie's shoulder
as her body lunged forwards. That would probably leave a bruise. "Oh, shit, shit, shit," she
groaned, grimacing at the sensation.

Charlie pulled the car to the side of the road and climbed out, letting the engine idle. If she turned
it off, there was a good chance it wouldn't start again, and she did not want to be stranded on the set
of 'The Blair Witch Project'. She looked to see if she had any indication of her location. Without
signs to direct her, she had no way to know exactly where she was. In some ways Beacon Hills was
one giant labyrinth of trees. Slowly, she circled the car, letting her eyes rake over it for any
potential issues until she came to a stop at the back left wheel.

"Son of a bitch."

A giant dark mass protruded from the tire—or what remained of it. The thing had blown out
completely. Charlie went back to the driver's seat, turned off the engine, and popped the trunk.
Grabbing a motor-oil-stained rag, she moved back to the deflated tire and carefully wrapped the rag
around the piece of debris. With one violent yank, she pulled out whatever it was that had caused
the blowout. She held it up to the light and squinted carefully.

"Holy shit."

An antler. An honest-to-god antler from a fully grown adult male deer. Or so her obsessive viewing
of the Discover Channel told her. The edge that had punctured the tire was splintering and had
fractured into a point, like it had somehow been broken off. And there was blood around the
breaking point from that velvet lining the bone, meaning the deer had been alive when it happened.
How was that even possible? What would have the strength to do that, let alone the motivation?

Weird. This town was weird. And weird shit happened in the woods.

Charlie's internal monologue was cut off abruptly at the sound of distant, rumbling thunder. Great.
The one think that could improve having a tire blow out in a middle of nowhere woodland road.
Rain. Excellent.

Standing up, Charlie held the antler a moment longer, considering what to do with it. Finally she
went back to the trunk of her car, wrapped it in a few more rags, and placed it carefully in the
corner between her mini-toolbox and ice-road chains before hauling out the jack and spare tire.

Snatching a spare hair tie from her messenger bag, Charlie quickly plaited her long, brown hair into
a messy braid. Ugh. This ensemble, while a suitable introduction to the school year, was not
conducive to impromptu car repairs. She kicked off the heeled ankle boots, chucking them into the
back seat almost violently before groping around in for the pair of green Converse she kept stashed
there. Well, that was as good as it was gonna get. Time to get to work.
After about 25 minutes, Charlie was pretty close to finished with the tire change. Her hands, as exhausted and sweaty as the rest of her, slipped against the handle of the allen wrench as she secured the last bolt. If Lydia could see her now, the girl might have a stroke. Chunks of hair stuck out of her braid at random points, her eyeliner had smudged, and her cheeks featured giant pink splotches that had nothing to do with the blush that had been shoved in her bag that morning. Not a pretty sight, even by Charlie's standards. She was just tightening the last of the nuts when all of the sudden, a loud jangling interrupted the general sounds of nature.

Spitting out some stray hairs that had somehow found their way into her mouth, Charlie dropped her tools and got to her feet. She brushed off her skirt, wincing at the sight of her tights. They had gaping holes at her knees, which were dotted with indentations where the rough gravel dug into her skin. Charlie circled to the front of the car, and sure enough 'Don't You Want Me, Baby?' was blasting from her phone. Leaning through the open window, she grappled around in her bag until she was able to extract her phone. Once again she was confronted by the image of a grinning face with enthusiastic finger guns.

"What's up, Donald?" she demanded, pressing her phone to her ear.

"That's twice now, Ozzy," his voice declared, breaking out her grade school nickname. Usually he just went with Oz, but Ozzy only ever got thrown back in rotation when he was mildly pissed about something but trying not to be. Charlie swore internally and gritted her teeth. The post first day check-in. She had missed it. Damn, this move had her all twisted up.

Charlie collapsed against the car with an apologetic grunt and pressed her hand to her forehead, probably smearing a not insignificant amount of grease across it. "Sorry," she mumbled into the receiver. "Sorry, Donald. I've been having a bit of a day."

"Yeah," he replied, his voice a little short. "That's kinda the point of calling me, right? You get to complain about how annoying about everybody is and then I make fun of them for you. I like making fun of stupid people. It's like...my third favorite pastime."

"After Halo and live-tweeting shitty movies—I know."

"Then you know what you're depriving me of," he replied, his tone still colored with dissatisfaction.

"I know, I know," she sighed. "I got caught up and the library—"

"Nerd."

"—and then my car tire blew out," she continued, glancing around, looking for any other forms of sentient life. Nope. She was completely alone. "I am currently stranded in the middle of nowhere. Plus it looks like it's gonna rain soon."

"Yeah, enough about your problems," he interrupted. "It's time for my news."

"Okay," Charlie nodded, unfazed by the abrupt topic shift. "Hit me. What's you news?"

When he spoke again, the edge of bitterness had completely abandoned his tone. One of the more best things about Donald—he had a short attention span when it came to things like anger and frustration. "Well, Oz," he announced, "who has two thumbs and just made first line on the soccer team? Oh, yeah. That'd be me."

"And ten other guys," Charlie tacked on, smirking a bit as she waited for the grumpy spluttering that would inevitably follow that comment.
"Hey, hey, hey," Donald interrupted. "Stop crapping on my parade. I made first line, and my badassery will be appreciated. I mean sure the whole team is basically a lightly microwaved bowl of oatmeal in terms of skill level, but I'm pretty good. Which means that here, I'm awesome. Seriously, unless we get a foreign exchange student from one of those soccer crazed countries—"

"Also known as anywhere that isn't the U.S."

"—I'm basically a god at this school," he barreled on. "And do you know what that means?"

Charlie wrinkled her nose, wrapping one arm around her middle and sunk further against the car. "I'm not sure I want to know what that means, Donald," she murmured. "But I'm going to go ahead and say offerings of food."

"It means girls," Donald continued. "It means lots of girls. Because I am officially a stud, it says so on my student ID card and everything. You had your chance in the seventh grade, Oz, but I am on to bigger and better things."

"I'm weeping inside," Charlie deadpanned, rolling her eyes heavily. "But seriously, man, congratulations." "Thank you," he proclaimed loudly. "Okay, so now it's your turn. What's the daily dish?"

Charlie bit her lip, her eyes flicking up to the skyline. The dark, looming clouds were slowly creeping in, ready to unleash a downpour on her head. She stayed on the phone, though. If she hung up on Donald, he would call her every minute on the minute until she picked up again. Patience was not among his many positive qualities. "I met a girl named Allison who seems pretty cool," she said with a shrug. "Apparently someone got murdered in the woods last night. My chemistry teacher's a total psycho. Plus there's this coach guy who—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Donald interjected, cutting her off. "Did you just say there was a murder in the woods last night?"

"Yeah," Charlie smirked. "Crazy, right?"

The line went quiet for a moment, making Charlie frown in confusion. Quiet generally wasn't Donald's thing. "Um, hello?" she prompted.

"Someone got murdered in the woods and that's not what you lead with?" he exploded. "Son of a—Oswin, where are your priorities?"

"On the stuff that actually happened to me," Charlie replied easily.

A giant squawking noise of protest louder than the nearby violent cracks of thunder emanated from the speaker, forcing Charlie to pull the phone away from her ear.

"Okay, just for future reference," Donald grumbled, "you always lead with the murder. I mean, how cool is that? Nothing interesting like that ever happens here. I wish we'd have a murder."

"Are you actively rooting for murder?" Charlie scoffed.

"You have no idea how boring it is here, Oz," he whined. "I'm in freaking New England. This weekend somebody suggested we go apple-picking. Like...for fun. As a form of recreation. Somebody our age!"

If the idea of murder but a wince on Charlie's face, the idea of apple-picking tattooed that wince on
said face where it would remain on a permanent basis. "Jesus," Charlie muttered under her breath. 
"Are you living in Stepford?"

"Basically," he muttered back in a quiet, almost evasive tone. She could picture him glancing around his immediate surroundings, ensuring some sweater-clad agent of the homeowner's association didn't overhear him. Donald the discount suburban spy. "Everybody here wears argyle and owns a set of golf clubs. And they smile all the time—it's weird. I would kill for a murder."

Charlie wrinkled her nose at his wording, but opted not to make any comment on it. Then, before she could make any comment at all, a sort of crashing noise came from the forest behind the Impala. On instinct Charlie pushed herself of the passenger side door, spun around, and peered over the hood of the car at the woods beyond. They were still—oddly still. Or maybe that was just paranoia kicking in from all the murder talk. That single dried, dead leaf falling from a tree and slowly floating to the ground felt ominous. For a moment she thought she had invented the sound on her own—pesky subconscious and all that—but just as the feeling of anticipation began to drop, the sound of a twig snapping echoed against the trees.

Operating under the inexplicable assumption that somebody was about to axe-murder her, Charlie snatched up the allen wrench from the ground. "Hold on," she muttered into the phone. "There's someone in the woods."

"Whoa, you're in the woods?" Donald exclaimed, sounding both too cheerful and too concerned for her taste. "You're in the murder woods right now?"

"No, my car has a flat," she drawled in response. "The road happens to be next to the woods. Everything is next to the woods here. And don't call them the murder woods."

"But you hear someone there, right?" Donald pressed. "Is it the killer?"

"How should I know?" she sniped back. "Killers don't really wear name badges or post their crimes on their LinkedIn profiles, do they?"

"No. Facebook is a much better way of publicizing it."

"Donald!"

"Maybe you could ask him," Donald mused. "Wait, I'm assuming the murderer a guy. Is that sexist? I feel like that's sexist. Girls are totally capable of murder—they can do anything, just ask my mom."

Charlie let out a sigh, her hand tightening around the wrench. "You realize that asking the murderer if they're a murderer involves me getting close enough to said murderer to be murdered myself."

"That sounds about right," Donald agreed. "Now Charlie, be real with me. Serious question time. If you die a gruesome, horrible death in the murder woods, will that hot redhead from this morning be at your funeral?"

"Your concern means the world to me, Donald," Charlie replied dully. "I've gotta go now."

"Okay! Let me know if you're dead."

"Will do."

Hanging up the phone, Charlie clutched it in her hand and waited. Those small, incidental snaps
and crashing noises increased in both volume and frequency. Eventually it added up to the sound of a few people plodding carelessly through the brush. The closer the noise approached, the tighter her hand cinched in around the grip of the allen wrench. After a few moments, though, two voices reached her ears as well. Two distinctly non-threatening voices, one of which even sounded a little familiar.

"No, man, I'm telling you!" the familiar voice said. "That was Derek freaking Hale! I mean did you get a look at that guy? He could totally be a creepy murderer person! He had serial killer eyes—I'm telling you!"

"Serial killer eyes are not a thing!" the second voice protested. "And you heard what Mr. Hobson said. They've got a suspect in custody."

"Um, excuse me while I break out my dictionary—oh yeah, 'suspect' and 'actual murderer guy' have different definitions. Seriously, like the police have never been wrong? I am familiar with the inner workings of the police department and I can honestly say that some of those guys barely function on a fifth grade reading level."

"Keep walking! I'm gonna be late for work!" There was a short pause accompanied by a loud thwack. "Ow! What was that for?"

"For not listening to me! And don't think I've forgotten about all this weird hearing and smelling stuff. Imagine what that's gonna be like next time you go to the movie theater. Oh, man, it's gonna be rank—"

The words came to a screeching halt as the two figures broke the line of trees and stumbled onto the ground. It was those same two guys again—Stilinski and the one majorly crushing on Allison. They were everywhere. The both of them froze like deer in headlights, and she slowly released her hold on the allen wrench. They looked plenty scared of her to begin with—no need to bring blunt instruments into it.

"Um, hey," she said, giving them a wave. They just blinked at her, staying completely silent. "Uh, I'm Charlie. I think I'm in your English class. And your Chem class." More silence. "I'm pretty sure this is the part where you tell me your names. Or just, you know, talk. In general."

"R—right!" the Stilinski guy said, snapping out of whatever fugue state he had lapsed into. "I'm Stiles," he continued, gesturing at himself, "and this—" he clapped his hand on the guy's shoulder "—this is my buddy Scott. And we—" he pointed back and forth between the two of them "—we are in your English class."

"And Chem class," Charlie added.

"And Chem class," he agreed, planting his hands on his hips and nodding with a special sort of jittery enthusiasm. "What are—what are you doing here?"

Charlie made a face and held up the allen wrench. "I got a flat tire," she said bluntly. "What are you doing here?"

"Just chillin'!" he answered a little too quickly. "You know...walking around, seeing the sights, birds chirping, with though trees...air...that sort of thing."

Well that was certainly something suspicious to be found in that fidgety and generally evasive behavior. Interest piqued. "Really?" she demanded, raising her eyebrows pointedly. "You're just wandering aimlessly in the woods? As far as extracurriculars go, that one doesn't really seem to
"We were looking for my inhaler," Scott blurted out, making Stiles sigh in frustration and shake his head. Scott's eyes seemed to widen, like he realized that he had made some terrible mistake. "I—I, uh, dropped it last night. When we were out here...in the woods...doing...stuff...chillin'...."

"Why were you wandering around the woods at night?" she inquired further.

Scott opened his mouth and closed it again. "Fresh air?"

"You know, you ask lots of questions," Stiles declared, wagging a finger at her.

"Yeah?" Charlie replied defensively, folding her arms across her chest and perching on the hood of her car. "Well you guys say a lot of weird crap that invites questions. For instance, wandering around in the woods at night...dropping inhalers... I'd say that's pretty weird."

Stiles blew out a long breath and scratched at the back of his neck awkwardly, looking extremely guilty. "We were—we were looking for the body. The one they found the other day."

Charlie blinked and cocked her head to the side in consideration. "Wouldn't the cops have the body?"

The boys exchanged a look before returning their eyes back to her. Scott spoke first. "The body...it was sort of cut in half."

"Bisected," Stiles added, lifting up a hand to make a sawing motion while wincing. "I mean that's how the cops put it. They have one bit. We were looking for...the other bit."

Charlie pursed her lips in thought, looking between the two of them curiously. "Which way?"

"Which was the body?" Scott mumbled, looking around him like he expected it to fall out of a nearby tree. "We don't really know where it is."

"No, I mean which way was it cut in half," she elaborated. "I mean was it cut off at the waist—legs from torso—or was it like a line down the middle, Body World exhibit style. That would be way more terrifying, but a hell of a lot cooler."

The two of them gaped at her like she had sprouted a second head which had then proceeded to ask them that question. Stiles let out an awkward laugh and rocked back and forth on his heels. "Don't, uh, don't you think that's a bit morbid?"

Charlie let out a loud snort. "As opposed to trying to track down half a dead body in the woods?"

He opened and closed his mouth like he was about to say something and snapped it shut again before pointing at her. "That's—that's a good point."

The three of them stood there in the road for a moment, just staring at each other. It was like some bizarre Western shootout, replacing the gunfire and death with face-palming and social awkwardness. Which is basically the social equivalent of death when one is in high school. They probably would have stood in that hell much longer, but a massive crack of thunder cut through their collective silence short.

"Right," Charlie said, hopping off the hood of her car. "Well I'm going to get the hell out of here before the weather goes to shit." She circled the car and tossed the allen wrench in the trunk before squatting down next to the wheel to remove the jack.
Oh, right," Stiles said, him and Scott rounding the side of the car as well. "Do you need any help with th—okay, you seem to have it pretty much covered."

Charlie yanked the jack out from under the car and stood up, wiping some of the sweat and a few stray hairs out of her eyes. "Yeah, pretty much," she mumbled, waving the jack around a bit before tossing it next to the allen wrench. "Hey," she chirped suddenly, turning back to face them. "You wouldn't happen to have a car around here, would you?"

The two exchanged a look again, looking like they were trying to synch up their stories. "Y—yeah, my Jeep's just around the corner," Stiles said, jerking his thumb to indicate at the bend behind them. "Why, do you need a ride? Your spare looks pretty much set to me—you should be good to go."

"It's not the tire," she said, rapping her knuckles against the hood of the car. "The spark plugs on this things are shot—they're pretty much just electrical tape now. I doubt I'd be able to start her up again on her own, and I'd rather not call a cab or towing company. Do you think you could help me jumpstart the engine? Pretty please?"


A small smirk pulled at Charlie's lips. "Better."

"Right," Stiles bit out. "Good. I'm just gonna...I'll get the ca—yeah."

Within about five minutes they had the jumper cables all set up and she was gleefully revving the engine of her car. The three of them said their goodbyes—which were as awkward as the rest of their interaction—and drove off in their respective directions. All in all it should have been an isolated incident—a little car trouble on the side of the road. But for some reason when she pulled into the driveway, Charlie couldn't stop thinking about that weird confluence of events. The antler, the severed body, those two weirdos stomping around in the forest, and whoever the hell Derek Hale with the 'serial killer eyes' was. The whole thing was very 'Twilight Zone'.

Well, one thing was for sure. This year was not going to be boring.

And Donald was going to lose his shit when he found out how much he was missing out on.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 2 – Car Trouble SOUNDTRACK

Driving to school, entering the school, chatting with Stiles and Scott.

~~~~~~~~~Scott Get The Van, I'm Moving - Cayetana

Going to the office and meeting Allison.

~~~~~~~~~Une Fraction De Seconde - Holden

Charlie introduces herself to the class.
In the hallway with Allison and introducing Lydia and Jackson.

10) Getting a flat tire and finding the antler.

That Ain't Right - Pyramids
Nothing

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Three - Nothing

"You know it's a good thing that tin can you call a car broke down. I was beginning to worry that you were going to get tetanus. Or Hepatitis A through M."

Exhaling sharply, Charlie propped her feet up on the dashboard of Lydia's Beetle. With her car out of commission and Aunt Mel having to open up her shop in the morning, Lydia had seemed like the best possible mechanism of transportation from her apartment to school. For a while she had contemplated walking, but after the rant Donald went on about the 'murder woods', the option had rather lost its appeal. Also, it involved walking for at least an hour. The idea itself she had no problem with, excepting the fact that it also required her to wake up an hour earlier. Which was completely unacceptable. So Lydia it was.

Traveling with Lydia came with a few drawbacks. Charlie had been willing to put up with the makeup and wardrobe check before she was reluctantly allowed entrance to the car. She had anticipated that aspect. It took another high-waisted leather skirt—this one red—and semi-well-executed winged eyeliner to gain admittance. What she didn't account for was Lydia's boundless energy and Type A personality which, when paired with Charlie's general hatred for all things before 10:00 a.m., let to an extreme desire to throw herself out of the moving car and into the sweet embrace of death.

"Hey, hey, hey," Lydia chided, reaching over and smacking Charlie's legs, "it's bad enough that you wear those combat boots. Don't get them on my car."

Letting her heels drag against against the upholstery, Charlie removed her feet from the dash. "It's not like I wore them through the trenches. They're from a sample sale Mel went to in L.A., not the Battle of the Somme." Charlie let out a wide yawn, wiping the sleep out of her eyes, wishing that Lydia had let her hit the snooze button one more time. "Anyways," she continued, "they're designer and you said anything designer was fine."

"Labels and good taste are not one and the same," Lydia replied snippily.

"Oh, come on," Charlie groaned. "They're designer boots. They're cute. I thought you'd be happy about the fact that I'm wearing Zoombinis."

"Oh my God!" Lydia almost shrieked, pounding her hand on the steering wheel. "Zanottis. They're called Zanottis! And they are sacred."

"You subscribe to a seriously weird religion," Charlie drawled sarcastically. "Do you build shrines and perform animal sacrifices? Is that what your poolhouse is for? Am I going to show up one day and find Prada missing?"
"There are about a thousand girls who would gladly kill their adorable furry dogs to get their hands on those shoes," Lydia said through an exaggerated eye roll. "I mean, do you even know how much those things cost?"

"No, I do not," Charlie replied evenly. "Nor do I intend to find out. Every time I find out how much those clothes cost these days I get a mental image of starving people in areas of natural disaster and that's always a bit of a downer. The markup on these things is completely absurd."

Lydia's mouth hung open in disbelief and she shook her head. "You are unbelievable. Sometimes I wonder why I choose to associate with you."


Lydia's lower lip stuck out in a determined pout and she cranked up the music, driving in silence. Charlie just sat there, twiddling her thumbs and waiting. It was only a matter of time before the redhead began to talk again. She had yet to dish on the first day intrigue, and Charlie could see the wheels turning in her head. Hell, they were spinning so fast she was surprised the entire apparatus didn't break down and send pieces whirling off into oblivion.

"So something interesting happened at the lacrosse practice you so idiotically insisted on skipping," she chirped cheerfully. She shot Charlie a few glances, trying to gauge her level of interest and provoke questioning, but Charlie just stared stubbornly in front of her, tapping out the tune to the song playing against her leg. After a few moments, Lydia let out an exasperated sigh and flipped her hair over her shoulder in frustration. "Fine," she bit out angrily. "I guess I'll just have to tell you anyway. It looks like Beacon Hills has a new star player."

Charlie immediately let out a spluttering laugh. "Oh, that is too great," she coughed out while Lydia glared at her in the rearview mirror. "Has Jackson had a stroke yet? Has his hair started getting all floppy and unkempt? Because I'm pretty sure his hair is the source of his power, and now not that he's no longer king of his little hill—"

"There is no flopping!" Lydia interrupted shrilly. "There is not 'unkempt'!"

"Are you sure?" Charlie drawled out, raising her eyebrows pointedly. "I think he's been using more product than usual. His hair might have lost its structural integrity. Are you sure it's not getting a little….limp?"

"There is no limp!"

"I wonder what would happen if you shaved his head," Charlie continued to muse, ignoring the expression of borderline rage contorting Lydia's usually mildly apathetic features. "I mean, there's a possibility he might just…shrink up…and die right then and there."

A hostile, twisted smile vaguely resembling a Guy Fawkes mask appeared on Lydia's face, making Charlie fear for her life on some small level. "Jackson is still team captain," she declared. "And he is still on top. Except, of course, when I am."

"Ew, Lydia," Charlie whined, wincing heavily. "Just ew. On so many levels. I really don't need to hear about your and Jackson's bedroom adventures."

"Well, I wasn't the one busy making double entendres," Lydia replied in a clipped tone. "I'm just moving to your level."

"Well don't," Charlie shot back, sticking her tongue out in disgust like a three year old presented with a plate of brussel sprouts. "As far as I'm concerned, Jackson is a Ken doll. I am totally
uncomfortable with the idea of him having the capacity to procreate."

"I can assure you from personal experience that he is not a Ken doll," Lydia said through a wide, highly suggestive smirk that made Charlie cringe even more.

"Ugh," Charlie muttered, sinking lower in her seat. "Consider me traumatized for life."

"But Jackson isn't the point of this conversation," Lydia barrelled on, tapping her finger against the steering wheel for emphasis. "I want to know more about this new guy. It's important to have all the necessary information before moving forward."

"Jesus," Charlie sighed. "This is like the most low-stakes Tom Clancy novel of all time."

Ignoring her little quip, Lydia breezed on. "Apparently he has an English class with you and Allison. Why don't you do me a favor and see what you can find out about him."

"Why?" Charlie inquired casually. "Is he about to be inducted into the elite social circle of the illustrious Lydia Martin?"

"It can't be that elite if you're a part of it."

"Hurtful!" Charlie objected, biting back a smile. "But if there's going to be hazing, I refuse to be a part of it. Somehow everything always ends up sticky."

"There will be no hazing," Lydia said, rolling her eyes heavily. "Like I said, I just want to know who the players are this year."

"Something which could be accomplished by looking at the bulletin board outside the locker room," Charlie added with a casual wave of her hand. "It's called the sign-up sheet. For someone with a genius level IQ, your detective skills are pretty shitty."

The car slowed to a stop as it approached a red light. As soon as the brakes engaged, Lydia twisted in her seat, leveling Charlie with a serious look. "Charlie," she instructed carefully. "You should know by now that all players are not created equal. There's the benched ones the coach keeps on the team from pity or for moments of extreme desperation. Then there's the alternates. Above that is first line. And above that is—"

"Demigods who are descended from the Greek gods themselves," Charlie deadpanned. "They might only be teenagers, but their abs were prophesied in mythology long ago....."

Lydia's face scrunched up into a displeased expression, vaguely resembling a frustrated hamster. "Above first line are the key players," she corrected. "The ones that make or break the game. The ones the scouts pay attention to. Jackson and Danny for example."

"Okay," Charlie said, bobbing her head. "I get the idea of the whole hierarchy of muscles you've got going on. Is there a point to this?"

The light turned green, and Lydia pressed down on the gas rather enthusiastically, causing the car to shoot forward with such force that Charlie found herself grabbing onto the hand hold for stability. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lydia's lips twitch as she hid yet another smirk. "There is a point," the girl declared. "His name is Scott McCall. Apparently he was on the team last year, but didn't make much of an impression. Obviously. But this year he's decided to go and make himself relevant. So now I have to figure out what his 'deal' is."

Charlie frowned to herself. Scott. The name was familiar, but the face she attached it to didn't
belong to a badass lacrosse jock. It belonged to an adorable nerd who made puppy dog eyes at the
girl sitting next to her in English class. Charlie furrowed her eyebrows and turned to face Lydia in
confusion. "Does this Scott McCall have floppy dark brown hair and huge eyes like a scared baby
in a youtube video?"

"Why, yes," Lydia replied. "Yes, he does. It sounds like you already have a bit of an advantage."

Charlie groaned and wiped at her eyes again. "Well, if I'm going to be thrown into this world of
high school espionage, I'm going to be needing some more sleep."

Blowing out a long breath, Charlie leaned her seat back as far as it would go and closed her eyes.
That was her response to Lydia whenever the girl got worked up over something. Play dead. That
was how one was supposed to deal with bears, so the adage should hold true for Lydia as well.
And apparently it did. The girl raised the volume of the music in a small act of passive aggression,
but otherwise left Charlie alone.

The fact of the matter was that Charlie had no intention of telling Lydia anything about Scott or his
buddy Stiles. No specifics at least. There was the general type of information: he's in my chem
class, he likes grapes, he apparently has an overabundance of pens—all the standard stuff that
'meant' something only in the most shallow of terms. That kind of thing...sure she would talk about
that. Because none of it really mattered. Basic high school gossip—it existed everywhere. Like
mono or the pervasive smell of gym socks.

But then there was the interesting stuff, for instance that he and his friend went hunting for dead
bodies and animatedly discussed potential murderers. Which, to be fair, sounded like a perfectly
entertaining Monday evening. But still, that kind of thing she fully intended on keeping to herself.
Mostly because it inspired a more than average degree of curiosity.

Lydia pulled into the school parking lot, selecting a spot near the front of the school. She retrieved
her lip gloss from her purse and began carefully applying it, staring in the rearview mirror and
smacking her lips loudly. Paint and polish—her early morning ritual. Charlie cleared her throat to
get Lydia's attention, but earned no response. "I'm—I'm just gonna go," she mumbled, gesturing at
the door and waiting for a reply that was not received. "Okay, then." She opened the door and
clambered out, grabbing her messenger bag on the way.

After stopping by her locker, Charlie headed straight for the English classroom, keeping the eye
contact with fellow classmates to a minimum so as to avoid getting pulled into conversation.
Dropping her books on the floor, she leaned forwards on the desk, circling her arms under her head
in some facsimile of a pillow. One of the perks of Lydia's insistence on getting there early to
network and 'prepare for battle': Charlie could rest her eyes before Kafka. A few minutes in and her
breaths became slower and more shallow, easing her into a casual doze. Just as her consciousness
was about to drift, it was pinned in place by a carefully orchestrated cough.

Charlie opened her eyes, blinking blearily at the floor. A pair of worn sneakers gradually came into
focus. Her eyes travelled up from those sneakers, only to be confronted with khakis and a novelty
T-shirt, until they finally came into contact with those of Stiles Stilinski. A rather redundant name
now that she thought on it.

"Wuzgoinon?" She muttered unintelligibly, straightening suddenly in her chair and blinking into
the light. The clock on the wall over his shoulder read 8:11 a.m. With a full five minutes left till
the bell rang, they were the only two in the classroom. "Hey," she croaked groggily, carefully
peeling off a chunk of hair that stuck to her cheek and wiping away that little bit of drool
accompanying it. Stiles was generous enough to pretend not to notice the display. "What's up?"
Stiles shoved his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders forwards, making himself smaller. Entering conversations on the defensive appeared to be a habit for him, like he was actively preparing to be rebuffed of waved off. "Nothing," he muttered evasively. "I was just wondering if you got back okay yesterday. No more car trouble and all that. Not that you couldn't handle it yourself if there was, because all the evidence points to the fact that you are highly capable with regards to the maintenance and upkeep of cars."

Charlie forced back a delicate snort. If she wasn't mistaken, Stiles was just the tiniest bit afraid of her. He wouldn't be the first. Or maybe it was just the typical undercurrent of anxiety guys who aren't egotistical douches sometimes experience when talking to an unfamiliar girl. Either way, she was provided a small degree of satisfaction from it. "I got back fine," she replied. "Thanks again for your help. I would have gotten completely soaked otherwise. When I tried it this morning, the ignition was totally dead."

Stiles pressed his lips together and puffed out his cheeks, bobbing his head a bit while he searched for mildly awkward small talk. "So you know cars, huh?" he asked nervously.

"Yeah," she said with a nod. "My dad and I had to practically rebuild my Impala back in San Diego last year. When you're covered in grease for three solid months, you kind of have to commit to it."

"It's a pretty sweet ride," he mumbled, scratching at the back of his neck and staring intently at the floor. "And it looked like it was in pretty awesome condition except for—you know—the fact that it didn't work."

"Hey, '76 CJ-5 is nothing to sneeze at. And it actually performs a car's agreed upon purpose, so score one for Stiles." He suddenly looked up from the floor, an expression of surprise on his face. "This town put a premium on shiny and new rather than old and classic, and that left Stiles's Jeep out in the cold. "It looked vintage, so I googled," Charlie said with an explanatory shrug. "It's cool. And in really good condition if it's got all the original parts. Mine's a '66 but the engine probably ranges from '66 to '86 given the number of pieces I've had to replace. There are some '93 seat belt buckles, but I prefer not to talk about those. It's a matter of pride."

The two of them lapsed into an awkward silence. Stiles stood there, rocking back and forth on his heels like he was unsure if he should stay or go. Reaching into her messenger bag, Charlie pulled out a bag of chips and held it out to him, but he shook his head in refusal. As she sat there, munching what was definitely the world's best breakfast regardless of nutritional content, anticipation rolled off Stiles in waves. She could tell there was something at the tip of his tongue—something he was desperate to ask her, but couldn't bring himself to do it.

Okay, then. She would answer him all on her own.

"I'm not going to tell anyone, you know," she mumbled out through a mouthful of greasy goodness.

"Wh—what do you mean?" he asked, the confusion in his voice not believable in the slightest. A wince was etched across his face, like he was afraid of being judged. It was kind of adorable really—his hesitation. Based on the level of twitchiness exhibited, you would have thought he was standing in front of a freaking firing squad. Charlie held out the bag of chips again and, after eyeing them warily, he snatched up a fistful and shoved them into his mouth all at once, chewing frantically so he didn't have to talk.

Charlie raised a single eyebrow and gave him a knowing look, ready to relieve him of his apparent terror. "The Misadventures of Stiles and Scott: Corpse-Hunter Edition," she elaborated, popping another chip in her mouth. "I'm not going to tell anyone. Your secret is safe with me."
The tension his shoulders relaxed slightly, and he swallowed down the chips with a loud gulp. "Thanks," he said in a calmer tone. "I appreciate that—so does Scott. Most people would be a little weirded out by that kind of stuff."

"Well, I'm not most people."

"Yeah, apparently," he muttered, his eyes rolling back in his head.

The words came out just a little too quickly and his expression shifted from one of sardonic relief to one of horror—as if her classification as 'atypical' would be deemed somehow offensive. He was afraid that she might be insulted or embarrassed. Again, Charlie fought the urge to laugh.

"Though," she tacked on, raising a finger for emphasis, "it occurs to me that 'I'm not most people' is something that most people would probably say. Which, paradoxically, makes me just like most people. So I am simultaneously like and unlike most people. I'm Schroedinger's weirdo."

"Schroedinger's weirdo?" Stiles repeated, his eyebrows disappearing into his hairline.

"Yeah," Charlie said, munching on another mouthful of chips. "You know Schroedinger's cat? That theoretical experiment with the guy Schroedinger. You put a cat in a box with a vial of poison that would open at an unknown time and closed the box. So while the box is still closed, the cat is both alive and dead at the same time."

"No, yeah," Stiles nodded. "I've heard of the whole Schroedinger's cat thing. I'm just trying to put the rest of those words in an order that makes sense."

"I'm both bizarre and painfully normal," Charlie finished. "Schroedinger's weirdo."

"That could totally be a thing," Stiles declared, bobbing his head with jittery enthusiasm. "I mean, I buy it. Mostly because I still have no idea what you're talking about and agreeing is just...you know...easier."

"That's fair, that's fair." Charlie furrowed her eyebrows, but nodded tentatively. "So just to be clear," she declared, folding her arms on her desk and leaning towards him, "this dead body hunting stuff...it's just your typical morbid man-shenanigans, right? You're not keeping the other half of the body locked in a freezer or something, are you? Because if this turns out to be some 'Silence of the Lambs' shit, I will be forced to contact the local authorities."

Stiles smiled and waggled his eyebrows theatrically. "The lambs are screaming, Clarice!"

Charlie stared at him evenly for a moment with an impassive expression. "That was a terrible Hannibal Lecter impersonation."

"Oh, come on," Stiles shouted, throwing his hands up in indignation. "That was great!"

"Nah, you've got to put more of a hiss on the end of 'Clarice'. Plus it's gotta be more of a slurping noise—sounds like he's eating. Clarisssssssssss."

"Hm," he muttered, scratching at his chin. "That is better."

She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at him. "I think we're getting a bit off topic."

Stiles winced and slammed his fist into his forehead. "Right, me," he said, gesturing to himself. "Not a serial killer. My dad's actually sheriff, so those kind of extracurricular activities have been pretty heavily discouraged in our household. The exact words were 'I'm not covering for your
delinquent ass'. It kind of makes me question the strength of our relationship. I mean, I like to think we're close, but sometimes...."

"What has happened to family loyalty these days?!" Charlie exclaimed with false indignation, pounding a fist on her desk. "Love means helping to bury the bodies. Mob rules."

Stiles's eyes widened and he began waving his hands wildly, gesturing back and forth between the two of them. "That's what I said! Our society has totally lost that sense of loyalty. Honestly, I'd like to think there's somebody in my life who cares enough about me to be an accomplice to murder."

Charlie pursed her lips and nodded. "Now that's true friendship. Ride or die."

Stiles laughed and opened his mouth to say something else, but the first bell rang and their classmates began to file in. With a jerky nod, Stiles ducked away from her and headed to his own seat. Charlie yawned and reached into her bag, pulling out her copy of 'Metamorphosis', notebook and pens before sliding down in her seat and propping her feet up on the desk in front of her. She flipped idly through the previous days notes, most of which were surrounded by doodles of trees and clouds. Turning to a fresh page, she began to sketch out a new drawing—a deer with a broken antler. Badass Bambi. Rambo Bambi. Rambambi. The image had stuck in her brain. And that thing in the back of her trunk was still bothering her, a whisper at the back of her brain.

"Psst! Hey, hey, Charlie!"

A hissing sound drew Charlie's attention away from her notebook and to the corner of the room. She turned to see Stiles hanging out of his seat, leaning towards her. Only a miracle of physics could be keeping him in that chair. Charlie leaned towards him as well, though far less daringly. "What?" she hissed back in confusion.

"Which one was the lie?"

Charlie arched a questioning eyebrow in his direction, silently asking him to elaborate.

"Yesterday," Stiles continued, waving his hand in a circle like he could roll back time through sheer force of gesticulation. "When you were introducing yourself you gave us that list—Gemini, long walks on the beach, James Franco. Which was the lie?"

The massive, shit-eating grin that spread across Charlie's face couldn't be helped. For the past four years she had stood up in front of a classroom and rattled off that list, and not one person had ever bothered to ask her that question. Eyes narrowed, she leaned further in Stiles's direction, mimicking his ridiculous posture. "I've always hated long walks on the beach," she whispered slyly. "They've been commercialized. Totally not worth it anymore—no authenticity to it."

Stiles's jaw dropped open and he stared at her with complete incredulity. "Are you freaking serious?"

"What can I say?" Charlie replied with a casual smirk. "James Franco loves him some churros. Especially when he's high."

"Wha—he was high?" Stiles demanded, snorting loudly.

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "I'd say that's a pretty fair assumption. I looked at him, said 'you're James Franco', and then he smiled at me, said 'thank you' for some reason, and then just...walked off. Plus he tried to share his churro with a chipmunk and got super-bummed when the chipmunk ran away. I think he thought they were going to become friends or something. Like a Disney movie."
Stiles let out a strange, squeaking laugh and opened his mouth to continue the conversation, but was again promptly cut off. The second bell rang, causing the metaphorical dam to break as students flooded through the classroom doors. No more opportunities for light conversation or casual banter.

Charlie quietly stared at the front door as the students moved in, taking in all the faces. That's what the first week or so of school always turned into—one giant game of 'Memory'. Match the face with the corresponding name. But that was when she managed to actually learn the names. For now everybody was identified by their most prominent characteristic. Body odor guy. Goth girl. Ironic facial hair guy. Unironic facial hair guy. Finally the lot of them were followed in by Teacher Buzzkill. The only two who hadn't made it into the room were the ones whose names she actually knew.

Scott and Allison stumbled into the classroom two minutes after the late bell, quietly slipping in behind Mr. Hobson. As soon as they crossed the threshold, the air in the classroom changed—it reeked of young love and teenage pheromones. Smiles were everywhere. Allison was smiling, Scott was smiling—far too many smiles for a first period English class. First period was for moody stares and stealth-naps while waiting for the caffeine to kick in. Add in the fact that the light glinting off their freakishly white teeth was giving her a migraine and it all made for an exceptionally confusing morning. Looking at them felt like staring into the sun. Whether that was a good thing or a bad thing she had yet to tell.

As she took her seat, Allison studiously ignored the pointed eyebrow waggling Charlie sent in her direction. She ran her hands through her hair, dragging it over her shoulder and letting it fall in a curtain to separate her face from Charlie's prying eyes, but not before Charlie saw the faint pink blush gracing those pale cheeks. Clearly Lydia had chosen the wrong spy, for reasons extending beyond Charlie's complete lack of interest. With regards to one Scott McCall, Allison was definitely jogging along the inside track.

Charlie considered writing a series of notes, crumpling them into small balls of paper, and tossing them at Allison until she incited some form of response, but Mr. Hobson's mood appeared to be more bitter and unfulfilled than usual. That course of action had detention looming at the end of it. Nope, instead she stared at her notebook and took diligent notes. Or diligently doodled. Diligence was involved in either a productive or unproductive capacity.

When the ending bell rang, Charlie stood and began shoving her books into her bag, ready to head off to the next class—American History—but as she was just finishing getting her things together, someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around to see Allison standing there, face flushed and smiling, clutching her bag like Linus held onto that blanket of his.

"What's up?" Charlie inquired hesitantly, not wanting to add any more to Allison's persistent anxieties.

"Hey Charlie," she breathed through a nervous laugh. "There's someone I wanted to introduce you to." She turned to the seat in front of her and tapped Scott on the shoulder, making him turn around. When Scott's eyes fell on Charlie, he paled visibly. The total and complete terror gracing his features was almost endearing. "This is Scott," Allison continued, unaware of the sudden look of nausea flitting across Scott's face.

"We've actually met already," Charlie said with a knowing smirk.

Allison furrowed her eyebrows in confusion and glanced between the two of them. Scott gave off a deer-in-headlights air, brown eyes wide and unblinking, mouth hanging open slightly before he suddenly snapped it shut. "Really?" Allison asked quietly. She readjusted the strap of her bag on
Charlie let out an easy, pacifying smile. "Yeah!" she chirped. "We, uh, we met yesterday. My car totally broke down on the way home from the library. I thought I was going to be stranded in an epic end-of-days style downpour when he and his friend over there—" she jerked her thumb in Stiles's direction, prompting him to give an awkward salute "—they kind of rescued me. I probably would have drowned—I could have died. I could have died a horrible, terrifying death. Or at least ended up looking like a pruny old man from getting totally soaked."

Both Allison and Scott visibly relaxed, posture slackening as they exhaled. Allison glanced over her shoulder at Scott in that flirty way girls do in the movies—head tilted down so she could look up at him through her doe-like lashes. Heavy on the eye contact and bashfulness. "He rescued you, huh?" she murmured, the corners of her lips quirking upwards. "He seems to keep doing that."

Scott laughed and stared down at the floor, flushing with embarrassment. "I do what I can, I guess."

"Hey, I helped!" Stiles called out from his spot in the corner, waving his hands about as if trying to disperse the fumes of flirtiness arising from the pair. "Just to be clear, I helped. I was instrumental in the helping process. It was my car and my jumper cables, so I'd even say I was the primary help-giver in this particular scenario."

"Nobody likes a glory whore, Stiles!" Charlie called over her shoulder. She stepped forwards and grabbed Allison's hand, yanking the girl after her. "If you two gentlemen will excuse us, Allison and I will be talking about Scott in hushed voices while giggling."

Without another word, Charlie dragged Allison into the hallway, ignoring her quiet shrieks of protest. "Charlie, I can not believe you did that!"

"Oh, like they don't already know."

Charlie pulled Allison into one of the small, windowed alcoves in the hallway, folding her arms across her chest and dipping her head forwards conspiratorially. "Spill."

"Charlie, we're going to be late for class."

"Don't care," Charlie said, waving her hand dismissively. "Spill."

Allison opened and closed her mouth a few times, glancing self-consciously at the tide of students moving past them. She gnawed on her lip and began to bounce up and down on the balls of her feet, both tell-tale symptoms of words itching to be spoken.

"Don't be coy, Allison," Charlie admonished. "Save that for Scott."

After a few more moments of hesitation, Allison's resolve crumbled. "So I met him last night—"

"And there it is!"

Allison rolled her eyes, but leaned in to whisper all the same. "I was driving in the rain last night," she murmured. "I—I hit a dog. It came out of nowhere. I couldn't avoid it. I brought it to the vet, and Scott was the one who opened the door. I was freaking out—acting like a complete girly girl, it was embarrassing—and he...he calmed me down. He gave me a dry shirt, took care of the dog. He was really sweet. We're—we're going to the party together."

Charlie let out a low whistle. "Well, you work fast. So the two of you going to this party....is it a
"It's a date," Allison mumbled, flushing pink to the tips of her ears. "I mean, I think it's a date. Is there any reason it wouldn't be a date?"

"Well, my cannibal theory has yet to be disproved."

Letting out a scoff, Allison shoved Charlie's shoulder lightly, knocking her back into the wall behind her. "He's not a cannibal."

"Then I guess he's just super into you," Charlie sighed. "Which, while less interesting, points to this being a decidedly date-like activity. Not that I'm the world's leading authority on dating. But agreeing to go to the same place at the same time...seems like a date. Are you meeting there or is he picking you up?"

"He's picking me up."

Charlie grinned widely and smacked Allison playfully on the shoulder. "And that is another great indicator! Date it is. You excited?"


"More excited than for 'family night' with the parents?" Charlie prompted, raising her eyebrows. "Can't say that I blame you on that one. I mean how many times can you play charades before you start to look like a lunatic? I'd just walk into school and try to gesticulate my way through Kafka."

Allison opened her mouth for a moment, but snapped it shut just as quickly. She glanced down at the floor and tucked her hair behind her ears before responding. "Yeah—about that. 'Family night' was...Actually it was more me sitting at home eating cereal and watching reruns of 'Gilmore Girls'."

"Wow," Charlie declared loudly, causing Allison to give a mild flinch. "That sounds way more fun than a party to me. I'll ditch Lydia and you can ditch Scott. We'll make a night of it. In terms of wardrobe, I'm thinking pajama pants and robes. Possibly slippers. Sound good?"

Allison exhaled sharply, but smiled in appreciation. "Nah," she replied, a slight edge of confidence entering her tone. "I mean, maybe not this Friday. But how about next weekend? I'll bring the Lucky Charms."

Charlie made a face and shrugged in acceptance. "I'll bring the Cocoa Puffs."

"A woman after my own heart."

The second bell rang, and Allison twitched violently like a scared rabbit before scampering down the hall towards her next classroom. Charlie chuckled at her retreating figure. She was gradually loosening up, but the girl was still suffering from the 'new kid' jitters. Charlie had seen it before. Moves affected different people different ways—some became perfectionists, others apathetic. She and Allison had clearly taken the different forks of that road.

Taking a breath, Charlie turned on her heel and headed in the direction of her own class. She meandered down the hallway, dragging the tips of her fingers against the cool metal of the lockers and whistling the 'Imperial March' theme from Star Wars. It was shaping up to be a pretty good year.

"Oh sweet mother of fried goodness."
One thing Charlie truly appreciated about Beacon Hills High School was the lunches. They had fantastic lunches. In that they were entirely unhealthy and only filled two of the three basic food groups. Her school back in San Diego had been one of those 'enlightened' ones that served exclusively healthy foods like tofu and vegetables that didn't come out of a can. In her opinion, any school lunch program that came with a 'vegan' option was disgraceful and un-American. Well, vegan options were fine. But anybody who denied her access to a disgusting number of tater tots was looking to start something.

Nope, she wanted her lunches fried, smothered with cheese, and with a good helping of ketchup on the side to fulfill the vegetable requirements.

Loading up her tray with an almost impossible number of the aforementioned tater tots, Charlie wound her way through the lunchroom, peering about for the right table. Generally the seating followed the standard high school layout. Each group had their designated area—the nerds, the geeks, the arty kids, the debate team, the jocks, the popular kids, and the inbetweeners.

Through all the schools she'd been in, Charlie had floated between categories fairly easily. Her academic paranoia planted her firmly in the 'nerd' classification, her guitar playing gave her an in with the arty kids, the sci-fi obsession gave her a push towards the 'geek' label—she was a swirling vortex of random characteristics that left her altogether untethered. Unaligned. And usually that posed no problem, because she would never stay at a school long enough for any one definition to stick. But there was one place she had never expected to sit, and that was the 'popular' table.

Charlie scanned the room searching out familiar faces. Her eyes fell on Stiles and Scott sitting at a table near the window, firmly planted in the 'inbetweener' category. The wave of acknowledgement she offered up was met with some vaguely confused frowns, but it was returned in a way that wasn't entirely unenthusiastic. For a moment Charlie considered going over to say 'hi' to them, but before she could take a step in their direction Lydia's voice called out across the lunchroom.

"Charlie! Charlie, over here!"

Charlie looked back at the two boys and gave them an apologetic shrug before making her way to the designated table at the center of the room. The table held the standard lunch group—Lydia and Jackson who sat side-by-side, caressing each other at random intervals, and Danny and Allison who were sitting opposite the overly affectionate couple. Approaching the table, she planted her tray between Danny and Allison, forcing them both to scoot to the side as she took a seat.


"You're looking ravishing yourself, Danny," she grinned, taking a sip of her drink. "I'm actually a bit pissed at you for raising the hotness standards around here. I mean how am I supposed to not look like a Disney witch sitting next to you. It's unfair."

Danny smirked and shrugged casually. "It's a burden I've got to bear. I do my best to cope."

"Yeah, you look really broken up about it," Charlie griped, punching him in the shoulder.

"You've got to accept the things you can't control," Danny replied easily. "But you do look nice. Maybe you could go stand over by the vending machines. That way people can notice you and fully appreciate you without the competition."

Charlie let out a soft laugh and shoved Danny's shoulder playfully. Honestly she had no idea how Danny and Jackson ended up being friends. Danny was all kinds of awesome—funny, clever, sincere, and generally nice unless someone pissed him off. And Jackson was...Jackson. The fact
that he was friends with Danny made her think he might have some redeeming characteristics, but every time the overly hair gelled monstrosity opened his mouth seemed to be evidence to the contrary.

"Real nice, Danny," Charlie muttered. "Banish me to the vending machines? You unfeeling son of a bitch."

"The vending machines aren't so bad," Allison sighed, patting Charlie on the back with feigned pity. "I mean a least you'll be well fed. Maybe make yourself useful and grab me a soda?"

"She's already well fed," Jackson interjected. He stared pointedly as the massive pile of fried potatoes on her plate with his eyebrows raised skeptically. "Are you really going to be eating all that? The party is on Friday. You're going to want to fit in your dress."

Charlie smirked widely and popped one of the tater tots into her mouth. "I appreciate the generous concern, Jackson, but I'll be just fine. I have the metabolism of a field mouse."

The corners of Jackson's lips tugged down into a frown. "Then how are you not the size of a house right now?"

"Field mice have incredibly fast metabolisms," Lydia sighed out, making everybody look at her. She idly pushed her food around on her plate a few moments before glancing up and finding herself the center of attention. She blinked rapidly, realizing her mistake, and immediately back-tracked. "That's right, isn't it Charlie? I mean that's what you told me the last time I saw you murder a pint of Ben & Jerry's on your own. Which was gross, by the way."

"Gross and delicious," Charlie mumbled through a mouthful of potato, trying to brush past the topic for Lydia's sake.

"Close your mouth when you chew, Oswin," Jackson scowled.

Charlie glowered back and swallowed heavily. "So Jackson," she drawled out casually, "I hear the lacrosse team is looking really, really good this year."

The statement itself was innocuous enough, phrased as a compliment, but given what Lydia had said to her that morning Charlie knew full well that it was loaded with a hell of a lot of passive aggressive subtext. Which was her favorite type of subtext. The glare she received in response was everything she had hoped for, burning with such intensity it was surprising her face didn't melt off right then and there. She just smiled back radiantly, enjoying watching Jackson fume.

The dig was well worth Jackson's animosity. His subsequent rant freed up enough time for her to eat her lunch in peace. Eventually the conversation turned towards the scrimmage, finally settling on the party afterwards. This allowed the guys to splinter off into a conversation about something more 'manly', and gave Allison the opportunity to reveal that 'family night' had been 'cancelled'. She was, in fact, able to intend.

"That is so fantastic!" Lydia exclaimed through a radiant grin. "The party technically starts at 8:00, but nobody who's anybody gets there before 9:30. The dress code is casual, so you can wear whatever you want as long as it doesn't make me want to claw my eyes out, but I don't think that'll be a problem for you. Get ready to have fun!"

The smile on Allison's face faltered slightly when confronted with the sheer force of Lydia's enthusiasm. The girl did take a little getting used to, especially for someone as unsure as Allison. The only reason Charlie hadn't been freaked out from their initial encounter was because she was as
aggressively laid back as Lydia was aggressively controlling. Somehow they seemed to cancel each other out.

"You're going to be there too, right?" Allison asked, turning to Charlie.

Charlie opened her mouth to respond, but no sound came out. She had contemplated going to the party, but the sequence of events was inevitable. First she would show up and help Lydia set up. Then the partygoers would begin to flow in, pulling Lydia away to play hostess. Finally, Lydia's lips would end up fused to Jackson's while Scott and Allison smiled bashfully at each other and she would be alone, cast adrift in a sea of drunk assholes. Not ideal. Scrunching up her face, Charlie arranged her features into an apologetic expression. "I don't think—"

Her words were cut off by a sudden sharp pain blooming in her shin as someone gave her a swift kick. Charlie let out a small grunt of pain and looked across the table to find Lydia resting her head on one of her hands, staring pointedly at her, the arch in the girl's eyebrows silently threatening to kick her again. Sighing loudly, Charlie looked between Lydia and Allison. Between Lydia's wrath if she failed to attend and Allison's need for a social buffer, she folded like a cheap suit. Charlie cleared her throat and continued, her voice not totally devoid of a defeated brand of sarcasm. "I don't think I would miss it for the world."

Allison nudged Charlie in the side and mouthed a silent 'thank you' while Lydia beamed. "That's what I like to hear!"

"So says one of us," Charlie murmured.

"Oh, shut up," Lydia said, the superior smile seeping into the tone of her voice. "You know you're going to have fun. We have drinks, we have dancing, we have music."

"All good things," Allison interjected with a small nod of her head. "I've been known to bust a move on occasion. Actually I have a full five moves I can bust."

"And!" Lydia proclaimed, leaning in closer. "And, we have cute guys. One of whom you will make out with."

A grimace pulled at Charlie's lips. She cocked her head to the side and narrowed her eyes at Lydia. "What if I feel no desire to make out with anyone? Like...on any level."

Lydia let out a sigh and jutted out her lower lip in a determined pout. "Ugh, Charlie I swear you're going to have to make out with someone at some point. It might as well be this party. A ton of hot lacrosse jocks hyped up from their first scrimmage of the year? It's the perfect opportunity. Make some memories. Just pick one and smash your face into theirs—it's not that difficult."

"Is making out a requirement for all Lydia Martin parties?" Charlie drawled in a resigned monotone.

Lydia made a face and shrugged primly. "I guess you could say that."

Charlie let out a long breath and scratched at her forehead absently. It should have been expected, really. Lydia had been subtly maneuvering Charlie towards various lacrosse players over the summer, hoping that one would stick. The efforts were well intentioned on some level, but Charlie was certain that Lydia's attempts to set her up were at least partially born of a desire to double date. The redhead was already part of a power couple. Now she was looking to upgrade to a power square. And she was careening towards inevitable disappointment.

"Well," Charlie harrumphed, "I only make out with people I trust." Twisting in her seat, Charlie
turned to face Danny, poking him hard in the shoulder and making him break off his conversation with Jackson. "Yo, Danny. Lydia says I'm required to make out with someone at her party. You willing to jump on that grenade?"

Danny's eyebrows shot up, a mixture of exasperation and amusement. "That incredibly romantic proposition aside," he drawled, "I think I'm going to have to pass. You're really not my type. You know, seeing as you're still a girl and I'm still very gay."

"Fair enough," Charlie sighed. She turned another 180 degrees in her chair, this time facing the doe-eyed brunette on her other side. "How about you, Allison? You up to the task?"

Allison's eyes, already quite round, widened even further and she swallowed down her mouthful of food. "Well," she said, clearing her throat a bit, "while it's a total honor to be considered for the position, I'm already going to the party with Scott. So that probably wouldn't looks so good with my date. And I'm not gay, so....."

"Also fair," Charlie said, bobbing her head in agreement. "Well if I'm obligated to make out at this party, somebody at this table is gonna have to take one for the team. Except for Jackson. Because he's, you know, Jackson."

"The fact that he's my boyfriend doesn't figure into that?" Lydia demanded.

"Well sure it does," Charlie replied. "But it's ultimately irrelevant because there's no goddamn way that's happening regardless of whether or not he was your boyfriend."

"Oh please, Oswin," Jackson sneered. "You wish."

"No I do not wish," Charlie shot back. "I literally just said that—I very much do not wish."

Sensing another argument brewing, Lydia quickly interrupted, leaning forwards and planting her hands on either side of the her tray. The force of the move sent a small shock wave through the table, making the cutlery rattle against the surface. "Anyway!" she declared, her voice forcefully chipper. "Now, back to the party. So, Charlie, you're going to help me out. Not conceptually, obviously. But you are taller than me, and the punch bowls are on the top shelf. You're coming over tonight and we're putting together a battle plan. Lights, decorations, drinks, snacks——" Lydia began ticking off an entire grocery list of tasks on her fingers, but when she got to 'mosquito nets reminiscent of the Moroccan desert', Charlie had to cut her off.

"Sorry, but that's a no-go," she said definitively. "I won't be taking this trip down the rabbit-hole. Not today, anyway."

Lydia's mouth hung open in a way that was not exceptionally attractive as she gaped in disbelief. "If you're talking about more homework, that is just unacceptable."

"I'm not talking about homework," Charlie said through a beleaguered sigh. "Mel is still sending me to a shrink to 'cope with the transition'. It's not exactly avoidable. She's still half-convinced that I'm going to freak out, take off all my clothes, and streak through the hallways of Beacon Hills High."

"Now that's something I'd like to see," Jackson leered. "Is there an ETA for this display?"

His insufferable smirk lasted about three seconds before Lydia smacked him over the head and Charlie flipped him off. He waggled his eyebrows suggestively one more time before turning back to Danny and muttering something about steroids. Well, Lydia was going to be disappointed. If he picked up that habit, his junk would shrivel up like a grape—or a pair of grapes—in the sun.
Raisins. Raisinettes. Rain-nuts. And as tragic as that might be, she might be spared the details of the Whittemore-Martin sexcapades. That would be a definite upside. Not for Jackson, though.

"No, but for real, though," Charlie continued, stabbing at her tater tots. "Mel is constantly waiting for me to have a nervous breakdown or something. It's sweet and everything, but also kind of annoying…"

"Um, sorry," Allison said quietly, her eyebrows knitted together as she glanced between them. "Who's Mel?"

Charlie paused for a moment, her fork poised at her mouth. Here she was presented with the primary problem in meeting new people. It was that moment—the one where they found out. People just didn't know what to do with that information. One second you're just another person and then blamo! She's that girl whose dad died. Pity and puppy dog eyes from strangers weren't exactly on her list of favorite things. But still, the topic couldn't be avoided.

Allison, sensing that she might have said something wrong, clammed up a bit so Charlie pressed her lips together in a look that was meant to be reassuring. "I actually moved in with my aunt. I recently went through a kind of a paradigm shift in the 'parents and/or guardians' aspect of my life."

Allison blinked in confusion, mumbling a quiet 'oh' as she tried to work through Charlie's weirdly vague declaration. The table itself became quiet for a moment, but the awkwardness was interrupted by Jackson's loud, abrasive voice. As per usual, he could be counted to turn the gently posited subtext into harsh, obnoxious text. "Her dad croaked," he said bluntly.

Charlie glanced around the table, taking everybody's mildly horrified expression in. The scene it painted was almost funny, really. All those faces staring on like an uncomfortable Norman Rockwell painting. She almost wanted to leave them like that, petrified until the end of time, but unlike Jackson she was not beyond pity. "It's not like he's wrong," she replied in a light tone. She turned to Allison, her voice calm and accepting. The girl gave a faltering smile, which Charlie took to mean she felt more at ease.

"My dad died last June," she explained. "My aunt is still learning how to deal with a teenager, so she wants me to go to a psychiatrist. Just to help with the move and everything." Then she let a hostile grin slip over her face, letting her head roll on her shoulders until she was facing Jackson. "And, of course, my tendency to fly into a homicidal rage when I smell a lethal combination of Axe body spray, hair gel, testosterone, and overcompensation."

Jackson clenched his teeth together, almost baring them at her as he glared. "I wear Gucci. Though I wouldn't expect you to know the difference."

The two of them began another one of their patented staring contests—the type where they actively tried to make each other's heads explode, 'Scanners'-style. Until Danny cleared his voice loudly. "You'll have to forgive the two of them," he said, directing his words to Allison. "They're what I like to call socially-challenged. I mean, we like them anyway, but sometimes you have to put them in time-out until they start acting like normal people."

"And speaking of normal," Lydia chirped, reager to redirect the conversation, "Charlie, I'm still going to need your help with the party. Can you do the music and help me set up?"

"Sure," Charlie acquiesced. "But I can't help tonight, so you're on your own."

"Fine," Lydia bit out reluctantly. "I'll think about a way you can make it up to me."
"I'm not helping you with your weave again!" Charlie announced loudly, slamming her hand on the table as Allison giggled hysterically. "Once was enough!"

Lydia shrank down in her seat and glared. "I hate you."

"No you don't."

The atmosphere around the table relaxed in the face of the antics. A few more minutes and everybody seemed perfectly at ease, Allison included. And that made Charlie oddly happy. She knew something about being the perpetual new girl. It might have sucked for her, but Charlie was built to accommodate that kind of life. Allison looked the type who wanted a place to belong. If she found one, all the power to her. Good people deserved to get what they wanted.

After school ended, Charlie caught a ride with Allison to the shrink's office after Lydia—who was still a little peeved about the lunch room display—had unceremoniously abandoned her in the parking lot. She sat in one of the itchy, uncomfortable, over-stuffed seats in the front office waiting to be called in. An old 'Highlights' magazine lay in her lap, open to one of those 'identify the ten differences between these two photos' exercises. That was about the most productive thing she could accomplish in that office—unless of course she managed to dig up a Sudoku puzzle.

In Charlie's opinion, she didn't need therapy. Therapy was for people who were trying to figure out their problems to they could fix them and become normal, functional members of society. Now Charlie knew that she was neither normal, nor entirely functional—she knew she had problems—but that was the point. She didn't need a shrink to tell her what her problems were. She was already entirely aware of them. Her tendency to shut people out, her refusal to fully confide in anybody, her trust issues, her use of humor as a mechanism of both defense and deflection—she knew about all that. And as far as she was concerned it was her right to deal with those issues however and whenever she so chose. But Aunt Mel had wanted her to go, and she was willing to sacrifice an hour of her life to give her aunt some sort of comfort.

A few minutes later, Charlie found herself being called into the office and told to have a seat. The room itself was all cool, calming tones of blue, featuring a wall of bound books and dotted with a number of potted plants, designed especially to be gentle and conducive to emotional honesty. Plus the plants were the high maintenance type, like orchids, which may or may not have been a metaphor for nurturing and that kind of bullshit. And all those books? How many of them had Dr. Hamilton actually read? Were they all for show? Who bought exclusively leather bound, gold print books? Or maybe Charlie was reading too much into it.

Dr. Hamilton was a rather plain-looking woman. She had a slim, boyish figure, straight, mousy brown hair that hung just above her shoulders, and watery blue eyes that were hidden behind thick-framed glasses. From the exterior she appeared to be the definition of 'ordinary', but from the first time they had met Charlie had noticed a steely intelligence in the eyes behind those glasses that made her wary. Charlie dropped her bag on the floor and immediately collapsed on the sofa, lying down and dangling her feet over the armrest. Dr. Hamilton sat down in the seat opposite her, clipboard and pen in hand, fixing Charlie with a neutral expression. "You don't have to lie down like that, you know," the woman murmured quietly. "The majority of Freudian psychology has been entirely rejected by the psychiatric community."

"Oh, I know," Charlie replied, waving a hand in Dr. Hamilton's direction. "I was just trying to create the right atmosphere—figure out the process. Why do you think it was that Freud made people lie on their backs in the first place? Do you think it would make them feel more vulnerable? That exposed posture made them more likely to reveal their innermost secrets?"

"That's entirely possible," Dr. Hamilton replied. Charlie heard the clicking of a pen and the sound
of it scratching against paper. The sound made her feel vaguely anxious, but she choked it back, instead focusing on the mildew stain on the ceiling that slightly resembled Daffy Duck. The two of them remained silent for a few minutes. This was how it usually worked out with Dr. Hamilton—or at least how it had worked out in their two previous sessions. Neither of them would speak. Honestly, it felt like a bit of a power play, but Charlie was never sure who was winning.

"So your first day of school was this week," Dr. Hamilton observed casually. "The first time you've gone since your father died."

"Yeah," Charlie replied with a shrug of her shoulders. "Is there a special significance to that?"

"Not necessarily," Dr. Hamilton replied. "It depends on how you feel about having to start school again."

"I feel like I have to do homework now and that kind of sucks," Charlie mumbled, picking at her nails absently.

A loud sigh emanated from the chair in front of her, which Charlie opted to ignore. Instead she grabbed one of the peppermints from the bowl on the coffee table next to the sofa and began crinkling the paper as loudly as she could manage before tossing it into her mouth. "Is that all you're feeling?" Dr. Hamilton prompted.

"I'm a little bit hungry," Charlie yawned as she unwrapped another peppermint. "Also there's this itch on my back that I can't quite reach. It's annoying the hell out of me."

Her statement was followed by another loud sigh—one that bordered on unprofessional. Charlie finally looked away from that mildew stain on the ceiling and made eye contact with Dr. Hamilton. The woman had her elbows rested on her knees and head propped up on her hands, pen and clipboard abandoned in her lap. The expression with which she regarded Charlie walked the line between sympathy and pity. "Charlotte, this is your third session here," she said simply.

"Yup," Charlie replied casually. "What's your point?"

"My point is that you have yet to share anything about the move, about your father, about how you felt when he died. You've given me a few anecdotal stories, but that's it. You haven't shared anything with me that you wouldn't put in an internet dating profile."

"Why on earth would I have an internet dating profile?" Charlie sniggered.

"Again, you miss my point," Dr. Hamilton said in a thoroughly unamused tone. "Would you please do me the courtesy of sitting up straight?"

Frowning slightly at the chastising tone, Charlie swung her legs back over the armrest and sat up in her seat. Dr. Hamilton looked at her through narrowed eyes, lips pinched together and severity written into the lines of her face. "Charlotte, do you want to be here?"

Charlie laughed and pushed the hair out of her face. "Honestly? No. I see no reason for me to be here."

"So there's nothing you want to ask me?"

Charlie pursed her lips in consideration. "Well, I would like to know where Waldo is on page 64 in that magazine out in the office. That's been bothering me for the past few weeks."

"Do you think I should be reading something into that?" Dr. Hamilton said, clearly beginning to
lose her patience. It wasn't all that professional, but Charlie had admittedly been pushing the woman to the point of exasperation. "I mean it, Charlie," she continued. "Is your quest to find Waldo indicative of anything deeper? Because your feelings vis-a-vis a sweater-clad cartoon character is more or less the extent of what you've revealed to me here."

Dr. Hamilton was goading her—trying to prod her into opening up more. Which, of course, meant it was time to spout some irrelevant nonsense. "Yeah, actually," Charlie supplied. "Where exactly does Waldo live? I mean, does the guy ever slow down? Does he ever take stock of his life? He's constantly missing and needing to be found, so there's no way he can form any lasting, meaningful relationships with all the running he does. My theory? Waldo is clinically depressed."

Dr. Hamilton surveyed Charlie with a knowing look, her lips twitching at the corners. "That's funny," she said, a small edge of victory in her voice. "Because the situation you're describing….it sounds a lot like you."

At that Charlie bit down on the inside of her cheek, her arms involuntarily tightening around her waist. Damn, the woman was good. She had gotten one over on Charlie and they both knew it. Dr. Hamilton crossed her legs primly and looked at Charlie over her glasses. She was about to ask a question, and they both knew Charlie was going to give at least a semi-honest answer. "Why are you here, Charlotte?"

"To make my aunt feel better," Charlie answered quietly. "She's going through enough as it is. If she needs me to be here, then I'm here. If she needs me to have 'help' going through all this, then I'll give her that."

"So you're here for what your aunt needs," Dr. Hamilton said, nodding slightly. "Well I'm here to find out what you need. So tell me, Charlie. What do you need?"

Charlie bit her lip and stared at the patterned carpet under her feet. What did she need? It was quite the question. She knew what she wanted—she wanted friends and a decent house and somebody who cared enough to take care of her. And she had all of those things. But there was a difference between what she wanted and what she needed. Her whole life she had trained herself to be independent. It had become clear since the very beginning that you couldn't fully rely on people—that even the people who were supposed to care about you would leave. So when Dr. Hamilton asked her what she needed, she had a very simple answer.

"Nothing."

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3 - Nothing SOUNDTRACK

Riding to school with Lydia and bickering.

~~~~~~~~~~~All of This - The Naked and Famous

Falling asleep in the classroom, waking up, and talking to Stiles.

~~~~~~~~~~~Don't Make Me a Target - Spoon

Awkward , light-hearted lunchtime conversations and talking about the party.
References!

1) Battle of the Somme - This was a WWI battle with over a million casualties. Charlie is clearly prone to hyperbole.

2) Zoombinis (what Charlie called the shoes) is a computer game I played when I was a kid! It involved saving these little blue creatures and taking them to a new home. Incidentally, it's also how I learned to make delicious pizza. If you played the game you'd understand that...

3) Also, I guess the hair/power thing is kind of a reference to Scott Pilgrim vs. The World? The source of the character's power was veganism and his awesome hair was a side effect of said power, but when he drank half and half his hair got all horrible and saggy because he lost his power. That plus the Samson thing...Suffice to say that nice hair is clearly very, very important. Notice how Scott became True Alpha after he got rid of the mop-hair and started styling it correctly. Coincidence? I think NOT!

4) Guy Fawkes mask! Ah, how it reminds me of V for Vendetta. Bomb-ass movie that was.

5) Tom Clancy wrote a bunch of books about spies and that kind of thing. Lots of movies are based off them. You might have seen 'The Sum of All Fears' or 'The Hunt for Red October'. Great writer.

6) 'The lambs are screaming, Clarice!' Silence of the Lambs/Hannibal Lector reference. I can't believe it took a full four seasons for a cannibal to show up in Beacon Hills.

7) More Chuck Norris/gelato stuff!

8) Memory! I played that game a lot as a kid. I have a Belgian cousin I visited when I was 10 and we don't speak the same language, but we would always play Memory together with animal pictures, and for some reason ended up yelling 'Fuzzy Bunny!' at the top of our lungs for a solid 15 minutes. Good times.

9) Grace Kelly. For those of you who don't know, Grace Kelly is an actress in old movies and the former princess of Monaco. I believe she was killed in a car accident. But she was quite beautiful and graceful.

10) Ah, Highlights magazine. The staple of the doctor's offices of my youth.

11) Daffy Duck.

12) Where's Waldo. And on that note, where exactly is he? I mean, does the guy ever slow down? Does he ever take stock of his life? He's constantly missing and needing to be found, so there's no way he can form any lasting, meaningful relationships with all the running around he does. My theory? Waldo is clinically depressed.

13) 'Scanners' was an old scifi movie where people could blow up people's heads with
the power of their mind.
Charlie honestly couldn't wrap her brain around what the big fuss was when it came to lacrosse. The people in Beacon Hills High found it enthralling to a degree that could only be classified as absurd. The enthusiasm for it...it bordered on lunacy.

Soccer was more Charlie's game. Old school, honorable soccer to be specific—not the new morally bankrupt version with the constant 'diving', faked injuries, and open weeping geared to get more fouls. Charlie remembered watching the 2006 World Cup—France vs. Italy—with her dad and Donald back in Galveston. The lot of them had screamed at the TV over all the overly theatrical falls, the night ending with loud booing and spilled popcorn as she and Donald had felt the urge to chuck fistfuls of it at the screen. Before that game Charlie hadn't seen grown men cry so forcefully since her dad and some of his drinking buddies had gotten together, downed just a little too much beer, and watched 'Field of Dreams'.

Anyways, Charlie didn't understand why lacrosse was such a big deal at Beacon Hills. As a sport it didn't hold anything above football or basketball. And the swim team had to be at least marginally good to justify the Olympic-size pool the school somehow managed to afford. And when Jackson had sought to 'educate' her on the state of things at their school—i.e. presenting her with an itemized list of all the reasons he was essentially a god—she had just smiled sweetly and told him that lacrosse was just soccer with props. His expression following that declaration would be filed away amongst her happier memories—the way his scowl shifted from superficial to genuine. The moment he had decided he hated her....Charlie treasured that moment.

But whatever Charlie's attitudes towards lacrosse may have been, it quickly became clear that they were wholly irrelevant. She was still being dragged to the bleachers, Lydia clutching the fabric of her jacket like she was afraid Charlie would scamper away into the forest if given the opportunity. Which, in all fairness, wasn't an absurd assumption. On the list of things Charlie would rather be doing with her time, running cross country through the woods sat above 'attending a high school testosterone fest'. As did other such marvelous options as re-grouting the kitchen tile, doing her chemistry homework, and, oh yeah, submitting to the sweet and icy embrace of death.

Charlie, Lydia, and Allison trudged towards the bleachers, wrapped up in their coats and scarves to ward off the biting fall wind. And for what? Watching a team play itself? To get a front row seat to the petri dish of social darwinism that is high school? Yeah, Charlie was as bitter as the frigid
weather she was being forced to endure.

A scowl painted itself on Charlie's face as the coach blew the whistle hanging threateningly from his lip. The shrill tone echoed in her ears with the volume and force of a marching band. According to her watch, only fifteen minutes had passed since the final school bell had rung, but she could swear it was an hour. The laws of the space-time continuum were conspiring against her. She would age at least three years during the span of this game. And, as she had forgotten her gloves, might lose a digit or two to frostbite.

"I hope Scott makes first line," Allison murmured from her position on Lydia's other side. "He really wants it."

"Jackson has been glaring at inanimate objects for no particular reason more often and with more intensity than usual," Charlie snorted, hopping up and down as she walked in the hope that the movement would provide her with some additional warmth. "I think Scott's pretty much got it in the bag. From what you said about practice the other day he sounds like a ninja. Nothing like a little friendly competition, am I right, Lydia?"

Lydia was none too pleased with the term 'friendly competition', a fact of which Charlie was well aware when she spoke the words. 'Competition' was the only word that registered, and 'competition' was not something Jackson was meant to deal with. He was the team's bright and shining star. Sure Danny was every bit as good as Jackson was, but he played defense. No reason to bump heads there. Scott, though? That was a different story. Lydia let out a huff, coolly flicking her hair over her shoulder with feigned calm. "Jackson is the leader of the team," she said, the territoriality evident in her voice. "I just hope Scott knows to stay out of his way."

"You don't think Scott's going to get hurt, do you?" Allison demanded, suddenly worried. It was adorable. Less than a week and she was already fussing over him like an Alsacian grandmother.

"Scott'll be fine," Charlie replied. "I mean apparently he has the reflexes of the Flash. Plus, scars are kind of hot. Are you sure you don't want him to get just a little bit hurt?"

"Of course not!" Allison exclaimed.

"Are you sure?" Charlie drawled out, eyebrows raised skeptically. "You could wipe his brow and nurse him back to health. Throw a little Florence Nightingale into the relationship and see where it takes you. My guess? Smooches." Charlie let out a theatrical gasp. "You can kiss him better!"

The look of wide-eyed horror on Allison's face shattered Charlie's composure. Her whole body shook with the force of the guffaw, lungs collapsing in on themselves, which, in turn, made Allison glare back. "You are the absolute worst, you know that?"

Charlie, still laughing like a hyena on nitrous, waved her off. "Oh, I'm perfectly aware of how terrible I am."

"Yeah," Allison drawled. "You're also pretty proud of how terrible you are."

Charlie extracted her hand from her pocket, reaching across Lydia to grab Allison's gloved hand in hers, and stared meaningfully into the girl's eyes. "It's like you just get me."

Allison fought back a laugh and shoved Charlie's hand away, for it to be immediately shoved back in a jacket pocket. Lydia gave a tiny, almost imperceptible roll of her eyes and linked her arm through Charlie's, squeezing it a little tighter than necessary as she directed the three of them towards the bleachers. "Well I guess we'll see if Scott needs to have his brow wiped," she snipped.
"The game is about to start."

The trio made their way onto the lacrosse pitch just as Coach Finstock began manically blowing the whistle and summoning the players into the huddle. Charlie let out a soft snort as she watched his hands wave frantically about. The dude was basically a coach and mascot all in one, what with the spastic jumping and over-exaggerated facial expressions. Between the wild, dark hair and bugged eyes, he was a set of colored pencils away from being a cartoon character.

Scott was easy to pick out among the players jogging to the center of the field. Crimson jersey, number 11, floppy hair and a sweet, but silly smile. Allison sent a wave in his direction, which he returned with such a happily bewildered expression Charlie was half convinced he had gotten a concussion before the scrimmage even started.

Pulling her jacket in closer around her, Charlie tried her level best to pretend the bleachers weren't cryogenically freezing her ass. Her ass would effectively be about an hour younger than the rest of her body by the end of the game. But this was what kids her age were supposed to do, apparently. They showed up at school sporting events and demonstrated 'cheer' and 'school spirit'. Most of the faces on the field were vaguely familiar, and then there were the few she knew well—Danny, Jackson, Scott—and then there was another she had not expected to see at all. Someone wearing the number 24.

"Stiles?"

Lydia suddenly stopped twirling her hair and glanced over at Charlie. "Sorry, what was that?"

Charlie pursed her lips and shook her head dismissively. "Nothing. Just talking to myself."

"Great," Lydia said with a curt nod. "That's normal. Definitely keep doing that."

Back on the field, Coach Finstock ran through his inspirational monologue. Charlie couldn't quite make out the particulars, but by all appearances it was extremely impassioned, especially given the number of times he hit the players. Finally, his whistle gave off one more shrill note to indicate the start of the game. A small cheer erupted from the crowd as the players dispersed across the field like someone breaking a rack in pool. They skittered to the ends of the field, each of them adopting that tension-filled stance.

And then they were off. It was a bit dizzying, actually, how quickly the ball zipped around the field. It was like watching tennis—head jerking back and forth to keep track of the motion of the game—only with a ton more players on the field that had to be taken into account. Five minutes in and Charlie thought she'd need a chiropractor just to keep up. She didn't pretend to know much about lacrosse, but if her degree of confusion was in any way proportional to their skill level as a team, then they were pretty damn good.

All of the sudden the ball stopped moving, and Charlie was forced to reorient herself. It had come to a screeching halt in the netting of Scott's lacrosse stick. The boy stood there for a moment, staring at the ball like he was unsure what to do with it. And more than that, baffled that it had landed in his net in the first place. After a few moments, he seemed to come to his senses and took off running. But he didn't manage to get far. A few long strides and he was unceremoniously rammed to the ground.

The collision gave off a soft thump, making Allison clench her fists in worry. Charlie leaned back to give her a comforting pat on the shoulder, and the girl gave a slight nod of thanks. Lydia, on the other hand, beamed widely. At the center of the field, the player who knocked Scott off his feet removed his mask all dramatic-like, revealing himself to be the one and only Jackson Whittemore.
Team captain. Number 37. Or, as Charlie liked to call him, Bully From Every John Hughes Movie Ever Made.

From that moment forward, what unfolded was the standard male posturing one usually observes in high school melodramas. Every time one of the boys had the ball, the other was right nearby. Jackson scored. Scott scored. Scott stole the ball from Jackson. Jackson blocked a goal. Scott scored again. Jackson fell to his knees and wept openly, pounding on his chest like a male gorilla and moaning to the heavens. All compelling stuff.

The display was accompanied by a host of angry glares and rude hand gestures only vaguely disguised by those massive, padded gloves. It occurred to Charlie that this whole rivalry thing was swiftly going to become seriously awkward seeing as the two of them were actually on the same team. But then again, it made the scrimmage just entertaining enough to be worth watching. She contemplated walking up to the two of them and offering to get a measuring stick to settle the dispute, but Lydia's arm was still linked through hers, holding her firmly in place.

Finally, as if the universe wanted to bring the competition to a peak, Jackson and Scott were paired against each other in the final face-off. The second Coach Finstock blew his whistle, Scott took off with the ball. Sprinting down the field like an excessively padded ballerina, he managed to nimbly dodge through all of the opposing players. As he approached the goal, the entirety of the defensive line came at him, forming a wall of muscle. Charlie expected Scott to pull another one of his evasive maneuvers and pirouette around them, but instead he continued forwards at a dead sprint. Charlie winced sympathetically, preparing her ears for a loud crunch upon impact. But it never came.

Scott launched himself into a deft backflip, spinning over the heads of the three opposing players, and stuck the landing. Charlie's jaw dropped open in shock as he sent the ball flying easily into the net through the legs of the equally dumbfounded goalie. But nobody appeared more confused than Scott himself. He wheeled about, taking in his surroundings, as if to confirm that what he thought had just happened had, in fact, happened.

The entire crowd—Charlie included—leapt to their feet. "Did you see that?!" Allison demanded, jumping up and down and clapping giddily. "That was incredible! I have never seen anything like that in my entire life!"

"Yeah," Lydia agreed. Her begrudging tone was almost completely hidden behind genuine, albeit reluctant, admiration. "Yeah, it was pretty amazing."

"I'll tell you what," Charlie laughed, "if he doesn't make first line, he's got a pretty solid audition performance for Cirque du Soleil."

The coach waved Scott over and began hollering incoherently. Charlie's ears managed to pick a few choice phrases out of the air- 'what the hell was that?' and 'this is not a gymnastics team' being the most audible among them. But after a few moments of the coach being his usual inflammatory self, a wide, toothy grin split across his face and he gave Scott an encouraging smack on the shoulder. He had made first line.

The announcement was followed by another burst of applause, and Charlie scanned the crowd. Among the sea of faces, three were not participating in the celebration. The first was Jackson, which was to be expected. As big and tough as he puffed himself up to be, he had one of the more fragile egos she'd ever encountered. The second was a guy Charlie didn't recognize, standing off on the other side of the field with only trees for company. He looked to be a few years older than her, ruggedly handsome with dark eyes and a square jaw. His hands were shoved firmly in the pockets of a black leather jacket and the stern scowl painting his face that made it appear as if his smile
muscles had been paralyzed on a permanent basis. Who the hell he was, Charlie couldn't say. A college age guy watching high school lacrosse tryouts? You'd think he'd have something better to do. Like going to frat parties or scrap-booking.

The third face not currently spazzing the hell out over Scott's lacrosse-themed acrobatics came as somewhat of a surprise. Firstly, because it belonged to someone predisposed to spazzing out in general. Secondly, because that person should by all rights be the most excited, seeing as he was Scott's best friend. Stiles stayed seated on the bench despite the chaos surrounding him. Charlie's clapping faltered as she took in his appearance. His features weren't bitter or resentful, nor did they exhibit any indications of the usual testosterone-induced jealousy. No, what he appeared to be more than anything else was worried. Given his...enthusiastic physicality...she had expected him to spin in circles like Sonic the freaking Hedgehog. But on the bench he stayed, like he was holding a vigil at someone's graveside.

After the reveal of Scott's newfound lacrosse awesomeness—Charlie attempted to coin the term 'lacrawesomeness' but Lydia kept hitting her over the head every time she said it—and Scott's induction to the first line, Charlie largely lost interest in the game. Jackson and Danny both made first line—big surprise there. Stiles seemed pretty much resigned to the bench, which may have caused his generally forlorn expression, but for some reason she highly doubted that. She had meant to ask him, but he evaporated as soon as the game ended.

A few offers of congratulations, some subtle Allison-Scott eye-flirting, and some horrifyingly explicit Jackson-Lydia kisses later, Charlie found herself being driven home and dropped off in front of her building. "Now remember you promised to come early," Lydia reminded forcibly as Charlie exited her car. "You said you'd handle the music selection and I'm going to need help setting up. I am expecting you to be early."

Charlie slammed the car door shut and leaned in through the open passenger-side window. "When have I ever let you down?"

Lydia raised a single eyebrow, fixing her with a withering look. "Two days ago. When I held up a curling iron and you asked 'what's that'?"

"Ah," Charlie interjected, holding up a single finger to cut her off. "That's the last time I disappointed you. I disappoint you all the time. I'm asking when was the last time I let you down."

Lydia pursed her lips and drummed her fingers against the steering wheel. "Never," she breathed out reluctantly.

Charlie smiled sweetly and reached in the window to pat Lydia on the head. "Exactly. Never."

"Though to be fair," Lydia barreled on, smacking Charlie's hand away in annoyance, "we haven't known each other that long."

Charlie glowered back, letting out a heavy breath. "I'll see you in like two hours, Lydia."

"Fine," the redhead replied snippily. "Don't be late."

And with that, Lydia drove off. And really drove off—tires screeching against the asphalt, small clouds of dirt kicked into the air as her car shot into the distance. Probably a little over-dramatic, but Lydia managed it with flare. If Lydia suffered from one thing in life, it was an excess of flare. Charlie straightened, waving idly at the Beetle as it disappeared into the distance, and spun on her heel to march back to the bright blue front door of her building.
Pausing a moment to rap her knuckles against the hood of the car which lay horrifyingly abandoned in her driveway, Charlie pulled out her keys and pushed into the shadowed entryway. The steps grunted beneath her feet as she carefully picked her way up the steep steps to Mel's apartment at the top level. Her keys stood poised at the second lock, but a muffled thump behind the door caused her hand to still. At 5 p.m. the house should be empty, Mel still firmly situated at her shop. Squinting in the dim light of the lone bulb above her head, Charlie slid the key into the lock, gently pushing the door open. What she saw on the other side made her jump in surprise.

Dresses were everywhere. Laid out on the sofa, hanging from the entertainment unit, draped over the coffee table—it was an invasion. An invasion of dresses. Had they become self-aware? Would they begin dancing around the foyer like a scene in some Disney movie? That scene would probably end with her being suffocated by taffeta. Gaping slightly, Charlie dropped her keys in the designated bowl by the door and took several small, hesitant steps forward.

"Mel?" she called out, her voice halting. "Mel, please tell me that you're here, and that someone hasn't broken in to give us stuff?"

Any alarm Charlie might have felt was cut off by the loud clacking of heels against hardwood floor. The frantic clattering was immediately followed by an alarmingly radiant face. Melody appeared from the kitchen, sliding into the foyer as she tried to come to a stop. Once she managed not to topple off her heels she clapped her hands together, those honest brown eyes alight with a mixture of mischievousness and glee. "What do you think?" she asked, gesturing at the visual cacophony of tulle and chiffon. "I mean I might have gone a bit overboard, but nobody ever deducts points for enthusiasm, right?"

Charlie's mouth hung open slightly and she readjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder. She blew out a long breath and blinked, half convinced the dresses would all disappear and she was in the midst of a mental breakdown. But, nope. They were still there. And her aunt was still smiling. "Mel, I'm thinking you might need to give me an advance on my allowance so I can pay your bail when the cops pick you up for shoplifting."

Mel scoffed, but the mildly peeved expression soon gave way to an eager grin. "Don't be like that, Charlie," she chirped. "I meant what do you think of the dresses? I brought them back from the shop for you to try on."

"Why?" Charlie demanded.

"Why?" Mel repeated, her eyebrows raised questioningly. "For the party tonight, of course! It's your first high school party, and it is my job to make sure that my niece looks absolutely spectacular."

"Is it your job to steal your own merchandise?"

Mel smirked as she snatched up a sleek green number, holding it to Charlie's form with a critical gaze. "All the dresses you don't wear are going back to the shop first thing," she said absently. "Plus, when you open up a boutique they give you one of those little guns that let you re-tag clothing. I can both remove and reapply security tags. I'm basically omnipotent in all matters retail. Fear me."

Charlie let out an amused huff and planted her hands on her hips as Mel quickly nixed the green dress and passed on several others without comment. "Well don't let all that power go to your head," she drawled as Mel picked up a floofy red thing. With a curt nod of approval, Mel strode towards Charlie with the dress, her lips pinched together with an altogether unnecessary degree of concentration. "I have been to high school parties before, you know," Charlie said, eyeing her aunt
warily. "I was never a complete social leper."

"I know you weren't, Charlie," Mel sighed, grabbing another dress. "But this is your first party here with your new friends. I remember high school—it wasn't too incredibly far off for me—and first impressions do matter. It's not something I like, but that's the way of it."

"I've been in school a week," Charlie muttered. She eyed the fabric being held against her. The purple, poofy skirt scratched against her bare shins. Charlie's lips pinch together in dissatisfaction and she bit down on her lip to hide the expression before looking up at her aunt. "The first impression is pretty much out of the way," she continued. "They've figured me out."

"First of all, I doubt anybody could figure you out with a crystal ball or a road map through your mind palace," Mel replied, raising her eyebrows pointedly as she went to get another dress, dismissing the purple one as quickly as Charlie had.

"Mind palace?" Charlie snorted.

"Shut up, I downloaded a TED Talk," Mel murmured. "And second of all, you only get one chance to make a second impression. Now I got everything I thought would suit your coloring, but I know there's probably one or two styles you probably won't be partial to. I figured I might as well bring them to try—better safe than sorry. But you'd look fantastic in any of them. And what good are free retail samples if I can't use them to spoil my favorite niece."

"I'm your only niece."

"If I had more, you'd still be my favorite! I'm petty and biased like that."

Mel fluttered around the room, arranging and rearranging the dresses in order of their perceived suitability, every so often plucking one up and pressing it to Charlie's frame. It made Charlie feel like one of those creepy, life-size Barbie dolls, but she understood the motivations behind it. Mel had more than enough reasons to be preoccupied with both Charlie's clothes and her social schedule.

When it came to looking after a teenager, Mel was kind of at a loss. Hell, when it came to looking after houseplants, Mel was at a loss. She couldn't cook, she had no idea how to help with homework, she wasn't a particularly good disciplinarian, and she was never well hydrated. For the most part none of that mattered—Charlie was a largely self-regulated individual. Homework was finished independently, tests were studied for without prompting, she did her own laundry and cooked. Her dad worked such long hours, she ended up making dinner most of the time anyway. Charlie had everything pretty much under control on her own.

But Mel felt like she should be doing more. That was obvious. She was hard on herself when it came to the role of caretaker. If Charlie was being honest, Mel did have a lot of holes in her knowledge. But if Mel knew one thing, it was clothes. And if letting Mel dress her up like a doll made her feel more secure, then Charlie was all for it. All the clothes. Bury her in clothes. She could wear a second pair of shoes on her hands if necessary.

Charlie walked over to one of the dresses laid out on the couch and brushed her fingers over the fabric. The satin slipped between her fingertips, soft and pliable. It was a beautiful dark blue-almost black like the night sky-strapless, pinching in at the waist with a full skirt. It wasn't
Charlie's style at all, but she picked it up anyway and turned to an aunt with a wide smile. "Why don't we try some of these on?"

Mel beamed and nodded enthusiastically before snatching up a pile of dresses and thrusting them into Charlie's waiting arms. "Come on," she grinned. "The lighting's better in my room. Plus you are going to be way too beautiful for anything less than a full-length mirror."

Grabbing Charlie's elbow, Mel dragged her down the hallway to her room. She was right. The lighting in there was superb. The room looked like a photo out of a Pottery Barn catalog, all soft fabrics and warm, rich wood paneling. After about forty minutes, fifteen dresses, and some more makeup tutorials—with a teacher decidedly more civil than Lydia—Charlie settled on a simple, sleek, sleeveless dress, lined in black with a colorful print of the Manhattan skyline on the front. It slipped easily onto Charlie's slim figure and hung to about mid thigh, accentuating what little curves she had in a flattering but not overly suggestive way. Mel stood behind Charlie as she turned towards the mirror, a radiant grin on her face.

"There," Mel proclaimed, her face flushed with pride as she placed a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "I think that suits well enough."

Charlie covered her aunt's hand with her own and smiled at her reflection. The light, smokey eye makeup and perfectly straightened hair complemented the ensemble perfectly. Everything about the look was...angular. Almost geometric. It gave her hard edges that lent themselves to a sort of intrinsic confidence. Hell, she even looked kind of badass. The woman knew what she was doing.

"Thanks, Mel," she said with sincere gratitude. "It's perfect." Something in Mel's face changed slightly, and Charlie could swear moisture was forming in the corners of the blonde's eyes. "Jesus—Mel, are you crying?"

"No," Mel insisted, flicking the tears away as surreptitiously as possible.

"Yes, you are," Charlie smirked, folding her arms across her chest. "You totally are. You are getting weepy because I'm going to a party. I don't even know what's going to happen once I'm going to a school dance or something."

"Well, obviously I'll break down into all-out hysterics," Mel said, smirking right back. "You know that the electric slide and tiny finger sandwiches are very emotional things for me."

Charlie patted her aunt's hand lovingly. "As they are for us all, Mel," she sighed. "As they are for us all."

"Is Lydia expecting you soon?"

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "Meh. Soon-ish. I've got some stuff to do first."

At that, Mel glanced over at the ornate, mahogany mantel clock that sat on her dresser. Her expression even held something resembling alarm. "You might want to keep an eye on the time," she said, staring the thing down like it was counting down to the apocalypse. "If Lydia's expecting you, I'd be there. Honestly, that girl scares me a little."

Charlie brushed past her aunt, pressing a theatrical, sloppy kiss on the woman's cheek before darting out of the room, smiling at the surprised squeak the woman gave off. "Call me when you're ready for a ride!" Mel shouted after her. "I still need lick my thumb and use it wipe something off your face to for the full 'annoying guardian' experience."

"And I look forward to the invasion of my personal space," Charlie shouted back. She marched
back to her room, relishing the feel of the carpet against her bare feet. It was pretty much inevitable
that they would spend the next few hours shoved in some painful and aggressively impractical
footwear. They had to enjoy their freedom while it was still available.

Collapsing into her rolling chair, Charlie spun herself in a circle a few times before pushing her
way to her desk. Flipping open her laptop, she turned it on and continued to spin in place as it
booted up. When her desktop screen appeared, she halted, trying her best to hit the appropriate
keys despite the intense dizziness. She managed valiantly, but was still met with some rather
disappointing news. Email inbox empty.

Grumbling to herself, Charlie exited her email and pulled up FaceTime instead. She scrolled
through a few dozen completely disused contacts before she found Donald's. Strange that she had
so many—she only ever really called one person. Pulling her legs up and tucking them underneath
her, she added a star to the beginning of his name, moving it to the top of the alphabet, and hit
send. The call rang about five times, which was strange for Donald. The guy spent so much time
on his computer, she was pretty sure his thumb was actually a USB drive.

Thumb drive? Dammit, she needed to stop making shitty puns when nobody was around to get all
pissey about them. If you make a pun and nobody rolls their eyes, did it happen?

Just as the sixth ring began, Donald picked up. The image buffered for a few moments, and Charlie
tapped her fingers impatiently against the surface of the desk. As soon as the image did appear,
though, she let out a shriek and shoved herself back from the desk. Her feet caught under her,
stopping her from keeping the chair steady. The wheels hit the edge of the carpet, sending it
tipping over and leaving her to topple onto the ground with a muffled thump. That thump was met
by two opposing sounds: Mel's anxious shouting and Donald's evil cackle.

"Charlie?!!" Mel called out. "Charlie is everything alright?"

"Hey, hey, hey," Donald's voice echoed from the tinny speakers now located about three feet above
her head. "I am just being a massive asshat."

"Hey, hey, hey," Donald's voice echoed from the tinny speakers now located about three feet above
her head. "I am being a moderate asshat."

Charlie shimmied forwards on the carpet until she was close enough to grip the edge of the desk.
She hauled herself up, this time physically, psychologically, and emotionally prepared for the
image on the screen. Donald sat before her at the desk in his room, textbooks shoved to the side,
Achievement Hunter and soccer posters in the background, and a giant Joker mask with a twisted,
murderous smile covering his face. Charlie pulled herself back into her seat, glowering at the
screen as she lifted her hand to make a prominent display of her middle finger. A strange coughing
noise came from behind that layer of severely alarming rubber. The Joker wasn't the only one
smiling. Downside of being three time zones away from the guy—she couldn't smack him over the
head from California.

The evil, twisted grin that had temporarily stolen Donald's voice cocked its head menacingly.
"Come on, Charlie. Why so serioussssssss?"

"Dude, why would you do that?" she demanded, throwing a pencil at the screen of her computer.
"You know the Joker freaks me out. I still can't look Jack Nicholson in the eye. Give me some damn warning."

"Yes, I know it freaks you out," he said, nodding so enthusiastically the mask flopped around on his head. "Hence me using this as payback."

Charlie let out a scoff and threw her hands in the air. "Payback for what?"

Donald leaned to the side, propping his head up on his hand. If Charlie wasn't mistaken, the killer clown was judging her. "Um, for the bailing earlier this week," he drawled. "Them's the rules."

"Yeah," Charlie grumbled. "Well your payback is going to get some payback. Next time you call me, I'm not going to answer. It's gonna be Tom Hanks from 'The Polar Express' or the whole freaking cast of that 'Tin Tin' movie."

"No!" the Joker exclaimed, pointing angrily at the screen. "You know those movies gave me nightmares. The CGI was freaky as hell."

"Yes, I do know that. Hence the payback. I'm dragging your ass so far into the uncanny valley, the sun is going to be pixelated."

"If you try and get payback from my payback, I'm gonna stop doing you favors," Joker-Donald snapped.

"Puh-leeze," Charlie snorted. "When do I ever ask you for favors?"

Donald stared back at Charlie evenly through the eye holes in the mask. "Yesterday," he deadpanned. "You literally asked me for a favor yesterday." His voice shifted into a higher register that she supposed was intended mimic her and not a cartoon character that had inhaled a crapload of helium and he began to wave his hands around like he was acting out an Elizabethan era play. "'Oh, Donald, my knight in shining armor! Praytell, wouldst thou please makest me a playlist of thine party jams?"

"I do not talk like that."

"You absolutely talk like that. I've heard you use the word 'behoove' in conversation."

Charlie almost ran her hands down her face in frustration, but promptly remembered just how long Mel had stood in front of her with that can of spray paint. "Just take the damn mask off," she growled.

Joker-Donald sighed loudly, letting his head sag oh his shoulders. "Fine. But only because it's getting humid up in this thing. I feel like I'm in south Florida. And that did not work out well for me while I was living there. Too many snakes and old people." He reached up, yanking the mask over his head and chucked it over his shoulder and out of frame. This action was immediately followed by a loud crash and the sound of breaking glass.

"What was that?" Charlie demanded.

"Not important," Donald winced, glancing over his shoulder. When he looked back at the screen, though, that wince was immediately replaced by another expression. A dumbfounded one. "Whoa."

"What now?" Charlie grunted, folding her arms across her chest.

"You...look nice," Donald replied. "You look like...'hot' nice."
"You don't have to sound so damned surprised," she frowned. "I mean I'm not a total garbage person. I have feelings—at least four of them."

"Hunger doesn't count as an 'feeling'."

"Fine," she snapped. "Then I have three of them. And none of those feelings appreciate you being so freaking surprised that I can clean up okay."

"Dude, shut up," Donald said with a roll of his eyes. "You are normal hot on a day-to-day basis."

"What the hell constitutes 'normal hot'?" Charlie demanded.

"But this shit," he continued, waving his hand at the camera. "You're actively seeking out hotness, and I personally find that unsettling. Like 'The Polar Express' Tom Hanks level unsettling. You're like a Pokemon that evolved."

"Pokemon are less cute after they evolve."

Donald let out a loud groan and covered his face with his hands. "Dude, the point just went so far over your head, it hopped on a freaking Boeing 747. Ugh, look can you just say something nerdy and boring so I can make fun of you and this moment can be over."

Charlie stuck her tongue out at him and drummed her fingers against the desk, her mind spinning through its rolodex of random factoids until it latched onto something. Snapping her fingers, she pointed at the screen. "Oh! I was watching the Discovery Channel the other day. Apparently in Costa Rica there's this plant called the piper plant. It's got these natural chemicals that ward off bugs, So the monkeys-they take this plant and rub it all over their fur. They basically make their own insect repellant. Cool, right?"

Donald's hands fell from his face and he stared at her blankly. "No, Oz. Not 'cool'. Captain America is cool. Lightsabers are cool. What you just said is boring as hell."

"Okay," Charlie interrupted. "As much as I love getting roasted, they usually drag on kind of long and I've got a party to get to."

Waving her off, Donald's focus shifted to his keyboard as he began to type away. "Okay, I'm consolidating the file and sending it over to you now," he muttered under his breath. "By the way, did you know that Ke$ha is like...a certified genius? Her IQ score is super-high and she got a 1500 on her SATs."

"What does Ke$ha have to do with anything?" Charlie asked.

"Nothing," Donald shrugged "She's just awesome. Plus I was listening to 'Tik-Tok' for....reasons....and got sucked into one of my Wikipedia wormholes." He clapped his hands, rubbing them together before shooting her a skeptical look. "I still don't understand why you needed me to do this. You have like three external hard drives filled with music."

"Yeah," Charlie said, bobbing her head in agreement. "But all that is classic rock and indie. Not exactly on par with a high school party. I'm pretty sure you're supposed to choose head bangs for this type of thing."

Immediately, the clacking of fingers against a keyboard ceased entirely. Donald glanced up at the screen, something like alarm in his eyes. "Head bangs?" he asked hesitantly. "Do you mean
bangers?"

Charlie jerked her head to the side noncommittally. "Probably."

Donald groaned so loudly she was surprised the sound didn't end up shaking the earth. "Jesus, Oz!" he exclaimed, his head falling back on his shoulders as he looked to the heavens for some type of intervention. "You are in no way equipped to be hanging out with cool people! You never drop the beat, do you? You just carry it around in a bag like a paraplegic dog!"

"Donald," Charlie repeated, her tone measured. "Just send me the file."

A laugh even more maniacal than the one featured while he was wearing the Joker mask burbled out of his throat and he began slamming his fingers against the keyboard. "I'll send you that file," he growled to himself. "I'd send you some social awareness too, but I don't think the internet can translate that for you."

"Thank you, Donald," Charlie drawled out, her voice all sugary sweetness, but he just waved her off. Her computer suddenly gave off a loud ding as she received an email. Subject line? 'You're hopeless'. Ignoring the dig, Charlie opened the dig and began downloading the songs. "Alright, then," she sighed. "That concludes our business for today. Don't forget to send me that first draft of your English paper so I can edit it for you."

"You're the brain, I'm the badass," he shrugged. "The badass who is also the brain. And the face. Signing off for today. Don't have too much fun or nobody will recognize you. Just frown at everyone and tell them about how the humidity agitates your sciatica."

"I don't have sciatica."

"Then complain about kids texting at dinner," he barreled on. "Or start calling people 'millenials'. You know, I still can't believe that you're actually not only going to a party, but participating in the planning stages. If it weren't for your constipation face, I'd be worried we were suffering from a body-snatching scenario."

"No body snatching," Charlie shot back. "Just a super-intense redhead and fearing for my life."

He gave another salute, which she returned, and then dropped off her screen. Her eyes flicking to the clock in the corner of her computer screen, Charlie swore internally. She was already late, and Lydia was probably already fuming. Wrenching open her desk drawer, she rifled through it until she found that flash drive shaped like the Tardis. Lydia wouldn't roll her eyes at that one, mostly because there was no way in hell she would know what it was referencing. After downloading the playlist plus one or two of her own additions, she grabbed the small, black clutch Mel had left for her and shoved her keys and flash drive inside.

"Mel!" she shouted at the top of her lungs. "Mel, it's time to go!"

Leaping to her feet, Charlie sprinted down the hall. Just as she reached the front door, though, a figure slid into her path, blocking the exit. Mel's eyebrows were arched and her hands clasped behind her back, giving her an air that was simultaneously amused and mildly patronizing. "Come on," Charlie said, jerking her head in the direction of the door. "I'm gonna be late, and I'd rather it if Lydia murdered me in the least painful way possible, so we're on a clock here."

"Charlie," Mel drawled out playfully. "Don't you think you're forgetting something?"

Charlie looked at Mel in confusion, but then the woman's eyes slid down to focus on the floor. Following her aunt's gaze, Charlie found herself confronted with a pair of very bare feet. Huh. That
was a bit of an oversight. Mel smirked and removed one hand from behind her back. Dangling from her index and middle fingers was a pair of vibrant yellow heels, both stylish and deadly. Charlie eyed the stilts warily, but silently took them, grabbing Mel's shoulder for support as she placed them on her feet. "This is not going to end well, is it?" she mumbled.

"Maybe wait to put them on till the last possible moment," Mel said, her lips twitching with amusement. "Come on, I'll drive you."

The car ride to Lydia's house wasn't a long one if objectively measured by a factor of time or distance, but set to Mel's anti-peer pressure monologue, it did seem to drag. Odds were that the woman had watched some instructional youtube videos—most likely dating to 1985 or earlier—as a form of preparation. Every minute or so her hand would leave the steering wheel, allowing a glimpse of her neat handwriting scribbled on her left palm. She had taken notes. Charlie sat silently in the passenger seat, nodding in understanding with every break in speech. By the time they pulled up in front of Lydia's house, her phone was filled with every potential emergency contact imaginable.

"Okay, now remember," Mel said as the car pulled to a stop, "remember if you need anything, you can call me. If you want to leave early or you're uncomfortable, don't hesitate. I don't care what time it is—just let me know. I'll check in with you at midnight. If you decide to stay over with Lydia, just call. I set my number to speed dial number one earlier. The police should be in as speed dial two. Now if—"

"Mel, it's just a party," Charlie interrupted. "I'll be fine. And if I need to come home, I will call you. No hesitation."

Mel twitched slightly and smiled at Charlie's use of the word 'home'. She gently pushed on Charlie's shoulder, angling her head towards the door handle. "Time for you to go. And if you don't have fun, you'll have me to answer to."

Charlie winced in mock fear. "I guess I'll just have to have fun then. I wouldn't want to brave the wrath of Melody Oswin—you might bake my oatmeal raisin cookies instead of chocolate chip. It would be the end of the world as we know it."

"Ah," Melody said, a mischievous light in her eyes. "But what if I told you the oatmeal raisin cookies were chocolate chip before handing them to you."

"You're like a super-villain!" Charlie gasped theatrically.

After a face that was probably meant to be intimidating, Mel shoved Charlie out the car door. She drove away from Lydia's house at what seemed like an unnecessarily slow speed, but finally turned the corner, leaving Charlie alone on the sidewalk.

The sun was just starting to sink as Charlie approached the steps leading to Lydia's door, casting an orange glow across the horizon. Charlie wobbled slightly in her heels in a way that was probably comically similar to a baby deer learning to walk. Approaching Lydia's house, her mother's Mercedes was conspicuously absent. Mama Martin had decided to go for a spa weekend during the
first week of school, which either meant she was completely oblivious to how teenagers operated, or she simply didn't care. From what Charlie could tell about the woman, it was a little bit of both.

As Charlie reached forwards to knock on the door, her phone began blaring out a generic ringtone. She dug it out of her clutch to find Allison's name flashing across the screen. Charlie hadn't chosen a song for that number yet. She quickly hit the send button and pressed her phone to her ear.

"Hey Allison," she said cheerfully. "What's up?"

"What's up is I'm freaking out a little bit," Allison's voice crackled out. Her words were carefully measured, but had an edge of panic behind them. "Um...I'm a bit nervous. I don't...like with the moving and stuff, I don't really date much. And Scott's coming by in like an hour and I haven't showered yet, and I have no idea what I'm going to wear. Plus I'm not going to know 90% of the people at the party and—Sorry, is it weird that I called you?"

"No, you're good," Charlie reassured. "You're fine. Just...you know...breathe. Find a paper bag if necessary."

Allison exhaled, something between a sigh and a laugh. "I don't need a paper bag. I need help."

"No, you don't," Charlie continued with the same calming cadence. "Have you seen the way Scott stares at you? It would be creepy if it wasn't so adorable. You could wear a burlap sack and he would still think you were Helen of Troy's hotter sister."

"But what if—"

"Allison," Charlie interrupted. "You're going to be fine. You don't even have to talk to anyone new if you don't want to. Scott will be there and the two of you can make googly eyes at each other all night. And if that doesn't work out, you can find me. We can call Mel, she'll pick us up, and we can do that 'Gilmore Girls' and Cocoa Puffs things as previously discussed. Make a night of it. Sound good?"

There was a short pause on the other side of the connection followed by a heavy exhale. It might not quite have been relief, but it definitely wasn't panic. "Okay."

"Alright," Charlie said, nodding slightly. "I'm gonna hang up now. See you at the party?"

"Yeah," Allison said in a newly determined voice. "See you at the party." Charlie was about to hang up when the voice chirped through the receiver again. "Hey, Charlie?"

"Yeah, Allison?"

"Thanks."

A smile pulled at the corners of Charlie's lips. "No problem, Allison. Get your ass here as soon as possible to save me from Lydia."

Allison let out a soft laugh. "No pressure, huh?"

"None whatsoever," Charlie replied with a smile.

Hitting the 'end call' button, Charlie took the last few steps to Lydia's front door and knocked three
times. After a few moments, the sound of footsteps reached Charlie's ears. The door was thrown open to reveal Lydia, already clad in a purplish dress with thin straps and a full skirt. Her hair fell on her shoulders in artful and no doubt carefully constructed curls. She leaned against the doorframe and blocked Charlie's entrance, her eyes raking up and down Charlie's form to spot any defects in appearance.

"Must you ask your questions three before I enter?" Charlie drawled.

Quirking a single eyebrow, Lydia glowered at her. "Did you just compare me to a bridge troll?"


Lydia rolled her eyes pointedly and returned to her inspection of Charlie's ensemble. Pursing her lips in what Charlie could only assume was approval, she stepped aside to allow entrance. "Do you have the music?" she demanded, closing the door behind Charlie as the girl walked through.

Charlie pulled out the flash drive out of her purse and tossed it to Lydia. Snatching the piece of plastic out of the air, she held it up to the light and inspected it suspiciously. "There's not going to be anything totally embarrassing on this, is there? If I hear 'Cotton Eye Joe' playing I will murder you."

"Nope," Charlie replied steadily. "I stayed away from everything on your veto list. No oldies, no alternative or folky stuff. Just a bunch of dance music." She opted to leave out the fact that she had included Weird Al Yankovic's 'White and Nerdy' in the mix. Lydia's face in that moment would be too priceless to allow for any sort of warning.

Lydia pursed her lips and gave a single, definitive nod. "Good. then you can help me with the drinks table. We need to move everything from the kitchen to the outside porch by the pool."

A grin of false enthusiasm covered Charlie's face and she trailed after Lydia, taking a winding path through the rooms of her house. She could never fully get used to just how big Lydia's house actually was, and she found anybody's ability to navigate it absolutely baffling. Half the time she expected to make a left where she should have made a right and somehow end up in Narnia. There could be whole rooms that the Martin family could just forget about for months at a time.

When they finally got to the kitchen, Jackson was already there, loading boxes full of bourbon, rum, and various other liquors. Upon catching sight of Charlie, his eyebrows shot up in surprise and he let out a low, patronizing whistle. "Wow, Charlie," he called out. "You actually look like a girl."

Charlie beamed back. "Thanks, Jackson. So do you."

"Alright," Lydia declared, throwing her hands in the air. "Would the two of you try to get along for one night? For my sake?"

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "Who's not getting along? I think we're getting along just fine. Jackson?"

"Oh, yeah," he drawled out with a degree of sarcasm and disdain typically reserved for politicians and stand-up comedians. "Me and Chuck are all good."

Charlie let out a snort and walked over to pick up one of the boxes. "Since when am I 'Chuck'?"

Jackson smirked back evilly. "Since the two of us became such good friends."
She stood there for a moment, box of clanking liquor bottles fixed in her arms. "Chuck," she murmured, tasting the name on her tongue. "As far as nicknames go, I kind of hate it."

Jackson picked up a box as well, striding out to the pool with as much swagger as he could manage. "Good," he called over his shoulder. "Then I'm definitely gonna keep calling you that."

Charlie laughed and trailed after him, trying to keep the extra weight from tipping her over on her heels. "Does that mean I get to start calling you Jacky? Because I think that nickname's super adorable. It makes you sound like a giant teddy bear. Or a teacup pig who becomes an overnight youtube sensation!"

"Chuck, do everybody a favor and shut the hell up. And then get sterilized."

"You got it, Jacky!"

The stream of curses that issued from Jackson's mouth was one of the longer and more creative ones that Charlie had heard in her lifetime, and by the end of it she found herself laughing like an idiot. Which didn't seem to make Jackson all that much happier, but she really couldn't make herself care.

Within an hour, everything had been set up. Fairy lights hung above the patio, casting an ethereal haze over the dance floor. Combined with the dimmed lights and impeccably manicured garden, optimum ambience had been achieved. Music was playing, the drinks table was stocked with enough liquor for a pub filled with 19th century Irish dockworkers to drink themselves under the bar, snacks were arranged in strategic positions throughout the house, and extra rolls of toilet paper stood proudly in all of the bathrooms. Yup, they had pretty much everything covered.

At about 9:00 p.m. the people began trickling in. Charlie recognized some of them—ironic facial hair guy showed up wearing a bowler hat—but there was nobody other than Jackson and Lydia that she knew in any functional capacity. And seeing as that lovely pair had already begun to make out by the pool, Charlie was left to her own devices.

So Charlie played the wallflower. She was the picture of a side character in a John Hughes movie—standing in the corner, red cup of straight bourbon clutched in her hand, bless her genetically high tolerance. The party slowly began to fill until the sea of people could barely be contained by the stately, cream colored walls of the Martin establishment. When Danny showed up, Charlie hijacked him for about an hour to play a few rounds of pool on the ridiculously ornate, claw-footed pool table in what—before the divorce—used to be Mr. Martin's study. But she could only keep him for so long, especially after kicking his ass so thoroughly.

Actually, she only kicked his ass a little.

Okay, fine, it had been more of a draw.

For most people, being alone at a party might be considered an uncomfortable situation. While it certainly wasn't Charlie's favorite place to be, she didn't mind it so much. There wasn't much to miss. Proper, audible conversations couldn't compete against the pulse of the music. This, in
addition to the fact that Charlie couldn't dance for shit, added up to a general avoidance of human interaction. There were a few instances in which a guy—each of which were more than slightly inebriated—got kind of handsy and tried to drag her out onto the dance floor. The first two were wise enough to leave her alone when she told them she had super-herpes—you can catch it through clothing. The other one, Aaron Harrison, wasn't so easily dissuaded. She was forced to put into a thumb-lock until he agreed to be less rapey.

All in all, Charlie was having a pretty decent time, as strange as it might sound. People watching—the stupidity of high school students in particular—served as endless entertainment. Plus at parties everybody is too wrapped up in the movement to notice that one person circulating on their own. The more people that joined the throng, the more solitude she was afforded. She wove her way through the dancers and made her way to the drinks table, pouring another healthy serving of bourbon. She began moving back towards the house, but found herself confronted with two equally familiar dopey smiles.

"Hey," she called out, making her way over to Scott and Allison. Scott waved back, still kind of dazed, and Allison greeted her with a brilliant smile. Charlie approached them, prepared to feel smug, and surveyed the pair in appraisal. "Scott and Allison," she mused. "Allison and Scott. It's about time you two crazy kids got it together."

A confused expression crossed Scott's face, his eyebrows drawing together. "We've only known each other a week."

"Exactly!" Charlie said, giving him a cheerful pat on the shoulder. "What took you so long?" Scott flushed as red as the Solo cup she was holding and scratched awkwardly at the back of his neck in embarrassment. "Congratulations on first line by the way," Charlie tacked on. "That shot was pretty incredible."

"Thanks."

The three of them stood there for a while, Scott being adorable and embarrassed, Allison finding it adorable that Scott was embarrassed, and Charlie being neither adorable nor embarrassed, but generally enjoying the scene being painted. She stared down at her cup, contemplating its contents for a few moments before downing it entirely. "Hey, Scott," she said, pushing the cup into his hand. "Why don't you get us ladies some drinks? If you roofie them, I'll know."

An expression of abject horror crossed his face. "I'm not—I wouldn't...Oh, you're kidding."

"Yes, Scott," she said in a slightly patronizing tone. "I'm kidding."

Scott let out a light, nervous laugh and moved towards the drinks table, shuffling around the crowd of dancers with none of the confident coordination he had shown on the field. Charlie turned to Allison, nose wrinkled inquisitively. "Sooooooo....." she drew out, raising her eyebrows expectantly. "How's it going?"
Allison exhaled sharply and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "No," she mumbled quietly. "No, I think I'm good. You can go ahead and not worry about me."

"Okay, then, I guess I'll leave you to it. Well, if you need anything—" she held up the cell phone clutched in her hand, twiddling it between her fingers "—I'm just a phone call away."

Allison mouthed a silent 'thank you' as Scott made his way back to them, trying with some difficulty to balance three different cups in his hands. Charlie smiled and took one of the cups from him as Allison blushed and did the same. "Well, here's to irresponsible fun," Charlie said, raising her glass in the air. "I'll let you two do your thing. Scott, behave yourself. Because I'm watching you. And so is God. And Santa. It's up to you to decide which is scarier."

Scott let out another endearingly terrified laugh. "You. It's definitely you."

"That's a good answer!" Charlie declared, patting Scott playfully on the shoulder. "Good work, Allison."

As Charlie moved away from them, picking a path through the dancers back towards the house, she paused in the doorframe and afforded the couple one last glance. Allison extended a hand to Scott, wiggling her fingers as an invitation to take it. Scott bashfully reached out, wrapping his fingers around hers and she dragged him to dance. Ah, young love. So innocent. So pure. And so out of place, what with the people dry-humping on the dance floor and that one asshole who was probably puking in the begonias.

Charlie began to feel a comfortable warmth and buzz singing in her veins. The alcohol was beginning to kick in, which meant she was likely still miles more sober than anyone else at the party. Except maybe Scott and Allison who were too drunk on each other to bother with actual alcohol. The state of affairs inside the house wasn't much less chaotic than that by the pool. Gyrating teenagers were everywhere—an abstinence-only educator's worst nightmare. She rolled her eyes and took a long sip from her cup, but as she lowered it again she saw something over the rim that struck her as odd.

A face stuck out of the crowd—stern, sober, and altogether far too old to be wandering through a sea of high school students. It belonged to that older guy she spotted on the lacrosse field. Same sour face, same leather jacket. He seemed even more out of place here than he had on the lacrosse field. And for some reason he was headed straight for her.

"You know Scott McCall," he growled as he came to a stop in front of her, the hostile edge in his voice matching his expression. He didn't even pose a question, it was a statement of fact. When she didn't respond, the guy took another step forward, his gaze more insistent. "I saw you talk to him on the lacrosse field."

Charlie opened and closed her mouth a few times, surprised by his bluntness. "Um, to say that I know him is probably a bit presumptuous as it implies some degree of emotional intimacy. I don't think that we're close enough to be friends yet per se. I can say that I'm acquainted with him and wouldn't mind getting to know him, but—"

"I'm not interested in semantics," the guy snapped. "Where is he?"

Charlie stood a little straighter and bristled. She didn't care for being snapped at, even when if the person doing the snapping was an older, mysterious, objectively hot guy. Cheekbones that could cut glass and dark, intense eyes were no excuse for rudeness. "What's with the broodiness," she said, waving a finger his face. "Are you practicing your 'Blue Steel' for some local fashion catalogues of have you just been sucking on lemons for the past three and a half years of your
life?"

The guy took another vaguely threatening step forwards, making her step back in turn. His jaw twitched at her apparent wariness and he settled back on his heels, putting a bit more distance between them. "I need to speak with Scott McCall," he said, his tone still rough but more measured. "Where is he?"

"You might want to re-think your approach there, buddy," Charlie whispered back—or whatever the semi-yelling equivalent to a whisper was. "The whole intimidation thing isn't exactly making me want to do you any favors. What do you want with Scott?"

The guy's back straightened and he surveyed her in an oddly calculating way. "I'm here to help him."

"Do you care to elaborate?"

Apparently, he didn't.

Charlie let out a single, loud bark of laughter. "So a weird, stoic, college age guy waltzes in and tells me he's here to help Scott—no mention of how he's going to help or what he's helping with—and I'm just supposed to...what exactly? Trust that you're not a serial killer? I have no idea who the hell you are. Sorry pal, but McGruff the Crime Dog has made it abundantly clear that Stranger Danger is a thing." She folded her arms and returned his steely stare with a questioning one of her own. "What's your name? Driver's license is preferable."

The guy eyed her for another moment before simply walking off and disappearing into throng of dancers. Given the amount of writhing going on, any attempt to follow him would likely prove unsuccessful. Charlie pulled out her phone and stared at it for a moment, unsure of what to do. Her first thought was to call Scott, but she didn't have his number. Her second thought was to call Stiles, but she didn't have his number. She did call Allison, but the music must have been too loud for the brunette to hear because she didn't answer. Which was probably a good thing, because what exactly did she have to say? 'Hey Allison! There's a slightly creepy, hot, broody guy who says he's here to help Scott with something. Okay, then. Bye!' Like that was a legitimate course of action. And then, miraculously, the solution presented itself. Charlie glanced in the direction of the front door as it cracked open. Suddenly, the disembodied head of Stiles Stilinski appeared through the small gap. It looked right and left, and then the rest of him slipped through in a way that was likely meant to be stealthy. As soon as he was in he quickly closed to door, eyes flicking around frantically, apparently expecting a six-foot, two hundred pound bouncer to grab him by the back of his button-down dress shirt and chuck him through a still-closed window. Charlie pushed through the crowd towards him in an entirely unsubtle manner, but somehow still managed to surprise him.

"Hey!" she called out over the loud music.

At the sound of her voice, Stiles jumped, an expression of sheer terror covering his face. He tried to turn it into a casual one. It did not work. Eye-twitching didn't generally scream 'casual'. "Oh, hey there Charlie!" he said, grinning far more than necessary. "Great party, huh? Everybody seems to be having a lot of fun. I know I am. Yup. Lots of f-u-n-fun. In Lydia's house. It's a party." He waved his hands in the air lamely and then seemed to reconsider, shoving them deep in the pockets of his khakis instead.
Charlie narrowed her eyes and crinkled her up her nose. "Don't you think that's a bit of a premature assessment?" she asked. "You literally got here fourteen seconds ago."

The huge smile on his face tightened slightly. "Ah, right. Well, what can I say? I'm an optimist."

Charlie continued to look at him skeptically and that tight smile faltered. "In the spirit of full disclosure, I may or may not be crashing. I...wasn't...exactly....invited to this little shindig. I think the invite got lost in the mail—or the cyberverse—or the note fell out of my locker...but it was definitely, definitely one of those three things, so—"

Charlie let out a soft snort and punched him lightly in the shoulder. "You're not crashing anymore."

Stiles blinked in surprise. "What—what do you mean?"

"I mean as of this moment right now, you're my plus one," she said, raising her cup in his direction. "So you don't have to worry about it."

Stiles looked around—again to make sure she wasn't talking to anybody else in the immediate vicinity—and let out a surprised laugh. "R—really? Thanks."

"No problem."

Stiles smiled and began scratching the back of his neck in a nervous way. "So are you having fun?" he asked, waving his hand in the general direction of the crowd. "Why aren't you dancing?"

Charlie let out an awkward laugh of her own and pushed the hair out her face. "It's a public safety thing." He shot her a questioning look that made her roll her eyes at herself. "If you'd ever seen me dance, you would get it. Every time I step a foot on the dance floor, I kind of look like someone who took a bunch of meth and then got tasered like...eight times. It's not pretty. I'd probably break somebody's nose, maybe pee on the floor—people pee their pants when they get tasered, right?"

"Can't say I've had that much personal experience with it."

"Well, it feels true," Charlie shrugged. "So I'm going to go ahead and assume that it is."

"I don't think I believe you," Stiles said, raising his eyebrows doubtfully.

"What, about the taser thing?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "About the dancing thing. Everybody can dance."

Charlie pursed her lips in consideration. "Well there is one move I can do pretty well. I only break it out for special occasions—birthdays, holidays, solar eclipses, that kind of thing."

"Well, let's see it," Stiles said, gesturing at her encouragingly.
"Are you sure?" Charlie drawled out with mock seriousness. "Do you think you're ready for this?"

"Yeah—yes, I'm ready," he nodded. "Hit me with your best shot—but not literally since apparently that's a problem with you."

"Alright, you asked for it." Charlie held out her arms rigidly, elbows bent, and twisted around at the waist making awkward, jerky movements. "This, my friend," she said to Stiles as he shoved a fist in his mouth to choke back laughter, "this is the 'Broken-Down Robot', and it has not received nearly enough recognition in the dance community." After a few moments she let her arms drop to her sides and stood up straight. "That's it, that's all I've got."

"Well that was beautiful," Stiles said quickly, still fighting back what were probably some very un-manly giggles. "I don't know why you don't just do that all the time. Robot-walk down the hallway at school." The two of them stood there for a moment, laughing for a while before Stiles seemed to focus in on the now empty cup she was holding. "Hey, do you want me to get you another drink?"

She held up the cup for a moment in consideration. She'd be fine with one more. "Sure," she said, nodding slightly. "You're going to need something too. I'll show you where the drinks are."

The two of them pushed their way back to the drinks table. The crowd of dancers had thinned somewhat as many had paired off to start making out in the shrubbery. Using their elbows, they managed to carve themselves out a place by the drinks table. As they stood over the veritable assembly line of cups, soda, and alcohol, it occurred to Charlie that she had yet to bring up the topic she had initially intended to broach. "Hey, Stiles," she said loudly as he was pouring something clear and not water-affiliated into his cup.

"What's up?" he asked, glancing up from the table.

Charlie took a sip from her glass and scrunched up her face into a slightly apologetic expression. "Right before you got here, there was this guy looking for Scott. Black leather jacket, kind of looked like a male model and a loan shark had a baby. He wouldn't tell me his name, but—"

"What did he want?" Stiles demanded, his voice panicked.

"N—nothing," she stammered. "He didn't say. He just said he wanted to talk to Scott. He didn't say what about and I didn't tell him where Scott was because, you know, Stranger Danger. He just kind of disappeared after that. I just figured I should tell you—you might want to call Scott or something. The dude was kind of creepy."

Stiles scoffed loudly and stared into his drink. "Yeah, I've actually called Scott like a dozen times. I think he turned off his phone." He suddenly looked up from his drink, his eyes strangely intense. "Have you seen Scott tonight? How was he doing? Did he look okay?"

Charlie made a face and shrugged her shoulders, absently swirling her drink in her hand. "He seemed fine to me. I mean, he does seem like he's perpetually surprised by...well...everything. He
was a bit nervous, maybe, but that's typical for a first date, right? I know Allison was a bit jittery too."

"But that's it," Stiles broke in. "It just seemed like first date nerves?"

"Y—yeah," she said, her confusion mounting. "Why, should there be more than that?"

"Nope," Stiles said, shaking his head almost pathologically. "Nope, there is definitely nothing more than that. Just friendly concern for my best friend oh his date with the girl of his dreams, who happens to also be your friend. Totally uncomplicated."

The two of them lapsed into silence as they walked back to the house, taking long sips from their drinks as a substitute for actual conversation. Stiles's eyes wandered, scanning the crowd. Probably for Scott.

"Hey, I'm sorry you didn't make first line," Charlie blurted out. "If you want I'll club Jackson over the head, that way you can take his position. The whole team'll probably get a lot less douchey as a result. I mean I'm surprised you guys are doing as well as you are with him on the team. He catches his reflection in a car window or something and I'm like 90% sure he'd just stop playing to stare at himself."

Stiles looked at her in surprise for a moment before his face broke into a wide grin. "Isn't Jackson supposed to be your friend?"

"Well, he is 'technically speaking'," Charlie replied, making exaggerated air quotes. "I mean, he's Lydia's boyfriend. But just because we're 'friends' doesn't mean I actually like him." She paused, hearing her own words play in her head. "Oh my God," she whispered. "I can't believe I just said that. I think I actually just became one of the characters in 'Mean Girls'. What has happened to my life? I knew I was better off watching 'Starship Troopers' and eating ice cream in my pajamas."

Surprise flashed behind Stiles's eyes and he opened his mouth to respond, but before he could Scott came tripping in their direction. By all appearances, he was very much not okay. His forehead gleamed with sweat and his lips were contorted in pain like a woman in labor. Charlie felt the impulse to provide him with ice chips. He blindly pushed his way through groups of people, grasping on random shoulders for support. Stiles moved directly in Scott's path. "Yo, Scott," he said, grasping Scott's arm to steady him. "You good?"

Scott just shoved past Stiles and stumbled outside. Allison soon followed him, concern etched into the lines of her face. Charlie called out to her, waving her down, but Allison didn't seem to notice. "He did not look like that last time I saw him," Charlie said, turning to Stiles. "What was that? Is he okay?"

"I—I don't know," Stiles stammered out. "He has asthma, maybe he's having an attack or something."

"Did he ever find his inhaler?" Charlie demanded.

"Huh?" Stiles muttered, his attention somewhere out the front door with his friend.

"In the woods the other day," Charlie amended. "He said he lost his inhaler—did he find it?"
"Yeah," Stiles muttered absently. "Yeah, he found it. It's probably in his car....I should go check on
him."

And with that, Stiles sprinted for the door, leaving Charlie totally alone and totally confused. After
two seconds of standing there stupidly, the phone she had been clutching all night began to buzz in
her hand. Allison's name flashed across the screen. She quickly hit the 'send' button and pressed it
to one ear, plugging the other ear with her finger, and dodged into one of the five bathrooms in the
Martin residence where the music wasn't so loud. Kicking the toilet lid down, and almost falling
off her heels in the process, Charlie perched on the seat.

"Allison?" she half-shouted into the phone. "Allison, what's going on?"

"It's—it's Scott," Allison replied. Her voice was caught between panic and worry. "He freaked out
and drove off. He's gone. I really don't know what happened—we were having a good time
and...God, I just don't know. I hope he's okay."

"Stiles says he has asthma," Charlie said encouragingly. "Maybe that was it."

"Asthma made him drive off in a car?" Allison demanded.

"Yeah," Charlie muttered back. "That doesn't really hold up, does it?"

"Not in any way that makes sense."

"Alright," Charlie said with a definitive nod. "Do you want ice cream and romcoms, or do you just
want to go home?"

"I don't want you to have to leave the party," Allison said sadly. "You don't have to stop having fun
because of me."

"Pshah, what are you talking about?" Charlie said dismissively. "I hate fun."

A weak laugh crackled through the connection. "That's really nice of you, but you don't have a car.
Yours broke down, remember?"

"Yeah, but I could totally steal Lydia's. I'm a badass with no respect for the law or property rights.
And I'm completely on the right side of .08 if that's what you're worried about. Or I could call my
aunt."

"No, really, it's okay," Allison said insistently. "I've got a ride. There's this guy named Derek—he's
a friend of Scott's. He said he'd take me home."

"Allison, I hate to sound like your friendly neighborhood PSA, but Stranger Danger is a real thing.
If you don't know this guy, then—" The words died on her lips as realization smacked her in the
face. "Wait, what does this guy look like?"
"I don't know...cute, older, stubbly beard, leather jacket."

Cold dread coiled in the pit of Charlie's stomach. "You said his name is Derek? As in Derek Hale?"

"Yeah, you know him too?" Allison said in a tone of mild surprise. "Look, Charlie, I appreciate your concern, but I'm just going to go. I'll call you when I get home. Bye."

"No! Wait, Allison!"

But before Charlie could get the words out, the line went dead. A small scream of frustration tore from her lips. She glowered at her traitorous phone before banging it on the bathroom counter a few times, knocking a few of the guest soaps to the floor. Her eyes met her reflection's and she stared at herself for a moment, anxiety mounting. Wrenching the ridiculous heels off her feet, she darted through the party to get to the front door. Several guests were allegedly knocked over in the process.

As she skidded to a halt on the front porch of Lydia's house, Charlie was hit with a wave of anger and frustration. A little bit of panic made it into the mix as well. She found the street empty, save for the echoes of the party behind her. Scott was gone, Stiles's Jeep was nowhere to be seen, and Allison had taken off with Derek Hale, the guy who, according to Stiles, had serial killer eyes. A sentiment which Charlie didn't wholly disagree with.

Swearing loudly and not bothering to go back for her shoes, Charlie sat on the steps leading to Lydia's house. She was done with the party—absolutely done. And objectively she knew Allison would be okay, even if Derek Hale did have serial killer eyes. He had left behind enough witnesses to testify to the fact that she left with him that only a complete idiot would bother trying anything. And generally speaking serial killers weren't idiots. If they were, they wouldn't be able to evade arrest long enough to become serial killers in the first place.

Retrieving her cell phone, Charlie hit speed dial one. It only took about half a ring for Mel to pick up, her voice bright and questioning. Charlie mimicked her tone, cheerfully asking for a ride home, making sure to smile widely so it could be heard in her voice. The baseline of 'White and Nerdy' thumped against the walls of the house when Mel's Prius pulled up, and Charlie hauled herself to her feet. She managed to muster up another smile as she climbed into the car, but her stomach twisted with worry and doubt. The evening left her with a crapload of questions and one conclusion.

High school parties sucked.

Chapter End Notes

References!
1) Florence Nightingale! I'm sure you guys don't need an explanation on this one, so I'm gonna leave it at that.
2) The Flash. Barry Allen has my heart. Such an adorable dweeb.
3) Cirque du Soleil! This is a troupe of acrobats who are, quite simply, incredible. They had a VHS tape (90s kids know what those are) at my local library and I think I wore it out the number of times I rented it.
4) Helen of Troy, the most inconveniently bootiful lady in Ancient Greece.
5) Narnia, my go-to fictional realm that you end up in by accident. I was wondering about the Pevensies and Narnia. Like...they spent 20+ years there and went back through, becoming children again. So theoretically they could stay there till their eighties, go back through the wardrobe, and become kids again. If they kept doing that over and over, they could make themselves effectively immortal. So.....how old ARE those kids?
6) 'Blue Steel'! No, folks, it's not a Supernatural reference. It's a Zoolander reference that was made on Supernatural. You guys should check it out! Apparently a sequel is coming out soon.
7) McGruff the Crime Dog! It's a cartoon bloodhound wearing a trench coat from the 80s that told kids to stay safe.
8) Mean Girls again. Man, I apparently really like that movie!
9) STARSHIP TROOPERS!!!!! Okay, this is the cheesiest most awesome 80s scifi movie ever. Just one aspect of it? Neil Patrick Harris wears a cape and talks to ferrets. Blamo!
10) Why so serioussssss???? The Joker anyone?
11) The uncanny valley. Look it up, because it’s a hella interesting concept.
Sunday nights always possessed a feeling of 'in-betweenness' that Charlie found vaguely unsettling. By that point her homework had all been finished, dinner cooked, and the comforting embrace of elastic waistband pajama pants had long since been accepted. No room left in the weekend to accomplish anything truly awesome or noteworthy, no remaining obligations to fulfill. Charlie was left to revel in her last few hours of freedom while simultaneously despairing at the knowledge that her alarm for the next morning was set for 7:30 a.m., contemplating what fresh hell high school would bring her next. It gave a sensation of paralysis. And this Sunday night in particular was more off-putting than most, what with the inevitability of a post-party reunion with Stiles and Scott, whose carnival of bizarre shit had plagued her mind for the last three days.

"I wonder what video games would have been like in 'The Matrix'."

Donald's words snapped Charlie's mind back to the task at hand. The spotty wifi in the house interrupted the audio connection, making all the phrases come out of her headset broken and staticky. Paired with the desolate, CGI landscape that stretched across her monitor, it gave the the game she and Donald were playing a strange sense of authenticity. The image before her was varying degrees of tan, from pixelated desert dunes to the blocky buildings to the absurdly flat cliff faces. The only interruptions to the color scheme were the dull green of intermittent palm trees, the glowing shields of enemy combatants, and the jet black gun in her player's hand.

They had been at the game for about an hour now. The popcorn filling the wide bowl wedged between her thigh and sofa cushion had long since disappeared, save for that one rogue kernel that always managed to lodge itself in her gum. Charlie's controller was alarmingly sticky in her hands, to the point that her player's reflexes had slowed significantly. Jump, swivel, shoot, run. All functions ran on a delay. Plus her Spartan laser had been dropped at some unknown location, leaving her woefully ill-equipped.

Charlie and Donald were well-practiced enough that Halo 3 usually took about two hours to run through in its entirety if they were paying attention, but this night found them stuck on the second level. Charlie would have been embarrassed had she been she fully aware of her performance, but her focus was as drained as her supply of ammunition. A freaking mud wasp could kill her at this point. Which meant that she and Donald had moved past the point of actual investment in the game
and lapsed into a combination of semi-coherent shower thoughts and a half-hearted effort to not die.

"What do you mean what were video games like in The Matrix?" Charlie asked, maneuvering her player up a set of stairs, Donald's player following close behind. She stayed close to the wall and ducked beneath a window, keeping out of the range of any rogue bullets. The two of them had made nominal progress—her still clearing the buildings of enemy grunts while he attempted to get his hands on a helicopter. "They were probably like this but shittier," she said through a wide yawn. "That movie came out in 1999. People still owned tamagotchis in 1999."

"Don't knock tamagotchis," Donald grumbled into the headset. "Taking care of mine gave me the confidence to babysit Jade."

"What were you doing with a tamagotchi in the 2000s?" Charlie scoffed. "Also, That was the bar you set for yourself for childcare? Thank God Jade's still alive."

"Alive and treasurer of her middle school student council back in New York, so clearly I'm doing something right," Donald sniped. "Shit, you got a bogie on your left! Watch your back!"

Charlie instinctively swung around and found a mutant creature hurling itself at her, glowing red shield up. Like all the other ones, the grunt stood oddly, knees bent backwards like a bird's. With one quick shot to that bend in the leg, Charlie's player brought it to the ground, the shield skittering uselessly to the side. Now exposed, one more shot to the head finished it off.

"Double tap. Nice. Ooh, I'm gonna go after that helicopter."

The offer of thanks on Charlie's lips as a swarm of grunts suddenly set upon her. Donald had split off in a different direction just in time to avoid them. He was as easily distracted by shiny objects as Lydia, those objects just happened to come in different forms. Lydia went after jewelry while he was generally more partial to fictional futuristic aircraft. And to-scale sized lightsabers. While he made his unconscious escape, the grunts came at Charlie in waves, crashing in from all possible directions and crowding her into a corner. All exits were blocked. Her player's back stayed firmly pressed against a wall, its gun firing off round after round with minimal effect. The spectre of imminent CGI death hovered not too far off in the corner of the screen. "Oh shit," she swore, wincing heavily and her thumbs slammed down on the keys. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. I'm so gonna die."

"And anyway," Donald continued, oblivious to her plight, "that's not my point. I mean like...the Matrix is basically one giant video game, right? Like everything you see in it is all false imagery. It's all coded. So did video games get that same amount of insane detail? Or does that code contain slightly crappier code. And if so, were the coders ashamed of that crappier code?"

Charlie's hands tightened around the controller, trying to keep it steady as her hands began to sweat. Her sticky, popcorn-covered fingers were giving her no advantage. Plus the salt worked its way into an old papercut between her index and middle finger, making it sting. The grunts were piling up around her. Her aim might be good, but the dwindling ammo reserves she had left spelled disaster regardless. Yup, she was going to die. "The guys who coded the Matrix were all dead, Donald," she said through teeth clenched in concentration. "I don't think they care about sub-premium coding in fake video games. That's all self-sustaining bullshit created and maintained by the A.I."

"Okay, fair point," Donald conceded. "But like....what about gradual technological development? Did that happen at all? Or were the people going to live in 1999 until the end of time, never questioning why further technological progress wasn't made? Imagine an eternity of having
"Windows Vista. How fucking terrifying is that?"

"You saw the next two movies in that franchise, man," Charlie grumbled. "Do you really think they put that much thought into the world-building? I mean these are the same guys who looked at an awesome intro movie and said, 'You know what this franchise could use? Some pasty computer generated vampires with dreadlocks.' Don't look for logic where there's none to be found. That, my friend, fries your brain."

Firing one final shot, Charlie took out one last grunt before she was left without ammunition. She sighed in defeat and allowed the controller to fall from her hands, rolling to the side. Not five seconds later, the red screen of death began flashing before her eyes. "Aaaaand, I'm dead. This round is up to you now buddy."

"No worries, I got you," Donald replied in a chipper tone. "I've almost got this helicopter and I'm about to start blowing shit up. Yippee ki-yay, motherfuckers!"

Charlie brought her legs up, curling her feet beneath her, and watched Donald play through the rest of the round. Seeing him play was like watching a form of abstract performance art. He kept a running commentary composed of aggressively humming the Mission Impossible theme song, making random explosion noises, mumbling 'pew, pew, pew' under his breath, and, above all else, trash-talking various animated characters. But despite all the antics, if actual wars could be won with a PS3, he would be the one to call. Strategy, skill, once he was in the zone it was almost a beautiful thing to behold. Graceful, even. He practiced way too much. Honestly, the dude kind of needed to get a life. But then again she didn't exactly have room to comment on that front.

Oddly enough, sitting on a couch, licking artificial popcorn butter off her fingers, and watching Donald decimate a bunch of video game characters while giving the speech from Independence Day could be considered the most normal part of her weekend. The shadow of what had happened at the party cast a pall over the majority of the weekend. Lydia was probably completely ignorant of the misadventure—her Saturday would be dedicated to sleeping it off and Sunday served as the panicked cleanup for which Charlie was determined to be completely unavailable, what with all of the incredibly pressing things she had to do. Allison, though, had called Charlie the following morning to rehash the bizarre series of events.

Actually, to call it 'talking' would have been somewhat of an overstatement. Charlie's lips didn't move enough to categorize her as an active participant in the conversation. It was more along the lines of listening to Allison going back and forth between wondering if Scott was okay or if she had done something wrong and the mildest expression of righteous anger Charlie had encountered in her life—if a dude bailed on her right before a kiss, she would be sketching out a retribution checklist. Charlie was left to nod and say 'mmm-hmmm' every minute or so. Emotional advice had never been her forte, but she could still listen. She was good at that.

Charlie had managed to cobble together a good number of the elements of that night in her head. Derek's appearance, Scott scampering off, Stiles apparently showing up at Allison's door, winded and wild-eyed....If she took all those odd events at face value, it was just freaking weird. Scott may have just had a panic attack, freaked out, and left. Maybe the prospect of kissing a cute girl had been too much for him and he bolted. Based on Jackson's grumbling, Scott McCall was not accustomed to being a lacrosse star or going to giant high school parties. But with Derek thrown in the mix, it was more mystery than random sequence of events. It was a puzzle, and Charlie liked puzzles. Usually she could solve them, be they little chunks of cardboard in a box, pieces on a chessboard, or people. It only took time and determination, and she had plenty of both. And what's more, she also had an inner line on random guy crap.
"Hey, Donald," Charlie drawled out as the boy blasted a tank with a laser cannon, "you're a guy."

"And it took you all this time to notice?" he laughed. "I'm going to try and not take that as an affront to my masculinity. I'll have to blow up more stuff in this game in a move of classic testosterone-induced overcompensation. Crap, Oz, I might even have to go out and buy a Hummer now. Just think of what you've done to the environment."

"Hilarious," Charlie deadpanned. "But I just had more of a general inquiry into bizarre dude behavior that you're better equipped to answer than I am."

"I do have that equipment," he replied, the immature grin in his voice making Charlie groan. "Alright, shoot."

"Okay," Charlie continued. "So this Friday I was at this party Lydia, the hot redhead, was throwing and while I was there this guy—"

Suddenly the image on the screen tipped to the side as the helicopter began spinning out of the air. His thumbs must have slipped against the controller. "Oh, gross," Donald gagged as the helicopter righted itself. "Is this actually you asking me about guys? Okay, so I know I made that crack about your love life the other day, but that was purely for comedic effect. If you are actually macking on someone, I can be spared the gory details."

Charlie let out an offended scoff. "Donald, you've gone into such explicit detail describing your crushes I might as well have been drawing a police sketch."

"Yeah, but that's me," he said dismissively. "You never have crushes. This is new and weird. I...do not care for it."

"Okay, that double standard is actually ridiculous," Charlie protested, sinking lower into the sofa cushions and wrapping her arms around her middle, "but I'm not asking for me. That other new girl I told you about—Allison—had a date and he sort of freaked out and bolted for no apparent reason right before they kissed. She wants advice—"

"Which you suck at."

"Which I suck at," Charlie confirmed. "So I'm bringing in a third party."

"A third, well-equipped party."

Fighting back a loud harrumph, Charlie then proceeded to give Donald a complete rundown of the night's events—Derek's appearance, Scott's exit, and Stiles's altogether weirdass behavior. Donald's intermittent hums of careful contemplation contrasted sharply with the degree of CGI carnage being inflicted on screen. "Okay," he mused, the measured consideration in his voice punctuated by a jarring on-screen explosion. "All of that could definitely be categorized as some weird shit—especially with that Derek dude—but I've got one question that could be a valid extenuating circumstance. Is this Allison girl as hot as Lydia the hot redhead?"

"Easily," Charlie replied.

"Well there's your answer for the Scott stuff," Donald snorted. "There was this one time last year.....okay so this girl Kirsten—"

"Police sketch girl?"

"Yeah," Donald confirmed. "Police sketch girl. Totally hot, funny, in every honors class, smile like
the shining sun. I made up my mind to ask her to homecoming. Next time I see her, she's walking down the hallway with the hair and the smile and the beautifully liberal political opinions.....No joke—I totally jumped in a storage closet to avoid her."

"You jumped in the closet?" Charlie drawled, her voice dull with disbelief. "Who the hell does that?"

"Not my finest hour, but yeah." All of the sudden, a missile on the screen launched towards Donald's helicopter. One shattering explosion later and the screen flashed red. Game over. "You see that!" Donald declared. "It's been a full year and Kirsten can still throw me off my game. I just died in the name of love."

Charlie made a noise of protest and threw her hands in the air. "Donald, you flirt like a 17th century courtesan!" she exclaimed. "I've seen it happen, and while I find it all manner of disturbing, you're really good at it. How is this a problem for you?"

"Okay, first of all," Donald interjected, his tone defensive, "your 17th century courtesans wish they could flirt like me. And second of all, I am a multi-faceted individual! I'm allowed to have layers! And she was...super hot. Respectfully."

"But didn't she end up going with you?" Charlie demanded. "I don't remember you moping a lot, so she must have."

"Of course she did!" he exclaimed, sounding almost offended that she had doubted him. "Have you seen my face? I'm adorable. But the point is that completely adorable me still jumped into a storage closet because I was intimidated. Wait, is this Scott guy more adorable than me?"

"I'm not answering that," Charlie announced, shaking her head definitively. "If I say yes, you'll start pouting. If I say no, your ego is gonna get just a little bit bigger and that is not okay. This is a no-win scenario, and I prefer to cha-cha slide right past those."

"You know," Donald said sagely, "with the cha-cha slide you always end up just where you started. It's the nature of the dance itself. I think it speaks to your avoidance issues coming back to bite you in the ass."

"Stop trying to sound deep, Donald."

"Oh, I am deep," he smirked. "I am the freaking Mariana Trench of philosophical wisdom."

Charlie sighed loudly, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration. "Philosophy is just spouting bullshit while holding a thesaurus," she muttered bitterly.

"Wow," Donald snorted. "I think you just pissed off Socrates with that one."

"Socrates can kiss my ass."

"You're being super hostile towards Socrates with like...zero prompting—the dude died like two thousand years ago. Give him a break. Wasn't the hemlock enough?"

Charlie let out another sigh and sank so low into the couch cushions she might find the candy bar's worth of change buried beneath them. What spectacular insights she had expected to obtain from Donald, she wasn't quite sure. But the one definitive conclusion she was left with....guys were across the board weird. Was there an algorithm she could come up with to predict their behavior? Most likely not. Was life a meaningless crapshoot of random occurrences that could never be arranged into a sensible image? Probably. Was she far too mentally exhausted by the social mores
of high school relationship drama to continue thinking about this? Absolutely.

Snatching up the PS3 controller from where it lay next to her, Charlie used the hem of her shirt to wipe the sticky popcorn butter from the buttons. "You wanna play another round?"

A satisfied chuckle echoed in her ear. "It's like you read my mind, Oz. Let's get ready to blow some shit up. Ooh rah."

The pair of them scrolled through the menu screen, selected their weapons, and began to play. Strategy worked more in their favor this time around. Donald went after the helicopter again while Charlie hijacked the Warthog, and between the two of them they cut a swath of destruction. Turns out actual communication about the battle at hand helps when participating in said armed conflict. Funny how ranting about The Matrix didn't positively contribute. Charlie did her level best to push the nigging thoughts of the party out of her head. Those problems would still be there when she woke up in the morning.

The fact that the next day at school was going to be awkward was completely unavoidable. She, Allison, Stiles, and Scott would all be forced to occupy the same first period class, breathe the same air, listen to the same dull lecture, and time had done little to dilute the tension. If anything, that tension had been raised. The only thing that might make the situation more uncomfortable would be if Derek Hale showed up as a substitute teacher.

When it finally came time for school to start on Monday, Charlie knew what her first stop would be. Of course before she had managed to get more than five steps away from Lydia's Beetle, she had been dragged into the obligatory morning exchange—the one where Lydia threw out a vaguely hostile comment with regards to Charlie's shoes or her hair or one of any number of aspects of her physical appearance.

"What the hell is with the over-the-shoulder braid thing you've got going on?" the redhead had shouted as Charlie stomped towards the side entrance of the school. She waved her lovely, un-calloused, well-buffed finger at Charlie's hair, nose wrinkled in mild disdain. "The only person who can get away with that sort of crap is Katniss Everdeen, and you don't have her gravitas or her cheekbones!"

Charlie let out a snort and spun on her heel, taking halting steps backwards towards the school and glad to be back in her Converse. "You know, before I met you I thought the whole 'all redheads are crazy' thing was an urban legend. Now? Not so sure."

"Hey!" Lydia shouted back, climbing out of the car and peeling away from Charlie to stomp towards the main entrance. "Be nice to me or I'll stop giving you rides! And at least I wash my hair!"

Waving her off dismissively, Charlie continued on her way. After a brief stop at her own locker, she took the few steps down the hallway towards Allison's. When she arrived at the locker about fifteen minutes sat between her and the first school bell, so she leaned against the cold metal and waited. And waited. And waited. Scott stopped by his own locker on the opposite side of the hall. He looked in her direction—the direction Allison was supposed to be—with longing written into those dark, expressive brown eyes. Charlie pressed her lips together in a thin smile and offered up an awkward wave. He ducked his head down in what was likely supposed to be a nod of acknowledgement and turned his back to her in disappointment. Standing with slackened shoulders, he loaded up his backpack and shuffled down the hallway towards the English classroom. Regardless of his behavior at the party, Charlie couldn't help but feel sympathy for the guy.

The seconds continued to tick by until about two minutes before the final bell was set to ring. A
frazzled Allison came jogging down the hallway, face flushed and lips pulled back into a mild grimace. "Hey!" she gasped out, quickly untangling her long, brown hair from the scarf wrapped around her neck before turning to her combination lock. "Thanks so much for waiting for me," she huffed, dialing in the combination. "I'm so sorry I'm late, I just—"

"Wanted to avoid Scott?" Charlie prompted, giving the girl a knowing look.

Allison sighed and nibbled nervously on her lip, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet as she extracted her books. "I still don't know what to do about the whole thing," she murmured, sparing Charlie a fleeting glance. "I mean, I'm mad about him disappearing from the party and just sort of abandoning me there. I should kind of hate him, right? It was a seriously 'jerk' thing to do—I should definitely hate him."

"But you don't," Charlie said simply.

Allison closed her locker door and leaned forwards, banging her forehead against the surface with a metallic thunk. "No," she mumbled weakly. Her head rolled to the side so she could look at Charlie. "No, I don't. He was really sweet before everything got awful."

"Well if it helps, he was staring at your locker longingly," Charlie said, knocking her shoulder against Allison's. "If I hadn't been here, he probably would probably be caressing it and whispering sweet nothings."

A crease formed between Allison's eyebrows. "Is that statement supposed to make me more or less likely to forgive him?"

"That's up to you," Charlie shrugged. "But I will say this—whatever the hell happened, he looked pretty sorry about it. Not that you should take my word for it, because I am criminally incompetent at 'emotions'."

Allison sighed again and took a step back from the lockers. "We should go. We'll be late to class."

"So we're a bit late," Charlie said, jerking her head to the side nonchalantly. "We're learning about Kafka, not defusing a nuclear bomb."

Allison laughed lightly and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, tugging on it hesitantly. "What do you think I should do?"

Charlie snorted and scratched absently at the back of her neck. "Asking me to answer a question like that is like asking a fish to fly or asking Jon Hamm not to be handsome—it's just not in my wheelhouse."

Allison smirked slightly and shook her head. "You're no help."

"Not generally, no...." Charlie drawled. She contemplated heading off to class and letting that be that, but the contemplative wince on Allison's face gave her pause. And if she was being honest, she probably had better perspective than most. Hell, she probably knew more about teenage boys than Allison ever would. Donald might be as terminally unhelpful as she was while giving advice, but his constant running commentary and inability to shut up did give her some insight.

"Look," she continued, clapping a hand on Allison's shoulder, "I can't give you any definitive advice, but I can tell you this. Guys....they drink poprocks and Coke to see if their stomachs will explode. They kick each other in the manberries for youtube videos. They'll wear their socks inside out because they think it makes them bowl better. There is genuinely no way to explain the shit they do. And I have a fairly reliable source that tells me they get even weirder when girls are
involved. And a lot of the time they try to keep that weird crap to themselves. I can't say I know from experience, but my guess? When you start dating someone, you find out about all that wackadoo behavior a few months in. Maybe you just got to see Scott's a bit early. Either way, you'll never know if you don't talk to him about it."

Allison opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, but abruptly snapped it shut. Readjusting the strap of her bag on her shoulder, she gave Charlie a curious look. "You know, for someone who doesn't give advice, you give really good advice."

Charlie wrinkled her nose in bemusement and shrugged. Just then the final bell before classes rang, making Allison squeeze her eyes shut in frustration. "I know I should talk to him," she said with a sharp nod, "but I don't think I'm ready to just yet."

"Okay, then," Charlie said, pursing her lips in thought. "So for today we switch seats. You won't have to talk to the wonder twins and you can sort out the Scott business later. Plus I'll glare at them and make them super-uncomfortable the whole time. Sound good?"

"Yeah," Allison chuckled. "Yeah, that sounds good."

Charlie linked her arm through Allison's and dragged her towards the English classroom. By the time they arrived, the room had already filled and their classmates were seated. When the door opened with an unnecessarily loud squeak, Mr. Hobson stopped writing on the board and turned to face them, glowering through red-rimmed eyes. His face had already hardened into its familiar mask of exasperation. "Ms. Oswin, Ms. Argent," he droned. "So nice of you to join us. Five minutes late."

"Sorry we're late," Allison murmured apologetically. "We were just—"

"Take your seats," he replied, waving them off. "Don't be late again."

Only two seats were left open, one at the front near the door and the one Allison usually took, behind Scott and next to Stiles. Charlie saw Allison glance over in Scott's direction, eyes hesitant and lips twitching. The two of them likely made awkward eye contact, because the brunette quickly turned away and dropped into the front seat before she so much as breathed. Charlie moved to the back of the room and collapsed in her newly designated seat.

As soon as Charlie sat down and began pulling out her books and pens, Stiles twisted in her direction, giving her an awkward wave and mildly terrified nod. Charlie smiled in response and he visibly relaxed, but still eyed her warily, like he was afraid she was angry with him for some reason. He glanced back to the front of the classroom, ensuring Mr. Hobson was facing away from them before leaning sideways out of his seat. "Hey," he whispered out the corner of his mouth.

Charlie's lips quirked down in confusion and shot him a few sidelong glances. "Hey?" she muttered back questioningly.

He cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "Sorry about the whole—" He waved his hand around frantically.

"The whole what?" she hissed, her eyes still trained on Mr. Hobson's back.

"Y—you know," he mumbled. "The whole 'ditching the party' thing with Allison and stuff. Probably not the best way to end the festivities. Sorry if it...ruined stuff."

"Don't worry about it," she dismissed with a snort and shake of the head. "I have this theory that parties are just an exercise in mass self-delusion. Everything starts out pretty well, but by the time
it's over nobody is having fun—we all just collectively agree that we do because we feel like we're supposed to. Same goes for parades. I freaking hate parades."

"Wow," Stiles said, making a face at her. "That's...like...super-depressing."

Charlie shrugged. "Super-depressing...honest...They're usually the same thing."

"And that's even more depressing."

"Well the party wasn't all that bad," she replied, raising her eyebrows teasingly. "I did have some fun. My broken-down robot was getting a little rusty. It was about time I busted out that move again."

Stiles narrowed his eyes at her, the hint of a stupid grin making his lips twitch. "Wouldn't— wouldn't the robot be rusted either way," he murmured. "Seeing as it's breaking down and all that."

Charlie quickly bit down on a finger to stifle the reluctant guffaw making her lungs heave. "That is a genuinely terrible joke."

"Well you're laughing aren't you?" he replied quickly, either amused, offended, or some combination thereof. "Isn't that kind of the point?"

"Yeah, but—"

The sound of a throat being cleared cut off her response. Slowly, Charlie turned back to the front of the class, teeth clenched together in anticipation. Mr. Hobson stood directly before her, hands planted on his hips and staring down with contempt. "Ms. Oswin, that is your second strike today," he drawled. "One more and you will be visiting the Vice Principal's office. Do you understand?"

Charlie pressed her lips together in a thin line and nodded fervently. "Yes, sir," she muttered. "Sorry, sir."

"Well," Mr. Hobson continued, taking another step towards her, "since you seem so eager to talk, why don't you be the first student to share with the class. What were your impressions of 'A Modest Proposal'? If you managed to dredge any up, that is."

Charlie bit her lip and tapped her pen against the paper of her notebook, smirking slightly at the round of snickering that typically followed a student being singled out. "Well," she said lightly, "obviously Swift was constructing a scathing indictment of the treatment of the Irish poor in the 19th century through the satirical suggestion that children should be sold to the rich as food."

The snickering faded, making Charlie bite down harder on her lip to fight back the smirk. "The title on its own is demonstration enough of the hyperbole," she continued, her voice matter-of-fact. "And it was only to be reinforced by the use of suggestions for preparation and artificially calculated financial benefits. There were also some further reaching implications for English-Irish tensions during that time period, especially with the religious divide. You know, the whole Catholic versus Protestant thing? It was all very Soylent Green. Except for the fact that everybody knows it's people." There was a short silence that followed, making her glance around the room and shrug. "At least that's the impression I got when I was reading it. Should I go into Malthusian growth of resources to support a population as compared to exponential population growth or...or are we good?"

Mr. Hobson raised his bushy eyebrows so they rested above the frame of his glasses, somehow managing to be simultaneously surprised and unimpressed. He folded his arms across his chest and
rocked back on his heels, returning to the front of the room. "Well it's nice to know that you're paying at least attention to the coursework when you're not in my classroom. Let's see if I can hold your attention now. And if I hear your voice one more time during this period, you'll be joining me for detention this afternoon."

Charlie gave him a half-hearted salute and sank back in her chair. This school seemed to have an overabundance of highly embittered teachers. And the fact that she had been forbidden from speaking meant she couldn't ask Stiles or Scott the question she had intended on subtly easing into—namely, what the hell? Under normal circumstances she would have tapped Scott on the shoulder and asked anyway, but if Mel came home to a message saying she had gotten a detention during the second week of school, the woman would have a heart attack. The shenanigans needed to wait a month at a minimum.

Patience had never been Charlie's strong suit. During the four periods that preceded lunch, she found her pen tapping against the paper of her notebook with increasing speed as the clock continued to tick. By the time the bell rang, those tiny little ink marks had totally blackened a full corner of her page. English, Bio, History, Math—each period of 45 minutes dragged on to the point that they felt like four full hours. When the shrill tone of freedom finally reached her ears, she shoved all her things in her bag and made a beeline for the cafeteria.

Once Charlie made her way through the lunch line, tray piled with as many tater tots as the vindictive lady with the ladle and sour expression would allow, she scanned the room. At one of the more central tables she found Lydia, Jackson, Allison, and Danny already taking their seats. Lydia reached up a hand and gestured for her to join them, but Charlie waved her off, eliciting quite the affronted huff in response. Charlie would be eating lunch with a different group that day. And that group occupied one of the more lateral tables near the wall of windows that overlooked the parking lot.

"Hey!" Charlie exclaimed brightly, slamming her tray down hard on the surface of the table before pulling out her chair. At the clattering sound, Scott and Stiles both jumped in their seats, Scott almost toppling to the ground while Stiles swiped what looked like a large, leather-bound book off the table and sat on it for some bizarre reason.

"H—hey, Charlie!" he managed to stammer out, righting himself in his seat. "How's it—how's it going?"

"Been better, been worse," she replied simply, popping a tater tot into her mouth.

"Don't you usually sit with Jackson and Lydia?" Scott asked in confusion.

"Yeah, generally," Charlie mumbled through a mouthful of food. "I've got a different agenda today, though."

Stiles coughed into his hand and blinked rapidly. "And what might that be?" he asked with an awkward, flourish wave.

"I'm here so I can debrief Scott."

As soon as the words left her mouth, Scott paled visibly and took on a twitchiness much more characteristic of Stiles than himself. His mouth opened and closed a few times, lips moving uselessly before he managed to stammer out a full sentence. "Charlie, that's—that's really flattering and everything, but I like Allison and, um—"

At that an exasperated look crossed Stiles's face. A facepalm and heavy roll of the eyes later, it was
Charlie's turn to be confused. And then realization smacked her in the face, causing her to stare at Scott in disbelief. "Do you—" she turned to Stiles "$—does he think I'm asking him to take off his pants?"

Stiles ran his hands through his cropped hair and down his face, nodding defeatedly. "That is a distinct possibility, yes."

"Okay, what are the two of you talking about?" Scott interjected, his eyes darting back and forth between them.

Charlie snorted in amusement. "Well I'm not talking about your tighty-whities, that's for damn sure."

Scott flushed red to the tips of his ears and scratched at the back of his neck. "I don't wear tighty—what's happening right now?"

Holding up a finger indicating for Charlie to wait, Stiles leaned over and draped an arm over Scott's hunched shoulders, pulling him in slightly. Charlie threw her hands in the air in submission and went back to eating her lunch while the two of them whispered. They seemed to assume she couldn't hear them, like they were having an aside in a Shakespearean play.

"Okay, buddy," Stiles muttered. "A debrief is basically a military type thing where a soldier or a spy or whatever has to explain what happened on a mission. She was asking what happened at the party. You should really watch more of the 'History Channel'."

"Oh," Scott mumbled under his breath, turning back to face Charlie. "Why didn't you just say that?"

Charlie let out a sigh and rubbed at her forehead. "I was wondering the same thing," she said, her voice tired. "I've clearly got to learn to stop embellishing, so I'm just gonna come right out and ask it for clarification purposes. Scott, what the hell happened at that party? You left in a bit of a hurry."

"Why do you want to know?" Scott inquired. He eyed her with a slight degree of suspicion. Which, ironically, Charlie found to be suspicious.

"Because Allison asked for my advice about what to do with this whole—" she gestured at Scott "—this whole situation. And I suck at advice giving in general, so if I'm even going to attempt it, I'd like to have all the facts in first."

At the mention of the girl's name, Scott's wariness gave way to his patented Allison-induced moon-faced expression. He leaned forwards over the table, suddenly highly invested in the conversation. "You talked to Allison about me?" he demanded desperately. "What did she say?"

"I'm not gonna tell you that," Charlie replied, popping another tater tot in her mouth. "Bros before hoes, man."

"Okay, just to be clear," Stiles interjected, pointing between himself and Scott, "we'd be the 'hoes' in this particular scenario."

Charlie narrowed her eyes at the pair. "No, Scott's the hoe," she said, pointing a slightly accusatory finger at the floppy haired wonder. "You're just hoe-affiliated."

"Hoe-adjacent?" he prompted.
"Exactly."

"Wait a second," Scott said, waving his hand at her. "Why am I the hoe? I don't want to be the hoe."

"Well, technically you are the one getting your flirt on with Allison," Stiles said.

"With mixed results," Charlie tacked on, earning her a mild glare from Scott.

Stiles let out an unapologetic sigh and shot Scott a pointed look before giving him a hard pat on the back. "Under this specific set of circumstances, you are kind of the hoe. Sorry, dude."

Scott let out a groan of frustration, folding his arms on the table and burying his face in the crook of his elbow. "Why does anybody have to be the hoe?"

"Oh my God," Charlie breathed, wiping at her eyes in frustration. "This is so not the conversation I want to be having right now. Can we stop analyzing my metaphor and move on, please? Scott, what the hell happened at the party?"

Immediately, Scott's demeanor shifted from embarrassed to cagey. He lifted his head and sat back in his chair, his posture closed off and retreating into himself, distinctly uncomfortable and incredibly guilty. "I can't really tell you what happened," he murmured. "I just started feeling...really weird...and I had to get out of there. I shouldn't have just left like that—I knew I shouldn't have and I'm really, really sorry I did. I want to take it back, but I can't." He stared at the table surface and traced a finger along it absentely. Jesus, this guy was ripping himself to shreds over the whole thing. The last time Charlie had seen a guy get this angsty over a girl, she had been watching a Baz Luhrmann movie.

Scott looked back up at her with those big, sad, puppy dog eyes of his and she actually started feeling sympathetic. "Do you think there's anything I can do?" he asked in that clichéd hushed whisper. "Do you think I can get her to forgive me?"

If it had not been for the muffled chatter of the lunch room, Charlie's ears would have been filled with the sound of metaphorical crickets. She folded her arms across her chest and collapsed backwards in her seat. Why did people keep asking her for advice? It was way too much pressure. Making her even partially responsible for the outcome of anybody else's relationship seemed like a really, really bad idea seeing as she was so terrible at them herself. But—for some bizarre freaking reason—her opinion was suddenly the one in high demand.

Well, one thing was for sure. If people wanted her opinion, they were most likely idiots. But what the hell, right? She might as well give it anyway. But anything that came out of her mouth was stamped with a disclaimer. Just so she couldn't be sued for it at a later date.

Sighing heavily, Charlie leaned forwards and fixed Scott with a serious stare. "All I can say is this: if you don't have an explanation, tell her as much. Don't try to make excuses or justify yourself—she's gonna see straight through that crap. So if you can't explain yourself, just apologize. And mean it."

Scott's eyes widened and he nodded earnestly. "I will—I mean I do. Mean it."

Charlie shrugged. "Well that's really all you can do."

A sad sort of silence fell over their little trio. Or at least one third of it was sad—Scott was moping again. Charlie pushed back from the table and continued eating. Stiles? He alternated between eating, drumming his fingers against the table and nervously glancing about.
"So this is good, right?" Stiles interjected suddenly, slapping a hand on Scott's shoulder and shaking it. "We've got some female intuition working in our favor. With that on our side we can do anything."

"Hell, let's take over the world," Charlie replied, raising an eyebrow. "I'd be down for that. I could totally maintain dominion over the earth and all its resources."

"You know absolute power corrupts absolutely, right?" Stiles said through a mouth full of food, spraying some chunks of tater tot at her in the process. "You might want to take that in consideration when mapping out your career plans."

Charlie snorted and shook her head. "I find your lack of faith disturbing," she muttered coolly, breathing heavily and theatrically as she said it.

All of the sudden Stiles stopped chewing and gave her the strangest of looks, eyes narrowed and nose wrinkled slightly. "Did you just quote Darth Vader at me?"

What followed was possibly one of the nerdier conversations of Charlie's life. But to be fair, she needed to release the pent up nerdiness that had been building up inside her since she arrived in Beacon Hills. While her dad and Mel did share many traits, an affection for the seminal works of George Lucas was not one of them. And hanging out with Lydia, Jackson, Danny, and now Allison hadn't allowed her to fully express that aspect of her personality. Not that Charlie was hiding anything—her constant references simply went either unnoticed or earned her a custom-made eye roll from Lydia, always slipping by without comment. Plus, whenever she tried to debate this kind of thing with Donald, he would always scream 'HAN SHOT FIRST!'—whether or not it was relevant to the discussion at hand—and then move on to a new topic.

Finally managing to talk with someone about the stuff was a relief, and Stiles was definitely an enthusiastic participant. She hadn't had the opportunity to discuss the possibility of Jar Jar Binks being a deeply powerful Sith Lord in quite some time. That debate ate up the majority of their remaining lunch time. Scott didn't appear to be having that much fun, though. Being simultaneously ridiculed by two people—one his best friend and the other a girl he had barely known a week—for not having seen Star Wars probably didn't qualify as an ideal lunchtime discussion.

By the time the bell rang, summoning the sound of chairs scraping against the cafeteria's laminate floors as students reluctantly filed back to class, Charlie had decided something. She liked those guys—Stiles especially. They were complete weirdos, and she respected that. But while they were entertaining enough to hang out with, she didn't trust them. Not in the slightest. But then again, when was the last time she really trusted anybody?

She hadn't bothered asking either of them about Derek Hale. From the moment she sat down she knew any answer they'd offer her would be complete bullshit, either because they didn't want her to know or because they had no freaking clue themselves. Probably a combination of both. That situation was a whole different can of worms. One she fully intended to open, but the high school cafeteria was neither the time nor the place. In polite society, one only opens their cans of worms in private.

The rest of the afternoon represented the quintessential, boring school day, filled with learning and knowledge and teachers who had absolutely begun to resent their students. And day drink. After the long anticipated final bell rang, Charlie collected the things from her locker and moved outside. She situated herself on one of the benches in the front courtyard, waiting for Lydia to give her a ride home. Shoving her earphones in, she blasted the music, closed her eyes, and angled her face towards the sun. The heat felt warm and comforting on her skin. The light penetrated the skin of
her eyelids, covering her eyes with a tapestry of red, the veins tracking lines through it like bolts of lightning. It had become a tradition of sorts. She would wait and Lydia would waltz by and slap her over the head, telling her it was time to go. But today she didn't get a slap over the head. Today, she got a timid and polite tap on the shoulder.

Cracking open a single eye and blinking into the light, Charlie's eyes slowly focused on the figure in front of her. Allison was shadowed against the sun, wrapped in her jean jacket and scarf, bookbag hanging off her shoulder. "Allison, hey," she said, straightening in her seat. "How's it going?"

The other girl sucked in a breath and inclined her head in Charlie's direction. "So I saw you talking to Scott at lunch."

"Yeah," Charlie admitted, scrunching up her face and giving her an apologetic look. "I wanted to see what happened at the party. I figured the best thing to do was ask. Go the direct route."

"Oh," Allison chirped, furrowing her eyebrows in confusion. "What did he say?"

"Nothing specific," Charlie replied, fingers fiddling with the end of her braid. "I'll tell you what, though. He is really beating himself up about the whole thing. Every time I look at his face it's like watching one of those animal shelter commercials where they play Sarah McLachlan songs while showing you pictures of sad, homeless puppies. It's rough—no pun intended."

Allison gave her a sceptical look. "Ruff?" she said, raising her eyebrows pointedly. "Pun was intended."

"Of course pun was intended," Charlie scoffed.

A breath pushed its way through Allison's lips, almost emptying her lungs as she glanced over her shoulder towards the lacrosse field. "So you think I should let him off the hook, then?" Allison asked, turning back towards Charlie.

Suddenly, the brunette gave an almost imperceptible start, her eyes flicking to something over Charlie's shoulder. Her brow furrowing, Charlie twisted in her seat to follow the direction of Allison's gaze. Scott sat at another bench not too far away, clad in his jersey and clutching his lacrosse stick so hard his knuckles turned white. He kept glancing in Allison's direction, knee bouncing up and down nervously.

"Again, that's not my call," Charlie murmured, giving Allison a shrug. "But I do think you should talk to him."

Allison's face screwed up into a pained expression, letting out a reluctant grunt. "Okay, fine," she muttered. "I'll talk to him." Spinning on heel, Allison began to walk in Scott's direction.

"Hey, Allison!" Charlie called out after her, making the girl stop and glance back in her direction. Charlie smiled mischievously. "You don't necessarily have to be nice to him."

Letting out a light laugh, Allison continued on her way. As she walked past Scott—with an adequate degree of swagger—Scott jumped to his feet and trailed after her. Charlie smiled after them and leaned back in her seat, waiting for Lydia. Problem was, Lydia never showed up. The students slowly filtered out of the school and one by one the cars disappeared from the parking lot. It was at that point that Charlie realized Lydia's Beetle was conspicuously absent. For the second time in a week, Lydia had unceremoniously abandoned her at school.

Whipping out her phone, Charlie checked her text messages. Donald had sent her about a dozen
photos of grumpy cat, each with the caption 'it u', but beyond that no word. Nothing from Lydia. Charlie gave off an angry grunt and sent Lydia a slightly hostile text asking where the hell she had gone. The response she received, while unsatisfying, was expected—a trite little quip stating that it was only fair seeing as Charlie had ditched her at lunch to hang out with a couple of 'socially irrelevant guys' whose names she still couldn't seem to remember. And when Charlie pointed out that was ridiculous, all she got was silence.

Charlie swore loudly and slammed her phone against her forehead in frustration. Being friends with Lydia was a complicated endeavor. The way she operated, friendship was a game of sums. Somebody always owed—a game of chess and a test of wills, played out over movie nights and trips to the mall. Usually Charlie didn't give a crap because she refused to play inside the lines Lydia had painted on the metaphorical field—which was quite possibly the reason Lydia actually liked her—but sometimes it added up to her being a massive pain in the ass. Sometimes being now.

After screaming a number of expletives at her phone, Charlie called Mel. Unfortunately that did not provide any solutions seeing as her aunt had to stay with the shop till it shut, meaning she'd be marooned at school till 8:00 pm at the earliest. As far as she could tell, she had one solution left—one she really hated. And that solution came with overly gelled hair, a bad attitude, and a Porsche. Ugh. Asking Jackson for favors felt like making a deal with the devil, even when it came to something as simple as catching a ride home.

Groaning loudly, Charlie slung her messenger bag over her shoulder and dragged the heels of her Converse around the school and towards the lacrosse pitch. The crisp wind stung her skin, whipping the hairs that had fallen loose from her braid back into her face. By the time concrete gave way to grass, most of the team was already running drills on the field. Charlie made her way to the lowest step on the bleachers, taking a seat. Interrupting Jackson while he was 'in the zone' didn't put him in a helping mood—not that he was ever in that sort of mood—so she decided to keep to herself until the coach called for a water break. She shoved her earphones back in her ears and straddled the bleacher, pulling out her books and laying them on the reflective surface before her to finish her homework.

After a few minutes of barreling her way through parametric equations, a shadow fell over her notes. Angling her head up, she found Stiles standing over her clad, in his maroon lacrosse jersey with the number 24 emblazoned across the front. His mouth was moving, but Mick Jagger's voice blocked out any outside sounds. Yanking one of her earbuds out, Charlie gave him an apologetic look. "Sorry, I missed all that. What were you saying?"

"What was I saying?" Stiles repeated, rocking back on his heels with his eyebrows raised. "Uh, nothing important. I was just wondering what you were doing here—" he waved his hands around the general area of the lacrosse field. "Don't you usually get a ride home with Lydia? While your car isn't working, I mean."

Charlie rolled her eyes theatrically at the mention of the redhead. "Generally, yeah," Charlie replied, bobbing her head. "But every once in while she decides I need to reevaluate my priorities, which for some reason means teaching me a lesson and stranding me at school. My aunt doesn't get out of work till 8:00, so I'm here to abandon all of my pride and ask Jackson for a lift home. If he says yes it'll be about twenty minutes of him telling me not to damage the suede interior of his Porsche, so that should be fun. Some primo bonding time for me and the son of Satan."

"I can give you a ride home," Stiles offered. As soon as the words came out of his mouth he seemed to rethink them, taking a step back and wincing slightly. "If you want a ride—I mean if you don't want to go with Jackson," he continued, scratching at this neck. "It would have to be after practice, obviously, and my car isn't exactly the most comf—"
"That would be great, Stiles," Charlie interrupted, smiling widely to put him at ease. "Thanks, I really appreciate it."

Stiles's lips twitched, revealing the faintest ghost of a smile, and visibly relaxed. "Anything for a damsel in—"

"STILINSKI!" Coach Finstock's exceptionally loud voice rang out from his position at the center of the field, making her and Stiles both turn in his direction. The man stood there, hair and eyes wild, hands planted firmly on his hips, and the dreaded whistle hanging threateningly from his lip. "Hey, Stilinski! I never thought I'd say this to you, but stop talking to girls and get your ass back on the field!"

Stiles flushed red and slowly twisted back to face her, a comically big grimace covering his face. "I'm just—I'm just gonna go," he mumbled, jerking his thumb in the direction of the field. "Yeah, I should go."

"That would probably be best," Charlie agreed, nodding sagely.

He jogged back onto the field while Charlie bit down on her lip, trying really, really hard not to laugh. After a few more minutes, she finished her math assignment and swung her leg back over the bleachers so she could watch the practice.

As much as she hated to admit it, especially after being subjected to Jackson's rants, the team was good. Exceptionally good. Most of the players were strong and fast—clearly having eaten their wheaties. Unfortunately, Stiles wasn't among them. It wasn't that he was slow, because he wasn't....he just seemed to lack the same rigidity and definitive way of moving the other players possessed. That typical muscled brute force was missing. He was so elastic that sometimes she wondered if he had any bones at all. The human equivalent of Gumby. His style wasn't necessarily a bad thing per se, but it was unconventional. And unconventional didn't typically inspire coaches —high school coaches at least—to take a chance on a player.

After the scrimmage, the coach lined the players up to practice shooting with Jackson standing between the line and the goalie. And, as with all things these days, it ended up featuring a McCall-Whittemore face-off. Scott stood at the front of the line, preparing himself to take the shot. Jackson tensed, like a cat on its haunches. Coach Finstock blew his whistle and Scott launched himself forward while Jackson stood his ground. Charlie was left with that age-old question: What happens when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object?

Answer: Somebody gets their ass kicked.

Jackson angled forwards, ramming his shoulder into Scott's chest. Scott flew backwards, landing hard on his back with a thump audible even from the bleachers. Charlie hissed through her teeth, wincing at the sound. Coach Finstock, however, didn't seem to share her sympathies. He hovered over Scott, who had clambered back to his feet but seemed to be doubled over in pain, and began yelling obscenities in his ear. Charlie rolled her eyes. The man might be entertaining as hell, but he was still an ass.

After a few moments of recovery, Scott jogged back to the group, bypassing the rest of the players to stand at the front of the line. He was going again. Charlie clapped her hands together in a half-hearted gesture of encouragement, but soon gave up as he obviously couldn't hear her. Coach Finstock blew the whistle a second time, and Scott sprinted forwards at double speed. And this time when Jackson moved in for the block, Scott barreled straight into him, giving rise to a sickening crack.
"Oh, shit," Charlie breathed out as Jackson hit the ground. That sounded very, very not good. Charlie squinted at the field, waiting to see Jackson's prostrate figure get to its feet and begin hurling abuse at Scott. But that didn't happen.

Oh, shit.

Shoving the remaining books and pens into her bag, Charlie threw it over her shoulder and jogged onto the field. Just as she reached the impromptu huddle, she saw Scott and Stiles out of the corner of her eye, darting across the field towards the locker rooms. There was definitely something seriously off going on over there. But she opted to ignore them, instead pushing through the circle of burly lacrosse players. At the center Jackson lay collapsed on the ground, grabbing at his left shoulder with his face screwed up in pain. The coach crouched over him, murmuring uncharacteristically soft words of encouragement. As soon as Charlie got near enough to observe the display, Coach Finstock looked up from Jackson and stared up at her with an expression that immediately morphed from confusion to its typical belligerence.

"Hey—hey you," he said, snapping his fingers and pointing at her.

"Charlie," she supplied. "I'm in your economics class."

"I don't care," he spluttered back. "Get off my field. In case you can't notice, we're a little busy right now."

"I have some First Aid training," she insisted. "I was a certified lifeguard back in San Diego."

The coach blinked up at her for a moment before exploding with that same manic energy of his. "Well why didn't you say that in the first place?!"

He moved aside and let her crouch down near Jackson who, upon seeing her, rolled his eyes heavily. "What are you here for, Chuck?"

"Shut up and stay still, Jackson," she muttered, pushing down on his uninjured shoulder. "Doctor's orders." After a few seconds of poking and prodding and some unmanly yelps that she didn't entirely regret having caused, Charlie sat back on her knees and pushed the hair out of her face. "Giving the swelling and deformation I'd say his shoulder is either dislocated or separated—can't tell for sure. He'll need to get an X-ray. We should get him to the hospital if we—"

"No!" Coach Finstock interrupted, pacing back and forth with big, angry, but simultaneously somewhat underwhelming stomps. "No, no, no, no. We have a game on Saturday, and to crush the opposing team, our team has to practice. And to practice, we need our captain. He can walk it off."

Charlie let out a loud, inelegant snort and shot Coach Finstock a look which was probably too impolite for a student to direct at a teacher. "The only time it's advisable to 'walk off' this type of injury is when you're being chased by a horde of ravenous zombies."

Coach Finstock groaned and threw his hands into the air. "You're killing me here—you're really killing me. After I die within the next ten seconds, they're going to write on my tombstone 'Here Lies Robert Finstock: He Was Killed By...What's-her-name.' The girl who wouldn't shut the hell up."

"Okay," Charlie said, pushing herself to her feet. "Let me re-phrase this. If we get Jackson to the hospital soon, he might be able to play this Saturday."

Coach Finstock planted his hands on his hips and glowered at her, his eyebrows drawing together in a cartoonish frown. "Well that the hell are you waiting for?!" he suddenly exploded, frantically
flapping his arms like he was attempting to take flight. "Someone get him to the hospital!"

"I'll drive him," Charlie said, reaching down to take the hand attached to Jackson's uninjured shoulder and hauling him to his feet. "The rest of you can keep practicing."

After a lot of whining and waiting for Jackson to finagle his way out of his lacrosse padding—which couldn't have been easy with one arm—the two of them made their way to the parking lot. Charlie was not looking forward to this car ride. She and Jackson didn't exactly get a lot of one-on-one time, with good reason. That reason being the heightened possibility of murder. The two of them generated a sort of Cold War-style dialogue—one would drop an insult, the other would drop an insult, but it never broke out into an all-out fight. But that was when someone else was present, usually Lydia or Danny, who could act as a sort of buffer or intervene before the conversation devolved into violent chaos. They were taking their lives into their hands sitting in that car.

As they sidled up to the Porsche, Charlie held her hand out expectantly. Jackson's eyes flicked back and forth between that hand and her face, his face tightening into a snarl. "What—do you want me to hold your hand," he sneered. "No thanks, Chuck, I think I'll pass."

"I'm not asking to hold your hand, dumbass," Charlie snapped back. "I don't know where it's been. Give me the keys."

The revulsion painting Jackson's freakishly angular features intensified. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, Jackson," she sighed out, "I'm not kidding. You can't drive with one arm—you'll end up in a ditch. Which, personally, I'd find hilarious, but Lydia would axe murder me for letting it happen, so here we are."

"You are not driving my car," Jackson spat back. "I've seen your piece of crap car. I'm not letting that happen to my Porsche."

"Okay, a) my car is not a piece of crap. And b) the only reason that it isn't currently functioning is because the spark plugs are older than the two of us combined. It has nothing to do with my driving." She held out her hand again, this time more insistently, and Jackson just looked at it like it was potentially diseased. Charlie sighed and shook her head in frustration. "Alright, how about this: if you get a ride with anybody else, that means your Porsche—your beautiful, shiny Porsche—will be spending the night here. In a completely un-gated community."

The smirk on Jackson's smug face faltered slightly. After a few moments of consideration, he swore under his breath and dropped his keys into Charlie's waiting hand. Much like Jackson himself, the car had been subjected to a great deal of product, gleaming brilliantly in the afternoon sun. Upkeep which she very much doubted he maintained himself.

"So this is an automatic, right?" she called out as she unlocked the car and opened the driver's side door. A look of supreme terror crossed Jackson's face, making Charlie bust out laughing. "Dude, I'm kidding," she managed to cough out between the laughs. "I drive a 1960s muscle car. I know how to drive standard."

"Yeah, well how am I supposed to know you're any good at stick," Jackson muttered darkly, opening the passenger side door and climbing in.

Charlie let out a cackle, sliding into the driver's seat. "Oh, Jackson," she sighed. "You and your double entendres are so very witty. I think I might be starting to get a little crush on you."
"Shut up, Chuck."

"Only for you, Jacky."

Everything about that car reminded Charlie of Jackson. Sleek, stylish and completely impractical. The deep rumble of the engine had nothing to do with technical difficulties, and everything to do with demanding the attention of anybody within a half mile radius. And it smelled of cologne samples from GQ magazine inserts. Eau de douche. Aesthetic over substance. But at least that aesthetic came with soft Corinthian leather.

The first ten minutes of the ride went by in absolute silence, staring out the windshield at the road to the hospital. Neither of them had all that much to say. And Jackson was busy sulking, lower lip stuck out and everything. Like a depressed Abercrombie and Fitch model, but with a shirt.

"I am going to murder Scott McCall," he said suddenly, glowering at the dashboard like it had been the one to injure his shoulder. "And I am going to sue him for everything he's got."

Charlie scoffed and rolled her eyes theatrically. "You're not going to sue Scott."

"Why not?" he growled back.

"Okay, I'm just going to bypass the logistical issues that would arise from trying to sue a decomposing corpse and move to the fact that it would make you look like a complete tool."

That hostile glint in Jackson's eye flashed a little brighter as he rounded on her. "Hey, that idiot maimed me! How would I end up looking like the tool?"

"I don't know, Jackson," Charlie sighed out, her voice thick with frustration. "Maybe it's because you're the big bad captain of the team. Then you finally get some actual friendly competition and you sue him because you got hurt playing one of the more violent sports offered at the illustrious Beacon Hills High. It looks like you're trying to eliminate said competition which, FYI, makes you look like a narcissistic, insecure tool. But that's just my opinion. You can try it out if you want."

Jackson swore loudly and ran his functional hand down his face. "Freaking McCall," he grunted. "I know that asshole is on steroids. There's no way you can go from being a pathetic little nobody to that kind of skill without some kind of juice."

Charlie blew out a long breath and shrugged. "Conventional wisdom suggests milk builds strong bones. Maybe that's got something to do with it."

"Just turn up the damn music," Jackson muttered, reaching forwards and cranking the volume up. Apparently they had hit their conversational limit. A full two minutes. That was actually better than Charlie had anticipated.

Getting through the hospital was a lengthy and dull process, and being forced to listen to Jackson's running commentary on its length and dullness gave Charlie the overwhelming desire to shove a pen in her ear and die right then and there in the emergency room. But she couldn't. Because she needed that pen to fill out Jackson's damn paperwork. Because apparently neither of his arms were working.

After a full hour of sitting in a waiting room filled with the wails of children, the wet, hacking coughs of the elderly, and the loud complaints of...well...everyone, it finally came to be Jackson's turn. Which was a relief as Charlie was prepared to place a requisition for painkillers to stave off the migraine Jackson's whining had induced. For someone who put up the big 'tough guy' front, he had an extremely low tolerance for pain. Though his angry mutterings did come with some...
foundation. According to the doctor's preliminary analysis, he did, in fact, have a separated shoulder.

Lying down on one of the tiny couches in the waiting room, Charlie draped her legs over the armrest, kicking them back and forth like a little kid. The vinyl-covered cushion squeaked loudly beneath her as she dug her phone out of her bag and shifted into a comfortable position. She let it lie in her palm, staring at it in dread as she prepared herself to call Lydia. The news of what had happened on the lacrosse field would not go over well. Steeling herself for the inevitable shriek, Charlie moved to dial her number until suddenly it began to ring in her hand. The number flashing across the screen of her iPhone was not one she recognized. Frowning to herself, Charlie quickly hit the send button and pressed the phone to her ear.

"County morgue, you stab 'em we slab 'em."

The short, static-infused silence that ensued was followed by a highly confused and familiar sounding voice. "So—sorry," the voice crackled out from the receiver. "I think I might have the wrong number."

"Stiles?" Charlie demanded, suddenly confused herself.

"Charlie?" Stiles replied quickly. "Why the hell would you answer the phone like that?"

"I didn't recognize the number," she shrugged. "I thought you were a telemarketer or something."

"Why would you answer a telemarketer like that?"

"To freak them out, obviously," she said simply. "Why are you calling me? And for that matter, how the hell did you get my number."

"Scott asked Allison—I hope that's okay."

"It's fine," she murmured. "Just a bit surprised. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing," he drawled with a forced sort of casualness. "I just heard that you drove Jackson to the hospital. We were—and by 'we' I mean me and Scott—we were wondering...what...happened with Jackson. How's he doing and all that."

"He's doing fine," she muttered. "Finer than he'd like you to think, probably. The preliminary analysis says he's got a separated shoulder. They're doing X-rays now. When they're done we'll know whether or not he can play on Saturday."

"Oh, okay," Stiles said, sounding a bit distracted—though that seemed to be the norm. "That's good. That he's going to be okay, I mean. Not that he's got a separated shoulder. That part is very much not good. Bad, even."

"Ah, I don't know about that," Charlie drawled out. "I think it's probably a good thing that somebody reminded him he isn't a god. How is Scott doing?"

"What—why, why would you think Scott's not okay?" Stiles stammered out, suddenly more tense.

"Ummmm, maybe because Jackson took him down pretty hard. And because he was kind of freaking out on the field afterwards. Was he hurt? Or does he just have really, really bad hay fever?"

"Right!" Stiles chirped. "Well, it's none of the above. Scott's fine. Just feeling guilty is all. We just
wanted to know if Jackson was alright or not."

"Okay, well he's going to be fine," Charlie replied, wrinkling her nose slightly. More than half of her conversations with Stiles ended with her wondering what the hell had just happened. A silence hung between the two of them, waiting to be filled.

"Sooooo, I guess I'll see you tomorrow, then?" Stiles finally said. "English class?"

"Sure, Stiles. I'll see you tomorrow."

Upon the distinct click of the hang-up, Charlie pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it for a moment. What the hell was going on with Scott McCall and Stiles Stilinski? It wasn't steroids, that was for damn sure. But it was something, and if she was sure of one thing it was that that something was truly bizarre. Shaking her head to reorder her thoughts, Charlie finally punched in Lydia's number and listened to the ring.

"If you're expecting an apology for leaving you," Lydia trilled into the phone immediately after picking up, "you're not going to get it. You know that, right?"

"Yes, Lydia," Charlie sighed into the receiver. "I would never presume to question your relationship math. You are the mathematics genius-person, after all. That's not why I'm calling."

"Really," Lydia replied in an arch tone. "Are you calling to apologize for bailing on me at lunch to spend time with McCall and that twitchy little friend of his? Because that is the only reason I'll accept."

"Since when have I apologized for anything ever, especially for some bullshit perceived insult?" Charlie asked, exasperation coloring her voice. "I'm calling from the hospital."

"Oh my God!" Lydia suddenly screeched, making Charlie pull her phone away from her ear. "What happened? Are you okay? Are you—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down, banshee," Charlie said in an even tone. "I'm fine, everybody's alive. I brought Jackson. He was injured during practice, he probably has a separated shoulder."

The rate at which Lydia shifted from blind panic to cold rage was actually alarming. The steel in her voice could cut like one of those infomercial knives. "Excuse me?" she demanded sharply. "Saturday is the first game of the season. Jackson is the captain—he can not be injured for the first game of the season. He has to play, and he has to win."

Charlie sighed heavily and wiped at her eyes. "Lydia, even if he isn't playing on Saturday, you'll still be dating the captain of the lacrosse team. That doesn't change because Jackson sits out a game."

There was a short static- and tension-filled silence. "I date the captain of the winning lacrosse team. Jackson is one of the primary reasons the team is winning. That does change things. Who the hell maimed my boyfriend anyway? I'm going to send them a birthday card filled with Anthrax."

"Why does it matter who was involved?" Charlie asked in a tired voice. "Lacrosse is a violent sport—people get injured all the time."

"Meaning it was Scott McCall," Lydia concluded bitterly, filling in the blanks. "Well it's a good thing we need him on Saturday. The punishment can't be too harsh then."

"Why does there have to be any punishment at all?" Charlie whined, kicking her legs in a mild
tantrum as her frustration mounted.

"Because, dear Charlie," Lydia pronounced in her 'wise' voice, "order has to be maintained. And I'm the one who maintains it."

"You are a massive pain in my ass."

"And what an adorable ass it is," Lydia chirped cheerfully. "I'll be down to the hospital in a bit."

"No, don't bother," Charlie responded through a wide yawn. "It's all under control here. Jackson is in the middle of x-rays—I'll take him home afterwards and either Mel will pick me up or one of his parents will drop me off. It's all taken care of. You can go back to painting your nails or writing nuclear launch codes or whatever the hell it is that you do on a weekday night."

A high-pitched nasal harrumph echoed from the other side of the line. "Fine," the redhead bit out. "But tell Jackson to call me as soon as he finishes up with the doctor. I want to know exactly what his prognosis is."

"Will do."

"And by the way, Charlie, I sent you a bunch of the pictures from the party on Friday. There's one where you've got Aaron Harrison in some weird kung fu grip thing. Real classy. Real normal." And then, without another word, Lydia hung up. Charlie should probably be used to it by now, but somehow it always managed to be a surprise.

Stowing her phone, Charlie clambered to her feet and trailed over to the vending machines, got a bag of chips and a Snickers bar, and collapsed back in one of the waiting room chairs. She ripped the packages open and began nibbling—not the healthiest of dinners but it tasted better than anything Mel would have cooked. After another half hour of intense boredom, Charlie pulled out her iPhone and went to her email, finding the pictures Lydia had sent her. The first dozen or so were of selfies of Lydia, either on her own or with her cheek pressed against those of various partygoers, including Charlie herself. She actually felt a wave of giddiness when she found the one of her putting Aaron Harrison into a thumb-lock. The sight of his burgeoning tears was undeniably entertaining.

For the most part, the pictures seemed like a snapshot of any high school party, but as Charlie went through them, she noticed something odd. A good number of the photos were washed out, like there was a lens flare, each time seeming to originate from someone's eyes. Two someones to be specific—just two out of the entire party. One of them had extremely rigid posture and was clad a white T-shirt and leather jacket. The other always seemed to be right next to Allison. Derek Hale and Scott McCall. What was up with those two? They obviously weren't friends, but there was some weird unseen force that seemed to keep associating them and dragging them together. Yet another reason to wonder what the hell was going on.

At least Beacon Hills wasn't boring.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 5 - Seeing Red SOUNDBTRACK

And FYI I do have a Spotify account with the soundtrack already organized. You can
find a link on my profile!

Charlie and Donald play HALO, discuss The Matrix and girls.

----------1991 - The Kingston Springs

Giving Allison advice and talking with Stiles in English.

----------Beautiful Gurrls - Ricky Eat Acid

Confronting Stiles and Scott about the party.

----------Midnight Crowd - The Tins

After school, waiting for Lydia, discovering she's been abandoned, and heading off to the lacrosse field.

----------Angeline - Howlies

Watching practice, Jackson gets injured, Charlie takes Jackson to the hospital.

----------After Awhile - Patrick Sweany

Charlie putting up with all the bullshit at the hospital.

----------Superrapper - Grip Grand (I feel like there's a kind of hilarious combo of this song with Charlie being super-frustrated)

Charlie at the hospital, getting some weird phone calls, end chapter.

----------I Hope I Become A Ghost - The Deadly Syndrome

References!

1) Katniss Everdeen, we come for the badassitude, we stay for the over-the-shoulder braid. No, that's not true. We come and stay because of the badassitude.

2) A Modest Proposal - A piece by Jonathan Swift, which I'm sure everybody will have to read at some point or another. Basically it's about eating babies, but it's HIGHLY SATIRICAL! Like, it's not condoning the consumption of babies. Actually it's quite the opposite.

3) Soylent Green is a Charleton Heston movie from the 70s. There's overpopulation and most people survive off processed rations of 'Soylent Green'. Turns out they're eating the spam version of people. Say it with me: ewwwwwwwww.

4) Malthus - If anybody wants a lesson in population dynamics, Thomas Malthus speculated that people wouldn't have enough food because while food grows geometrically, populations grow exponentially. IE food production will be outstripped by population. No good comes of that...

5) 'The History Channel', home of 'Band of Brothers' and 'How It's Made'. Good channel.
6) Baz Luhrmann movies...all the angst...Good movies though.

7) 'I find your lack of faith disturbing' is a Darth Vader quote from Star Wars.

8) Jar Jar Binks. Aka, a tragedy in both CGI and storytelling. You guys ever hear of the 'Uncanny Valley'? Well Jar Jar Binks fell right down that motherfucker.

9) Those Sarah McLachlan pet shelter commercials, man. They always make me cry. In the arms of the angels...

10) Jackson as an Abercrombie and Fitch model. Funny thing is, I had NO IDEA that Colton Haynes actually did model for Abercrombie before I wrote that! Happy accidents.

11) 'County morgue, you stab 'em we slab 'em' might be a reference to something, but honestly it's just something my dad always said.

12) BANSHEE! Okay, so this isn't really a reference, but I'd like to point out that I wrote this before Lydia was actually revealed to be a banshee! Kinda proud of that. I might be psychic.

13) "soft Corinthian leather" was gonna be a reference to Deadpool, but apparently Deadpool was referencing a Ricardo Montalban Chrysler commercial from the 1970s.

14) Mission Impossible theme song

15) Independence Day speech! Couldn't help referencing it a bit earlier in the story.

16) Mariana Trench….it might be a band, but it is also the deepest point in the whole ocean, between two tectonic plates.
Tapetum Lucidum

Chapter Summary

On a trip to the hospital, Charlie overhears a confession.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Chapter 6 – Tapetum Lucidum

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Tapetum Lucidum. Spoken together, the two words sounded something like an elaborate, mangled sneeze. Or possibly a lesser known character from one of the earlier J.K. Rowling books. Translating the phrase from its original Latin it technically meant 'bright tapestry', but that particular combination of words didn't mean anything to anybody. But, for the past few days, the phrase held a bizarre sort of significance in Charlie's life.

The tapetum lucidum was quite the remarkable piece of biology. It was a layer of tissue that existed inside of the eye, forming a ring around the retina. The basic function was to catch light, reflecting it within the eye to allow an animal to see in the black of night. Additional fun fact courtesy of the Discovery Channel—the tapetum lucidum also caused those animals' eyes to glow in the night. All those unearthly flashes in the brush you see as you drive home at night? Brought to you by the tapetum lucidum. Also provided by the tapetum lucidum? The inability to take flash photography of your pets. The raccoons that flipped over the trash cans, the neighbor's dog, her old cat Chairman Meow that used to pee on everything—every photo could come out with some sort of lens flare around the animals' eyes.

After Charlie trudged back up the stairs to her apartment—dropped off by Jackson's disturbingly polite and grateful mother—she had gone into Mel's closet and extracted one of the few boxes filled with her and her father's old life. Funny how little physical space it occupied. They were carefully wedged in like Mel had been playing a game of high stakes Tetris, filling the space that should have been occupied by tasteful heels. It took a little rooting around, but eventually she found the one with all the old photo albums. Charlie flipped through them until she settled on one in particular—one of the cheap ones with plastic coating—and thumbed her way through the pages until she came across a photo of eight-year-old self holding the spectacularly fat Chairman Meow. Pulling her phone out of the pocket of her jeans, she held up the photos of the party to compare. Yup. The weird laser eyes on her cat were identical to those of Scott and Derek Hale.

There was just one problem. Humans didn't have a tapetum lucidum. So unless Scott and Derek
were planning on transferring to Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, something was off with this scenario.

Charlie leaned forwards, resting her forehead against the glass of the vending machine. The options inside sat within reach, colorful wrappers shimmering under the fluorescent lights, but cruelly separated by glass. Taunting her. Should she taste the rainbow? Were Funyuns truly fun? Maybe she could finally discover the wrong way to eat a Reese's. Surely there was at least one. Charlie had both the time and inclination to do so, but did she have the cash? Weighing the assorted coins she had fished out of the couch cushions in her hand, Charlie estimated she had a respectable $2.15 or so. Unfortunately, given the absurd inflation on vending machines these days, that would only afford her one snack plus some useless change.

For the second time in three days, Charlie found herself stuck in the hospital while various medical professionals—including Lydia if the number of medical journals the girl had read meant anything—waited for any word on Jackson's shoulder. As such, it was inevitable that she and the hospital vending machine had become fast friends. They had the same taste in food, which seemed a strong basis for any relationship. Sometimes Bob—she had decided to name him Bob—would even give her an additional candy bar free of charge, the generous soul that he was. But their relationship was threatened by one little quirk. Bob always had so much to offer, but Charlie wasn't always certain of what she wanted—chocolate, chips, those weird cheese crackers smeared with peanut butter, there were just too many choices. Too much pressure. So she shoved the coins in the machine, blindly punching buttons until she heard the whirring of the machine followed by the soft thunk of something hitting the bottom. Equal opportunity snacking.

"Snickers, nice," Charlie whispered, leaning down to retrieve the two candy bars. She gave the machine an affectionate pat. "Thanks, Bob. Good choice."

Charlie shoved one of the candy bars into her bag and ripped open the packaging of the other, taking a bite out of it. Chocolate, caramel, and the lovely contrasting crunch of peanut. It was the one thing that could get her through these hospital visits. Other than whiskey, but Charlie was fairly certain that wasn't readily available in the ER. Lydia had been more of a pain in the ass than usual what with her rants about Scott McCall—both about him injuring her boyfriend and his apparent refusal to play in the game the next day—and about her aspirations for Jackson and his destiny to 'go pro'. The latter of which made even less sense to Charlie than the former seeing as nobody gave two shits about professional lacrosse. Hell, she couldn't even name a professional lacrosse team. But seeing as Charlie liked her eyebrows and preferred not to have Lydia set them aflame, she kept that thought to herself.

Clutching the candy bar like she was holding onto a lifeline, Charlie collapsed back against the wall next to the machines, her eyes darting around. Stark white walls, off-white tiles speckled with black, cork board ceilings, scratchy intercom messages, the doctors wandering in starched lab coats and scrubs of varying degrees of wrinkledness depending on how far they were into their shift—all the typical hallmarks of hospitals. And she hated them. She hated them all. Not to mention the incessant beeping of monitors and acrid stench of disinfectant. It bombarded her senses, leaving her with a headache and poor attitude.

Hospitals held so much uncertainty. Hundreds of clipboards lying about, and each held a person's fate, scribbled in illegible handwriting. One room could be occupied by someone with a bad case of the flu and the one next to it might house a case of stage four pancreatic cancer. The people could be fine or dying, and you never knew which room held which. They certainly hadn't told her which when it mattered. All she got was morbid speculation followed by grief. Uncertainty plus death only ever yielded bad things for her. Yup, hospitals sucked.
Pushing herself off the wall, Charlie shook out her limbs in an artificial shiver before striding back down the hall. Bad thoughts—she shouldn't dwell on them. Especially when her life was being assaulted by so much other weird crap. Plenty of other topics to think about. Plus once her thoughts strayed in that direction, they tended to spiral. Like a broken toilet that refused to stop flushing. Yes, her brain was a giant toilet.

Half of the Snickers bar disappeared with her next bite.

Lydia was easy to spot in the waiting room. Those surrounding her had sunk low in their seats, either with heads drooping from boredom or worry or staring vacantly at the small, flickering TV in the corner that constantly blared daytime soap operas. Meanwhile, Lydia sat with her head up, back straight, and ankles crossed primly to display her spectacular heels to their full advantage, a flash of the red soles just barely visible to the passerby. She chatted idly into thin air, her Bluetooth successfully obscured by her glossy curls. Most likely she was in the process of emotionally manipulating Scott into playing the game on Saturday, using Allison as bait, but Charlie chose not to dwell on that fact. As a rule, Lydia didn't share those plans with Charlie and Charlie didn't ask. Mostly because Lydia knew Charlie would get pissed and Charlie knew she had no leverage to bring Lydia to modify her behavior. They were both equally stubborn on the issue so, much like political discussions during family reunions, the topic had been silently forbidden. For the good of their relationship. And mankind.

Rolling her eyes heavily, Charlie trudged back towards her empty seat, now occupied by Lydia's purse. Just as she began to round the front desk, however, her path was blocked as a tall, somewhat gangly figure slid in front of her. Pale skin, close-cropped hair, general twitchiness, clad in one of what she could only assume was an endless supply of plaid overshirts... Charlie smirked slightly as she found herself looking at the back of Stiles Stilinski's head. He was as good a reason as any to stop eavesdropping on Lydia's pouty monologues or her half of an over-the-phone conversation with various lacrosse players. She reached forwards to tap him on the shoulder, but before she could he broke out into a rambling speech. Charlie drew back and leaned against the main desk, preparing herself for the in flight entertainment.

"Hey, Lydia!" Stiles blurted out breathlessly, leaning a hand against the wall in a manner that was probably meant to seem casual. "You probably don't remember me...um...I sit behind you in biology?" He paused for a moment, waiting for Lydia to respond, which, of course, she didn't. "Uh, anyway," he barreled on, "I always thought that we had this kind of connection. Unspoken, of course."

"Hey, Lydia!" Stiles blurted out breathlessly, leaning a hand against the wall in a manner that was probably meant to seem casual. "You probably don't remember me...um...I sit behind you in biology?" He paused for a moment, waiting for Lydia to respond, which, of course, she didn't. "Uh, anyway," he barreled on, "I always thought that we had this kind of connection. Unspoken, of course."

Charlie, her expression caught somewhere between a smile and a grimace, slammed her fist into her forehead—call it sympathy facepalming. Stiles had a crush on Lydia, the poor, misguided idiot. Lydia smiled and nodded in Stiles's direction, radiating an uncharacteristically soft and encouraging aura, and twirled her hair absentlly. Her usually sharp eyes had fogged over, leaving her face open and vacant. To Charlie it was glaringly obvious she was still on the phone, but to someone caught unawares it could be construed as tacit interest.

"Soooo, maybe it would be kind of cool to, uh....get to know each other a little better."

Scooper, her expression caught somewhere between a smile and a grimace, slammed her fist into her forehead—call it sympathy facepalming. Stiles had a crush on Lydia, the poor, misguided idiot. Lydia smiled and nodded in Stiles's direction, radiating an uncharacteristically soft and encouraging aura, and twirled her hair absentlly. Her usually sharp eyes had fogged over, leaving her face open and vacant. To Charlie it was glaringly obvious she was still on the phone, but to someone caught unawares it could be construed as tacit interest.

Scooper cleared his throat, removing his hand for the wall before replacing it again, actively trying to find the most nonchalant posture possible. "Soooo, maybe it would be kind of cool to, uh....get to know each other a little better."

"Hold on, give me a second," she muttered to whoever it was on the other end of the line and removing the small piece of hardware. She turned back to Stiles, her eyes narrowed with a mixture of frustration and condescension. "Uh, yeah, I didn't get any of what you just said," she bit out, waving a hand in Stiles's direction. "Was it worth repeating?"
Stiles let out an awkward chuckle and scratched at the back of his neck. "Uh, no," he stuttered out. "Sorry." He slid backwards a few steps in Charlie's direction, still looking at Lydia, and gestured to another set of equally uncomfortable chairs. "I'm just gonna sit...you don't care."

He finally turned fully around, only to find himself face-to-face with Charlie.

One high-pitched yelp and violent twitch later, Stiles swallowed heavily and stared at her through bugged eyes. "Waaaaaa-uhhhh, hey Charlie!" he exclaimed a little too loudly. She smiled and gave a small wave, allowing him a chance to collect himself. Stiles planted his hands on his hips and nodded at her. "How are—you doing? How's life treating you? School going good?"

"School's fine," she said simply, bobbing her head along with her words. "Not much has changed since the last time you saw me in fourth period chem class which was..." she checked her Avengers watch watch for the time "...six hours ago. Yup, pretty much the same."

"Great! Um, why—why are you in the hospital?" he stammered out. A frown tug at the corners of Charlie's lips. Each of their conversations seemed to begin with one of them asking the other what they were doing there. Which left Charlie with the distinct impression that she was interrupting him, or walking in on something she shouldn't see. Though, to be fair, this time she actually was.

"The spark plugs for my car haven't gotten in yet," she replied with a shrug, readjusting the strap of her bag on her shoulder. "Until then I go where Lydia goes, and Lydia goes pretty much wherever the hell she wants. Jackson's getting some anti-inflammatory meds for his shoulder before the game."

"Right, the game—the big game," Stiles said, waving his hands around enthusiastically before placing them back on his hips. The air between them filled with an awkward silence which prompted Stiles to remove his hands from his hips yet again, instead shoving them deep in his pockets. "Soooo," he drawled out hesitantly, "I'm guessing there's not even the remotest chance that you didn't hear that."

Charlie's eyes instinctively flicked to Lydia, making Stiles's shoulders slump as he resigned himself to his fate. Charlie gave him an apologetic look, though a hint of her ill-concealed smile managed to fight its way to the surface as well. "Yeah...I'm afraid so."

Stiles let out a loud groan and rocked back on his heels, staring up at the ceiling. "Well that's just...awesome. I can't imagine how this could possibly get more awesome. The awesomeness of this situation is really overwhelming." He collapsed into one of the waiting room chairs around the corner from where Lydia was seated, still chatting on her Bluetooth. He snatched up a pamphlet, sliding down in his seat and holding it up to cover his face, hiding both from her and the world in general. Charlie choked back another laugh when at the title of said pamphlet—MENSTRUATION spelled across the front in big, bolded letters. She hoped he was only pretending to read it. In her experience, any sort of talk about periods or tampons turned guys into weepy puddles of awkward discomfort.

Moving around to Stiles's other side, Charlie took the seat next to his and dug around in her messenger bag. "Man, I hate hospitals," she mused, ignoring the giant, pink, tap-dancing elephant that had taken up residence in the waiting room chair. He collided into one of the waiting room chairs around the corner from where Lydia was seated, still chatting on her Bluetooth. He snatched up a pamphlet, sliding down in his seat and holding it up to cover his face, hiding both from her and the world in general. Charlie choked back another laugh when at the title of said pamphlet—MENSTRUATION spelled across the front in big, bolded letters. She hoped he was only pretending to read it. In her experience, any sort of talk about periods or tampons turned guys into weepy puddles of awkward discomfort.

"Well that was a lot of references crammed into one sentence," Stiles mumbled to himself, still not looking at her. "Not so sure if it made sense."
Charlie waited for more of a response, but when she didn't receive one she extracted the extra candy bar from her bag. "Snickers?" she asked, holding it out as some sort of peace offering. After a few moments, Stiles's eyes appeared, peeking over the top of the pamphlet to observe the chocolate suspiciously. "It doesn't have a razor blade in it," Charlie said drolly, waving it back and forth in front of his face like she was trying to hypnotize him. "The vending machine likes me—it keeps giving me extra snacks. Do you want it or not."

After a few more moments of contemplation, he grabbed it from her, opened it, and shoved it in his mouth so quickly odds were he ate some of the wrapper along with it. It might be a cheat, but Charlie had come to understand that one of the ways to put Stiles in a better mood was to feed him. Thank God it wasn't after midnight or would have been seriously screwed.

"Soooo," Charlie drawled out, not entirely sure of where to direct the conversation from that point, "I guess you have a bit of a crush on Lydia then."

Stiles snorted and took another big bite of the candy bar. "What gave me away?" he mumbled with as much sarcasm he could muster as the caramel from the candy bar fused his teeth together.

Charlie pursed her lips and shrugged. "Little things," she sighed. "The fact that the first words I ever speak were 'Lydia Martin is the best thing to ever happen to Beacon Hills'...stuff like that. And now that I think about it, you say her name a lot. 'Don't you usually eat with Lydia', 'doesn't Lydia usually drive you home'—it's all coming together. And then there's—"

"My recent self-inflicted humiliation?" he prompted, indicating to the spot where he delivered his ill-advised speech.

Charlie frowned and bit her lip. "Well, I wouldn't go that far," she murmured. "Plus Lydia didn't hear any of it, so it's not like you've got anything to worry about. Mum's the word. Mum is my middle name."

Stiles sighed dejectedly and ran his hands down his face. It was like those hands were paint rollers, liberally applying a shade of red to his complexion that Charlie decided to call 'Lover's Lament'. It sounded like a song off a Baz Luhrmann movie. Maybe 'Crush's Curse'? 'Curse of the Crush'? Eau d'Embarrassment? Shit, now she was just brainstorming perfume names. Okay, she really needed to get back on topic. The red of Stiles's face faded away unevenly, leaving behind pink splotches. "I know what you're thinking," Stiles mumbled through the food, his voice quiet and garbled.

"That I still can't find a word that rhymes with orange?" Charlie supplied.

"This is the part where you tell me that she's out of my league and I should aim for something else, right?" he sighed out. "You know somewhere more—" he held out his hand at shoulder level "—more here."

The bitterness in his tone wasn't directed towards her. It was angled inwards, like he was berating himself for allowing his crush to be witnessed. Charlie blew out a breath, puffing out her cheeks as she steeped in the awkward. "No," she said, inclining her head in his direction. "But this is the part where I remind you that she has a long term boyfriend and that public declarations of love are usually better received by the single. Just as a general rule."

"Right," Stiles muttered, bobbing his head in resignation. "Jackson. Good ol' Jackson. Lacrosse captain Jackson. Stoic, non-rambling-declaration-making Jackson. With his stupid Porsche and stupid face." He kicked out his feet in front of him and sank down in his seat, trying to make himself as inconspicuous as possible—quite the feat seeing as she was sitting right next to him. And he was failing miserably. Which for some reason made Charlie feel oddly guilty. More often
than not, when someone dug themselves a grave of awkward like that she would lean back in her chair, hands behind her head and feet propped up like she was at a movie theater. But seeing Stiles without that jittery enthusiasm somehow felt...wrong.

"You know," she drawled out, trying to keep her voice light-hearted without lapsing into being flippant. "You know, there was this one time last year I had a crush on this guy on the soccer team. So I managed to get access to the P.A. system and sang through the speakers. The whole school heard it. Lots of laughing was involved. You want embarrassing moments, that one there takes the grand prize right there."

Slowly, Stiles's head lifted and he looked up at her through narrowed eyes. "That's the plot to 10 Things I Hate About You."

Charlie blinked innocently and cocked her head to the side. "Is it?" she demanded. "What a strange coincidence. Talk about art imitating life."

"The movie came out like ten years ago," he deadpanned.

"Talk about life imitating art."

"O—okay," Stiles said, waving her off, a little bit of a smile pulling at the corners of his lips. "I get it."

"There was this one time," she barreled on, staring at him with wide, earnest eyes, "my friend was running for class president, and I did this really awesome disco dance in solidarity."

"That's Napoleon Dynamite."

"When we found out my dad and I were going to lose our house, me and some friends found this treasure map in the attic—"


"That Fratelli family," Charlie continued, ignoring Stiles's curious looks and staring wistfully off into the distance. "I'll tell you what, those bastards almost had us. But we found that treasure. And you know what else? We found ourselves too."

By that point the decidedly forlorn expression had faded somewhat from Stiles's face, replaced by the slightest hint of a smile. "You realize that each movie you bring up is getting less and less relevant to our current situation, right?" he demanded.

Charlie shifted in her seat, angling herself so she was facing himself fully. "Alright, one," she said, lifting a single finger, "The Goonies will never not be relevant so you can go ahead and shut your mouth. Two, getting away from the topic was kind of the point seeing as you didn't seem terribly inclined to keep talking about it."

Stiles made a face and bobbed his head along with her words. "Yeah, but you're still thinking that I'm that cliched dweeb who has a crush on the pretty, popular girl who doesn't know he exists."

Charlie shot him a sympathetic look. "Okay, I'm not saying you're 1980s Anthony Michael Hall, but no offense Stiles...isn't that kind of the case? Minus the 'dweeb' bit?"

"Yeah, I guess it is," he muttered, bouncing his leg up and down nervously as he suddenly became fascinated by the patterning of the floor tiles.
Again, the dejectedness of his appearance gave Charlie pause. Those the tile pattern was far too uninspired to merit that degree of scrutiny. "Hey, I get it," she declared, clapping her hands on her legs. "Lydia has a ton of great qualities. Hell, if she wasn't so high-maintenance I might even make a go of it."

That managed to make his head perk up. Actually, it kind of snapped up. It snapped up with so much manic energy Charlie was surprised it didn't pop off his neck like an old Barbie doll and roll down the hallway. He stared up at her with wide, almost scared eyes. Charlie just smiled serenely and shrugged. Guys really were so easy to manipulate. It would be funny if it wasn't so sad. "And anyways," she breezed on, "I think I might have a solution to your problem."

"Oh really?" Stiles scoffed. "And what would that be?"

"I could just kill Jackson," Charlie offered. "It would open a door for you and Lydia, I wouldn't have to put up with his whining anymore, it removes him from the gene pool......Honestly I'm not seeing anything but upsides, for you, me, or the human race at large."

An indelicate snort forced its way out of Stiles's nose and he smirked at her. "That's an insanely generous offer."

"What can I say?" Charlie sighed in response. "I'm a humanitarian."

"I can see that," he replied, eyebrows raised. "Still, though, I think I'll have to pass. You know, my dad being the sheriff and all that might represent a bit of a conflict of interest. And, you know, if you're arrested then who would I humiliate myself in front of?"

Charlie took a moment to survey Stiles. His eyes kept flicking to the corner of the waiting room where Lydia was still chatting away on her Bluetooth and generally looking like a crazy person talking to herself. But the way Stiles looked at her was different from the usual superficial admiration that so often came with the unrequited crush. Maybe he put her on a bit of a pedestal, but it wasn't that typical 'idolize what you can't have' look. He looked at her like she was a person. Not some crazy far-off dream he was lusting after as some sort of external manifestation of the American Dream or some metaphorical shit like that—she was a person. And that was more than Charlie could say for most of the male population. He was only mildly delusional, and, believe it or not, that was saying a lot.

"So, Stiles," she drawled, "can I say what I was actually thinking now?"

"What?" Stiles said, blinking in confusion before nodding quickly. "Oh, yeah. Sure."

Charlie smiled wider and elbowed him in the side. "I was going to say that I wish that Lydia would get her head out of her mind games long enough to notice the people worth noticing."

Stiles blinked again and looked around, trying to see if there was anybody else around. "Me?" he asked, pointing to himself with a pleased expression. "Are you talking about me?"

Charlie rolled her eyes and let out an amused sigh. "No, the dude over there wearing the tinfoil hat," she said sarcastically, gesturing at a twitchy guy in the corner. "One word of advice though—never ever use the word 'connection' again when referring to anything romantic. Ever. It sounds like you're a) a stalker or b) trying out an internet dating site. And the second of those is referring to wifi connection. Neither of those seem particularly appealing to me."

Stiles let out an uncomfortable laugh and began nodding again. "Duly noted. Henceforth that word will be completely removed from my vocabulary. No more 'connections'." He shot her a few
sidelong glances, cringing slightly. "Can you do me a huge and not tell anybody about that? Like ever? Like if Colombian drug lords invade Beacon Hills, kidnap you, and start torturing you, you will still tell nobody."

Charlie snorted and threw her hands up in submission. "Bros antes de putas, man."

Stiles gave her a funny look eyed her suspiciously. "Bless you?"

"That's 'bros before hoes' in Spanish," she responded wisely. "The Colombian drug lords will never break me. And don't worry, you're the bro in this scenario. The Colombian drug lords are the hoes. Though I probably shouldn't call them that to their faces."

"So you speak Spanish now too?" Stiles said raising his eyebrows at her.

"¿Dónde está la biblioteca?" Charlie replied, looking at him with wide, earnest eyes. "Me gusta el queso. El caballo está saltando. " Stiles stared at her a moment before busting out into laughter, with her soon following him. "That's it," she replied through giggles. "That's all the Spanish I've got. I learned most of it from watching this one weirdass movie about a giant, blue-green Spanish-speaking bear when I was a kid."

"Well it was inspired," Stiles said through a snort. "Really, it was beautiful."

"You should hear me read the menu at an Italian restaurant," she replied through a laugh, waggling her eyebrows. "It's like poetry, really. My description of the fettuccine alfredo will make you cry. And not just that single, solitary tear coursing down your face that can actually be kind of hot in a vulnerable way, I mean ugly cry. Face all blotchy, phlegm everywhere—"

"Remind me never to eat Italian food when you're around," Stiles managed to cough out. "It sounds like a traumatizing experience."

"I get it," Charlie murmured, patting her mouth in a theatrical yawn. "Big manly men can't cry in public."

"That is exactly the problem," Stiles said, latching onto her words and nodding enthusiastically. "I am a big strong manly man. That is definitely the biggest one of my character flaws."

The overall mood of conviviality was brutally cut short as the ultimate buzzkill entered the room. Jackson waltzed by them, rolling his injured shoulder and affording them a contemptuous glare before making his way over to Lydia. Charlie rolled her eyes and let out a passive aggressive grunt, but both her eyes and Stiles's followed Jackson. In a flurry of movement, Stiles grabbed that same pamphlet—the one titled 'MENSTRUATION'— and used it as a shield as he watched the couple.

Seeing Jackson's approach, Lydia quickly said goodbye to whoever she was speaking with on her bluetooth and hung up, getting to her feet. "Did he do it?" she asked abruptly, folding her arms across her chest, her eyes flicking up and down Jackson's form like he was a show horse.

"He said not to make a habit of it," Jackson growled resentfully, "but one shot won't kill me."

Lydia pursed her lips in contemplation. "You should get one right before the game too," she declared in that tone—the one that meant you were going to end up doing exactly what she wanted regardless of how much of a fight you put up. Jackson's hand twitched in frustration as he let go of his arm, letting it collapse against his side. The general pissed off expression marring his absurdly symmetrical features clearly stated he did not want to participate, but Lydia the beautiful steamroller kept pushing. "The pros do it all the time," she continued, a mild hostility seeping into her tone. "Do you want to be a little high school amateur? Or...do you want...to go...pro?"
With the last few words, Lydia slipped into her 'seductive' voice, the one that always made Charlie cringe instinctively because she knew what would follow: gratuitous making out in public venues. Charlie's lip curled slightly as the pair began to go at it. For some reason, Jackson and Lydia making out always felt sleazy to her. Mainly because it always seemed to come with some calculated purpose—staking claims, power plays, manipulation. A kiss was never a simple gesture of affection. It was strategy.

"Ugh," she muttered under her breath, wrinkling her nose at the display. "I think I just threw up in my mouth a little."

Stiles didn't seem to hear her. He was busy watching the couple, more for masochism's sake than voyeurism's. After a few moments Jackson and Lydia ceased with the making out and began striding down the hallway without so much as a word to her. Charlie sighed loudly and grabbed her bag from its spot on the neighboring chair.

"Well that's my cue," she said, clapping a hand on Stiles's shoulder and getting to her feet. "Stay frosty, Stilinski. Good luck with that rash."

"Wait—what?" Stiles said, staring at her wild-eyed as she rose from her seat. "What rash? I don't have a rash. What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I made up a reason for you to randomly be in the hospital," Charlie replied, waving a hand absently. "And generally when I invent ailments, the grosser the better. You also have a really bad case of athlete's foot. It's basically gangrene at this point. They might have to take the leg."

"Well thanks for that," Stiles drawled. "That was totally a mental image I needed."

"You're welcome!"

She began to trail down the hallway after Lydia and Jackson, lest she be abandoned for a third time, but before she could get more than a few steps a voice called after her.

"Hey, Charlie!"

Charlie turned to see Stiles waving over at her, still peeking over the top of his pamphlet. She furrowed her eyebrows in confusion and shrugged at him. "What's up?"

He cleared his throat and leaned in her direction, hanging over the armrest of his chair in a way that could not be comfortable. "This, uh, this might sound like a weird question," he said, "but what just happened?"

Charlie exhaled loudly and scrunched up her face in thought. "Well I guess it depends on your opinion as much as mind, but from where I'm standing it looks like we might have just sorta become friends. Unless you've got a problem with that."

Stiles's face morphed into a strange expression—a vague look of terror flitting behind his eyes—but a tiny smile pulled at the corners of his lips. "What? No. No problems here. Friends are good. Everyone needs friends."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Stiles."

With one more wave, she spun on her heel and continued on her way, jogging now that she was in imminent danger of being left behind. At some point she had to start asking her if it was even intentional abandonment. Maybe she was just that forgettable.
Nah. She was way too loud to be forgettable. And Lydia was too slow in those heels to leave her behind without direct access to motorized transport.

About halfway down the hall, though, she shoved her hand into the pockets of her jacket and found the both of them alarmingly empty. Before going to the vending machine—back while she was seated next to Lydia—she had been playing a non-stop marathon of Angry Birds and Snooker while actively trying to ignore the constant stream of irrelevant and idle chit-chat that somehow seemed to arise from that massive brain of hers. A good thing she had realized it too. As a millennial, that phone was basically her pacemaker. Without it, her heartbeat would become erratic and the likelihood of her survival would be severely compromised. At the sound of her loud swearing, Lydia stopped and spun around on her three-inch heels.

"What's wrong, Charlie?" she demanded, her perfectly groomed eyebrows raised questioningly.

"Nothing," Charlie replied, waving her off. "I just—I just forgot my phone in the waiting room. I'll go grab it and meet up with you at the car."

"Are you sure?" Lydia said. "We can wait for you here."

Immediately, Jackson let out a gigantic scoff. "Speak for yourself. I'm not sticking around in this hospital any longer than I have to. For all I know one of these guys is going to sneeze on me and give me pneumonia." As if on cue, a stooped, elderly man being escorted down the hall by a scrub-clad orderly let out a wheezing, hacking cough. Jackson shuddered violently and threw his hands in the air. "That's it!" he announced, backing away towards the door. "I'm out!"

"Jackson!"

Lydia called after him, but he was already stalking down the hallways with the same cadence of a pissed-off henchman in a Bond movie. She turned back to Charlie, but Charlie waved her off. "Go ahead, I'll meet up with you at the car," she said. "And do me a favor and get the obnoxious making out stuff over with before I get there. I want to be able to eat my dinner tonight. I'm making chicken parm."

That disturbingly coy smile slid back onto Lydia's face. "Oh, Charlie," she sighed. "You should know better than to make requests I can't guarantee."

Charlie's face contorted into a grimace and she let out a plaintive whine. "Gross. You're gross. That's gross."

"God, you're so immature."

"Tell that to the whole grain cereal I ate for breakfast this morning."

Lydia levelled Charlie with an unamused look. "Just go get your phone. If you take too long, Jackson and I will have to find a way to pass the time."

Cringing heavily, Charlie slowly spun in place, the rubber souls of her Converse squeaking loudly against the laminate tiles as she turned away from Lydia. She trudged back to the waiting room, actively trying not to think about Lydia and Jackson. As she turned the corner, though, all thoughts were startled away. Stopping short, she ducked back behind it, almost ramming into a wearied-looking middle-aged nurse with greying, frizzy hair and salmon-colored scrubs. A clattering noise soon followed, and Charlie looked down to find a large pile of tongue-depressors scattered across the floor. "O—oh, I'm sorry," Charlie stammered out, crouching down to help scoop them up. Her eyes went down to the name badge the woman was wearing and looked back up at her, her teeth
clenched together in a guilty grin. "So sorry, um, Gladys."

The woman made no response. At least she didn't say anything specifically to Charlie. The words 'and I still have another two hours on this damn shift' were most certainly uttered, but they were more of a general curse lobbed into the universe. She marched away, violently chucking the spilled tongue-depressors into a bin marked 'biohazard' as she went, allowing Charlie to redirect her attention to its original object and the ultimate reason for her bizarre behavior. That reason? Two idiots she was becoming increasingly familiar with.

Charlie peeked around the corner, staring at the seat she had left all of three minutes ago. It wasn't just Stiles standing there anymore. Scott had somehow managed to conjure himself out of thin air as well. The two of them stood close together, heads bowed conspiratorially and frantically discussing...something. Knowing the two of them, the topic had to be bizarre, and even though there was too much space between them to catch the whole conversation, she did overhear at least one word. One name, actually.

Derek.

Stiles smacked Scott on the arm and the pair of them spun around, stumbling in her direction. Again, Charlie dodged back around the corner, turning to face the wall and practically shoving her head in her messenger bag as she pretended to root through it. Again, she wasn't sure why she did it. Unlike the two of them, she had nothing to explain or justify—she just forgot her phone. But secrecy begets secrecy. And weirdass behavior begets suspicion. Given the never-ending supply of bizarre Stiles-Scott interactions, she was left feeling like she had witnessed something she wasn't meant to.

The pair waltzed past her, completely unaware of her presence. Apparently whatever it was the two of them were working on, it had gripped their attention firmly. Charlie felt them go, highly aware of each footstep. When those steps faded and enough distance was put between them, she extracted her head from her bag and peered at their retreating figures.

Dodging back around the corner, Charlie didn't make a beeline for her old seat as she had originally intended. Instead she stopped by the front desk. "Uh, excuse me," she murmured to the woman, whose phone was propped up by her ear. The woman held up a hand, indicating for her to wait a moment before barking some loud orders into the receiver and hanging up. "Yes, how can I help you?" she finally said, her voice tired and frustrated.

"Those two guys," Charlie pressed, waving her hand to the space Stiles and Scott had just occupied. "Is there any chance you know what they were here for?"

"I can't disclose any patient information to anybody other than their parent or guardian," the woman replied shortly.

"No—I know that," Charlie said, shaking her head. "I don't want access to their patient information. I was just wondering—"

She was cut off by the abrasive ringing of the telephone, which was immediately followed by a frustrated sigh as the woman wiped at her eyes. "Look," she said, her tone clipped. "Neither of those boys so much as came to my desk. I really can't help you, and I've got more pressing things to do. Like my job."

Charlie offered up a weak smile and sucked in a breath through her teeth, giving rise to an inadvertent hiss. "That's for your help."
She was dismissed with a simple 'yeah' and wave of the hand.

Rapping her knuckles against the desk, Charlie retreated away from the nurse and moved towards her old seat. Her phone was still there underneath the old 2003 issue of Highlights magazine—so that crisis was averted. Objective achieved. But now she had to deal with another one entirely. One that was much more mysterious and, dare she say it, ranked even higher on her list of priorities than a missing phone.

What exactly was going on with Stiles Stilinski, Scott McCall, and Derek Hale?

Quickly collecting her phone, Charlie shoved her hands into her pockets and trudged out of the waiting room, heels dragging against the floor and eyebrows furrowed. Derek Hale. Derek freaking Hale. The scrimmage, the party, now—he just kept cropping up. And each time he did, Stiles and Scott were either right there or not far away, generally doing inexplicable shit. Charlie liked those guys—she really did. But she couldn't shake the feeling that there was something going on beneath the surface. They couldn't possibly be that socially deficient—it had to run deeper than that.

Charlie let out a sigh of relief as she stepped through those automatic doors and into the frigid night air. The interior had been oppressive. She sucked in a deep breath, searing the inside of her lungs with the cold. She felt oddly liberate as she made her way back to Lydia's Beetle, like a pressure pushing in at her from all sides had been lifted. Not that she'd be able to feel that way for long. Seeing Lydia and Jackson making out pressed against the side of the car? That felt pretty damn oppressive to her.

"Gross," she called out, making the couple draw apart. "Seriously guys, I think might be taking this PDA thing to a bit of an extreme."

"Don't be such a prude, Charlie," Lydia replied, her words somewhat undercut by the fact that they were spoken as she was trying to surreptitiously wipe excessive amounts of smudged color from around her mouth. Apparently making out with Jackson led to coloring outside the lines.

Jackson smirked widely as well, the menace in it rendered slightly less intimidating by the fact that his face was also painted with plum-colored gloss. "What took you so long, Chuck?" he said bitterly. "We can't wait around for you all night. Some of us actually have social lives we'd like to be getting to. You know what a social life is, right? That thing where you go out and do things with people you're not related to?"

Charlie fought back her near-constant urge to smack him over the head and instead opted to climb in the back seat of Lydia's shiny Beetle. She reached into her purse and pulled out her iPod, quickly shoving the earphones in her ears and cranking up the volume before Jackson and Lydia could get into the car—these days the two of them only ever argued or made out, and she didn't care to listen to either. Trauma couldn't be entirely avoided, though, as the two of them opted to spend even more time making out while leaning against the frame of the car. Letting out a loud sigh, Charlie sank lower in her seat, propping her feet up in front of her, waiting to get home and pass out in her bed. Or work on the mountain of homework Hobson had left for them to do. Or fall through the earth and sink to the ninth circle of hell. Any of those options were preferably to her current circumstances.

Life always seemed to suck a little bit. Maybe that sounded like some overly angsty teenage melodrama crap, but from where Charlie was standing—or sitting—it seemed to be the case. And not just because of exhibitionist couples who made out pressed against the car window directly next to her head. Everyone she knew was either hiding a part of themselves from everybody else or was lacking something they desperately wanted or needed. Lydia had this whole secret side to herself, Jackson was desperately clinging to his status as lacrosse all-star as attention was shifting...
elsewhere, Stiles had all sorts of feelings for a girl who didn't know he existed, and to top it all off every time she caught Stiles and Scott alone they seemed to be in the midst of conspiring to....do....something.

Maybe that was the human condition—being constantly dissatisfied so there was something to strive for. And if that was the case, what the hell did that mean for her? As far as Charlie could tell, she didn't have anything she desired with any sort of intensity. She just was what she was—what happened happened—and she dealt with it, accepted it, and moved on. Did that make her more well adjusted or more zen than everybody else, or more pitiable? She couldn't really be sure, and she honestly didn't want to know.

After dropping Jackson off at his place, Lydia insisted that Charlie move to the front seat. Charlie tried pretending she was asleep but Lydia, in her true fashion, yanked out her earphones and smacked her over the head. The rest of the ride was filled with top forty music and idle chatter, most of it revolving around the upcoming game. Lydia did most of the chatting. Charlie devoted herself more to making random guttural noises and staring absently out the window. When they finally pulled up in front of Charlie's apartment, Lydia slowed to a halt and let out a musical sigh. "So," she chirped, turning to Charlie with a satisfied smile. "You want to watch a movie or something? Maybe you could let me do your nails and fix the atrocity that is your cuticles?"

"Nah," Charlie replied, stretching out her arms and cracking her neck. "I've got homework and dinner to make. Then I am going to fall asleep and probably drool a lot. Have some lucid dreams. Maybe play Quidditch."

"Ugh," Lydia grumbled, wrinkling her nose a little. "Why do you always have to take it to a weird place?"

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "Because I'm weird."

"Understatement." Letting out a harrumph, Lydia glowered at Charlie out of the corner of her eye. "Fine. Go be simultaneously weird and boring. I've got better things to do anyway."

"Okey dokey," Charlie said, flashing her a smile.

"And don't say 'okey dokey'."

"Okey dokey."

"Get out of my car."

The smile on Charlie's face widened to a grin—molars and all—and she reached for the door handle, hand poised to make a quick escape. "Okey dokey."

Frustration bloomed in Lydia's face, making her cheeks flush as red as her hair. Charlie darted out of the car, slamming the door closed just toon enough to muffle the shrill tone of Lydia's voice. "What did I just say?!"

Charlie offered a sarcastic salute, met by Lydia's stern, judgemental glare. Maintaining eye contact, Lydia shifted the car into drive and slammed her foot on the accelerator, the wheels squealing against asphalt before she took off down the street. The car kicked up a cloud of dust, a thin layer settling on Charlie's skin. She smiled at the car as it vanished around the corner. Lydia was, if nothing else, an inherently dramatic creature.

Charlie spun around and dragged her heels to the front door. The windows on the top floor were still dark—all except for that one lamp in the living room that was set on a timer—and Mel's
glimmering hybrid was missing from the front curb. Her own car occupied the driveway, sad, lonely, and abandoned, left un-driven for almost a week. Charlie could almost hear the rust creeping in, settling on the gears. It hurt to look at Gertrude like that. Charlie stretched out an arm, letting her fingers trace along the side. She had been neglected lately—Charlie needed to be sure to take better care of her. For her dad's sake as well as her own. It was more their car than hers.

As she approached the front door, a small cardboard package revealed itself on the front stoop. Frowning curiously, Charlie snatched it up from the ground and peered down at the label. Sealing the seams of the cardboard lid together was a giant sticker featuring a clip art stock image of a primary colored cartoon tractor with giant eyes and the caption 'MacEntyre's Automotive of Sacramento'.

A wide grin split across Charlie's face and she tucked it under her arm before grappling in the bag for her keys. She shoved them into the lock and twisted violently, slamming through door. Hell, she practically skipped her way to the kitchen island, and Charlie Oswin did not skip. Except when holding a lollipop and/or ice cream cone. In that event, skipping was an absolute requirement.

Grabbing a steak knife out of the drawer, she sliced open the lid—effectively murdering the cartoon tractor—and ripped open the cardboard. Those little, cylindrical pieces of metal gleamed like polished jewelry. Functional bits of jewelry she would cover in black, sticky grease—that was her kind of jewelry. If her cuticles were bad now.... Lydia would be appalled, which somehow made her cherish those spark plugs even more. They shone of a brighter future. A future where she could go where she wanted when she wanted with the music she wanted, free of Lydia's running commentary and the threat of being stranded. Freedom in a tiny metallic tube.

But then that feeling was overtaken by something else. Melancholy, sadness, nostalgia—whatever you want to call it—it filled her up and took her over. The last hands that had been in the engine were her dad's. Leaky radiator, dripping on the driveway like a September rainstorm. All day they had worked on that car, from morning until the sun sank low on the horizon, up to their elbows in grease and the caked salt of evaporated sweat cracking on their skin as they moved. They ended it on the front porch of their duplex, collapsed in sagging canvas chairs with their feet propped up, the grime of the car's interior covering them like a heavy layer of dust. He had even handed her a sippy cup filled to the brim with beer. Because, according to him, a day of hard work like that one necessitated a cold glass of beer. The cup was barely the size of a juice box, but her dad insisted he was maintaining the sentiment perfectly. The gesture was symbolic.

That had been a good day.

Slowly, Charlie closed the box, folding the cardboard lids over each other. She stared at that box for a good, long time, her mind straying to the one down the hall, still tucked in the corner of her closet. Full of treasures, that one was. Little bits and bobs that to anyone else would add up to a garage sale or maybe a table display at a thrift store. But given context, those little memorabilia added up up to a man. A good one.

Placing her hands on the counter, Charlie pushed herself up to her feet. Her movements felt slow and forced as she made her way down the hall, like a weak force field was trying to push her back, growing steadily in strength as she passed the threshold into her room. Her own hesitation formed a wall. But she battled through it, all the way to her closet door.

Charlie grabbed the door handle and twisted. The hinges squeaked as she pulled it open, almost like a cry of warning telling her to stop, to go back, warning her she wasn't ready. And there it was, lying in the corner, somehow managing to look ominous and innocuous all at once. Charlie settled down on the floor cross-legged, reaching out to pull the box closer. The glue on the duct tape
holding the box shut had since dried, causing the once tight seal to buckle. Sucking in a deep breath, Charlie peeled away the dull silver tape and tossed it carelessly over her shoulder before opening it up and staring at the contents within.

That old pair of aviator sunglasses, the set of shell casings from WWII he had converted to salt and pepper shakers, his watch, the marksmanship and command badges from the Coast Guard—they were still waiting for her. And his face was reflected in all of them.

Charlie's hand clapped over her forehead, rubbing it soothingly as if the act could quiet the voices blathering in her head. She squinted her eyes, staring into the light to force them to well up, but they remained as dry as ever. Even after all this time, she didn't have any tears to shed. That hollowness was there, though. She still had that reminder.

Charlie stared at into that box for what could have been hours. It was like staring into a black hole—space and time ceased to exist. But then the silent whir of a gas efficient hybrid reached her ears, followed by the slamming of the front door and the clack of heels against hardwood floors. Charlie jolted to attention, shaking her head to cast off the cobwebs that had taken up residence inside her head.

Giving one last look, she grabbed the pair of Aviators, hooking them over the neckline of her shirt before folding the box shut. With one push, it moved back to that shadowed corner of her closet. How much longer it would stay there, she couldn't say. For now she had chicken parm to make and a shitload of English homework to finish.

Chapter End Notes

Comments/kudos would be appreciated!!!

Chapter 6 Soundtrack

Visiting with Bob and seeing Stiles talk to Lydia.

-------------Fishin With John - Sol Cat

Talking with Stiles about Lydia, joking around, seeing Jackson and Lydia kiss.

-------------Fog - Mason Proper

Charlie comes back to get her phone, only to find Scott and Stiles being sneaky again.

-------------Faun - Grass House

Charlie goes through her dad's things and finds that she still can't cry.

-------------Subtle Weight - Foreign Fields
Game Day

Chapter Summary

Some suspicious behavior and a lacrosse game.....

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

Fair warning, I'm not 100% on this chapter...I just can't look at it anymore. I'm tired, and honestly if I don't post it I feel like I'll never move on so here we go.

P.S. I have a story blog on tumblr. The url is charlieoswin. There you'll get some edits and BTS stuff and there will be spoilers because I actually finished this story and am currently rewriting it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 7 – Game Day

"Up! Up! Up!"

The shrill voice ringing in Charlie's ear was more offensive than any alarm clock known to man. It was worse than Lydia's ringtone wrenching her out of consciousness at obscenely early hours of the morning—hell, it was worst than the air-raid horns of the London Blitzkrieg. A comparison which was in not in the least bit hyperbolic. There was, in fact, no sound more harrowing than Aunt Mel's unwavering, insufferable positivity hovering over her on a sleepy Saturday morning.

Letting out a nondescript 'mmph', Charlie grabbed onto her pillow and yanked it over her head. If crazed serial killers could use pillows to muffle gunshots, then she sure as hell should be able to drown out Mel's voice.

This strategy proved unsuccessful.

"Charlotte Oswin," her aunt's voice insisted. "I am telling you to get out of that bed this very instant. I am being stern and forceful to convey my meaning without appearing aggressive or hostile."

Ignoring the excited chirping, Charlie shifted her head from under her pillow. She rolled over and grabbed her alarm clock, twisting it in her direction to see the time. The sleep in her eyes left the glowing red numbers fuzzy and illegible. Blinking several times, Charlie squinted at the squiggly red lines until they assembled themselves into something she could read When they finally did, the clock read 10:14 a.m. Nope. No. That was simply unacceptable. Weekends meant sleeping till noon or later, no exceptions, no compromises.
Charlie rolled back over in her bed, yanking the covers over her head. "Go away," she mumbled into the pillow. "I shall not be awoken until the prophesized hour."

"Oh really?" Mel demanded skeptically. "And when exactly is 'the prophesized hour'?"

"Whenever I feel like waking up," Charlie replied, snuggling deeper into the covers. "Probably some time tomorrow afternoon."

For a few moments her ears met with silence, giving Charlie a small degree of hope that maybe—just maybe—she would be left to her own devices. But that hope was cruelly ripped away from her, along with the covers. Mel took hold of that deep purple fabric and tore it away from Charlie with unexpected force, leaving Charlie exposed and vulnerable to the unhappy state of consciousness. And then, to add insult to injury, Mel ripped the curtains open as well. Light streamed into the room, hitting Charlie in the face with the force of a wrecking ball. Her eyes stung with the assault, eliciting a feral hiss from her lips.

"AH!" Charlie shouted, throwing her arms over her face to protect it from the harsh rays. "It burns! Make it stop! For the love of Neil Patrick Harris, make it stop!"

"You need to stop being so dramatic Charlie," Mel said in a slightly patronizing tone.

Charlie huffed loudly and finally pushed herself into up, scooting back until she could lean against the wall, and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm not being dramatic," she grumbled. "Mel, let me tell you something and I want you to listen very, very carefully. Saturdays? They're for sleeping. Blissful lack of consciousness. So why don't we get a giant black Sharpie and mark off every Saturday on the calendar. Write 'if you wake up Charlie, she'll come at you like a honeybadger'."

Mel wrinkled her nose into a frustratingly adorable expression. "Honey badger?"

"It's like the most violent animal in existence," Charlie said, waving her hand dismissively. "I saw it on the Discovery Channel, but that's not the point. The point is that right now I should be having dreams about chocolate fountains and clouds that are actually made out of actual cotton candy."

Mel perched herself on the foot of the bed, placing a warm hand on Charlie's extended leg. The look she leveled Charlie with was on that had become all too familiar. It was the concerned, 'how are you doing' look. The 'I hope I'm not failing terribly at this and somehow screwing you up' look.

"You shouldn't be sleeping your life away," Mel said, staring at Charlie with wide eyes. "You know that excessive amounts of sleeping is a sign of depression. And you've been sleeping a lot lately."

"It doesn't mean I'm depressed!" Charlie exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air in frustration. "It means that I was up till two in the morning playing World of Warcraft. And it means that I'm a teenager. Teenagers need more sleep than adults—scientifically proven. We grow better in the dark. Like fungus. As far as I know there's only one cure for being a teenager, and it's called your twenties."

Mel narrowed her eyes into a look of reproach, and Charlie faltered. Despite all the good intentions driving it, she was getting really, really tired of all this 'overprotective' stuff Mel was pulling. She understood it, though. Pulling out of sessions with Dr. Hamilton probably hadn't helped ease Mel's anxieties, but they were expensive and useless. If Charlie was less sensitive, she might have pointed out that Mel might need a therapist instead seeing as the woman kept projecting insecurities onto Charlie's mental state. But she kept that thought to herself.
Still, Charlie was tired of being treated like some porcelain doll, precariously poised at the edge of a table, ready to shatter. She wasn't a damn Hummel figurine.

"I just think you should be using your time more productively, Charlie," Mel reasoned. She smoothed down the skirt of her neatly ironed dress. Even her nervous ticks lent themselves to wardrobe perfection. "Do your homework," she continued. "Play your guitar—you haven't played in weeks. Maybe go for a run. Visit your friends. Just get out of this room. I hate the idea of you cooped up in here. It's small and isolating."

Sighing heavily, Charlie sagged back against the wall, but nodded in acquiescence. "Okay, Mel," she muttered. "I'll go for a jog. The fresh air will probably do me some good. You know, because of all the extensive cigarette smoking and boozing I've been engaging in recently."

"Great!" Mel exclaimed brightly, ignoring the sarcastic dig.

The blonde suddenly straightened and plastered on a cheerful smile, the look of teary-eyed concern disappearing in a millisecond. Charlie eyed the woman warily. Given the abrupt shift in demeanor, there was a very good chance she had just gotten conned. Mel's face was so open and innocent, Charlie had yet to realize the potential danger that lay there. If Mel attempted deception or manipulation, there was a 90% chance Charlie would buy into it by virtue of those big brown doe eyes alone.

Mel spun on her heel and marched towards Charlie's dresser, pulling open a drawer and rifling through the contents. Not two seconds later, a sports bra, tank top, and pair of shorts sailed through the air, landing on the bed with a gentle plop. Charlie stared down at them with something akin to alarm, and by the time she looked up, Mel stood above her with a pair of running shoes dangling from her well-manicured fingertips.

"There are some great trails going through the woods," Mel continued without missing a beat. "Maybe you should try one of those out. I like to walk there when I have the time."

Still keeping a suspicious eye on the woman, Charlie plucked up the clothing and shimmied to the end of the bed. "Look," Mel declared as Charlie got to her feet, "I'm sorry if I'm coming off as paranoid or neurotic. I just—I worry, you know? With everything you've been through and the long hours I work at the shop—"

Charlie faced her aunt and grabbed the woman's shoulders, steadying her. "It's okay, Mel," she said, giving the woman a sincere look. "I get it. We haven't been spending too much time together lately. Look, Lydia is strong-arming me into going to a lacrosse game later tonight. Why don't you come? Make it a family thing."

Mel folded her arms across her chest and cocked her head to the side in mild surprise. "Really?" she demanded, sounding oddly flattered. "Are you sure? I mean, you don't think it would be weird?"

"It would only be weird if you rushed the field or something," Charlie shrugged. "Which, by the way, you should totally do. Maybe grab one of the opposing player's sticks and start swinging. That would be hilarious."

Mel stared back, her face impassive. "You're advocating that I attack the opposing team?"

"Why not?" Charlie replied. "If you can't get one of the lacrosse sticks, just use a stiletto heel. Go all—" she began to mimic a stabbing movement with her hand "—go all Norman Bates on them. What do you say, Mel? Win the big game for us? Be the big hero—the final act twist!"
"I can assure you, I have no interest in being the unexpected hero of a John Hughes movie," Mel muttered, absently tucking her hair behind her ears. "Or an Alfred Hitchcock one from the direction that went. That took a dark turn really fast. I don't think most high school films involve murder."

"We've upgraded to horror since the eighties," Charlie said drolly. "But murder aside, you're still coming, though?"

Mel blew out a long breath and cocked her head to the side. An unusually coy move for her. "Oh I don't know...a bunch of young lacrosse hotties running around in uniforms, ramming into each other, sweating—"

All sense of mirth left the conversation, replaced with shock and a side of mild revulsion. "LALALALALALA!" Charlie shouted, shoving her fingers in her ears and squeezing her eyes shut like a petulant child. "Never mind. You're not coming. You are uninvited."

"Rescinding your invitation so soon?" Mel asked, planting a hand on her hip. "I haven't even gotten to their athleticism yet."

"Please stop!" Charlie exclaimed, shaking her head. "I am actually begging you to stop right now. I have friends on that team and I don't need my aunt perving on them. Please keep it in your pants. You're old enough to be their—"

"Aunt?" Mel supplied, raising her eyebrows in a way that made her appear slightly dangerous. "I'm not going to start hitting on your friends, Charlie. It might have been a bit slow for me lately, but I don't think I need to resort to kids whose voices have yet to drop an octave. But I would like to know who these friends of yours are, though. Are they cute? I want to know who my niece is spending time with—inquiring minds..."

Charlie scrunched up her face in disgust. "Ew—just, ew. Let's just move on. Are you coming or not?"

Mel pursed her lips in consideration and gave a definitive nod. "Yes, yes I think I will. And then you can tell me which one you're crushing on."

A loud snort forced its way out of Charlie's nose. "Who says I have a crush on any of them?"

"Oh come on, Charlie," Mel said with a knowing smile. "There's always a crush."

"You know," Charlie drawled out sarcastically, tapping a pensive finger against her chin, "I've got to say, the mascot is quite alluring itself. All that felt...That giant swirl of wind has absconded with my heart."

"I'm being serious, Charlie," Mel replied, her lip sticking out in a pout. "I want you to feel like you can share things with me. There's got to be a crush. Even a baby crush? Just like...a pinch?"

"Nope," Charlie said, giving her a casual shrug. "Not for me. I don't crush. It's not in my programming—never has been."

The look Mel gave her could only be described as doubtful, but she let the subject drop and moved to towards the door. "I'll make you a breakfast smoothie before your run," she said as she exited the room. "It'll be ready in five."

Charlie shot her a double thumbs-up. "Can't wait."
Within an hour, Charlie was clad in her exercise clothes and jogging down some of those wooded back roads. She would never give Mel the satisfaction of acknowledging it, but it felt good—the feet pounding against the ground and ponytail swishing against the back of her neck. Charlie loved to run. It imbued her with a sensation of clarity—she felt more connected. And running in Beacon Hills was nothing like running in San Diego. The city was all concrete, asphalt and car alarms. Each breath had her sucking in car exhaust or the malodorous fumes wafting from street-side trash cans. Here it was fallen leaves, bird calls, crushed pine needles, and crisp fall air. She could get used to it. It was calming—the type of stuff people record and then sell at Whole Foods for a ridiculous price as a sort of 'meditation aid'.

More than anything else, though, running was a release. Whatever anxiety and frustration that might be building up inside of her would just wash away at the rhythmic feeling of her feet hitting the leaf-strewn path. The adrenaline and endorphins washed any sort of negativity out of her veins—Drano for the soul. Her dad always used to ask her what she was running from, and she would simply respond 'from whatever's chasing me'. And then, when he asked what was chasing her, she would smile and say, 'I don't know, I'll tell you when it catches up.' The art of being cryptic was something she had set out to accomplish early on in her youth.

Lately, though, it felt like that nameless thing chasing her? It was catching up. Charlie couldn't really explain it, but over the past week or so that creeping feeling that there was something seriously off in Beacon Hills had grown stronger. Some nameless cloud hovered over the town, amorphous and indefinable and annoying as hell. It was like she was trying to put a puzzle together, but some kid had stolen half the pieces. When something else—some event or clue—fell into place, the picture just ended up more distorted. Usually her runs would allow her to see the picture more clearly, but this time? This time a whole new tier of weird settled on top of what was already a layer cake of confusion. More specifically, that blue Jeep that kept popping up in the periphery of her vision.

What was the saga of the blue Jeep? The events unfolded thusly. The road taking her through the woods was long and winding one, sometimes directing her deeper into the forest, sometimes brushing near the edge of the Beacon Hills roads. And each time she approached that break in the trees, a blue '76 CJ-5 Jeep just happened to be there, driving about in a way that would definitely not be sanctioned by the local authorities. At one point it came to a full stop in the middle of the road, tires screeching against asphalt. Charlie could almost swear that whoever was in it—and she had a pretty good idea who—had caught sight of her jogging and slammed on the brakes. But that would be crazy, right? That would make no sense whatsoever. But nobody would ever know, because in that moment her trail twisted again, putting distance and a hell of a lot of trees between her and that Jeep.

Hell, maybe she did need to schedule another session with Dr. Hamilton. Maybe she was going crazy.

By the time Charlie got back to her house, she was covered in sweat and panting, the hands of the clock pointing well past noon. She leaned over at the waist and took a few gasping breaths before climbing the stairs and walking through the door. "Hey, Mel, I'm back!" she shouted, throwing her keys in the bowl. She paused at the mirror in the entryway and sighed. Her hair had ended up a curly mess with bits of it sticking to her forehead and neck, her face red and splotchy, and she just generally looked like crap.

"Why is it that when people run in the movies they never break a sweat?" she called out, moving into the kitchen and plucking out a leaf that had somehow managed to lodge itself amongst her unruly locks. "I mean, Angelina Jolie always has perfect makeup when she's spelunking. I look like a freaking tomato. Hollywood is deceiving us. I mean, I don't get why—why are you making that
Mel sat at the kitchen island with a plate full of last night's Thai food takeout, a bottle of chilled Perrier, and a knowing smile worthy of the Joker. Carnage could be expected. "You forgot your cell phone," she almost sang out, taking a sip of her water. Slowly, she placed the phone on the kitchen island like she was offering it up for ransom. "You got a call. Several calls, actually."

"That's great, Mel," Charlie said, raising her eyebrow pointedly, "and that would be super-impressive to me if this was the early 1900s, but the technology has lost that sort of impact."

For once, Mel didn't tell her off over her sarcasm. In fact, her smile just grew wider. "Even when that telephone came from a boy?"

Charlie frowned and moved towards the fridge, grabbing a chilled water bottle. "So what if the call came from a boy?" she said after taking a few large gulps from the bottle. "Roughly half the world's population is of the male persuasion." Mel smirked and plucked up Charlie's phone, twiddling it between her fingers. The ominous nature of her grin made Charlie swallow heavily. "Mel, did you answer my phone?"

"That Stiles guy called about six times," Mel said, widening her eyes innocently. "I was getting a headache from all that Weird Al blasting in my ears. I told him you'd call him when you got back—he seemed quite eager to talk with you. He was nice, if a little over-excited." She placed the phone on the counter and slid it across the island in Charlie's direction, forcing the girl to catch it lest it clatter to the ground. "So, who is he?" she asked, perching her elbows on the counter and resting her chin on her hands.

"A friend," Charlie replied tersely, snatching up her phone and fixing Mel with a thoroughly displeased look. "Just a friend."

"Does he have a girlfriend?" Mel asked, her voice adopting a sly overtone.

Charlie finished chugging the water bottle and wiped at her mouth. "Not that I know of," she shrugged. "What does that matter?"

"Because," Mel said, waggling her eyebrows at Charlie, "as When Harry Met Sally taught us, men and women can't ever be 'just friends'. There's always something else going on in the background."

Charlie let out a disbelieving snort and shook her head, perching herself on one of stools. "I'm not going to let Billy Crystal dictate my relationships with people," she replied sarcastically. "And if I'm going to choose a movie to live my life by, it's sure as hell not going to be When Harry Met Sally."

"Which one would it be, then?"

Charlie pursed her lips in concentration. "I would have to go with The Big Lebowski."

"Right," Mel drawled out sarcastically, rolling her eyes. "You pick a movie about a bowling bum who spends his days smoking weed. That's exactly what every parent and/or guardian wants to hear from their impressionable teenager."

"Hey, I am not impressionable," Charlie snapped back, waving a finger in her aunt's face. "I am aggressively apathetic. Peer pressure doesn't work when you don't give a crap. If I become a weed-smoking bum it won't be because it's what the cool kids are doing or because I saw it in a movie. It'll be because I want to."
Mel frowned, looking back to her plate. "There's some comfort to be found there, I suppose."

Charlie reached across the counter and plucked up one of the baby corns from the plate, popping it in her mouth before grabbing her phone and jogging down the hall. "Don't forget to call that Stiles kid!" Mel sang after her.

Ignoring her aunt's girlish giggles, Charlie shut her bedroom door behind her, locking it for good measure, and flipped through the 'missed calls' section of her phone. Mel was wrong. She had eight missed calls from Stiles. Eight. Five more than what she considered 'excessive'. Charlie made a face at the screen of the phone and hit the 'send' button, pressing the phone to her ear. It picked up after half a ring—an almost alarming degree of efficiency.

"H—hello?"

Charlie was met with blaring music and the sound of wheels screeching over gravel. Hm. Maybe she wasn't going crazy. Maybe that blue jeep she spotted was not, in fact, the suburban edition of The Flying Dutchman. Maybe Stiles was driving around like a madman for no apparent reason. He and Scott seemed to do a lot of things for no apparent reason.

"Hey, Stiles," Charlie said, toeing off her sneakers and kicking them across the room. "My aunt said you called?"

"Oh, yeah!" Stiles said eagerly. His audible sigh of relief left Charlie even more baffled. "Right. You're home safe from running. That's good."

"Was there a scenario where I wasn't going to get home safe?" she posited, scratching at her forehead. "I mean sure I haven't gone jogging for a while, but I don't think my cardiovascular health has plummeted that drastically."

"Wha—no!" Stiles stammered. "I was just, uh...I was just calling to...to find out the English assignment that's due on Monday. Yeah, English. I forgot to write it down and Mr. Hobson is kind of—"

"A dick?" Charlie supplied.

"Yeah," Stiles barked out through a laugh. "Yeah he definitely is that. An excellent one-word summation of character you got right there. Eloquent in its brevity."

"Why didn't you just ask Scott?" she inquired curiously. "Before yesterday I thought you guys were conjoined twins."

Stiles let out a tremulous laugh. "Believe me, I would love to ask Scott but he's—he's a little busy right now. Not sure where he is and he hasn't picked up his phone, so..."

"So you called me eight times?"

"Yeah..." Stiles drawled. "I'm just...really trying to get the semester started on the right foot, you know? Committing myself to academic excellence."

"Um, okay," Charlie muttered. "Just give me a second." Charlie grabbed her messenger bag, upending it and dumping its contents onto her bed. From the pile of papers and books she extracted her planner and English folder. "It looks like we've got to read chapters six through twelve of 'Candide', come up with a list of fifteen satirical elements, and write a paragraph explaining each. Your standard stuff."

"I'm not sure I'd describe English homework as 'great', but you're welcome," she mumbled in response, flipping through the pages. "I really doubt he's actually gonna check all of it." Hobson really had laid the content on thick for so early in the semester. A few weeks in and they had already slogged their way through Kafka, Swift, Voltaire, a little bit of Ibsen. For someone who had reached his degree of 'not giving a fuck' one would have thought he'd lighten up a bit on the reading material, but he seemed determined to render the students as angry and frustrated and generally dead inside as he was. Then the folder fell open and she found herself staring at another set of papers entirely, making her swear loudly into the receiver.

"What is it?" Stiles demanded, that edge of anxiety returning to his voice. "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing," Charlie replied, shaking her head and propping her phone up with her shoulder as she rifled through the document. "Just a massive paper on 'Beowulf' that I've got to edit and totally spaced on."

A strange, strangled noise of confusion emanated from the other end of the line. "'Beowulf'? We haven't done anything on 'Beowulf' yet, have we?"

"No," Charlie replied, thumbing her way through Donald's paper which she could already see was rife funny asides and tangents that no high school teacher had a good enough sense of humor to appreciate. "I just promised a friend of mine in Providence that I'd help him out."

"A friend?" Stiles asked stupidly. "In Providence? As in Rhodes Island?"

Charlie let out an indelicate snort and raised her eyebrows. "Yeah, Stiles. A friend. I wasn't birthed in the moving van on the way to Beacon Hills. I do actually know some other people."

"N—no, of course you do," Stiles stammered. "Plenty of people. I'm sure you've got tons of friends—you're a friendly person. Lots of people like you. You're likable."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Charlie replied, smiling into the receiver in spite of herself. Stiles let out another uncomfortable laugh and the conversation lapsed into nothing. Dead silence. Staticky air.

Suddenly, Charlie was filled with the ill-advised desire to poke the conversational bear. "How's Scott by the way?" she inquired casually.

The shift in Stiles's posture was obvious despite the fact that he was nowhere in sight. "Um, what do you mean?" he asked. "Is something wrong with Scott?"

"Well I heard he was skipping the game," Charlie replied. "Plus you seem to be having some trouble reaching him. Did he get hurt or something? Is he okay?"

"Oh, no," Stiles laughed nervously. "He's dead set on playing. There is absolutely, literally nothing wrong with Scott. He's never been better. He's...excellent. And definitely playing."

"Really?" Charlie muttered. "Well I'm sure Finstock is glad he's changed his tune. Good for us, I guess."

"Yeah," Stiles agreed. "Yeah, he's fine. Totally fine."

Charlie's lips quirked downward into a frown. This conversation required a decoder ring. "Good," she replied, her voice filled with hesitation. "Glad to hear it." Dead silence filled the airwaves,
leaving Charlie twitchy and frustrated. "Was that it?" she asked. "Were you just calling for the English homework, or is there something else?"

"Nope," Stiles answered quickly. "No that's it. Just trying to get some studying in before the big game today."

"Yeah, I think I'm going to do the same," she muttered. "Chemistry is kind of kicking my ass right now. Pretty sure Harris is a sociopath. And I can't say this for sure since I made it a rule not to get within a five foot radius of the guy, but he also seems like he would have really bad breath."

"That sounds like a great plan," Stiles declared, interrupting her Harris-hate monologue. "Stay inside and study. Or watch TV. Or read a book—that seems like something you would be doing a lot of. Whatever. It's up to you, really. But you should remember that direct exposure to sunlight contributes to skin cancer."

"Okay, then..." she drawled out, furrowing her eyebrows. "Thanks for the concern. I'm sure my dermatologist thanks you...I guess I'll see you tonight?"

"Yup. Tonight."

Charlie stared at the phone for a few moments after hanging up. Her phone calls with Stiles were getting increasingly bizarre, and there had only been two of them so far. What would happen when the next time around, if there was one? Would he just shriek into the receiver in a high-pitched voice? Would he start talking in Klingon? Calling her eight times for an English assignment seemed fairly extreme—nobody was that eager to do homework. And then there was his insistence on her staying home and the whole 'you got home safe' thing. Weird. Really fucking weird.

True to her word, Charlie spent the rest of the day ensconced in her room, alternating between wading through bone-crunchingly boring chemistry problems and working on Donald's paper. Though to be fair, dodging calls from Lydia also made up a significant portion of her activities. With each call, she unceremoniously hit the 'ignore' button and pushed her phone a little closer to the edge of her desk with her pen. Pretty soon she might have to push it over the edge and accept the inevitability of a cracked screen. Lydia during game days was even more terrifying than Lydia on conventional occasions—making banners and such. Charlie refused to be a part of that process. Writing 'we love Jackson' on a poster would feel too much like a lie, and anything involving glitter was completely off the table. In the immortal words of Demetri Martin, glitter was the herpes of the arts and crafts world. No matter how much you try to get rid of it, it keeps coming back.

Ultimately 'chemistry and 'Beowulf' turned into exclusively working on Donald's paper as chemistry was, empirically speaking, the absolute worst. As per usual his thesis was good and he backed it up with plenty of literary evidence, but he always managed to get distracted half-way through a thought and wander off. Plus punctuating your point with the phrase 'boom goes the dynamite' didn't exactly smack of professional discourse. He'd probably get a little angry at the amount of red she inflicted on the page—it looked a bit like a bloodied corpse by the time she was through with it—but it was for the best. She quickly scanned the end result over to him and turned her attention to chemistry while waiting for the old man, grumpy Donald call.

After about an hour, that fatal noise began to emanate from her computer. Donald's smiling face appeared on the computer screen, finger guns and all, leaving Charlie to steel herself for what was bound to be quite the abrupt transformation in facial features. Dropping her pen and tossing her notebook aside, she hit the 'answer call' function. Sure enough, she was met by the deepest of scowls—one worthy of a hundred-year grumpy grandpa with a growing collection of confiscated frisbees and baseballs in his backyard.
Charlie spun slowly in her chair, fingers pressed together all dramatic-like with her stuffed kangaroo Leonard in her lap. "Hello, Donald," she drawled, channeling her inner Bond villain. "How can I help you today?"

"What the hell, Oz?" he demanded, brandishing the papers at her. "I asked you to edit the thing, not murder it!"

Charlie let out a sigh and leaned back in her chair, hands resting behind her head. "Are we going to do this every time I edit your stuff?"

"If you keep making it look like the paper is bleeding, then yes!" he protested loudly. "I mean look at this!"

He thrust the paper forward, making the pixelated writing fill the screen. The red lines of her pen merged together in angry, smudged streaks. Charlie let out a huff and rolled her eyes. "Well maybe if you stopped referring to Beowulf's epic quest as 'monster whac-a-mole, Grendel edition' I wouldn't have to use so much red," she drawled out. "Believe it or not you do need to maintain some degree of professionalism when writing high school papers."

"Oh my God, you sound so boring right now," Donald groaned. He tossed the paper to the side and stare at her through narrowed eyes, mentally cursing her very existence. "You know it's gonna take me like two hours to make all those corrections?"

"And you realize that you have a kickass paper, right?" Charlie replied. "Literally all you have to do is change the wording, and you've got a guaranteed 'A'. Congratulations to you. You just can't write it with that conversational tone. The teachers aren't looking for funny. It's academic."

"Ugh," he muttered bitterly, sagging back in his seat. "School kills the soul, Oz. It's just like...you've spent your whole life soaking up the creative juices. Then you go to school and the teachers—they just ring you out like a Shamwow and all that creativity juice ends up in the sink, flowing down the drain. And for the sake of what? Grammatical correctness and standardized test scores. It's a freaking travesty. I mean, I know you're good at writing dull, flavorless research papers that could cure insomnia, but that's just not my style."

"Right..." she drawled out, narrowing her eyes at him.

"I—I am an entertainer," he declared, pointing to himself. "I can't keep writing these crusty old, boring ass papers. I don't want to write shit I wouldn't want to read. Do these people not understand the impact of contemporary media? Why the hell do high schools always have to focus on the then? Why can't they focus on the now? Or at least not make us write like we lived through the freaking Bubonic Plague."

"Because old people are insecure and afraid of being made irrelevant and have to trivialize everything we could possibly be interested in," Charlie deadpanned. "It's an ego thing."

Donald sank lower in his seat to the point that he was about to slip out of the chair. His lower lip jutted out in a determined pout, giving him the air of a small child whose parent had dragged them to the doctor's office. Donald hated the doctor's office. And the bank. And generally any location where they stuck you in a waiting room and kept pens attached to chains.

"Hey," Charlie said, wishing she could clap a hand comforting hand on his shoulder. "Hey, we're already over a year into high school. In less than three years you're gonna be out of suburbia and in Los Angeles taking a screenwriting class at USC, walking the same halls as George Lucas and Ron Howard. You'll get to write whatever the hell you want. Sometimes you've gotta wade through the
shitty parts before you get to the awesome."

Donald smiled sardonically, shooting her a double thumbs up. "So you're saying that high school is the waiting room for life. Great pep talk, Oz. Equal parts depressing and optimistic."

"That's how I roll."

Donald sagged back in his seat, rolling back from the desk a little ways. "Well there goes half my Saturday, I guess," he mumbled darkly. "So how about you? Any existential crises on your front?"

A breath pushed past Charlie's lips, unsure whether or not to turn itself into a laugh. Was her situation laughable? Maybe. Maybe not. To refer to her current state as an 'existential crisis' would likely be hyperbolic. But these days her life sure as hell inspired quite a bit of questioning. She was stuck in a town that didn't make any sense, with people whose actions were abnormal at best and criminal at worst. The ridiculousness of the dilemma in which she found herself was a function of how much weight her suspicions held.

Suddenly Charlie found herself preoccupied with the stuffed animal sitting in her lap. Leonard the kangaroo had been with her a long time. Ten cities in just as many years. One of his eyes had fallen out somewhere in Burlington, Vermont and the thread holding the seams together had come loose, allowing the stuffing to become visible if you peeked closely enough. The reddish-tan color was dirtied and greyed after years of stains. She ran her fingers over the once plushy surface that time and wear had rendered rough. Battered but enduring, he was a veteran. Leonard had seen a bunch of shit in his lifetime, lived in a lot of places. But none of them inspired as much confusion as Beacon Hills. Charlie stared down at the stuffed animal, and Leonard stared right back, his one-eyed gaze empty. He didn't have any answers for her either.

Charlie tossed Leonard over her shoulder and onto the bed and turned back to the webcam. "Other than a psychotic chemistry teacher?" she said, nervously running her hands through her hair. "I think I might be getting paranoid. Like actually paranoid. Like conspiracy theory paranoid."

Donald shot her a look of reproach. "You watched The Outer Limits after 9 p.m. again, didn't you? I told you not to do that. Why don't you ever listen to me?"

"No, man," Charlie grumbled. "I'm not that stupid. There's just been...weird shit going on. In conjunction with the previous weird shit that went on. In conjunction with some weird, albeit nice dudes, and this other dude who might not be so nice—"

"Whoa, stop—are you having a seizure?" Donald said, holding his hands up to slow her down. "You're getting repetitive. Use more than like...five words."

Charlie let out a sigh, rubbing at her forehead. How could she vocalize her concerns without sounding like a complete lunatic? How did she bring up the tapetum lucidum bullshit? How in the hell was she supposed to tell the tale of Beacon Hills's most bizarre trio: Grumpy, Dopey, and...which dwarf would Stiles be? Sneezy was probably the closest. How could she explain it? It sounded insane when she told the story to herself. Bringing it to a third party was a recipe for disaster. But Donald was Donald. He'd get it out of her one way or another. And if anybody was crazy enough to roll with her on this amateur investigation, it was him.

"Okay," Charlie acquiesced, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration. "Okay, so you remember when I asked you for advice on that Scott dude?"

"Yeah?" Donald shrugged. "What about him."
This time Charlie did laugh, fully and with no hint of mirth. In the ten minutes that followed, Donald received a brief account of the varying levels of weird she had put up with. It began with a full recount of the party—not her previous, abridged version. No, this time Donald got every excruciating detail, including their caginess in the aftermath of that party. She dwelled for a while on the truly bizarre stuff going on at the hospital, and finally settling on the equally inexplicable behavior this morning. She left out the tapetum lucidum business, though. Because literally, what the hell?

"So I think half this town is clinically insane," she concluded, folding her arms across her chest. "Or I'm clinically insane. But seriously...I don't pretend to be an authority on what is and what isn't normal behavior, but come on. Donald, the guy was checking up on me after jogging. It makes more sense than calling eight times for a freaking English assignment—he knows other people at school."

"You went jogging in 'the murder woods'," Donald pointed out, raising his eyebrows right back at her. "Of course he called to check in on you. That's not weird—it's polite. They call them 'the murder woods' for a reason."

"You are literally the only person who calls them 'the murder woods'."

"For now," he replied. "It'll catch on."

"You're saying you see no weirdness in a random guy calling me eight times," Charlie deadpanned. Donald made a face and shrugged. "Maybe he has a thing for you." The withering look she gave him caused him to throw his hands in the air. "Hey, it's not impossible. I mean I know that being around so much pretty as all—" he gestured at his face "—all this might have compromised your self-esteem, but don't sell yourself short. You're pretty hot."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she replied easily, thinking back to Stiles's moon-faced look when he talked about Lydia. "But I don't think that's what's going on here. Plus, what about all that Derek Hale stuff? They're obsessed with the dude. And he keeps showing up in random places. And he's really freaking stealth too. I swear the dude just materializes out of the ether."

"God, your town is so much cooler than mine. It's wasted on you and your boring research papers."

"Donald!"

"Okay, okay, okay," Donald said, holding out his hands to pacify her. "So let's think about this critically. What is the root element of the weirdness. Let's give it some context. Go back to the beginning."

Charlie nibbled on her lip, the screen before her slipping out of focus as her attention shifted internally. She combed through her past interactions with the pair, seeking out any patterns of behavior. For the most part, they seemed reactive. They weren't in control of whatever the hell was going on, that much was glaringly obvious. They weren't responsible for Derek showing up at the party. Scott had to have a reason for dropping out of the lacrosse game, for however brief a period of time. Stiles calling her was bizarre, but something had to have spurred him to it. When she took a step back, it looked more like they were flailing wildly. In fact, she had only seen them engaging in 100% self-directed behavior the one time.

"They were looking for the body," Charlie said aloud, looking back to the screen. "The murder. They were looking for the body when they ran into Derek—I overheard them talking about him in the woods. It sounded like it was the first time they had met him."
"Ah, 'the murder woods'," Donald said sagely. "It all comes back to 'the murder woods'."

"But what comes back to the murder woods?" Charlie demanded. "I mean it looks like they're digging into something, but what does that have to do with me going out for a freaking jog? And why would they go to the hospital? Stiles's dad is the sheriff—if they've got something on Derek, why wouldn't they just tell him? I have no freaking idea how to make sense of this."

"You don't have enough plot points yet," Donald replied. "You don't have a story. And until you have a story, you just sound like 'old man yells at cloud'. There's nothing there worth pitching. Fill in some more blanks, maybe the puzzle'll solve itself for you. Until then...you just gotta wait, I guess. Maybe fill in some blanks. Character motivation is crucial. It looks like it comes back to this Derek dude. What do we know about him? What's his backstory? Research."

"Yeah," Charlie muttered bitterly. "I guess you're right."

"Please, I'm always right."

Charlie's face puckered into a pained whine. She collapsed forward, her head hitting the desk with a heavy thunk. The soreness that contact inspired was nothing compared to the approaching migraine. Her brain was at capacity. Any more mysteries and it would overheat and shut down altogether. "Oh my God," Charlie groaned, lifting her head from the desk once more. "This town is insane."

"That's all relative," Donald said, shaking his head. "You have a dude who called you a couple of times and a gruesome murder. Big whoop. I, on the other hand, just attended something called a clam bake."

"A clam bake?" Charlie demanded, her eyebrows drawing together into a frown.

"Yes, a clam bake," Donald repeated with a solemn nod. "And before you go and ask, it did not involve going and getting a bunch of mollusks stoned. Super disappointing reveal. Also, sweater vests."

"Dear Lord," Charlie muttered.

"Yeah," Donald whispered, his voice haunted and far away. He looked at her with a shadow behind his eyes—the look of a man who had seen too much in his few years. "Sometimes I get scared, Oz. I'm starting to wonder whether or not we've joined a cult. I'm pretty sure the Homeowner's Association is The Borg."

"Jesus."

"No, he doesn't have anything to do with it," Donald barreled on. "Mr. Rogers might. I wouldn't be surprised if one of these people had his cryogenically frozen head stored in their basement so they can bring it out during full moon rituals." He grabbed hold of his computer, angling it towards him. He stared directly into the tiny webcam at the top of his laptop so that the two of them locked eyes, making Charlie physically twitch. He was gazing into the depths of her soul. "Oz," he murmured, his voice uncharacteristically serious. "This might be the last time we speak. Now you're the only person I trust with this. If you don't hear from me again, I want you to fly up here, and delete my internet search history before my mom sees it. I know technically I can't be killed twice, but dammit she's gonna try."

Charlie, who had been leaning closer towards her computer with each ominous word, let out a loud groan and collapsed back in her chair. "Dude, do not make me responsible for your pervy
tendencies. Just open up a 'private browsing' session and be done with it."

A blank look slid across his face and he gazed wistfully off into the distance like he was seeing a sunrise for the first time. "You're right," he whispered. "I could totally do that. This changes everything."

Charlie made a face, sticking out her tongue like a small child who had just been presented with a plate of root vegetables. A sarcastic comment was forming on the tip of her tongue, but before it managed to fully realize itself, her phone began to yet again blare the strains of 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun'. While she let out a huff and had her head sag on her shoulders, Donald straightened up. "What's this?" he demanded, a coy tone entering his voice. "Who exactly is important enough to have received a specialized ringtone from Charlotte Oswin."

Snatching up the phone, Charlie quickly silenced the ringer before tossing it to the side. "That's just Lydia."

"Lydia?" he prompted, a vaguely creepy smirk pulling at the corners of his lips. "Lydia the hot redhead who's gonna be my future wife on my future boat that I'm gonna own in the future."

"Yeah, whatever," Charlie muttered, waving a hand absently. "She's trying to infect me with school spirit. There's a game we're going to later today."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, hold up," Donald demanded. "You're going to go to a school football game. Voluntarily. As a part of a group. During hours that you could be spending off school property."

"They don't play football," Charlie replied evasively. "They play lacrosse."

A loud spluttering noise emanated from the other side of the connection. "That makes it worse!" Donald protested. "Lacrosse? Who even plays lacrosse? I swear to God, I'm in Stepford, but you're the one whose sliding into suburban oblivion!"

Charlie let out a sigh, staring back evenly. "Go write your paper, Donald."

"Ha!" he shot back, snapping and pointing violently at the screen. "You see that? That right there. You just admitted defeat. You are folding to the pressures of a non-metropolitan society! Pretty soon you're going to be braiding friendship bracelets and hosting barbecues and lending people cups of sugar and—"

Donald likely had a number of items left to prattle off, but he was gloriously interrupted by the shrill ring of the doorbell. "Would you look at that?" Charlie chirped with a passive-aggressive shrug. "Literally saved by the bell."

"HEY!" Donald snapped as she started to get up from her seat. "This conversation isn't over. You're on a slippery slope, Oz. You might slide right into that white picket fence and impale yourself on it!"

The doorbell rang yet again as she shoved her chair back towards the desk. She leaned forwards, bringing her face up close to the webcam and staring directly into it. "Write your paper, Donald. Or I'll call your mom and have her change the wifi password again."

"You're a monster, Oz!" he called out. "You're a goddamn mon—"

Before he could finish, Charlie grabbed the top of her laptop and slammed it shut, silencing him just in time to hear the doorbell ring again. And again. And again. The damn thing rang more than ten times in the space of fifteen seconds, which could only mean one thing. A very impatient
strawberry blonde had laid siege to the apartment building. Peace could not be found until she was allowed entry. And so it was, that upon the eleventh ring of the bell, Charlie found herself at her front door with her finger on the buzzer. The ominous stop of heels against rickety stairs grew in volume until they came to an abrupt stop on the other side of that woefully unreinforced plank of wood.

The moment the door swung open, a fiery ball of perfume and Prada pushed past Charlie and marched into the foyer.

"So I'm going to ignore the fact that you've been screening my calls," Lydia declared, spinning on her heel to face Charlie. She paused for a moment, waiting for a response, but Charlie simply folded her arms across her chest and stared back evenly. The self-assured expression on Lydia's face faltered, allowing frustration to peek through. "So you're not going to deny that you've been screening my calls?"

"Nope," Charlie replied. "I've totally been screening your calls."

Lydia narrowed her eyes and took a small step forward, advancing on Charlie. "And why would you do that?"

"Because I've got other things to do," Charlie shrugged. "I've got homework, a paper to write, laundry to do, dishes to—"

"Yeah, I don't care that you don't have a maid," Lydia said, waving her hand dismissively. "I'm just here to make sure that you don't bail on me for the game later today. It's the first game of the season, and we need to start it right."

Charlie sucked in a deep breath, preparing herself to release the most forceful of sighs, but before her lungs could expel the air Lydia grabbed hold of her hand and dragged her down the hallway to her bedroom. The moment they broke the threshold, Lydia released Charlie's hand and marched straight for the closet. She yanked the door open with such force it groaned on its hinges. Immediately, she began tearing through the contents, frowning and letting out multiple noises of disapproval as she was confronted with the less-than-satisfactory wardrobe within. Charlie plopped down on the bed, watching her closet being ripped apart.

"Seriously, Charlie?" Lydia demanded. She spun on her heels and held up a red T-shirt featuring Darth Vader and the caption 'I Find Your Lack of Bacon Disturbing'. She tossed the shirt of Charlie, followed by the tossing of her own hair. "What the hell is that?"

"It's a funny T-shirt," Charlie replied evenly, pulling the shirt from her face and chucking it into the corner. "I like Star Wars, I like bacon. There's not that much to read into."

Lydia scoffed and turned back to the closet. "There's more flannel in here than in the world tour of a '90s grunge band," she sneered. "I thought I threw all this stuff out."

"Noooo..." Charlie drawled, "you put it in a pile of things to be thrown away. Which I preceded to not throw away."

"Whatever," Lydia dismissed. "We need to find you something decent for the game. We don't want our team to be distracted by the fact that there's a transient sitting in the stands."

"Lydia, it's a sports game," Charlie said, collapsing back on the bed. "Who cares what I'm wearing? It'll be hidden under my coat anyway. It's freaking freezing outside."

"That may be the case..." Lydia trailed off, grabbing a top and pair of jeans, holding them up to the
light and judging them. After a few moments consideration, she tossed them at Charlie. "There, wear that. We're going to have to say hello to the team after the big game, either to celebrate or console each other. And it had better be to celebrate."

Groaning loudly, Charlie scrunched up her face into an expression of distaste. "That's not going to happen. I don't exactly get along with like 70% of the lacrosse team. I might be going to the game, but I fully intend to slink off into the shadows the second that final whistle blows."

"Yeah—you're not going to do that," Lydia shot back, her voice tinged with bitterness. "And maybe you'd get along better if you stopped physically assaulting them. Aaron Harrison said that you almost dislocated his thumb."

"Aaron Harrison is a whiny infant who would call 911 for a paper cut," she replied, absently picking at her fingernails. "Anyways, he's lucky that he got to keep that thumb after trying to grab my ass."

Lydia muttered something under her breath that was most likely not complementary, and Charlie sat up again. The top Lydia had thrown at her was a deep blue, all ruffles and beading. Pretty, but the thin fabric could likely ward off the cold about as well as the contents of a Victoria's Secret catalog. "Yeah, there's no way I'm wearing this," she said, getting to her feet and hanging the top back in the closet. "We're going to a lacrosse game, not meeting the queen of England for tea. This shirt is reserved for occasions where they serve cucumber sandwiches."

Lydia let out a small scream of frustration and stamped her foot. "Ugh! Is there any way you could stop being lame for like two seconds? For me? Stop acting like you have a bedtime!"

"As far as she's concerned, she does have a bedtime," Mel's voice interrupted. The two girls turned to see Mel standing in the door, leaning against the frame with a determined, albeit pinched looking expression on her face. At the sight of her Lydia faltered slightly, but the hesitation only lasted a moment before that easy, confident smile slid across her face. She flicked her hair over her shoulder and took a few steps towards Mel.

"Listen, Ms. Oswin," she said in her 'I'm totally on the debate team' voice. "You can just call me Mel, Lydia," her aunt said, planting a hand on her hip. "You usually do anyway when you're not asking for something."

Lydia exhaled sharply, but kept smiling. "Alright, Mel," she continued, taking another step forwards. "I just thought I'd introduce Charlie here to some more people after the game is over."

She grabbed Charlie's arm and yanked her to her side, draping her arm over Charlie's shoulder in a way that was more aggressive and possessive than comforting. "That way she can matriculate more efficiently. Get settled, make some more friends..."

Mel pressed her lips together in a thin line and nodded along with Lydia's words, but didn't appear convinced. "You make a compelling point, Lydia, but I'm not letting Charlie out tonight. The sheriff has put into effect a 9:30 curfew because all of the animal attacks lately and—"

"Animal attacks?" Charlie inquired, furrowing her eyebrows in confusion. "There have been animal attacks in the area?"

"Yes," Mel replied. "And what kind of authority figure would I be if I let you go out and get mauled after you've only been living with me for six weeks."

Charlie winced theatrically and turned to Lydia, shrugging her shoulders. "Sorry. I guess that's
"Yeah, you look really broken up about it," Lydia shot back, glowering at Charlie. Charlie sighed heavily and scratched at the back of her neck. Lydia had a tendency to get passive aggressive when things didn't go her way. Which was why people usually let things go her way. But the equally stubborn Charlie didn't usually fold.

Unstoppable force. Immovable object. Sometimes it led to problems.

Mel held up a delivery menu in the hope that the promise of food would diffuse the tension. "So, Lydia, are you staying for dinner? We're ordering Italian from Corleone's before the game if you'd like to join us."

"We?" Lydia demanded, pointing between Mel and Charlie. "Mel is coming too?"

"We're trying out some aunt-niece bonding time," Charlie said through a shrug. "While you're out with you lacrosse players we'll probably be watching romcoms and eating ice cream."

Lydia squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. "That's great. I guess I'll see the two of you there." And then without another word she brushed past Mel and Charlie, down the hall, and out the front door. Charlie winced at the sound of the door slamming shut. "Bye!" she shouted into the now vacant space where Lydia had just been standing.

Lydia Martin, purveyor of the dramatic exit probably from the moment she left the womb.

Charlie turned towards Mel, offering up a bemused shrug. "She doesn't really like it when things don't go according to plan."

"Yeah," Mel said through a tight smile. "I gathered."

"Mmh."

Mel opened her mouth and shut it again, eyebrows furrowed in thought. "She was only here for like five minutes."

"Yes, she was," Charlie confirmed.

"Isn't her house...over twenty minutes away?"

"Yes, it is."

"Why—?"

"Nobody knows."

Mel let out a sharp breath and gave a definitive nod, embracing her bemusement. "Right. Well, I'm gonna order us some food."

"That would probably be for the best."

Another hour and a plate of Corleone's delicious fettuccine alfredo later, Mel and Charlie were seated in Mel's hybrid, on their way to the Beacon Hills lacrosse field. Charlie had opted to ignore Lydia's flouncy wardrobe suggestions, instead settling on a T-shirt with the print of a classic French film poster, red jeans, a striped cardigan, and a pair of worn boots. On their way out Mel had shoved a hat, coat, and scarf into her arms, which, as she stepped out onto the field, Charlie found herself immensely grateful for. She had yet to become accustomed to the unseasonably cold
weather in this town. Barely a week into September, and her breath was already crystallizing into clouds before her eyes.

Mel linked an arm through Charlie's as they picked their way to the bleachers. The grass crunched under foot, as much a victim of the cold as Charlie herself. By all appearances they were running a little bit late. The bleachers were brimming with spectators and the team had already finished their warm-ups. The players were clustering together in their pre-game huddle. Mel let out a low whistle as she eyed the players, making Charlie cringe. "You promised you wouldn't be pervy," she mumbled under her breath, and Mel let out a musical laugh.

"I don't recall making any promise of the sort," Mel said with a toothy smile. "In fact, I'm pretty sure I declared my intention to embarrass you. It's one of my duties now. I was deputized."

As they approached the bleachers, Charlie caught sight of Allison wrapped up in a tan trench coat, a purple beanie pulled down to cover her ears. The cold made her cheeks flush pink, and her eyes sparkled with excitement. The brunette waved the pair of them over, smiling enthusiastically. Charlie waved back and changed course towards her, yanking Mel along. Just as they reached her, though, another figure sidled up as well. At first the profile was cast in shadow by the stadium lights, large and imposing. The man shifted on his feet, his features coming into view. Golden blonde hair, stern face, and sharp, intelligent-looking blue eyes...the two giant popcorn containers in his arms did nothing to render him less intimidating. Charlie felt herself shift on her feet underneath his harsh scrutiny.

"Hey Charlie!" Allison exclaimed brightly, stepping forward and pulling Charlie into a quick hug. "I'm so glad you could make it too!" She rocked back on her heels and gestured to the man standing next to her. "This is my dad. Dad, this is Charlie, the girl I mentioned from school. She's made the whole experience of being the new girl a whole lot less traumatizing for me."

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far," Charlie replied with a cheeky smile. "I'm self-aware enough to know that being friends with me can be pretty traumatic all on its own."

The man—Allison's dad—smiled at her and Mel. Despite the outward friendliness, the smile felt vaguely threatening, maybe because of the way his incredibly white teeth glinted in the dark. He took a step forwards and extended a hand, which Charlie took and gave a firm shake. "Chris Argent," he greeted. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you as well, Mr. Argent," Charlie returned with a nod.

Mr. Argent took a step back and gave her an appraising look. "So you're the clever, insubordinate one, right?" he asked, eyes still narrowed. "From what I understand you're a questionable influence."

"Dad!" Allison hissed, smacking him lightly in the chest. "You can't say things like that to my friends. Charlie's not insubordinate, she's just...colorful."

Charlie just ignored Allison's outburst and smiled at Mr. Argent, shoving her hands deep into coat her pockets. "Insubordinate, huh?" she said, bouncing up and down on her feet. "I've got to say, that's the best euphemism for 'smartass' that I've ever heard."

"Charlie!" Mel scolded. "What's this about being insubordinate? Have you been talking back to teachers again?"

"Only a teeny, tiny bit," she said holding up her thumb and forefinger to indicate. Mel bristled, planting her hands on her hips and giving Charlie the 'parenting glare'. "Come on, Mel," Charlie
whined, "you really didn't think I'd check my sarcasm at the door when I leave in the morning, did you? It's a character flaw—I really can't help it. And personally I don't think that they should put limitations on the discourse in school. It dampens creativity."

"And what about discipline?" Mr. Argent demanded, raising her eyebrows at her.

"Dad!" Allison whined, pulling on the sleeve of his jacket. "Stop being weird."

Charlie opened her mouth to respond, but Mel stepped forwards and put a gloved hand on her shoulder, indicating for her to be quiet. "Discipline means knowing when to stop talking," Mel said pointedly, glowering Charlie into submission before turning to Allison and her dad. She extended her hand to them both. "I'm Melody Oswin," she said warmly. "Charlie's aunt. Welcome to Beacon Hills."

"How long have you been here?" Mr. Argent asked.

The abruptness of the question paired with the gruffness in his voice gave Mel pause. "Um, only about three years," she replied, nodding along with her words.

"And why Beacon Hills?" he pressed, squaring his shoulders in Mel's direction. Charlie wrinkled her nose at the display. The whole thing felt a little like an interrogation, lacking only a tetanus-riddled interrogation room and a one-way mirror. Their current venue lacked a polygraph, but the way the man stared through you it was possible he didn't need one. Apparently Allison was feeling the weird as well, left tugging on her dad's sleeve and hissing in his ear.

Mel, ever the graceful and generous saint of a woman, simply tucked her hair behind her ears and answered calmly. "I wanted a place to get started on a fashion line," she replied. "Beacon Hills is close enough to San Francisco and L.A. that I can get there easily, but it's out of the way of the chaos. Plus there's a surprisingly good market here for designer clothes. Charlie's friend Lydia makes sure of that." She smiled serenely in the face of Mr. Argent's tense jaw. "It's a great town. You'll enjoy it here."

"I'm sure that we will," Mr. Argent responded. The words sounded friendly, but the grin on his face was still tight and forced and his eyes held a calculating look, as if he was dissecting the social interaction into its base components so that he could form an educated opinion.

"Were you military?" Charlie asked suddenly, fixing him with a curious stare.

He blinked at her in surprise. "No," he said casually, shaking his head. "No I was never in the military. Why do you ask?"

"No reason in particular," she replied. "You've just got the posture. My dad was in the Coast Guard and he and his buddies always have this really upright posture." She straightened her shoulders for a moment to demonstrate before letting them sag again. "I never really had the discipline to maintain it."

Mr. Argent's toothy smile widened slightly at her use of the word 'discipline', revealing a set of rather pointed canines. "You should come to our house for dinner sometimes next week," he said politely. "I always like to meet my daughter's friends—to see who she's spending her time with."

Allison rolled her eyes heavily from her position behind her father, and it took all of Charlie's effort to restrain the wheeze of laughter. By all appearances, the overly protective vibes emanating from Mr. Argent were nothing new.

"I would love to," Charlie said, all politeness. "Just name the date and time."
"Fantastic," Mr. Argent responded. "I'll have to talk to my wife first, but Allison will let you know. Be sure to invite your parents as well."

Charlie opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. Any awkward silence that might have arisen from that statement was quickly cut short as Allison elbowed her father in the side. "Dad!" she hissed, shaking her head violently.

"What?" the man chuckled. "Did I say something wrong?"

Mel lifted her hand timidly. "It's, uh, it's actually just me."

"Oh," Mr. Argent said with a nod, wisely letting the subject drop. "Well in that case my wife and I would love to have you and Charlie over for dinner."

"And we'd be happy to come," Mel accepted warmly. "Isn't that right, Charlie?"

"I couldn't think of anything more exciting."

Just then Lydia appeared at the bleachers, blue coat and leopard print earmuffs complimenting her hair color perfectly. She waved over at Allison and Charlie to indicate that she had saved seats. "Thank God," Allison said, grabbing hold of Charlie's hand and pulling her in Lydia's direction. "Hey, dad, I'll see you after the game. You guys can talk about...grown up stuff that you have in common. Tax returns, that kind of thing."

The two girls clambered onto the bleachers, carefully stepping over people as they made their way over to Lydia. "Dude," Charlie snorted. "Does your dad have a polygraph machine in your basement or something?"

"I'm so sorry about that," Allison said, grimacing slightly as she glanced over her shoulder at Charlie. "My dad—he just gets really overprotective. He comes off as super-intense, but he's really nice when you get to know him."

"Hey, I'm no stranger to overprotective dads," Charlie said, throwing her hands in the air in submission. "I had a single dad. It just manifested differently. Your dad invites your friends to dinner so he can vet them. Mine enrolled me in self-defense classes when I was six. Dads always freak out when it comes to their daughters."

"If it helps, I think he liked you."

The bright smile she flashed fooled exactly nobody. Charlie narrowed her eyes and studied Allison's face. Deceit was written into every line. She let out a snort and shook her head. "I call bullshit. Your dad hates me. Which is weird since he met me literally three minutes ago. I've got to give him props for his instincts, though. I am a nightmare."

"He doesn't hate you," Allison insisted. "He just thinks that you're—"

"Insubordinate?" Charlie supplied, raising her eyebrows challengingly. Allison winced and nodded, making Charlie laugh in response. "Don't worry, Allison," she smirked, patting the girl on the back. "I'm going to have fun corrupting you."

After a lot of tripping and nearly mauling people as they climbed up the steps of the bleachers, they reached Lydia, whose hair still managed to stay perfectly coiffed in spite of the frigid winds. Like Allison, the cold had turned her cheeks a healthy pink as opposed to Charlie's frigid, marble white. Standing next to the pair of them Charlie was rendered distinctly corpse-like, both in pallor and in level of enthusiasm. At the very least the claustrophobia of the stands served as a flimsy barrier
against the cold. But Charlie still found herself yearning for a book and mug of hot chocolate.

"Thank God you both made it!" Lydia said happily. "I was afraid you would miss the beginning. And Charlie, I was beginning to wonder if you were going to show up at all."

"You know me!" Charlie said with false levity. "Always overflowing with school spirit."

Lydia shot Charlie a withering look and then smiled at Allison, gesturing at them both to sit. Eventually they ended up with Allison in the middle and Charlie and Lydia on either side of her. Charlie scanned the area to see where Mel had gone, finding her chatting with Mr. Argent next to the bleachers. The conversation had apparently turned in a decidedly civil direction seeing as all disdain seemed to have left Mr. Argent's face. Then again, Mel had that effect on people. There was just too much nice to stay hostile.

After a few moments, the referee blew the whistle and the players ran out on the field, getting into position for the game. Lydia cheered out Jackson's name as number 37 made his way to the center of the field for the face-off and Charlie scanned the field of burgundy-clad players looking for familiar faces. How Aaron Harrison managed to make first line in such a violent sport with such a low pain tolerance was a complete mystery. Then there was number 11—Scott—who was crouched down, getting ready for the whistle to blow while Danny—number 6—stood in the goal. Finally her eyes fell on number 24—Stiles—firmly planted on the bench.

The team mascot remained conspicuously absent. No cyclones to be seen.

As the game began, Mel and Mr. Argent maneuvered their way through the bleachers as well, taking a seat with Mr. Argent right next to Charlie and Mel on his other side. Charlie shot them both a weak smile and turned back to the field, leaning forwards so that her elbows were resting on her knees. The man's proximity made her uneasy, given his obvious inclination to dislike her. Though if any tension did fill the air, Mel found herself happily oblivious to it. She had coopted one of the buckets of popcorn Mr. Argent held and munched away, her eyes focused on the field.

All the players found their spots, and slowly the chatter from the bleachers died down. The air became still save for the stiff breaths of player and spectator alike. As the moments dragged longer, the players began to fidget on the field—a twitch here, a roll of the ankle there, small movements to keep their muscles from seizing up. The referee slowly made his way to the middle, hand raised in the air. He swung that arm down with force and finally blew the whistle, the shrill note cutting through the air.

And then they were off. Jackson easily swiped the ball from that center circle, dodging around his opponent and sprinting towards the goal. He was immediately swarmed by opposing players. He came to an abrupt stop, searching for a teammate to pass to. Scott stood at the opposite side of the field, wide open and waving frantically. Jackson's eyes seemed to slide right past him, instead passing to number 26 who was, quite frankly, much poorly situated.

"Scott was wide open," Charlie murmured to herself, eyes fixed on the field as the ball bounced back and forth between players. "What the hell is Jackson doing?"

"He's winning," Lydia replied tersely, clapping her hands together to cheer on her boyfriend. "That's what winners do."

After a few moments of passing the ball, it seemingly disappeared. Suddenly, Scott started sprinting down the field. Charlie's eyes followed his trajectory and saw the ball lying on the grass. As Scott approached, though, he was rammed into the ground, not by an opponent but by someone wearing the Beacon Hills maroon. The sympathetic grimace on Charlie's face soon morphed into a
scowl as the offending player was revealed, of course, to be Jackson. That guy's ego was seriously more fragile than a soap bubble. Beautiful and shimmering one moment, a sticky, inconvenient mess the next.

But Charlie wasn't allowed to scowl much longer. Jackson barreled towards the goal. He sent the ball flying, squarely into the net. Everybody in the bleachers threw themselves to their feet, cheering wildly. The players on the field jumped up and down in celebration and the giant red 0 on the scoreboard changed to a 1.

Charlie got to her feet slowly, cheering with less enthusiasm than those around her. Her eyes stuck to Scott. He didn't look all that happy, especially after Lydia broke out one of the 'We Luv U Jackson' posters and enlisted Allison to help her hold it up. And the grammatical and spelling inaccuracies probably weren't source of his frustration. She winced slightly, imagining the dejected expression that was no doubt hiding behind that face mask. "Brutal," she sighed out shaking her head slightly.

"What was that?" Allison asked, suddenly turning to face her.

"Hm?" Charlie responded stupidly. "Oh, nothing. Go Direwolves!"

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Lydia complained loudly. "We're the Cyclones."

"No matter how many times you tell me, it won't be enough to make me care," Charlie muttered back.

The euphoria of that first goal was short-lived. And not only that, it was soon replaced by a heavy cloud of depression. As the game dragged on, nobody in the bleachers or on the field was drunk on success or high on life. No, the game was a sobering one. Primarily because Beacon Hills was losing. Badly. Within the second quarter the Cyclones found themselves two points behind, and despite all their best efforts were not able to make up the difference. One notable factor, though: none of those best efforts included Scott. The boy was perpetually in range, but apparently never in sight. He might as well have sat on the field and staged a picnic.

A shrill note pierced the air, signifying the end of the last time out available to Beacon Hills. A minute and a half left in the fourth quarter, and they were two points down.

"Which one is Scott again?" Mr. Argent asked.

"Number 11," Lydia replied bitterly. "Otherwise known as the one who hasn't caught a single ball this entire game."

"Well he can't exactly catch a ball if nobody is passing to him," Charlie replied with a roll of her eyes. "Dollars to donuts says Jackson told the rest of the team not to pass to him so he could be the big hero."

Lydia leaned forwards and shot her a scandalized look. "Do you really think my boyfriend is that petty?"

Charlie returned her stare evenly and nodded. "Yes."

Lydia opened her mouth to say something, but seemed to reconsider, instead snapping it shut. She straightened in her seat, crossing her legs primly and staring intently at the field. Allison on the other hand was leaning forwards, almost curled up in a ball with her foot tapping anxiously. Charlie followed her line of sight and found her staring at number 11, who was bent over at the waist and breathing heavily.
"I just hope Scott is okay," she murmured under her breath.

"I just hope we're okay," Lydia interjected.

"I just hope I can get home before 'The Daily Show' reruns start," Charlie mused under her breath. But then her brain fully registered the words that had just been spoke and she turned to Allison. "Wait a second—why wouldn't Scott be okay?"

Allison snorted and raised her eyebrows, looking pointedly past Charlie at Mr. Argent. "It might be because my dad hit him with his car earlier when he stopped by to say hello."

Charlie's jaw dropped as she turned to face Allison's dad. "Isn't it a bit early to be running down your daughter's dates, Papa Argent?" she asked incredulously. "I mean I'm pretty sure they haven't even kissed yet. Vehicular homicide is for when you become eligible for one of those teen pregnancy reality shows."

"Charlotte Evelyn Oswin, hush!" Mel hissed from Mr. Argent's other side. "Be respectful."

Charlie threw her hands in the air and shot them both a sheepish look. "Sorry."

Mr. Argent looked at her coolly, which made Charlie more uncomfortable than if he had shouted at her, so she slowly turned back to the field. The players were arranging themselves for the next face-off. They lacked the solid stance with which they had begun the game. Exhaustion and disappointment had taken their toll. The sun had set long before the first play of the game, but somehow the dark of night seemed to encroach upon the field, creeping in from the woods behind. Oh, the drama of it all.

A few moments of tense silence hung amongst them until that familiar look of stubborn determination crossed Lydia's face. "We need to win this," she muttered to herself. Getting to her feet, she hauled the 'We Luv U Jackson' sign over her head—like it was some sort of freaking magic talisman—and looked down at Allison expectantly. "Allison, a little help here?"

Allison hesitated a moment, eyeing the poster with some skepticism, but soon enough got up to her feet. But judging by the expression on her face, she wasn't enjoying herself very much. Nor was anyone else. The spectators stood still and somber, wearing looks similar to those of family members about to take their elderly relatives off of life support. No hope was left, they were just waiting for the end to come. It was freaking depressing. Charlie's eyes strayed down to the bench. Coach Finstock sat, head in hands, while Stiles twitched frantically. Sighing heavily, Charlie got to her feet and began to stumble her way down the bleachers.

"Charlie," Lydia hissed from where she was standing, "where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to say hi to some people," she hissed back.

"But you don't know any people! You actively try to not know people!"

"I know some people," Charlie scoffed. "And you guys are bumming me out right now."

Bristling at her words, Lydia turned her chin up and faced the field, cheering out Jackson's name. Charlie slowly made her way down the bleachers, avoiding all of the morose faces, and began to walk down the field towards the bench. She would have thought that removing herself from the collective despair audience would lighten the mood somewhat, but the atmosphere surrounding the bench was equally as oppressive. Stiles sat slumped forwards, gnawing on his fingernails nervously as his leg bounced up and down with almost inhuman speed. "Hey," she chirped out, taking a seat next to him and making him jump.
"Hey...Charlie," Stiles said, giving her a weird look. "What are—you doing here?"

Charlie shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her coat and shrugged. "The view was getting pretty depressing from the bleachers. I figured I'd try out a new angle."

"Oh, no," Coach Finstock declared, shaking his head with that same usual, manic energy. "No, no, no. No girls on the field on game day."

Charlie leaned forwards and shot him a weird look. "I'm not on the field."

"No girls on the bench, then!" he shot back. "You're a distraction with the smiling and the nice smelling shampoo, you'll ruin their concentration and then y—" His voice cut off abruptly as he looked and the scoreboard. The dismally low number stood under Beacon Hills's name, mocking the lot of them. "You know what?" he continued, throwing his hands in the air. "Screw it. Just—whatever."

Coach Finstock stood up and began pacing back and forth along the field line, muttering incoherently. Charlie wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Are we sure he's mentally stable?" she asked, gesturing in the man's direction.

"There's a distinct possibility that he's not," Stiles muttered back. His eyes were fixed on Scott's position on the field, his knee bouncing quickly enough to break the sound barrier.

"Are you okay, Stiles?" she inquired.

He made a face and jerked his head to the side twitchily. "Been better."

The two of them fell silent as the referee stepped onto the pitch. He leaned down next to Jackson and the other team's captain and finally, after what felt like a lifetime, blew the whistle. The two players rammed into each other, frantically struggling for the ball in some testosterone-fueled game of Red Rover. Somehow the ball was projected straight up in the air, spinning above their heads. Jackson and his opponent both jumped to their feet, looking around wildly for their prize, but a giant streak of crimson flew over them and swiped it clean out of the air. It wasn't until the person hit the ground and kept running that Charlie got a decent look at him. Number 11. It was Scott.

"Holy shit," she mumbled, her jaw hanging slack as he dodged and weaved between players. "He's a freaking ballerina."

Within seconds Scott was in front of the goal and sent the ball flying into the net. The buzzer rang victoriously, and the number 3 on the scoreboard changed to 4. One point down and still a minute and five seconds left to turn the tide. Charlie, along with the rest of the crowd, threw herself to her feet and screamed her lungs out. Stiles practically had a seizure next to her. Coach Finstock was still pacing up and down the field, but this time their was a modicum of hope on his face.

"Pass to McCall!" he called out through cupped hands. Stiles trailed after him, still jumping up and down, flailing in excitement. "Yeah! Pass to McCall!"

Seconds passed and the reset button had been hit. Stiles was back on the bench, chewing on his gloves for some inexplicable reason, and now it was Charlie's leg that was bouncing up and down frantically. Shit, was she actually invested in the game now? Dammit.

"That is seriously unsanitary, Stiles," she said, swatting at his gloves. "You're going to give yourself one of those gross parasites you have to have surgery to remove."
"Shut up, Charlie," he muttered back in a jittery voice. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm a bit preoccupied over here."

The ref blew the whistle again and the players spread out across the field. The opposing team won the face-off and one of their players took off down the field towards their goal, eliciting a collective groan from the bleachers. But then, all of the sudden, the player stopped, frozen in place like a deer in headlights. Then, for some ridiculous reason, he tossed the ball neatly into the net of Scott's lacrosse stick and stepped out of his way, giving Scott a clear shot at the goal. Charlie furrowed her eyebrows in confusion until she felt herself being pushed aside. Coach Finstock came up behind her and Stiles and stepped over the bench, wedging himself between them.

"Did the opposing team just deliberately pass us the ball?" he demanded in disbelief.

Stiles pulled the glove out of his mouth long enough to nod frantically. "Yes, I believe so, Coach."

Coach Finstock let out a small laugh and nodded as well. "Interesting..."

Scott dodged past the last few players separating him from the goal, drawing his arm back to give him more leverage for the shot. He sent the ball flying and Charlie cringed slightly as she saw it sail directly into the net of the goalie's lacrosse stick. And then something impossible happened. Or at least it should have been impossible. The ball tore through the netting, landing past the goal line. Charlie stayed seated, paralyzed by disbelief, staring in awe. Screams shattered the silence around her. All tied up and 39 seconds still on the clock. The other team's coach started kicking up a bit of a fuss, but was immediately shut down by Stiles and Coach Finstock.

"The ball's in the net. That's the whole point right?"

The moment of truth. The last face-off. As soon as the whistle blew, Jackson swiped the ball and managed to shelve his ego long enough to pass to Scott, who then took off down the field. But when he approached the goal, Scott stopped, looking around him. Two steps to the left, a shuffle to the right, but no movement forward. The clock counted down, seconds slipping away like sand through splayed fingers. Charlie slowly and involuntarily stood up to her full height, her stomach twisting itself into knots with each tick of the clock. Then she heard Stiles's voice from next to her.

"No, Scott, no, no."

Eighteen seconds. Scott stood there, looking around like a cornered animal.

Seven seconds. Two of the opposing players launched themselves at him. Scott drew his arm back, ready to shoot.

"Come on, Scott," Charlie whispered under her breath. She grabbed ahold of Stiles's shoulder for support. "Come on, come on, come on."

Five. Four. Three.

The final buzzer rang. The ball glided into the net. The ground shook beneath them as the crowd jumped to their feet.

They had won, six to five.

A loud cheer erupted from the crowd and people began to spill onto the field. Charlie wasn't sure who had initiated it, but somehow she and Stiles ended up in a one-armed hug, jumping up and down and screaming like idiots. Once the crowds thinned out a little bit, Stiles looked over at her in surprise like he hadn't even realized she was there. The two of them released each other
immediately and took a step apart. Stiles cleared his throat awkwardly and began scratching
nervously at the back of his neck. Charlie rolled her eyes and his discomfort and turned to face
him.

"Good game, man," she said, holding her hand up for a high-five.

Stiles laughed slightly and returned it. "I didn't really have much to do with it, but thanks."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, punching him in the shoulder. "Moral support is a fundamental part of
the team effort. And God knows you were screeching like a lunatic."

Stiles shot her a small, grateful smile which she would have returned, but she was interrupted by
the lilting voice of her aunt. How the woman had managed to find her so quickly in the chaos
reigning on the field, Charlie would never know.

"Hey Charlie," Mel said as she approached them, her face alight with satisfaction. "That was way
more exciting than I expected!"

Charlie rolled her eyes and scratched at her forehead. This was going to be painful. "Hey Mel," she
mumbled less than enthusiastically, waving a hand in the general direction of the boy next to her.
"This is Stiles."

"Oh, Stiles," Mel chirped, drawing out the name. She held her hand out to Stiles, which he took,
but not before shooting Charlie a puzzled look. "I believe we spoke on the phone earlier today."

Stiles blinked in realization. "Oh, right, Ms. Oswin," he stammered out, shaking Mel's hand for
longer than was probably necessary. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," Mel said, her eyes flickering up and down to take in his appearance. "Very
nice to meet you."

"Okay then!" Charlie said loudly, grabbing hold of her aunt's hand. "We're going to go. Stiles,
congratulations again. I'll see you Monday."

"Yup, yeah," he said, giving her an awkward salute. "Monday. The day school weeks generally
begin."

"Oh, and good luck with the English homework."

Charlie felt a small burst of victory at the bewilderment written across Stiles's face. Its blankness
belonged to someone who had no idea what she was talking about. Her lips pinched together,
fighting back the inherently suspicious expression her features were begging to form. "The reason
you called earlier..." she prompted. "Our assignment for Monday?"

"Oh, right," Stiles said, planting his hands on his hips and nodding enthusiastically. "English
homework. Reading. Words and stuff. Yeah, totally. Thanks for that."

"Okay then," Charlie mumbled, giving him an awkward salute of her own before marching off with
Mel in tow.

"He was kind of cute," Mel whispered.

"So are Beanie Babies, but that doesn't mean I want to start a collection," Charlie muttered back.
"Now let's go home. We've got a curfew."
After a quick goodbye to Lydia and Allison, who was desperately looking for Scott, Charlie dragged Mel towards the car, mentally facepalming the whole time. Mel might only be 28 years old, but she was quickly becoming a fantastic parent. She certainly had the 'humiliate the teenager' aspect down pat, meaning she had to be removed from the scene as quickly as humanly possible.

As they made their way to the car, Mel and Charlie passed by a few of the players from the opposing team, all of whom were sulking. Heads drooped, wilting like one of Mel's window box plants she always forgot to water. Charlie didn't blame them. They had lost the game in the space of a minute and a half. It was pretty freaking embarrassing. As the two girls pushed their way through the throngs of people to get to Mel's hybrid, Charlie could catch snippets of their conversations. Mostly it was comprised of the stereotypical guy-whining—the ref had been paid off, they were robbed, blah, blah, blah.

One of the comments, though, stuck in her head. As she opened her car door and climbed into the passenger's seat, she overheard the guy who passed the ball to Scott.

"What the hell was number 11 on?" he shouted. "I swear his eyes were freaking yellow. Like glowing yellow. What the hell kind of drug does that? PCP?"

Charlie paused for a moment until Mel called at her to get in the car. She climbed in, buckled up, and propped her feet on the dash. As she stared out the windows at the woods on her right, flashes of eyes glowed in the brush. Yellow flashes.

A single, familiar question began swirling around in her head.

What the hell was going on with Scott McCall?

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are always appreciated! Thank you for reading!

Chapter 7 - Game Day SOUNDTRACK

Being woken up by Mel and informing her as to the significance of Saturdays, discussing the lacrosse game.

------------Not Again - Yumi and the Weather

Song playing on Charlie's iPod while jogging and when she thinks she sees a blue Jeep (I love the franticness of the rhythm here, I feel like it fits really well with the confusion of Charlie seeing the Jeep everywhere, plus it fits in with her doubt, etc with the Jeep).

------------Content Nausea - Parquet Courts

Lydia pays a visit, criticizes Charlie's wardrobe, tries to convince Mel to let Charlie go out after the game.

------------Moves - City Brat
Arriving at the game, meeting Mr. Argent.

-------- Tomahawk - Wild Yaks

Watching Beacon Hills get their ass kicked by the opposing team.

-------- Don't Shoot - Devo

Sitting on the bleachers with Stiles and watching Scott save the day.

-------- Into Your Dream - Foreign Born

Overhearing some of the other lacrosse players talking about Scott and driving home all pensive-like. End chapter.

-------- Halls of Columbia - Pickwick

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References!

World of Warcraft

The Flying Dutchman - the ghost ship. Not really a POTC reference, but I guess you could consider it one.

Klingon.

"Glitter is the herpes of the arts and crafts world" is a reference to a skit by Demetri Martin. I actually thought a friend of mine made that up and I was like 'I'm totally gonna use that' and she neglected to tell me that she didn't, in fact, make it up. I'm mildly disappointed that she didn't make it up, but whatever.

The chair swivel with Leonard in her lap is a play on that dramatic swivel entrance of all Bond villains.

'Old man yells at clouds' is a Simpsons reference.

The Borg is a Star Trek TNG reference. YOU WILL BE ASSIMILATED!

Stepford

"I find your lack of bacon disturbing"...play on a Star Wars quote.

Beanie babies!
Two figures stood over her. One brunette, wide brown eyes staring into the depths of the engine with interest and maybe even a touch of awe. The other—her reddish locks shining like the most searing flames of hell—lacked any such investment in the task at hand. And more than that, she lacked the patience. The toe of her no doubt designer shoe tapped against the pavement with an almost absurd pace, the sound every so often accompanied by a bereft sigh.

"Can you hurry it up, please?"

Charlie stood stooped over the chrome guts of her Impala, up to her elbows in some noxious black mixture of oil and grease. The morning sun hit the back of her neck, causing beads of sweat to slide down the collar of her flannel shirt despite the crisp weather. The view of the inner workings was obscured by two shadows. As to how Charlie found her work being scrutinized by these two other girls, she was somewhat at a loss. Her plans for this particular Sunday had taken a sharp left turn with the 10:00 am ringing of her doorbell. Wiping the sleep out of her eyes, she had stumbled down those rickety stairs to the front door, still clad in sweatpants printed with small UFOs and more hair hanging loose from her bun than was left in it. And who stood on the other side? Allison and Lydia, perfectly dressed and smiling more brightly than the morning sun. Allison at least had the decency to look confused by Charlie's complete unawareness of their 'breakfast plans'. Lydia on the other hand had simply strode through saying something about pancakes.

The post-game play-by-play. It was something of a tradition in the Oswin family household. Every morning after a big game, Charlie and her dad would munch on waffles and discuss its finer elements—deploring bad calls by the referees, complaining about plays blocked or shots missed, and reenacting various scenarios with the salt and pepper shakers. These days, though, the post game play-by-play had taken a bit of a different structure than those of days past.

This time around, the after-action report had nothing to do with sports whatsoever. The first of it came shortly after Charlie arrived home from the game. A phone call from Allison informed her of the extremely unsurprising news that the girl had kissed Scott in the boy's locker room. No details were spared, delving into how creepy the locker room was at night, how adorable and nervous Scott was, just how fun kissing Scott turned out to be. Allison firmly denied that he used too much tongue, and when discussing their plans later that week her tone even bordered on wistful. All the gushing led Charlie to wonder whether or not Papa Argent would be scheduling a second attempt to introduce Scott to the front bumper of his car.

The closest Charlie actually got to talking about the game itself was the subsequent call from Lydia, most of which was spent grumbling about Jackson having sulked his way through their victory party. Apparently Scott's end-of-game performance sent him into somewhat of a tizzy, and now he and his shellacked hair had slid neatly into the male posturing/overcompensation phase. This involved massive amounts of complaining, a renewal of accusations of steroid use, and
obsessive viewings of old lacrosse game footage to 'regain his edge'. What edge he had to lose in
the first place, Charlie really couldn't say.

As for the post-game breakfast, no salt and pepper shaker reenactments were held. Charlie zombie-
walked her way through one-handedly making chocolate chip pancakes—unwilling to relinquish
her mug of coffee for even a moment—as Allison and Lydia chatted idly. Three cups made their
way down her throat before she flipped the pancakes onto a set of plates, setting them down next to
a can of whipped cream. By the time she sat down the conversation had shifted to the post-game
get together—no doubt to subtly emphasize just how much she had missed out on. But Charlie's
fuzzy, caffeine-deprived brain had found itself distracted by something other than her misspent
youth: the headlines of that morning's paper.

'Jane Doe Identified, Likely Killed in Animal Attack'

'Police to Prolong Curfew in Light of Recent Attacks'

'Kardashian Pregnancy Scare: Which One Is It This Time?'

Alright, so the last one hadn't been particularly appealing, but the animal attacks certainly had a
way of capturing interest. She didn't manage to plow through much before Lydia wrenched it out of
her hands and tossed it across the kitchen, scolding her for not paying enough attention. But not
before Charlie seized onto one particular piece of information. The victim's name was Laura Hale.
Hale as in Derek Hale. Derek freaking Hale. Derek Hale who kept going and making himself
relevant. Usually at the most inconvenient of times.

The breakfast had ended about as abruptly as it began, accompanied by a strategic cough on Lydia's
part. Pancakes and gossip came to a close with the redhead's executive decision that they would be
spending the day at the mall. Again. Until, that is, Lydia found herself outnumbered—democracy
at its finest. Charlie's small victory came with the light entering Allison's eyes as she mentioned her
need to repair her car. This spark was accompanied by a statement of interest on the brunette's part.
A wicked smile had twitched at the corners of Charlie's lips at the sight of Lydia's jaw clicking.

The crisp fall air swirled through the street, carrying with it fallen leaves. By all rights it could be
considered a nice day. Quietly suburban. Positively picturesque. The type of day a child might
even have been happy to mow the lawn, so accommodating was the weather. Until, that is, one of
those fallen leaves had the audacity to get stuck in Lydia's hair. With a huff she ripped it out,
crumpling it to bits before tossing it aside and glowering at her surroundings. Lydia's capacity for
dissatisfaction was a thing to be admired or feared—possibly both. Nothing inspired more venom
in her gaze, though, than the sight of Charlie's tools gleaming in the late morning sun. A source of
aggravation to which Charlie remained most wilfully ignorant.

The screwdriver, torque wrench, plug socket, and plug starter lay next to the car on an oil-stained
towel, scratched and worn with time and use, but clean and rust free. Charlie snatched up the
screwdriver, one by one removing the screws holding the ignition coil housing in place. The small
bits of metal were cold in her palm, a sign of just how long this car had been sitting lifeless in the
driveway. Blowing off any dust, she carefully deposited them in a ziploc and put to the side for
future use.

"Seriously, Charlie?" Lydia demanded. "How long is this going to take?

The heels of Lydia's shoes clacked against asphalt as she began to pace back and forth across the
driveway. Each snap like a ticking clock, her annoyance continued to grow. Lydia looked good in
most things, but impatience wasn't her color. "We were supposed to hang out today," she groused,
throwing her hands in the air.
Charlie's head remained firmly stuck under the open hood of her car. "We are hanging out," she replied. "We, the three of us, are standing in proximity of each other during our leisure time. That is the actual definition of 'hanging out'."

"I'm sorry," Lydia shot back, "but when 'hanging out' there is a tacit agreement that fun is supposed to be had. Are you having fun? Because I'm not."

While Lydia maintained her distance, putting as much space as she could between herself and manual labor, Allison hovered so closely over the car, her hair threatened to dip into the reservoir of grease pooling in the engine's crevices. While Charlie hadn't expected any of Lydia's belligerence from her, the bright-eyed eagerness came as a surprise. With each note or comment Charlie offered, the girl gave a small nod of understanding, filing the new information away. "Come on, Lydia!" Allison protested, shooting a glance over her shoulder. "This is cool. I mean, don't you want to learn how to fix your car if it breaks down?"

Lydia's stiletto scraped loudly against the ground as she spun on her heel. "No," she scoffed. "That's what I pay other people to do. You know, professionals. Who fix cars in a professional capacity."

Charlie snorted at the idea. At this point a professional mechanic would likely have no idea what to do with her car, what with all the semi-functional parts that had been jerry-rigged into functionality with Saran wrap and chewing gum. Gertrude wouldn't run for anybody but her. "Why would I pay some crook of a mechanic $500 to do something that takes me an hour to do on my own?" she smirked into the belly of the car.

The mirth in her voice only served to irritate Lydia more. "Because that mechanic actually knows what he's doing," the redhead snapped.

"That's what I pay other people to do. You know, professionals. Who fix cars in a professional capacity."

"So does she," Allison defended. "I mean, we should all try to be self-sufficient."

"Please," Lydia drawled, her tone dripping with knowing sarcasm. "Self-sufficiency in this day and age is a myth. If you want to be self-sufficient, go live in the woods 1600s-style with your sharpened sticks and moose jerky. I, on the other hand, am perfectly satisfied with climate controlled buildings and Prada handbags. Both of which I can find at the mall. Where we should be."

"But next year's 2012," Allison pointed out, arching her eyebrows playfully. "If the Mayans and that John Cusack movie are right, she might be putting those automotive engineering skills to good use."

Lydia wrinkled her nose in distaste. "I'm going to RSVP 'no' to the apocalypse. I don't want to live in a world without frozen yogurt. But you guys can be each other's plus one for the gore and bloodshed. Have fun!"

Charlie wiped a few stray hairs out of her face and stood to her full height. She narrowed her eyes at Lydia, the stern glare compromised by the giant smear of grease that had no doubt taken up residence on her face. "You know, Lydia, if you wanted your Sunday Funday plans to go off without a hitch you probably should have let me know I was involved in the first place."

The girl exhaled in a loud harrumph. "Well I guess I forgot," she sniped. "Sorry that keeping you from being a hermit is a full-time job."

"Yeah, my apologies for not paying your salary," Charlie returned. "It's because I really don't care."
"Ugh, I hate you."

Allison looked back and forth between the two of them, her nose wrinkling in bemusement. "I'm not sure I'm ever going to understand this dynamic."

"Nor should you want to," Charlie sighed. "It's highly dysfunctional."

Lydia stuck out her lip in a determined pout, and Charlie rolled her eyes. When it came to Lydia, the path of least resistance always came with some concessions. And usually that path was the only one available, as all alternate routes had been sabotaged in one way or another. The girl had all manner of treacherous potential. Letting out a groan, Charlie rocked back on her heels. "Okay, look….if you agree to stand around while I finish up with my car—which will be like...an hour, tops—I will agree to a mani-pedi."

The transition from pouty to pondering was seamless. "One hour?" Lydia demanded, the arch in her eyebrow reaching dangerous levels of steep. She squinted at Charlie, mentally calculating the cost-to-benefit ratio of the exchange. "Fine," she concluded. "One hour, then we're off to mani-pedis."

Charlie swore loudly and turned back to the engine. The insides were a patchwork quilt of parts, taken from different sources at different times, spanning years and probably continents. It was kind of poetic as long as your eyes stayed shut. The setup wasn't pretty by any stretch of the imagination, stitched together out of dead cars like an automotive edition Frankenstein's monster, but that didn't matter under a plate of shining metal. She lived, she worked, she breathed. And with just the right parts, Gertrude could be freaking immortal. If she could drive to school on Monday, dealing with some overly friendly nail clippers would be worth it.

"So what's next?"

The enthusiastic chirp drew Charlie back to the task at hand. Allison stood over the engine, eyebrows raised with irrepressible curiosity. Using her wrist, Charlie shoved some sweaty hairs out of her face and nodded. "Okay, well now that the screws are out, we're gonna want to disconnect the ignition coil and remove the assembly covering the spark plugs."

Lydia wandered in and out of the apartment—her time outside used primarily to express her dissatisfaction—and Allison watched carefully, lips pinched together in concentration. Probably more concentration than was necessary—the process was simple enough. Step one, remove the assembly covering the spark plugs. Step two, unscrew the plugs with the torque wrench. Steps three through six, remove the plugs with the starter, swap them out, re-tighten, re-install the assembly, and done. Paint by numbers.

As she finished, Charlie carefully lowered the hood of the car. As it snapped into place, she breathed a sigh of relief. Gertrude looked whole again. Charlie hated the sight of her vulnerable—hood open so that any random bird could take a crap on her insides if it was so inclined. Closed was better. She circled around to the driver's side door and slipped in. A warm, familiar smell washed over her—some combination of french fries, leather, and pine air freshener. Not a particularly pleasing combination at first whiff, but with the familiarity a warmth bloomed in her chest. Her fingers ran over the cracks in the leather covering the steering wheel, gently reintroducing herself.

"Do you guys need a minute?" Allison asked, smiling fondly.

Charlie snorted and gripped the steering wheel, the material rough under her hands. "Just getting reacquainted."
Finally, she extracted her keys from the pocket of her ripped jeans and reached for the ignition. Moment of truth.

The car shuddered, giving of a pathetic, wheezing cough. Charlie's heart felt in freefall—that split second before plummeting to earth. But with that moment of panic, the engine gave off a roar. It echoed against the surrounding buildings, a full, strong sound, and carried down the street. Charlie's lips twitched into a satisfied smirk. "That's my girl."

No sooner did the engine rev to life, though, than Lydia, who had been firmly ensconced inside the house, appeared in the open window. "Well look at that," she declared loudly. Charlie jumped in her seat in surprise, letting out a strangled yelp, but Lydia barreled on unconcerned. "Noise pollution," she announced. "That's fantastic. Now time for mani-pedis. We're taking my car."

Without further comment, Lydia reached into the car, across Charlie, and yanked the keys out of the ignition. The engine sputtered pitifully into silence, and Charlie let out an offended scoff. "Be gentle with her!" she shouted. "She's just been through an ordeal."

"No," Lydia contradicted. "I've been through an ordeal. Now go inside and get cleaned up so we can go. I want to get to the mall before it closes."

"I think we'll be okay," Allison offered, hiding her amused smile behind her fingertips. "I mean it's noon, so there shouldn't be a problem. Unless your car breaks down. But then, hey, we'd have Charlie to fix it for you. All self-sufficient-like."

Lydia spared Allison a scathing glance, but said nothing. A silence most likely maintained through a great deal of effort. Her lips pressed together in such a tight seal they all but disappeared from her face, rendering her berryliscious lip gloss irrelevant. When she had composed herself enough to form words, they came through gritted teeth. "My car didn't roll off of Henry Ford's first ever assembly line. I think it can get us there."

Hands raised in submission, Charlie clambered out of the car. She took a few small steps backward, away from Gertrude and retreating towards her apartment to get cleaned up. On her bed she found a set of clothes laid out for her. Like she was a kindergartener. In a move of quiet and oddly productive passive-aggression, Lydia had gone through Charlie's closet, organized it by clothing type and color, and selected an outfit she had deemed suitable for the day's outing. Somehow Charlie's ripped, oil-stained jeans and sweaty plaid overshirt had been found wanting. And rather than waste any more of the day on useless back and forth, she relented. By the time she stepped through her front door, her hands had been scrubbed clean of grease, her hair was brushed, and she wore that printed high-waisted skirt and deep blue top.

Goddamn Sunday Fundays.

The Beacon Hills mall was more than just that. Charlie had seen the phenomenon before. The smaller the town, the more compact its recreation. Coming in from the northern gate found you in the movie theater, while the southern entry would direct you to the Macy's. Shopping, manicurists, movies, hell even a laser tag facility all took up residence under that one, gigantic roof, tied together by the friendly neighborhood Target where the dads congregated in the sports section to preserve their collective masculinity. This mashed up nexus of 'fun' was where the girls found themselves, in a manicure studio wedged between a 'J. Crew' and a 'Sbarro'.

Charlie's feet felt odd in her Converse as she shuffled out of the manicurists. After twenty minutes of waddling around in those cardboard flip flops, waiting for the nail polish to dry, she had expected to find comfort in the warm embrace of her fuzzy socks, but they slipped oddly against the cloth. While the experience of a mani-pedi hadn't been altogether unpleasant, the end result was
odd. All those layers of skin stripped away by pumice stones and insistent scrubbing, she likely
didn't have fingerprints anymore. One overly enthusiastic manicurist and she was set for a life of
crime.

Charlie trailed after Lydia and Allison as they marched through the Macy's shoe department, a
frown tugging at her lips. Her thumbs ran over her forefingers over and over again, slick and
unfamiliar. They didn't feel like they belonged to her, some perverse inversion of phantom limb
syndrome. "They removed all my callouses, Lydia," she whined. "They're all gone!"

Lydia didn't bother looking up from her new pair of green Marc Jacobs pumps. "Duh," she
drawled. "That's what they're supposed to do. What did you think would happen?"

"I thought they'd paint my nails!"

Those hazel eyes flicked away from her newest prize just long enough to spare Charlie a
judgemental look. "Have you never had a manicure before?"

"Lydia, I need those callouses to play guitar," Charlie grumbled, waggling her fingers in some
particularly unenthusiastic jazz hands. "The strings hurt like hell without them."

"You mean that alleged guitar I have yet to see you play ever?" Lydia drawled.

Allison chose that moment to stick her head out from behind a rack of Steve Madden, eyebrows
furrowed curiously. "You play guitar?"

"Aha!" Lydia cackled, pointing at Allison. "Thank you, Allison, for making my point."

Charlie let out a pathetic whine, bouncing up and down on her heels like a petulant child, and
crossed her arms over her chest. The leather of her jacket felt rough against the freakishly soft skin
of her palms. Allison, now sporting a pair of leather ankle boots, rounded the corner. "You can get
the callouses back," she said. "It's just extra reason for you to practice. And for now your hands
just feel like silk."

"They feel like raw chicken is what they feel like," Charlie grumbled.

Allison stared back with a blank expression, her mouth hanging open ever so slightly. "The only
response to that I can think of to that is 'ew'."

Letting out another groan, Charlie played the asshole cat and knocked a few shoes from the
display. They clattered to the ground, each sad and lonely without their partner. Lydia raised her
eyebrows pointedly, both of those eyebrows criticizing her lack of maturity. With a huff, Charlie
scooped up the shoes and neatly put them back in place, but not before she got a peek at the price
stickers underneath. Triple digits. What the hell were these constructed from—the supple pelts of
baby unicorns?

Charlie wandered idly through the aisles, picking up articles of clothing only to replace them just as
quickly. Allison and Lydia, what with their steady allowances and stable family incomes, continued
to snatch up shoes and drape colorfully patterned pieces of clothing over their arms. The mall
presented itself as somewhat of a limbo. She stood in it with a wardrobe equally as stylish as either
of theirs, but no way to add to it. The gaping maw of her closet door had been fed well and
regularly by Mel's constant supply of clothing samples and new personal designs, but her wallet
remained a different story. Though not starving by any means, it didn't hold much to dispense.
Eventually she found herself pacing back and forth near the sales rack—the garish discards
mocking her from beneath the 40% off sign—before finally trudging out of the Macy's.
Of all the places in the mall to visit, Target was where Charlie found herself. More specifically, the candy aisle as her belly was easier and less expensive the feed than her wardrobe. The wall of chocolate stood before her, reflective wrappers gleaming more brightly in her eyes than any jewelry. Each hand clutched a candy bar. One, fluffy and airy, sat too light on her palm. Chucking the Three Musketeers bar back into the pile, her fingers curled around the more substantial Snickers bar. An hour into shopping, and she had made her first definitive purchase.

Charlie spun on her heel, marching towards the cash register, but as soon as she stepped past the protective barrier of aisle twelve, she darted back behind that wall. A surprised hiss escaped her lips as she peeked back around the corner. Through those automatic doors strode none other than the five o'clock shadow all day long—having monument to the brooding stare. Derek Hale.

Context was a funny thing. There were probably a half dozen or so locations where Charlie wouldn't be shocked to find Derek Hale. The murder woods for one. Possibly a graveyard. Any high school sporting event seemed to be fair game. But the neighborhood Target? Shopping? Doing normal, everyday activities? During daylight hours? That was too much to wrap her brain around. Which meant she had only one option available. Follow him creepily around the store.

Shoving the Snickers bar in her jacket pocket, she ducked down, waiting until he meandered down the aisle a few yards over. As soon as he disappeared from sight, she bolted forwards, stalking aisle to aisle to find that ridiculously rigid figure. Two almost-collisions later—one small child and one elderly woman—Charlie peered carefully around the corner and found him. Those impossibly angular shoulders sat just as tense as ever under the corners of his leather jacket. The personification of doom and gloom in the brightest lit superstore in existence. Charlie's eyes flicked up to the sign dangling above her head and her heart seized.


Still mostly concealed by a flatscreen TV display, Charlie rooted around in her purse and dug out her phone. She hit speed dial three and pressed the phone to her ear. One, two, three rings, and a loud click echoed in her ear as someone picked up.

"Oh, Oz, thank God," Donald's voice echoed in her ear. "Okay, can you tell me what the hell is up with Twelfth Night? This play is bullshit—it's got every trope in the book. You got twins. You got mistaken identity. There's a goddamn shipwreck in here. And what is the bullshit with the yellow stockings? Malvolio, dude, nobody gives a shit what color stockings you wear—was Willy Shakes shrooming when he wrote this?"

Charlie crouched down lower to the ground, making herself smaller as her eyes stuck to Derek's back. "Just watch She's The Man and it'll all make sense," she murmured into the phone. "Plus it's got soccer in it—I'm actually shocked you haven't seen it already."

"Why would I watch some Amanda Bynes vehicle?" Donald scoffed. "This isn't 2007. Where's your head at?"

"Other than the fact that it breaks down the plot to the play currently annoying the shit out of you? Channing Tatum."

"You make a compelling point."

Derek wandered further down the aisle, his movements oddly reminiscent of Arnold Schwarzenegger's acting in the Terminator franchise. Still ducked low to the ground, she took careful, hesitant steps forward. "Look, I'd be happy to discuss Willy Shakes at a later date," Charlie hissed. "But I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment."
"Oz, why are you whispering?"

"I may or may not be stalking somebody."

She would have liked to say the pause that followed was a long one, but Donald's response was virtually immediate. "Makes sense. You were bound to crack sooner or later. Who is it—William Shatner? The bassist from the Talking Heads?"

"I'm in a Target," she muttered in reply.

"Oh, so it's Dan Aykroyd."

Seeking out cover, Charlie ducked into the clothing section that flanked the sporting goods. The overstuffed racks of clothing stood like technicolor shrubbery, concealing her from view. Her head bobbed over the tops of the racks, raised just high enough for her eyes to track that leather jacket. The lion stalking the wildebeest. Swift. Silent. Deadly. Only in this particular case the lion would likely be the one getting its ass kicked.

"Houston calling Charlie," Donald called out. "You can't lead with something as juicy as 'I'm stalking someone' and then go radio silent. It's rude."

Charlie forced the words out through gritted teeth and pinched lips, somehow afraid the moping wonder could hear her half a store away. "Derek Hale."

The loud squawk that echoed from the other end of the line bordered on offended. "Derek Hale as in serial killer eyes-having, hanging out in the murder woods Derek Hale? The Derek Hale that crashes high school parties and lacrosse games like he's in an episode of 21 Jump Street? The Derek Hale that you keep rambling about all suspicious-like—you mean that Derek Hale?"

"The very same."

"You know, Oz, when you suspect someone of murder, the go-to move is usually to avoid said murderer. Not follow him around a damn superstore. Get your head on straight. Go buy some adult-size pajanimals like normal people."

At that moment, Derek turned, angling his head towards the flannel pajama sets among which she found herself. Her knees buckling beneath her, Charlie dropped to the floor. After about five seconds of awkwardly prolonged eye contact with a suspicious five-year-old whose mother was checking out some ducky pajamas, she slowly stood back up. Derek had his back to her once more and was retreating deeper into the recesses of the sporting goods section, veering into hardware. Hunched over like a Disney witch, Charlie scuttled after him.

"Dude!" Donald growled. "You have to talk to me or I'm gonna assume you've died."

Her hand darted out, grabbing a baseball cap off a nearby rack and yanking it on her head. She pulled the brim down low, just over her eyes, shadowing her face. Incog-freaking-nito. "I read the papers this morning," she hissed as she continued to creep forwards. "They identified the dead body in the woods. It was Derek's sister."

"Whooaaaaaa," Donald murmured in awe. "So if Derek is the killer, then this shit just became hella Shakespearean. And not the yellow stockings, Amanda Bynes type of Shakespeare—I'm talking the awesome tragedy kind of Shakespeare with mass death and dick jokes."

Suddenly, Charlie found herself at the edge of the clothing section. Her toes stopped where dingy grey carpet gave way to laminate tiles. Beyond lay the sparsely occupied aisles lined with various
metal tools, none of which provided any type of cover. The open floor plan left her exposed and vulnerable. It did leave her with a good view, though. And the subject of said view? Derek Hale walking off with a gleaming new shovel tucked under his arm.

"Holy shit!" she swore into the receiver. "Holy fucking shit! He's getting a shovel. Donald, he is purchasing a shovel! Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, he's incompetent," Donald returned with a hearty scoff. "The cops check recent purchases. Buying a shovel right after a murder? That's freaking amateur hour."

Curiosity now trampling all over her instinct for self-preservation, Charlie made the decision to follow. Pausing only to snatch up a pair of sunglasses from their display, she continued forth into the great unknown. Her disguise, while decent enough for celebrities walking amongst the normal folk, was rendered somewhat less effective by the roof over her head. And by the giant tag dangling between her eyes. "Donald, I'm going in."

"Jesus," Donald muttered, exasperation and concern warring for dominance in his tone. "Okay, well if you're going to do something as stupid as stalk a potential murderer around a freaking grocery store, you've got to at least be smart about it."

"Okay," Charlie agreed with a bob of her head. "And how do I do that? Mine the depths of your action movie knowledge, because I'd rather not die in a Target."

Donald let out a dismissive 'pfft' before continuing. "The only advice I have for tailing is automobile based."

"Lethal Weapon? Mad Max?"

"Stop pulling shit from the Mel Gibson roster. I'm talking Driving Miss Daisy."

"Right, only the hard core stuff."

"That's how Miss Daisy rolls. Both literally and figuratively."

Donald's rules were fairly easy to follow, though she did have to translate them from car-speak. The ability to tail someone is a function of that driver's route and their alertness. Try to best gauge both of these variables. Do not follow directly behind the vehicle being tailed. Stay two cars behind at all time. Do not mimic their movements in any way. Serpentine—always travel in a serpentine pattern.

Okay, that last bit he had definitely gotten from The In-Laws. And honestly meant literally nothing when put into context.

Charlie implemented Donald's rules as best she could. She was careful to keep a good stretch from Derek, two or three shoppers between them lest she need to do something drastic and duck behind them like a human shield. Hell, she even hijacked a stranger's abandoned shopping cart, pushing it along idly. Rule seven: drive an inconspicuous vehicle. Was it a dick move? Yes, most assuredly. But desperate times….

Derek slowly wound his way through the hardware aisle, every so often pausing to contemplate one item or another. At one point he picked up a hammer, feeling its weight in his palm, and Charlie damn near had a heart attack. But then he hung it right back on the wall. And then he did the same with a wrench, a screwdriver, some pruning shears—if it was blunt and/or sharp, Derek Hale stared at it for a good long time. And all the while Donald got a running narrative hissed at him over the phone. His play-by-play commentary was not helpful.
Finally Derek turned down the next aisle over, disappearing from view. Abandoning her the shopping cart, Charlie jogged after him to the end of aisle. She hung back a moment at the edge of hardware, not wanting to immediately jump departments with sourface, but peeked around the corner. "He's going into the ‘Garden and Patio’ section now."

"Okay," Donald instructed. "So you're gonna want to see if he goes for any of the classic murder cover-up tools. I'm talking lye. I'm talking tarps. Some types of mulch could totally facilitate body decomp."

"Whooa, slow down Murder, She Wrote," Charlie replied, ducking back around the corner. "This is Target, not a freaking murder emporium. They don't have lye. The closest thing they've got to murder material in 'Garden and Patio' is a well-cushioned lawn chair."

"You could totally murder someone with a lawn chair," Donald barrelled on. "I mean technically you could murder someone with anything. Lawn chairs. Sporks. Milk. There was this one movie where one dude killed another dude with this, uh, this novelty dentist pen. All it takes is commitment."

Charlie's fist instinctively slammed into her forehead. "Oh my God. I just—I don't have the time to do this with you right now. If I don't call you back in a half hour I've been gruesomely killed. Stay classy."

Grumbling to herself, Charlie shoved her phone in her jacket pocket and rounded the corner to find...nothing. Less than fifteen seconds and the dude had up and vanished. Like a whiff of Axe body spray in a wind tunnel—he was just gone. And she was left alone with a sad, empty deck display. Jaunty elevator music tinkled from the store speakers, as bright and cheerful as anything else in the store. But to Charlie it rang sinister and threatening, like the tinkling tune of a Jack-in-the-Box, and she was left waiting for her freakish clown surprise.

Slowly, Charlie spun in place. Her eyes scoured the landscape, seeking out that set of block-like shoulders under a sharp haircut. She made the 360 degree turn until she completed the full rotation, and suddenly found herself being stared down.

A strangled yelp escaped Charlie's lips as she vaulted herself a good foot in the air. But the eyes glowering at her were not dark brown and brooding, they were green and scolding. And they were set a good foot lower than where Derek's eyes should be. "Lydia, what the hell?" Charlie gasped, clutching her hand to her heart.

Forgoing society's conventional greetings, Lydia ripped the baseball cap from Charlie's head and snatched the sunglasses from her face, frowning at them before tossing them on a nearby shelf without question. "Um, you just stole my line," she sniped, brushing a curl of hair over her shoulder. "You just run out of Macy's without so much as a 'see ya later'? Tell me—are you allergic to fun? Does fun make you feel itchy?"

The rapid thumping of Charlie's heart gradually slowed, and as soon as the abject terror had worn off she was left with exasperation. "Why didn't you just call me?" Charlie demanded. "That's what phones are for."

Lydia smiled that serene, unknowable smile of hers. "I prefer to make a dramatic entrance."

"Well you managed that just fine," Charlie sniped. "Lots of flair. How the hell did you know where to find me?"

"Easy," Lydia snorted. "I just identified the closest location that sold Snickers in bulk." She
reached forward for the pocket of Charlie's jacket, her expression seven types of smug as she drew her hand back with a candy bar clutched in her manicured talons. "Well would you look at that. It's a Snickers."

Charlie snatched the the candy bar back possessively. "Alright, fine. You got me. I have a weakness for peanuts and caramel. Sue me."

"Also I downloaded 'Find My Friends' to your phone."

"You what?!"

"Ah, ah, ah," Lydia trilled, grabbing the chocolate back once more. "Allison's waiting for us at Pinkberry before we head home. And I told her to order you something with a lot of fruit in it."

"Who ruins perfectly good ice cream with fruit?!"

Lydia rolled her eyes and tossed the candy bar alongside the hat and sunglasses before linking her arm though Charlie's and yanking her along. An anticlimactic ending to Charlie's first foray in covert surveillance that, while unwelcome, honestly should have been expected.

No chocolate. Fruit ice cream. Goddamn Sunday Fundays.

And goddamn Derek Hale.

Derek Hale. Derek freaking Hale with the serial killer eyes, bad attitude, evasive behavior—including but not limited to the purchasing of shovels and superstore disappearances—and his stupid, stupid perpetual stubble. Somehow the weird shit going on always seemed to come back to him. Well, him and Scott. Their bizarre relationship was another mystery all of its own. They weren't friends, but they were obviously linked in some sort of way. And if she could figure out what the deal with Derek Hale was, then maybe Charlie could find out what the hell was going on with Scott, and in Beacon Hills in general. He was the piece of the puzzle that might allow everything else to fall in place. One of those annoying middle pieces that takes forever to find its place, but ends up being the tipping point.

Cue slightly obsessive internet stalking.

As soon as Charlie arrived home from the mall, she bolted up the stairs to her apartment and booted up her laptop. From what she could glean from the limited records available to the public, Derek Hale had led a pretty shitty life. There was actually a reason for that sour face and grumpy demeanor other than trying to establish himself as an international man of mystery. About six years previously, the majority of his family had died in a horrific house fire. After that he seemed to fall off the earth—he was a ghost. Then again, it was easy to disappear when you had virtually no human connections to keep you tethered. If it hadn't been for Mel, Charlie could have just as easily done the exact same thing.

Ultimately, her few hours of cyber-creepiness yielded absolutely zero results. It wasn't like the guy had a Twitter account where he posted every freaking thought that entered into his head, or if he did he used a pseudonym. He might be on Instagram, posting depressing pictures of dead trees and that kind of crap—she could see that—but his theoretical hipster blog, even if it did exist, was irrelevant to her current purposes.

"Okay, so here's the sticking point," Donald's voice declared through the tinny echo of her computer. His face occupied the upper left hand corner of her laptop screen. He was back at his desk in Providence, notebook and pen in hand. A stack of textbooks sat next to him, hastily shoved
to the side as he abandoned Twelfth Night and seized onto a subject he considered to be of greater interest than Malvolio's yellow stockings. The rest of the Charlie's monitor was a dizzying mosaic of websites and digitized archives of the local news. Her eyes darted from window to window, focusing on everything and nothing. Which was apparently an issue as she should have been listening to Donald. "Yo, Ozbert," he said, more forcefully this time.

Charlie ran her hands down her face, leaning back from the computer. Her nose had been so close to the screen, its glow likely would have given her a sunburn. "Yeah, sorry Donald," she murmured. A few clicks later the other windows disappeared and his face filled the screen. "What's up?"

"Like I was saying," Donald continued, his eyebrows raised expectantly, "we've got one sticking point. In this theoretical horror movie, is Derek Hale the psychotic villain or the moody hero?"

"Those are polar opposite positions in storytelling," Charlie replied.

Donald bobbed his head in agreement. "Yeah, but think of the backstory. The fire, the loss of his family at an early age. That could go one of two ways. Either he becomes a warrior for good, or he goes all end-of-days murder plot and lays waste to the world in the process. I mean, on one side there's Batman, and then you've got Loki with his messed up family situation. Plus their aesthetics are really freaking similar."

"Their aesthetics?" Charlie demanded, her eyebrows drawn together in confusion. "What the hell do you mean 'their aesthetics'?"

Donald's shoulders sagged forwards with something resembling disappointment. As he looked back up at her, it was quite evident a lecture was now in order. "Okay, let's go through the checklist. Does the dude wear a leather jacket?"

"Yes."

"Does he have a sharp, chiseled jaw line?"

"Yes."

"Awesome hair? Probably at least a little bit styled?"

"Yes."

"Does he have dark, romantic eyes eyes that you feel like you could just fall straight into and potentially drown in?"

"Gross. And yes."

Donald waved his hands about so frantically his chair tottered and threatened to tip over. "You see, this is what I'm talking about," he declared. "Like, think Angel from the Buffy. Depending on the episode he is both the good guy and the bad guy. But his look stays the same. The costume department must have saved so much cash."

"Mm hmm," Charlie mused, nodding to herself. "You are aware that this is real life, right?"

A loud thunk rang out as Donald's head hit the desk before him. Her Ikea furniture would likely have buckled under the force. He stayed collapsed forward for a few moments, making good use of his melodramatic streak, and when he wrenched his head back up his eyes were judgemental. "Come on, you gotta admit some level of horror tropism here. I mean I'd be live tweeting this shit
right next to Blood Lake if that wasn't running the risk of getting you axe murdered."

"But the cops said Laura Hale was killed in an animal attack," Charlie countered. "So technically there was no murder to begin with."

A thunderous snap echoed from the computer, jolting Charlie into a different level of awareness. Donald had clapped his hands, loudly and right near the microphone. An admonishing finger was being jabbed directly at the camera. It almost seemed to reach through the screen, pointing directly between her eyes. "Oz," he declared, "you best not be going Drew Barrymore on me."

Charlie worked her jaw, trying eliminate the ringing that loud clap had incited. "Dude," she declared, her thumb pressed just below her ear, "even I can't keep up with all these movie references you're throwing out."

Donald leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest, wriggling in his seat as he settled into his sense of superiority. "Drew Barrymore."

Always with the movies. Action movies, superhero movies, comedies, period dramas, thrillers, even the old vintage stuff—you name it, Donald watched it. All of them. Every last one. 'Research', he called it. Time well invested for when he was living out in Hollywood, writing kickass scripts for kickass movies. Film and television were his second language. Spanish his third. But to the plebeians were not in possession of that encyclopedic knowledge of all things cinema—apparently excluding the Amanda Bynes catalog—conversations often required a shitload of footnotes. Which was the cause of that expression on Donald's face—one Charlie knew well. It was a mixture of frustration and pity. Like he simultaneously wanted to scream to the heavens and hit her with a sad, patronizing 'oh, honey…'.

"Saying it slower isn't going to make me magically know what you're talking about," Charlie sighed. "What the hell does that mean?"

"The first Scream movie," Donald elaborated, groaning at her ignorance. "When that movie came out, Drew Barrymore was the biggest star in it—everyone thought she'd last the whole way through. But she bites it in the first scene. The first on screen death."

"I'm assuming there's a point to be made."

"So you're already making the classic mistakes. Never trust the papers. They're written by people too myopic to believe what's actually going on. You need to be the open-minded protagonist who looks at that carnage and is willing to say, 'this is NOT a boating accident.' By the way, that's Jaws."

"I know that's Jaws," Charlie forced out through gritted teeth.

"You're still suspicious enough about all this nonsense to stalk a guy around a store," Donald barreled on. "You gotta go with your gut—your gut will guide you."

As much as Charlie hated to admit it, Donald did have a point. As she skimmed through the article that morning, she found herself squinting at the print. Not because of the tiny text, but because of that niggling sensation of doubt that had curled in the pit of her stomach. It took one Discovery Channel documentary to see that animal attacks were messy. They're about food, not malicious intent. Ripping and tearing and mauling—that's what animal attacks looked like. A perfectly bisected body, intact limbs, and a face preserved enough for visual identification? It didn't quite reek of bullshit, but it sure as hell wasn't a floral scented candle.
Charlie blew out a long breath, deflating as she sank lower into her seat. Her eyebrows contracted into a ‘v’ as she began to gnaw on her nails. Donald perked up at her apparent despondency, leaning closer to his computer screen as she shrank back from hers. "Your gut is speaking to you," he whispered. "I can tell—you have 'grumpy old man' face….Or do you just have gas?"

"Then spill."

Charlie opened her mouth only to close it again. Several times. Like the sadistic clown at the last hole in a game of goofy golf. "I don't know," she finally said, throwing her hands in the air. "I just...I feel like there's something else going on. There's just too much weird shit and random coincidences."

Donald pounded a fist against the desk and pointed at her with enthusiasm. "Now that's what I'm talking about. Paranoia—the best way to survive a horror movie."

"Thanks," Charlie deadpanned. "I love being told I'm paranoid."

"It's a compliment," Donald said with a pronounced roll of his eyes. "Now as much as I love murder talk, I've got an English test on Wednesday and soccer practice every day this week, so I've gotta be all responsible and shit. Our first big game is on Thursday."

"Fine, be that way," Charlie sighed. "You need any help with Willy Shakes?"

"Nah," he dismissed. "I downloaded She's The Man. Channing Tatum will be my tutor."

Charlie's lips twitched into an involuntary smile and she shot him a double thumbs up as he ended the chat. But any hint of mirth dropped from her face as soon as she closed Facetime. Behind it remained that tiled wall of research, each window a case study in human suffering.

The first article provided the most basic details of the fire—when the fire department got the call, how long it had taken to put it out, the names of eight victims. One of them, Cora Hale, would have been her own age. With the follow up article the fire was declared the result of an electrical malfunction, suspicion of arson, changing it from a tragedy to an atrocity. The pieces that followed that revelation were increasingly demoralizing.

August 4, 2005: No leads.

October 13, 2005: No leads.

January 7, 2006: No leads.

The January article was followed by five years of nothing. And just like that, the Hale fire had made that seamless transition from heart-wrenching catastrophe to urban legend.

Charlie brought her fingers to the keypad and began exiting the windows. They quickly fell from the screen, but as she reached that final article her hand stilled. It was an archive from the Beacon Hills Herald dated to the morning after the fire, digitized and preserved for posterity. The text was almost too small to read, smudged where some bored temp had fed it through the scanner. What was preserved almost perfectly, though, was the photo. Grainy though it might have been, its subject was clear as day. A great, stately house—two stories, a wrap around porch, and several balconies—surrounded grey smoke and shock white flames. And before it the silhouette of a boy—tall for a teenager—hands clasping the sides of his face as he watched it burn. The black and white print made it feel far away, timeless, historic, like one of those old newsreels from World War
Two. It didn't have the look of something that could happen to somebody she knew. Or something that could have happened a twenty minute jog away.

Charlie knew she was being stupid as she yanked the sports bra over her head. She knew she was being stupid as she laced up her sneakers. She knew she was being really, really stupid as she locked the front door behind her and stepped onto that leaf-strewn path behind her apartment building. The sheer magnitude of her idiocy, however, was not to be revealed until 21 minutes and 57 seconds later.

What she had expected to find, Charlie didn't know. A long driveway leading to an empty lot? A cracked foundation at the center of a break in the forest ceiling? The last thing she had anticipated was to find charred skeleton of the Hale house still standing. Though the building's roof had been incinerated in the blaze the face remained, those majestic balconies still clinging on to life. But the wood had warped with the heat, curling inwards so small fissures formed in the planks. With all the sturdiness of a house of cards, one touch would likely bring it to the ground.

Light filtered through an overcast sky, grey but bright and not a shadow to be found. Nothing hidden and nowhere to hide. Chilly though the day was, a breeze colder than most ripped through the trees, shaking their dying leaves with an ominous hiss. Charlie wrapped her arms around her form and took a few small steps forward towards the house. She wasn't one to believe in ghosts, but if in some alternate dimension they happened to exist, she would look for them in a place much like this one.

Charlie rolled her eyes at herself for the shiver running down her spine, but the sensation that she was being watched couldn't be shaken. It had been stupid to come here. She had no reason to come here. And she had no reason not to go.

Charlie turned to leave, but the sudden snap of a breaking twig made her freeze in place.

"Hello?" Her voice, quiet though it was, echoed against the trees. She could hear anxiety in its tone as it returned to her ears. "Is anybody there?"

Charlie's eyes darted to each flicker of movement. A dead leaf fluttering to the ground. A bird taking flight. Her focus pinged back and forth across the clearing at a dizzying rate. Until, that is, they caught something that brought them to a screeching halt. Something completely stationary.

A few feet from the stairs, there was an interruption to that thick blanket of leaves covering the forest floor. The collage of varying tones of red, yellow, and brown gave way to a patch of darkness—a rough oval, stretching about four feet length. With a craned neck and squinting eyes, Charlie realized what she was looking at. Derek had bought himself a shovel, and here she found herself staring into the depths of a pit. Funny how it was about the size of half a body.

"Fuck," she breathed out. "I'm totally Drew Barrymore."

It had taken 21 minutes and 57 seconds to arrive at the Hale house from her apartment. She made the trip back in fifteen.

Chapter End Notes

To those of you who believe that Derek is totally trolling Charlie by picking up the hammer, wrench, etc...You are correct.
Chapter 8 Soundtrack

Allison and Lydia show up at Charlie's door and they fix up the car.

--------Lake House - Pepper Rabbit

Shopping and wandering off.

--------Just Kids - FURS

The stalking of Derek Hale.

--------Riot! - The Coasts

Charlie sees the pit in front of the Hale house and takes off. End chapter.

--------Find Your Fame - Holy Fever
Charlie needed a hobby.

It wasn't that she had no hobbies to begin with. Car repair, guitar, Krav Maga—all those hobbies she kept telling people she had did, in fact, exist. They were not, as Lydia loved to suggest, falsehoods conjured to mask her intense laziness. She had invested two, seven, and nine years in them respectively. But all of those hobbies had fallen by the wayside. Car repair was an activity of necessity. Guitar had become a literal pain with her callouses sheared off. And Krav Maga? If Jackson agreed to be her punching bag it might be worth her time, but he wasn't volunteering to get his ass kicked and Charlie was all out of sparring partners. So what did that leave her with?

Derek Hale. Derek freaking Hale and his decimated family home and his dead sister and his giant, gaping pit. Maybe that pit didn't signify anything sinister at all. Maybe someone had decided to take up some high intensity gardening. Perhaps they dug up a tree stump—who knew? But Charlie needed a hobby and volunteering to be the single member of her own Scooby Squad was the option that kept presenting itself. Nothing like a good, healthy obsession to help pass the time in this sleepy little town. And Donald was absolute shit at dissuading her—the asshat kept prodding her into it. He thought it was funny.

Her first question that needed answering? What the hell was going on between Derek Hale and Scott McCall.

The only discernible connection between Derek and Scott that Charlie could find, other than the odd social encounters and creepy laser eyes, was his and Stiles's ill-advised quest to find Derek's sister's body. And that they thought that he could have killed his sister. Not that they had known that it was his sister at the time. Anyways, her complete lack of progress in comprehending that bizarre dynamic meant that soon enough she was going to be forced to do something she really, really didn't want to do. Straight-up ask. But did that mean she expected a straight answer? No, no it did not. In fact, she expected more evasiveness. But with Scott at least it would be incompetent evasiveness. And the nature of that evasiveness might provide some insight into mystery numero uno. All she had to do was wait for the right time to ask.

Overall her investment in this drama was putting a toe past the line of normal. Which was why the following few days were so frustrating.
Most of the week had progressed fairly normally. Aggressively normally, actually. No murders, no Derek Hale sightings, no biblical plagues, no nothing. Meatless Monday involved a shitload of studying. Taco Tuesday came with a chemistry test. Mac n Cheese Wednesday was boring as hell until her evening was hijacked for more froyo and chick flicks, which ended in touch ups to her already chipped manicure, Lydia deploring her lack of femininity the whole way through. In fact, everything reeked of such bland normality that Charlie began to wonder if all the weirdness was just in her head.

But then Thursday morning happened.

Charlie had actually been enjoying her morning, excepting, of course, the fact that she wasn't still wrapped in the comforting embrace of her bedsheets. Having access to a functional car meant liberation from Lydia's early morning dictations of tastes. Complete windows-down, wind-in-the-hair freedom. Her ride to school featured no scoffs or wrinkled noses. For the first time in upwards of a week she was able to wear something casual, and dare she say sloppy—a black, oversized Mia Hamm jersey she had owned since she was twelve, a frayed pair of denim shorts, a green, lumpy zip-up hoodie, and those green Converse that had been effectively retired since school started. Virtually care-free, she had climbed into her Impala and began blasting 'The Specials' as loud as her speakers would allow, shouting out the lyrics as she zoomed down the thoroughfare. The most dramatic thing on her horizon was Donald's soccer game that night.

Rolling into the side parking lot of the school, Charlie threw her car into park. The parking lot was a wasteland. By some miracle she had actually managed to be one of the first students there—all the other cars she recognized as belonging to staff or members of the lacrosse team, probably in the middle of one of their early morning practices. Actually, it hadn't been a miracle. Not an act of God, but an act of Mel. The woman had seen fit to rip her from the warm glow of sleep at 6:00 am and shove her out the door as soon as possible.

Mentally cursing her aunt, Charlie trudged towards the school. The wind nipped at her bare legs, causing her to burrow further into the fabric of her hoodie. Hundreds of washes had beaten the fabric to a comfortable softness. She pulled the hood over her pink ears before her hands retreated into the sleeves, balling up the cuffs in her fists. Arms now folded over her chest, she was ready for the trek. It started out as one of those blind marches, mind in the cloud and feet automatically stomping from point a to point b. But before making it to the front doors, Charlie's feet came to a screeching halt. The scene painted before her, not even her hoodie could protect her from.

"Holy shit."

More profanities would have likely slipped from Charlie's lips had her hand not flown to her mouth. Before her sat a school bus. On an average day it would have looked just like any other, but three days was as long as Beacon Hills could sustain 'normal'. The emergency exit door had been wrenched open, the metal warped and peeled back. The yellow paint had been scratched away by what looked to be large claws—a set of five. And then the interior....The seats had been shredded, the outer vinyl skin torn to bits so the beige stuffing spilled out and littered the floor. Chunks of cushioning was missing here and there, as if some rabid animal had taken a bite out of them. But while disturbing, it wasn't what rooted her in place. No, it was the blood she saw that made her own run cold. Bright, arterial red covered the bus's interior. It coated the floor, was splashed on the seats, drops slid down the windows like an apocalyptic rainstorm. A handprint stained one window, the only one partially opened, like someone tried to escape only to be dragged backwards. All that blood—someone was dead or halfway there.

"Excuse me," a deep male voice said from next to her. Charlie jumped in surprise and took an instinctive step back. The man, clad in the khaki uniform of the Beacon Hills police department,
brushed past her, drawing a line of yellow caution tape between herself and the bus. Charlie remained on the opposite side of the flimsy barrier, surveying the officers and forensics team as they milled around the scene. Some snapped photos, others took samples of blood and hair and whatever other types of evidence might have been left behind. Shit, was there viscera? That much blood, there had to be at least some viscera.

Charlie's hand left the cocoon of her hoodie, making its way into her pocket almost involuntarily. One hand still pressed over her mouth, the other raised her phone and snapped a few photos. She was a terrible person. She had already passed the fork and the road and was skipping down the path to hell, iPhone in hand.

After a few moments of loitering, one of the men took note of her presence. He murmured some instructions to what looked to be a few lower level officers and shoved his hands deep in the pockets of his jacket, a slightly darker edition of the Beacon Hills PD khaki, before walking slowly in her direction. Her phone was hastily stowed before he came to a stop in front of her. Sandy brown hair sat atop a ruddy, weathered face. His lips were pressed together in a thin line and the creases on his forehead and around his eyes displayed a combination of exasperation and concern. A set of emotions he seemed to experience frequently given the way his expression fell easily into those lines. Planting his hands on his hips, he presented her with a tired sigh.

"Hey kid," he said, nodding in her direction. "Are you alright?"

Charlie cleared her throat and bobbed her head. "Yeah—yes, sir. I'm fine."

The groove between the man's eyebrows deepened, looking at her like he expected her to leave. When she didn't he sighed again and pinched at the bridge of his nose. Given the bloodshot surrounding the green in his eyes and the coffee stain on his sleeve, he had been awake for quite some time. "Is there something I can help you with, then?"

Biting down on her lip, Charlie's eyes darted to the bus before returning back to the man. "What happened here?" she asked, waving her hand in the direction of the crime scene.

"It looks like another animal attack," the man replied, glancing over his shoulder at the carnage. "It happened some time last night."

"Yeah," Charlie breathed out. "Yeah, I gathered that from the claw marks and the blood. I was wondering a bit more about the specifics. Is whoever was attacked still alive?"

"Can't say," he shrugged. "We haven't found them yet. We're canvassing the area right now. So if you see anything suspicious be sure to let an officer know."

Swearing under her breath and scratching at her forehead, Charlie averted her gaze and took a good long look at her Converse. As she looked back up, she noticed the gleaming badge pinned to the front of the man's shirt. It read 'Sheriff'. The man in front of her was Stiles's dad. The revelation threw Charlie for a loop. Odd that someone this steady and grounded had birthed a kid so jittery he was one Adderall away disrupting his molecular makeup and phasing through solid materials. "You must be Sheriff Stilinski," she said, offering up a weak smile of greeting.

"Yeah," the sheriff replied, curiosity causing his eyes to squint further. "Yeah, that's me. Who's asking?"

Charlie stuck her hand out. "I'm Charlie Oswin. I go to school with your son. Though that's probably obvious given where we're standing right now."
"Oh," he said, those squinting eyes widening slightly in surprise. He took her hand and gave it a firm shake before stepping back and folding his arms across his chest. "I remember Stiles mentioning a Charlie. He didn't make it completely clear that he was talking about a girl."

"I'll try not to hold that against him," Charlie said with a light snort. "Or you for that matter. The two of you are lucky that I'm secure in my femininity." As the sheriff let out a reluctant chuckle Charlie's eyes strayed to the bus, that cold shiver afflicting her once more. She hooked her thumbs through the belt loops of her shorts and rocked back on her heels. "I know the last thing you need is a smartass kid getting in the way, but I wouldn't feel right not asking—is there anything I can do to help?"

Sheriff Stilinski gave a firm shake of the head. "I'm afraid not. Like I said, if you see anything suspicious, notify one of the officers around campus. Beyond that just go ahead to your class and pretend to have a normal day. And try to make sure that idiot son of mine doesn't get into any trouble."

Charlie gave a theatrical wince. "Sorry, sir," she shrugged. "I have a wide range of skills, but getting Stiles not to do something stupid once he has decided to do that stupid thing is far, far beyond my abilities."

The sheriff just sighed and nodded, scratching the back of his neck in a way oddly similar to Stiles himself. "Yeah," he mused, more to himself than to her, in a tone equal parts frustration and fondness. "That's my boy." He glanced back at her, the exhaustion even more prominent in his eyes now that he had relaxed. "It was nice to meet you. I'm sure I'll see you around, though hopefully under less official circumstances."

Without waiting for her response, Sheriff Stilinski turned around and headed back to the bus, pausing only to accept a cup of coffee and a clipboard from one of the deputies. His voice called out loud and gruff, coordinating those present into a canvass. With his back turned and the majority of the team occupied, Charlie grappled with phone, subtly snapping a few more photos before she did as she was told and headed inside.

That day Charlie found it difficult to focus on her studies, despite the insistence of the announcement ringing through the loudspeakers before first period. "Attention, students. This is your principal. I know you're all wondering about the incident that occurred last night to one of our buses. While the police work to determine what happened, classes will proceed as scheduled."

Yeah, right. The administration office was clearly functioning in a state of mass delusion. Students typically sought out excuses not to focus on their studies, and one bloody excuse had just fallen into their laps. No, that Thursday was going to be dedicated to rampant speculation. Even Mr. Hobson seemed resigned to it, making no comment on the steady murmur and flurry of notes being passed back and forth. And Charlie was no exception to that speculation. But she opted to keep those thoughts to herself, barely talking to Allison through English class excepting the cheerful 'good morning' and wave goodbye. Not that Allison was particularly aware of Charlie's silence—her attention had been dedicated more to Scott. The adorableness of that pair bordered on nauseating.

What Charlie did do was eavesdrop on other people's conversations, trying on their theories like pairs of pants at Forever 21. Who had died, who had done it—the most colorful suggestion so far was Yeti. But given the sheer level of destruction on that bus, Yeti almost seemed plausible. 'Mountain lion' was the most widely circulated theory, but in her eyes it didn't hold water. No way a mountain lion had the strength to crush metal like that, and it had no way to find the leverage to peel the door down from the top. Yet another addition to her file of 'weird, unexplainable shit' file.
That file was getting pretty big lately.

English class blurred into math which blurred into economics which blurred into chemistry. With the start of the day Charlie diligently each word spoken or written on the board, but her brain didn't seem to process any of it. In one ear, out the other, and her hand a mindless automaton performing its task. By fourth period chemistry she had given in to distraction entirely. All that graced the page of her notebook was an elaborate doodle of a golden retriever wearing a soccer jersey. Luckily enough, she had managed to snag a seat in the far corner back row, far from Mr. Harris and his beady, rodent-like, near-sighted eyes.

Charlie filled in the jersey with the blue of her pen, leaving only a '06' in white—Donald's new soccer number. Eyes fixed on Harris's back, she slowly reached into her bag, extracting her phone as carefully as possible. She opened her chemistry textbook and sat it on its spine, allowing it to act as a shield between her and the rest of the class before snapping a photo of the drawing. Attaching the photo to a text, she sent Donald a quick message.

From: Charlie Oswin; To: Prettiest Dude in this Contacts List, Don't Lie

Here's a dog ur not allergic to. His name is Chewbarka & he loves & supports u & he is ready to see you kick ass during ur game. P.S. we had another murder/animal attack this morning. One of the buses looks like Miss Frizzle drove it through Jurassic Park.

Despite his being in his seventh period class, her phone immediately buzzed in her hand. Score one for the academic excellence of the Bratz.

From: Donald Price; To: Oswin Some, Lose Some

He is handsome and I am proud of him. Also stOP HOARDING ALL THE MURDERS? LET ME HAVE AT LEAST 1 PLZ? WTF?

Charlie snorted in spite of herself and placed her thumbs over the keys for a response until Harris's hostile voice called out across the classroom. The quiet 'ahem' rang like an air raid siren, inspiring a proportional amount of panic. Immediately she shoved her phone into her shorts pocket and slammed her textbook shut, lying it flat on the desk. Pen once more in hand, she stared attentively at the chalkboard. But Harris's focus wasn't directed to her, thank God. The unhappy victims of his rage were none other than Stiles and Scott, sitting one behind the other a few rows up.

"Mr. Stilinski," Mr. Harris drawled out, his tone dripping with an unwarranted degree of self-satisfaction, "if that's your idea of a hushed whisper, you might want to pull the headphones out every once and awhile. I think that you and Mr. McCall would benefit from some distance, yes?"

Stiles was facing away from her, but the sudden shift in posture implied he very much did not think he would benefit from such distance. A suspicion confirmed as he stammered out a weak 'no'. But Harris, insensitive dictator that he was—emphasis on 'dick'—waved the pair of them off. Reluctantly Stiles and Scott both collected their things and moved across the room, trading soulful glances as the ghostly strains of Sarah McLachlan's 'I Will Remember You' echoed in Charlie's head.

"Let me know if the separation anxiety gets to be too much," Harris called out snidely as they split.

Scott began to move to the front of the class, opting to sit in a free seat in the front next to some girl wearing a hat—Harley or something. Stiles on the other hand turned to the back of the class, scanning it for an available place to sit. Charlie gave a slight wave and his eyes jumped to her, his face relaxing into an expression of relief. He made his way towards her, tossing his bag to the floor...
and almost falling into the chair next to her.

Stiles silently fished out his notebook while Charlie turned back to hers. Neither of them began to write, though. Charlie began to sketch the golden retriever a hedgehog best friend named Kevin. Stiles tapped his pen against paper, the small smudges of ink darkening the corner of the page into an inky black, and glanced at the back of Scott's head with what could only be described as an alarming frequency. Narrowing her eyes at him, Charlie leaned in slightly.

"I can try to ease you through the separation anxiety," she murmured.

Stiles twitched violently at the sound of her voice. He blinked in confusion and stared straight forwards at the chalkboard, refusing to make eye contact. "Wha—what do you mean?" he asked with a jerky shrug.

"I've been working on a Scott impression," Charlie drawled casually, still sketching her hedgehog. "Not to brag or anything, but I think it's getting pretty good."

Stiles snorted and finally looked in her direction, a fleeting glance out of the corner of his eye. "Are you about to make fun of my best friend?"

"Yes, absolutely I am," Charlie replied with a definitive nod. "Why? Is that going to be a problem?"

"No, not at all," Stiles answered immediately, shaking his head with such vigor it threatened to pop off his neck like an old bobble head whose head had been tapped one time too many. "No, I have less than zero problems with that. Like, absolutely none whatsoever."

"Okay." Charlie dropped her pen and shifted to face him. "Are you ready for this? Because in a few seconds you're not going to know where I end and Scott begins." Immediately after the sentence passed her lips, Charlie scrunched up her face in distaste. "That sounded a lot dirtier than I meant it."

"Yeah," Stiles nodded in agreement. "That wasn't a great moment for you."


A dull pain bloomed in her shoulder as Stiles nudged her with one of his oddly pointy elbows. "Just do it already," he hissed. "Because any second Harris is gonna turn around and you've hyped it too much now."

Charlie elbowed him right back, eliciting a scandalized hiss, but otherwise relented. "Okay," she acquiesced. "Here it is." She twisted her head, cracking her neck, shook out her limbs, and cleared her throat before reaching for her water bottle. The bottle was poised at her lips when she noticed Stiles staring at her, now not even pretending to pay attention to the lecture, with eyes narrowed and mouth hanging open in complete bemusement. "What?" Charlie demanded sharply.

"What are you doing?"

Charlie gestured indignantly with her water bottle, sloshing some onto the table. "Be patient," she hissed back. "I'm getting into character!" A few more moments of preparation, and she let her shoulders sag forwards slightly, rearranging her features into Scott's usual endearingly plaintive expression. "Blah, blah, Allison, blah, Allison, lacrosse, I hate Jackson, blah, Allison, blah, blah, blah."

A creeping feeling of discomfort followed, along with Stiles's dumb stare. Too far? Line crossed?
Was this Panama City all over again? But within a few moments, Stiles was virtually swallowing his fist to suppress the fit of laughter currently racking his body. When he finally managed to choke back the laughs into some semblance of composure, he pressed his lips together in a thin line and nodded enthusiastically. "That was uncanny. For a second there I was all like, 'whoa, Scott, buddy, when did you grow out your hair when did your voice un-go through puberty'. It was like he was right here with me."

"I know," Charlie smirked. "I have a gift. I think I might audition for the spring musical."

"I would totally go see that."

"I appreciate the support." She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. "I have one for you too."

"One what?" Stiles queried.

"An impression," Charlie elaborated. "I have one for most people. Yours is mostly just high-pitched shrieking, though. Still….uncanny…."

"Shrieking?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "Specifically shrieking and falling off stuff. But, you know….nuanced."

"Oh, well as long as it's nuanced," he drawled sarcastically.

Any further comment was cut short as Harris turned away from the chalkboard to face the class. Talking while the man had his back turned was risky enough—he had both the eyes and the ears of a rodent. Talking while he was facing you was a guaranteed week of lunchtime detentions. So Charlie found herself pretending to pay attention to a boring ass lecture on molecular polarities. Stiles though...his head pointed in the direction of the board, but his eyes were all over the place. Scott, the wall of windows, the clock to check the time, Scott again, the door to the classroom—it was enough to make Charlie dizzy. Something else was on his mind.

Now that Charlie thought about it, Stiles was the best pipeline of information that Beacon Hills had to offer. The authorities weren't likely to dispense information freely, but Stiles had direct access to police resources no other civilian had. A veritable font of insight into the attacks was one rambling speech away. And if she knew one thing about Stiles, it was that the boy liked to talk. Shit, waiting for Harris to turn his back again was going to be agony.

"Do you know if they found the victim yet?" Charlie asked at the first available opportunity.

Stiles's head snapped in her direction. "What—what do you mean?"

"Come on, Stiles," she hissed back. "I got to school early and saw the bus. I talked to your dad and he said—"

"Wait, you talked to my dad?" Stiles demanded. He paled visibly, those moles on his face becoming more pronounced than ever. "My dad, what did he—I mean what did you—"

"He pulled out a bunch of naked baby photos," Charlie replied, rolling her eyes. "Stiles, I was standing in front of a mauled bus. That's where the focus was. I asked about what happened and he said they hadn't found the victim yet. I just wanted to know if—"

Her query was cut off by a shout from the front of the classroom. "Hey, I think they found something!"
The girl next to Scott was hovering above her seat, craned neck and hands planted on the table, peering out the window to the street below. Nothing else was needed for class etiquette to dissolve, even under Harris's sadistic eye. Chairs scraped against the floor as a ripple of eager murmuring washed through the class. Within seconds a dozen faces were shoved up against the glass, Charlie's included. Using her elbows, she maneuvered through the crowd till she was at the very front and peered at the scene below.

Five people stood below, two paramedics and two deputies surrounding a grey-haired man laid out on a stretcher, pushing him urgently towards an ambulance. The lights were on, but the siren stayed silent, trying to be stealthy around the building filled with impressionable, easily traumatized teenagers no doubt. Charlie pressed herself closer to the glass, mashing her nose into it without even the barest hint of dignity. The man on the stretcher—blood matted his hair and was smeared across his ashen face. A face so pale there was likely more blood on in than in him. The room reached an unnatural level of quiet as the students peered down at the street below.

The man vaulted up in the gurney. A visceral, primal scream erupted from his twisted lips, and all the students jumped in fear. That shriek—that was what terror sounded like. But Charlie didn't move as they loaded him in, thrashing violently with a strength someone that frail shouldn't have. The ambulance stayed silent as the doors were shut behind him. Not a peep could be heard as it drove off. It wasn't till it turned the corner onto the next road over that the muted screech met Charlie's ears.

Needless to say, Harris didn't accomplish much in the way of 'teaching' for the remainder of that class. The whispering and theorizing were irrepressible. Groups formed that could not be broken up, not even by Harris's threats. None were more frantic or more indivisible than the dynamic duo of Stiles and Scott. The pair of them holed of in a corner, far from prying eyes. Charlie, though, she stayed silent for the rest of the class. The image of that guy's face was lodged in her brain. Complete, utter, undiluted terror, like he had looked death in the eye himself. What the hell had he seen? Something fucking harrowing most likely.

When the lunch bell finally rang, Charlie shoved her books in her bag and headed for the door.

"Hello!"

The moment she passed the threshold of the classroom, she was assaulted by an overly energetic and chirpy voice. Charlie jumped in surprise and dropped her bag, its contents skittering across the floor. Sighing heavily, Charlie squatted down and began grabbing her stuff. "Jesus, Lydia," she muttered under her breath, "you scared the crap out of me."

Lydia leaned against the wall or lockers, almost lounging, and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "It's good that you've finally learned to fear me," she trilled. "Most people do so instinctively. You really don't have the best learning curve."

Charlie sighed and pushed herself to her feet, tucking the last stray pen into her messy bun. "Are you only here to demonstrate how terrifying you are, or are you just ambushing me for funsies?"

With Charlie now standing at her full height, Lydia was able to take in her wardrobe in all its glory. Her eyes flicked up and down Charlie's form, mentally cataloging each item of clothing. Noting which ones she would later douse in kerosene and set on fire, most likely. The scuffed up Converse were dispensed with quickly, as were the worn shorts. Even the slouchy hoodie was given a reprieve. The sticking point of her sartorial critique seemed to be the Mia Hamm jersey. And honestly Charlie really couldn't fault her on that one. It had started out a crisp black, but over the years it had faded into a somewhat dingy dark grey. Worn in some places, pulled in others, frayed...everywhere.
"You've been avoiding me all day," Lydia finally said, directing her pointed stare to Charlie rather than her ensemble. "And now I know why. You didn't want me to see this—" she flailed a hand in Charlie's direction "—this monstrosity. You look like you've just stumbled out of a thrift shop."

Ignoring the jab, Charlie shot Lydia a skeptical look. "It's barely noon. That does not qualify as all-day avoidance."

"Ah, ah, ah," Lydia replied, wagging an admonishing finger. "We haven't moved past the wardrobe yet. Now tell me, because I'm really curious…you have a food stain on a black shirt. I don't even know how that's possible."

"Is there a question there?"

"How is the question that I'm asking. Actually, I'm more interested in why. Why you insist on torturing me, why you're an actual disaster of a human being, why this shirt exists….

Letting out a groan, Charlie folded her arms across her chest and collapsed against the portion of the lockers next to Lydia. Her fingers wound and unwound in the hem of her shirt "Donald had a game today," she explained. "We bought the jerseys together back in Galveston, and on game days we wear them. It's just a good luck thing. Five years comes with stains."

Lydia opened and closed her mouth multiple times before she deemed her response adequate. "So," she announced, jabbing a glossy talon at Charlie. "What you're telling me is that somewhere in Rhode Island, the cute guy I saw on your computer that one time is wearing a matching jersey?"

"Yes," Charlie nodded.

"You have literally zero excuses for being single right now." Charlie's responding scoff only caused the redhead's eyebrow to move further up the slope of her forehead. "What?!" she protested. "I call them like I see them."

"Is this seriously your priority right now?" Charlie demanded. "In case you haven't noticed, there's other crap going on right now."

"Ugh, don't even get me started on that whole situation," Lydia said, waving idly down the hallway in the direction of the parking lot. "Everybody has been talking about that all day. It's depressing. Like I really want to hear about some guy who got attacked by a mountain lion."

Charles wrinkled her nose in response. "Seriously? That's what you're going with?"

"Yes, seriously." Lydia pushed herself off the lockers and linked her arm through Charlie's, dragging her down the hall. The three inch heels were not enough to combat the height difference, causing her to yank on Charlie's arm at an odd angle. It was only through concerted effort that Charlie didn't topple over and crush her. "Now come on," Lydia declared. "We're eating at a different table today."

Charlie stumbled along, trying to keep up with Lydia's determined step while remaining upright. "Why? You're usually pretty dead set on us eating at the center table."

"Yes, because it has the most exposure," Lydia explained, her voice slow and patronizing, as if she was speaking to a toddler. "But today has another objective." She paused, no doubt waiting for Charlie to ask what that objective was—something which Charlie refused to do on principle. The expectant silence was finally broken with a hearty scoff. "We're sitting with McCall and that little friend of his today."
The suspect motivation rang as loudly in Charlie's ears as the sound of Lydia's heels clacking down the hall. Such an alteration of the routine required an ulterior motive. She shot the redhead a suspicious glance through narrowed eyes. "Okay?" Charlie drawled, withdrawing her arm from Lydia's crushing grip. "That sounds fine to me. I'll go draw up a seating chart to feng shui our personalities."

"That won't be necessary," Lydia chirped. "I already worked all that out. There will be as much space between you and Jackson as possible, for obvious reasons. Your bickering derails pretty much any substantive conversation—"

"Oh, so we're having substantive conversations. What a refreshing change of pace."

Lydia barrelled on, failing to register any words that didn't belong to her. "So Allison will be sitting next to Scott, obviously. Jackson will be next to me. I'll also be sitting next to McCall of course—"

"Why 'of course'?" Charlie demanded, giving Lydia the side-eye.

Lydia gave a musical scoff and rolled her eyes, unwilling to pass up such a 'teachable moment'. And comment on its teachability. "Come on, Charlie," she sighed. "It's like you actively try not to understand what I'm talking about."

"That's actually true," Charlie said, poking Lydia in the shoulder only to have her hand smacked away. "I actively try not to understand what you're doing, because I'm pretty sure my brain would melt under the strain of trying to decode the bizarre 'social system' logic you operate under ninety percent of the time."

"Well then," Lydia huffed. "I will try to explain it in very clear terms. I'll even be monosyllabic whenever possible. Just so that you don't have to work to hard."

"This Charlie thank you for simple talk," Charlie replied in stilted, staggered words while pointing to herself. Lydia glowered at her antics, but she simply smiled back beatifically. "Simple talk help Charlie thi iiiis much!" She held her arms out wide to indicate, and that smile morphed into a dopey grin. "Charlie hug Lydia?"

Charlie advanced on the readhead, ready to envelop her in a giant hug, but Lydia quickly deployed evasive maneuvers and ducked under Charlie's arm. "Put those down," she hissed, yanking Charlie's arms back to her sides. "I really can't take you anywhere, can I?"

"And for that I thank both God and Stan Lee every day," Charlie sighed in return.

Lydia let out a grunt of frustration that somehow still managed to be ladylike before speaking again. "Back to my point," she bit out. "I'll be sitting next to McCall because he suddenly decided to go and make himself relevant."

"Are you saying he was irrelevant before?" she said, keying in her combination. "Wow, Lydia, that's pretty harsh."

Lydia strode a ways past Charlie, planting her hands on her hips so she could employ a dramatic spin. "You know what I meant. If you look up Scott McCall's photo in the freshman yearbook he looks like he's clutching his inhaler."

Charlie yanked open the door to her locker. "Yearbook photos are only from the shoulders up. You wouldn't see his hands."

The look she received in response was decidedly unamused. "You know what I mean," she whined,
waving a hand absently. "Don't be so obtuse, Charlie. I was being metaphorical. The topic at hand is the fact that Scott McCall went from being just another player on the team to a player." Special emphasis went on the last word, and it came with a set of arched eyebrows.

Charlie let out a theatrical gasp and clasped her hand over her heart. "What?! Scott's cheating on Allison?"

Once again, she found herself on the receiving end of the patented Lydia Martin 'melt your face off' glare. The girl marched forward and slammed the locker shut, far too close to the tip of Charlie's nose than comfort might allow. Arm snaking back through Charlie's, Lydia proceeded to frog-march her to the cafeteria. To the outside viewer it might have appeared ridiculous, but this was a frequent enough occurrence that the Beacon Hills student body had likely already become accustomed to the sight of Charlie tripping down the hallway on Lydia's arm. "Okay, again, you know that's not how I meant it. He's a player because he suddenly has lacrosse potential. Not because he's running around with a ton of girls."


"Intentional misunderstanding," Lydia corrected. "Now can we get back to my original point, please? Because of all this lacrosse stuff, Scott is positioning himself a little higher on that social ladder you pretend not to know anything about. Which, by the way, is probably courtesy of your being at the top of it. Anyway, after the way he played the last game, he's jumped a few rungs. That, combined with the fact that he and Allison are rapidly becoming an item, well….."

"Well, what?"

"Ugh, Charlie, you have no head for strategy," Lydia chided.

As Charlie began to parse apart Lydia's weird insinuations, an involuntary grimace pulled at the corners of her lips. "Lydia, are you about to start socializing with Scott because you're afraid that he and Allison are about to veer off and form a rogue shadow popular clique that might rival yours?"

"No!" Lydia protested, the squeak of falsehood ringing just a little too loud for plausibility. "No, absolutely not." Charlie raised her eyebrows pointedly, and the slightest crack appeared in the grand, marble facade that was Lydia Martin. But she shook it off just as quickly, and only the buffed and polished exterior remained. "The point is that Allison is our friend. Since she and McCall clearly have a relationship in the works, I think we should be friends with him as well. It's all about making the effort—I am being considerate. And the conclusion of this ridiculously rambling conversation is that we will be sitting with McCall and that Stiles guy for lunch today."

Charlie gave a noncommittal jerk of the head. Honestly, as much as she disdained the thought process that had led to these revolutionary lunch plans, she had no problem with the outcome. She didn't mind hanging with Scott and Stiles. But Scott and Stiles might have a problem hanging out with Jackson. Oh, well. Fighting was an exercise in futility. And watching would probably fun. And painful, but mostly fun. Probably. Possibly.

"Fantastic," Charlie sighed in resignation. "And in this impromptu ambush, where exactly do I fit in the formation."

"Oh, where you sit doesn't matter." The dismissiveness of Lydia's response left Charlie a little offended. Noticing her reaction, Lydia waved a hand. Dismissively. Which really didn't help. "Don't be like that," the redhead pronounced. "You know you'd be completely terrible in this
scenario anyway. You're either too principled or too uninterested. Either way you're useless to me."

"Okay, then."

Now at the end of the hall, Lydia opened the cafeteria door with a flourished wave of her hand. Her movements sometimes seemed like magic, even inanimate objects—impervious though they were to mental manipulation—somehow bending to her will. "I'll tell you what," Lydia continued, squeezing Charlie's arm a little tighter. "You can sit next to McCall's friend and remove him from play altogether. The two of you can talk about that geeky crap you like—the second shooter or that the moon landing was faked."

"Okay," Charlie declared, holding up a hand to get her to stop talking. "Being a sci-fi enthusiast and subscribing to conspiracy theories are two totally separate things." She paused for a moment. "Area 51's totally real though."

"I rest my case."

As they approached the lunch line a head of long, curly brunette hair soon stood out. They caught up with Allison just as she was joining the queue, flanking her in an almost military formation. "Hey Allison!" Lydia said brightly as she sidled up next to the girl.


Opting not to be a cog in Lydia's massive, yet intricate machine of manipulation, Charlie offered up a single wave before snatching up a tray and entering the line. She focused the majority of her attention on the elaborate graffiti sharpied onto the red plastic—male genitalia, super original—but Lydia's voice was too close to fully ignore.

"So," Lydia announced cheerfully, "I was wondering if we could all sit with Scott for lunch today. I'd really like to get to know him better. I know he and Jackson have had their problems in the past, but I think it would make everything more enjoyable if we could all be friends."

A wrinkle of confusion occupied Allison's forehead, but it soon smoothed out as her face morphed into an expression of... joy? Contentment? Happiness? Charlie couldn't quite place it, but it was ill-advised. And Allison would likely end up regretting it. Sooner than later. Shaking her head, Charlie pushed her tray further down the lunch line, doing her best not to ogle the slow motion train wreck in progress.

"Okay, sure," Allison nodded. "Yeah, I think that would be a great idea."

Charlie choked back a snort at the wide, shark-like smile that split across Lydia's face. The sheer number of teeth involved carried an aura of menace. "That's great," Lydia said, whipping out her phone to send a quick text. "I'll let Jackson know."

While Lydia was busy networking, Allison turned to Charlie with a grin on her face. Those sweet, naive dimples were in for a rude awakening. "This is great!" she sighed. "I feel like I've been dividing up my time so much I've been missing out on half the things going on." She pursed her lips, a thoughtful frown erasing the previous giddiness. "You know, I don't think I've really spoken to you about anything but Scott for the past couple of days. Except for chemistry, and that's just depressing. We need to catch up. What's new with you?"

Charlie blew out a long breath and shrugged. She pushed herself up on her tiptoes and slowly lowered herself back to her heels. "I think my hair grew like 0.1 centimeters. So that's fun."

Allison snorted and shoved Charlie lightly in the shoulder before grabbing a tray herself. But while
Allison took her time, chatting with Lydia about her date with Scott the following night, Charlie sped through the line. Meal of the day? Spaghetti and meatballs, doused in a marinara sauce that was definitely not just ketchup with a little bit of pepper thrown in. By the time she got to the tiny milk cartons, she had broken the sound barrier. Sliding her tray off the counter, she made a beeline for Stiles and Scott at their usual seat near the windows. Their heads were tipped together, speaking in hushed whispers inaudible above the din of lunchtime teenage chatter, but given the severity of their expressions it was something serious.

"You can't just cancel your entire life," she heard Stiles murmur as she came up behind him. "We'll figure it out."

Charlie unceremoniously slammed her tray down on the table just to the left of Stiles and both boys jumped. "Figure it out later," she declared.

"H—hey Charlie," Stiles stammered as she pulled out the muted orange chair next to his and sat down.

"How's it going," Scott tacked on, swallowing heavily.

"Okay, so here's the deal," she said abruptly, opening up her fruit cup and stabbing at its contents with her spork. "You're about to be invaded. ETA's at about fifteen seconds, so if there's any weirdness going on you're gonna want to tuck aside in a deep, dark corner."

Scott laughed nervously. "What—what are you talking about.

Charlie opened her mouth to explain, but before she could the answer itself came marching towards them in designer pumps. "That," Charlie said simply, jerking her head in Lydia's direction.

They barely had the chance to turn their heads before Lydia appeared at Scott's shoulder. "Hello, boys," she smirked, planting her tray down on Scott's left and pulling herself up a seat. "Mind if I join you."

"Would they have a choice if they did?" Charlie replied through a mouthful of high fructose corn syrup-saturated peaches.

Lydia spared her a scathing glance before smiling brilliantly at the wonder twins. The pair of them sat with hanging jaws, unable to process this most unexpected development. Stiles's eyes darted between Lydia and Scott before leaning in and whispering a frantic 'why is she sitting with us?'. Scott's big brown eyes blinked back with equal, if not more confusion. Confusion which only mounted as Lydia was followed by Danny, who took a place on Stiles's other side, and some lacrosse lackey of Jackson's Charlie wasn't too familiar with, who plopped down next to Lydia.

Allison took the spot on Scott's other side that he had saved for her, directly opposite Charlie, and Jackson was across the cafeteria, far, far away from Charlie. So far Lydia's seating chart was falling snugly into place. Until Jackson started towards the table. An expected move, but no less frustrating.

Jackson marched up to the table, glowering at unnamed lacrosse jock. "Get up," he ordered casually. The guy stared up at him, all pouty and entitled, but bowed to Jackson's higher rank of jockitude and collected his things. "How come you never ask Danny to get up?"

"Because I don't stare at his girlfriend's coin slot," Danny snorted. The guy sighed in exasperation but got up, clearing the way for Jackson and his self-satisfied smirk. Though to be fair that was his usual expression.
"So I hear they're saying it was some kind of animal attack," Danny said, immediately seizing the issue of the day. "Probably a cougar."

"I heard mountain lion," Jackson drawled, taking a bit of his apple.

"A cougar is a mountain lion," Lydia bit out with a roll of her eyes. Thus was highlighted one of the more bizarre aspects of her relationship with Jackson. His relative stupidity frustrated the hell out of Lydia. Every time he spouted bullshit with the authority of a PHD candidate, her teeth would do this weird grinding thing that made Charlie pity her dentist. And yet she would go out of her way to maintain his feeling superiority, including dumbing herself down. Which was why she let a silly smile cover face and threw in a bemused 'isn't it?'.

Charlie tore a chunk of her bread roll off with her teeth. "Yeah, they're the same thing," she mumbled through a mouth full of food. "But I don't think I'm buying the mountain lion thing."

Jackson let out a snort and glared at her with more contempt than usual. "So you're saying you know better than the whole police department."

"Of course not," Charlie sighed. "But did you see that bus? Those scratches? Five claw marks. Cougars have four toes with four claws, ergo not cougar. And cougars are predators—they attack to eat. And the ones that come into populated areas are usually sick or malnourished, so they're looking for food. That guy was torn up, but it didn't look like anything took a bite out of him. Same with that girl they found in the woods. Anyways the cops haven't said definitively what they think it is."

Charlie began to rip her roll into small bits, soaking them with the limited marinara sauce. The silence didn't even register until she had shoved a giant hunk of spongy bread into her mouth. All eyes at the table had migrated to her. Lydia's held frustration, Jackson's contempt. Danny had an air of mild interest while Stiles's mouth was hanging open slightly. And Scott looked….worried?

She swallowed hard, forcing the too-large chunk of dry bread down her throat. "What?" she bristled. "I watch a lot of the Discovery Channel."

Danny was the one to speak first. "Well if I'm ever stuck in some Blair Witch Project type situation, you're gonna be the first person I call."

"Whatever," Jackson scoffed loudly, collapsing back in his seat and glowering at his friend. He seemed to take any positive interaction between Danny and Charlie or Danny and Scott or Danny and anyone he didn't like as a form of personal betrayal. "Who cares about that dude or the bus or what happened? The guy's probably a homeless tweaker who's going to die anyway."

"Wow, Jackson," Charlie said, raising her eyebrows at him. "Your compassion is just blowing me away. Tell me, when you ran over that hobo over the summer was it an accident or were you hunting him down for sport." Jackson glowered at her, making her smile back sweetly. "I'm just kidding, Jackson. I know you'd never risk the paint job on your Porsche."

Danny chuckled into his plate, earning himself one of Jackson's more pronounced eyerolls. Soon, though, the walking tub of hair gel found himself an easier target in Stiles. One mild snort and Jackson rounded on him, teeth bared and gleaming like a Crest Whitestrips commercial.

"You got something to say, Stilinski?"

If Stiles suffered from any intimidation, he didn't show it. "Yeah, actually," he said, fumbling with the phone in his hands. "I just found out who it is—the guy who was attacked. Check it out."
He held his phone out to the middle of the table. The thing took on a magnetic pull, drawing everyone closer in towards the tiny screen as he hit play. Craned necks and crowded faces. The picture was fairly cheap, filmed from a hand-held camera. It featured a gaggle of policemen standing around the bus, Stiles's dad included. "The Sheriff's Department won't speculate on the details of the incident," the voiceover rasped through the weak speakers, "but confirmed victim Garrison Meyers did survive the attack. Meyers was taken to a local hospital where he remains in critical condition."

The clip ended on a photo. It was an image of an old man, clad in a suit and smiling happily at the camera. A snapshot of some happy moment—daughter's wedding, grandkid's eighth grade graduation—and a far cry from the man screeching in pain she saw loaded into that ambulance. Charlie swore loudly and ran her hands down her face. "So not a homeless tweaker, then," she muttered bitterly.

"Guess not," Stiles replied, his expression equally somber.

All of the sudden, as the man's face appeared, Scott went rigid. "Wait," he interrupted, grabbing the phone out of Stiles's hand. "I—I know this guy!"

"You do?" Allison asked, her voice thick with confusion and concern.

"Yeah!" Scott glanced around the table, anxiety lurking behind his eyes. "When I used to take the bus back when I was living with my dad—he was the driver."

"Can we talk about something slightly more fun, please?" Lydia interjected.

And with that flippant drawl, any seriousness the moment might have held was destroyed. Because why dedicate time to contemplating mortality and the fragility of man and how life should be cherished when the weekend starts tomorrow, right? Ah, Lydia Martin. The poster child for desensitized teenage apathy. Charlie reached across the table and stole Lydia's uneaten bread roll, ripping into it with her teeth. "What did you have in mind?"

Lydia pursed her lips and waved her fork around like she was conducting a silent symphony, idly considering what she found to be more suitable conversational topics. "I don't know," she mused. "Like...oh! Where are we all going tomorrow night?"

Twisting in her seat, Lydia's unnervingly chipper stare fell on Allison. Allison, fork poised at her mouth as she chewed on her most recent bite of pasta, choked on her food. Her wide eyes returned that forceful gaze with all the confidence of a baby deer staring down a Hummer. A deeply rooted terror to which Lydia remained most wilfully blind.

"You said you and Scott were hanging out tomorrow night, right?" Lydia prompted. She raised her eyebrows pointedly, like an executioner's axe preparing to drop.

Allison looked away, her eyes darting about for some possible escape route. They fell on Charlie for a moment, begging for a reprieve. An apologetic shrug was all Charlie could offer in return. The girl shifted in her seat, unsure of what to do. "Um...we were thinking of what we were going to do."

Allison hedged as best as she could, evidently thinking ill-defined plans might deter Lydia's insistence. That Lydia might take the hint. Oh poor, sweet, naive Allison. She had no idea. Lydia was never oblivious—she knew precisely what she was doing. Charlie gently pushed her lunch tray back, away from the edge of the table, and let her head collapse against the surface with a loud thunk. Stiles shifted in his seat next to her, leaning in so he could whisper quietly. "What exactly is
"What degree of carnage are we talking about?" he inquired further.

"For reference points I'd go Evil Dead...The Saw Franchise...anything from the Tarantino catalog...."

A short pause followed as Stiles straightened once more, but not before a barely audible 'oh crap' reached Charlie's ears.

"Well," Lydia chirped out in a determined tone. "I am not sitting at home watching lacrosse videos again, so if the four of us are hanging out tomorrow night we are going to do something fun."

And that was it. A brick chucked into the fragile pond ecosystem that was high school relationships. The equilibrium had been disrupted. Labels were mixed up, and confusion would inevitably follow. Friendship? Dating? Group activity? School-sanctioned field trip? What the hell was going on? Now nobody could say, because of the introduction of those fateful, vague as hell words.

Hanging out.

"H—hanging out?" Scott stuttered, feeling the weight of those words crashing down on him. Her morbid curiosity getting the best of her, Charlie peeked up to find Scott gaping at Allison incredulously. Stiles on the other hand sat with a hand clapped over his mouth, clearly in the throes of the same second hand embarrassment she was suffering from.

"Like the four of us?" Scott continued, his tone making Charlie cringe. "Do you want to hang out like us and...them?"


Charlie's head dropped back to the table, the this thunk louder than the previous one.

"You know what else sounds fun?" Jackson drawled, contempt coloring his voice. "Stabbing myself in the face with a fork."

"You stabbing yourself in the face with a fork sounds fun to me too," Charlie murmured into the fake wood laminate.

"You know what, Oswin?" Jackson snarled, "why don't you go—"

"Charlie," Lydia interjected brightly, cutting off Jackson's insult, "why don't you come too? We could go bowling."

Charlie suddenly straightened in her seat, yanking her head off the table with enough force to give her whiplash. "No," she said, shaking her head frantically. "No absolutely not. I'm not comfortable with the idea of crashing someone's date as a third or fourth wheel. Crashing as the fifth wheel is absolutely absurd."

The smile on Lydia's face faltered for a millisecond while Allison squirmed uncomfortably in her seat. It came with some guilt, translating all that subtext into actual text. But it wasn't some trade secret—everybody knew what was going on. Lydia was certainly aware she was forcing herself
into the date, she just wasn't used to being called out on it quite yet. But, luckily enough, Jackson was there to diffuse the tension with a biting comment at Charlie's expense.

"Well I've got to say Chuck, you not being there makes the idea a hell of a lot more enjoyable," he said through a wide smirk. "But I'd still rather gnaw off one of my own toes."

"Come on, Jackson," Lydia pouted. "You love to bowl."

Jackson scoffed loudly and narrowed his eyes at Scott. "Yeah," he said, rolling his eyes slightly and patting Lydia's hand. "With actual competition."

"How do you know we're not actual competition?" Allison demanded coyly. In the face of an oppressive degree of awkward, the prospect of competition lit a fire behind her eyes. She turned to Scott, a confident smirk covering her face. "You can bowl, right?"

Given the wide-eyed horror etched into Stiles's face as he stared at his friend, Scott could not bowl. Bowling could have been potentially lethal. But Scott just jerked his head to the side noncommittally. "Sort of."

"Is it—is it 'sort of'," Jackson goaded, leaning in and fixing Scott with his 'intimidation glare', "or is it yes?"

Scott's jaw twitched in anger and he leaned in as well. The thick tension, the hunched shoulders, the prolonged eye contact—throw in some padding and a whistle and the two of them might as well have been on the lacrosse field. "Yes," Scott growled with steely determination. "In fact, I'm a great bowler."

But the staring contest didn't end there. No, Scott and Jackson continued gazing into each other eyes for a good long while with an intensity only testosterone-fueled teenage males can maintain. Charlie glanced back and forth between them, waiting for one to blink or avert their eyes, but the tense silence carried on. "Annnnnnd, KISS," she declared loudly, slamming her hands down hard on the table.

The trays rattled against the surface under the force of her fists, causing a collective start among those seated. Danny regained his composure first, snickering loudly at her words. "Now that's something I'd like to see."

The statement had its desired effect, though. Scott and Jackson, now sufficiently uncomfortable, finally broke eye contact. Jackson's clicking jaw and Scott's pink ears gave testimony to their embarrassment.

The rest of the lunchtime conversation reverted to the usual topics—ranking teachers by how much of a pain in the ass they were, theories about the latest episode of whatever was on TV, debating who would win in a fight between cavemen and astronauts….. Personally, Charlie thought that last question was impossible to answer. Context was needed. In a bar brawl or some test of brute strength, cavemen all the way. Now guerilla warfare was a different story. With their working knowledge of physics and basic engineering skills, advantage astronauts. But that wasn't really the point. The point was that by the time she had finished eating the rubbery protein nuggets the cafeteria staff had labeled 'meatballs', Charlie had come to a definite conclusion. She was going to help Scott not make an idiot out of himself. And if she managed to subtly interrogate him while doing so…..so be it.

After the final school bell rang, Charlie quickly dropped by her locker and jogged through the halls to get to Scott's before he left. By the time she arrived, he and Stiles were disappearing down the
stairwell heading to the front door. Charlie followed briskly, dodging around various members that slow moving herd, the Beacon Hills High student body. As she approached, she could hear the two of them talking—Stiles with scolding a overtone and Scott with anxious one. They seemed to be fully immersed in two completely separate conversations.

"—I don't think Danny likes me very much," she heard Stiles saying contemplatively, clearly veering off whatever topic they had been discussing previously.

"I ask Allison on a date and now we're 'hanging out'?' Scott groaned in frustration. "Hanging out?"

"Hold on," Stiles said, putting a hand on Scott's shoulder. "Am I not attractive to gay guys?"

Charlie snorted and picked up her pace to catch up with them. "Don't sweat it, Stiles," she said, falling in line with the two of them. "If I was a gay guy, I'd totally be into you."

The two boys let out a collective strangled yelp at her sudden appearance. Stiles was the first to recover. Or at least the first to say something. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "Less than something, more than nothing."

Stiles squinted at her in bemusement, planting his hands on his hips. "And what the hell is that supposed to mean."

"Absolutely nothing at all." She turned to Scott, ignoring his complete bewilderment in favor of her intended topic. "So," she said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Things got a little out of control at lunch, huh?"

Scott didn't say a thing. Honestly, at this point they were beyond words. His shoulders slumped forwards at an angle so steep her hand slid right off. He withdrew just far enough from her and Stiles to make a sharp left and slam his forehead directly into the nearest set of lockers. "Yeah," she murmured to herself. "That sounds about right."

Stiles slid into view, teeth gritted into a grimace. "Yeah….we're trying not to think about that so much."

"Really? And how's that working out for you?"

Stiles patted his friend on the back pityingly, which served only to elicit a louder groan. "Not so great. As is probably obvious."

Charlie pressed her lips together in a wan smile and nodded absently. "Right….so would I be correct in assuming that Scott absolutely sucks at bowling?"

Immediately, the deflated basketball that was Scott McCall bolted up to his full height, suddenly ready to play the game. "No," he declared, his wide, manic eyes and frantically shaking head doing little to increase Charlie's confidence. "No, I'm a great bowler. Like I said, I totally bowl. I bowl all the time."

"He's horrible," Stiles interjected, rolling his eyes at Scott's denials. "Really, like genuinely the worst. Last time he got his finger stuck in one of the holes and ended up dropping the ball on his foot. It was embarrassing. And we were like...eight. It was embarrassing for an eight-year-old. So now it would be like...an epic degree of embarrassment. He might not be able to show his face again—there's like a seventy percent chance he'd have to flee the country."

Scott paled and punched Stiles in the shoulder. "Dude?!"
"Ow!" Stiles hissed, grabbing his shoulder where Scott had hit him. "And come on, man! She literally just told Jackson she wanted him to stab himself in the face like two hours ago! Do you seriously think she's going to scamper off and tell him your deep, dark secret that you can't bowl? I'm pretty sure he's going to find out about that tomorrow when you humiliate yourself."

"Thanks for the support," Scott growled back.

"Hey, dude," Stiles said shrugging his shoulders, "just being realistic."

Right..." Charlie drawled out, glancing back and forth between the two of them. "Well the reason I'm here is because I was thinking that I could probably help you out with that."

Stiles and Scott both blinked in surprise and exchanged a look, their eyebrows holding an entire silent conversation amongst themselves. Charlie folded her arms across her chest, waiting patiently for the congress of eyebrows to present its verdict. Finally, the pair turned to her, the eyes still suspicious despite the eyebrows' resolution. "How....how would you be able to help me?"

The battle to keep the smirk from her face was a valiant one, but alas she failed. "Look," Charlie said matter-of-factly, "according to Lydia I suck at pretty much everything, but there a couple of things I know a lot of things about: playing pool, beer—which was probably inappropriate given my age—, soccer—which apparently makes me a traitor to my country—, American cars, and...wait for it...bowling."

This only seemed to increase Scott's confusion. His eyebrows furrowed once more, and congress resumed. "What are you saying?"

Charlie rolled her eyes at what could only be intentional obtuseness. "What I am suggesting, Scott, is that we meet at the bowling alley tonight and I will do my level best to teach you how to bowl. I'm not guaranteeing anything, mind you, but it sounds like you could do with a little practice. Plus Jackson looks like he's pretty dead set on destroying you, so—"

"Yeah," Scott said, nodding eagerly. "Yes. Please—I mean thank you. It'll have to wait till I get out of work, though."

"Alright," Charlie nodded. "I should let you know that I subscribe to a Mr. Miyagi teaching strategy, so before we start with the actual bowling you'll be washing my car." Stiles snorted lightly, but Scott just stared at her. "I'm messing with you, Scott," she said, raising her eyebrows. "What time do you get off of work?"

"6:30."

"Great. So we'll meet at the bowling alley at 7:00."

Scott winced. "Can we make it 7:30? I've got to drop of dinner for my mom at the hospital."

"Okay, 7:30 then. Stiles, you're coming too."

"Wait, what, why am I coming?" Stiles asked, pointing to himself. "I don't need to learn how to bowl. I'd prefer not to learn how to bowl. I could live a long, full, happy life without ever sticking my fingers in a bunch of mystery holes drilled into a freaking spherical hunk of plastic. Why do I have to be there?"

"Girl code," Charlie shrugged. "Allison's my friend. I can't be hanging out alone with her almost-boyfriend, especially before you two firm up the relationship. Also, I don't want Scott to think that I'm hitting on him again."
"Oh, come on," Scott whined as both Stiles and Charlie began laughing. "Can we please forget about that whole 'debriefing' thing?"

"Sorry, Scott," Charlie sighed out, patting him on the shoulder sympathetically. "I've got a long memory, razor-sharp wit, and very little pity. I don't think you'll ever live that one down."

"That's just great," Scott mumbled to himself. He glanced down at his watch and let out a loud groan. "Great, now I'm going to be late for work."

Scott took off down the hallway, hitting the front doors like a ton of bricks. He exploded through, leaving the doors to slam violently shut in his wake. An oddly dramatic exit for such a flustered person.

"Run, Scott," Stiles shouted after him, cupping his hands to his mouth to amplify the sound. "Run like the wind!" He turned back to Charlie, a jovial grin on his face. "Hey, thanks for helping him out," he said, jerking his thumb at the vacant space that Scott had just occupied. "He's kind of freaking out about the whole Allison thing."

Charlie snorted and threw her hands in the air in submission. "Hey, you don't have to tell me," she drawled. "It's not like it's any different with Allison. I've heard the name 'Scott' so many times over the past few days, it doesn't even sound like a real word anymore. Anyways, I figured he needs all the help he can get, especially after that lunch today. That was—"

"Oh my God, it was brutal," Stiles said, running his hands down his face. "Don't remind me. The whole thing—" he waved his hand around absentely "—it was like watching a train accident or one of those reality TV shows with the housewives yelling at each other. You want to look away, but you just can't. Pain. Physical pain, oh my God. Plus Jackson has really had it out for Scott ever since he made first line."

Charlie let out a bitter laugh and shook her head. "Jackson is just trying to prove something to himself, and for some idiotic reason that involves proving that he's better than everybody else. And if he can't be better than them, then he just craps all over them. I kind of get why he acts like such an ass-hat, but I honestly don't know how Lydia and Danny put up with it."

"Do you know Danny well?" Stiles asked suddenly, staring at her with wide questioning eyes. "Well enough, I guess. We're not best friends or whatever, but I've known him pretty much since I moved here."

"Do you know if he likes me?" he continued, narrowing his eyes at her.

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "How am I supposed to kn—"

Stiles's eyes became unfocused, gazing off into the distance like he was staring through space and time. "I really don't think he likes me all that much, and I'm not sure why," Stiles mused. "Do gay guys just not like me? Is it something about my face or how I look?" He started waving his hand around his face indicating at it. "Could that be it? Because I don't remember doing anything to piss Danny off. I mean...nothing specific anyway."

He looked back down at her expecting some sort of answer. Shockingly, she was still part of the conversation. It wasn't some Shakespearean soliloquy into empty space—he expected an actual response. Charlie just pressed her lips together in a thin line and exhaled sharply. "Well if we're going to do this pre-date bowling prep, I have to get homework out of the way." She spun on her heel and followed Scott out the front door, leaving Stiles standing in the hallway.
"Hold on—Charlie!" he shouted after her. "You didn't answer my—! Am I attractive to gay gu—!"

Charlie spun around and pushed her way through the doors walking backwards. "I'll see you at 7:30 Stiles," she called out, giving him one definitive wave before pushing her way out the doors.

"Right! 7:30!"

Chapter End Notes

The Cavemen vs. Astronauts debate is a reference to ANGEL the TV series!

Soundtrack currently in the works....will be added later.
Nobody Fucks With The Jesus

Chapter Summary

Bowling, aired grievances, and continued frustrations.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own Teen Wolf. Any similarities in content or dialogue originated with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Objectively, there was nothing appealing to be found in the smell of a bowling alley. None of its base elements were in any way fragrant—fried food, fake, neon nacho cheese, cheap beer, the oil coating the lanes—but combined they carried an innate feeling of nostalgia. It smelled of her childhood. City after city, Charlie's dad would always sign up with one of the local leagues. It was his way of joining his new community. Avoid homeowners' associations like the plague, find the group that spends a lot of time sitting down and drinking beer. Strategy. Charlie's life could be broken down using bowling alleys as a unit of measurement. Not a bad way to live. She loved bowling alleys—even the smell.

Except for the bathrooms. Those were unilaterally disgusting.

Charlie arrived at the Beacon Hills bowling alley about three quarters of an hour early. As far as such places went it was middling. Overall the building was well cared for, but the balls for rent came with small notches taken out and the lanes featured a few divots here and there. Not ideal for playing. But the scent of fry oil wafting from behind the snack bar was enticing enough to compensate. Plus they had funnel cakes.

Slapping down enough cash for a dozen games, Charlie grabbed her scuffed, rented shoes from the joyless man behind the counter. He handed them over with a beleaguered sigh. She couldn't blame him—that many kids' birthday parties and she'd be bitter too. Making her way to the racks of bowling balls, she ran her hands over available options, trying to find the right fit. Eventually she settled on a number 15, blue, printed with the design of a skull wearing sunglasses and headphones. She picked it up, judged the weight, measured the distance between the holes to see how it fit in her hand. Perfect. A nod and a smile later, she was striding towards her reserved lane.

Stepping onto the smooth wood platform, Charlie held the ball up to the tip of her nose, peering carefully over the top. The pins stood at the lane's end, staring her down despite being entirely faceless. After three long steps forward, Charlie drew her arm back and then swung it forwards, releasing the ball with a little bit of a twist. The skull design spun dizzyingly as the ball flew down the lane, making that characteristic curve. "Come on," Charlie whispered, twisting her head on her neck in an attempt to physically direct the ball's course to the center pin. "Come on, come on, come on."

The ball connected with a thunderous crack, but not with the center pin. Only six toppled over.
Regarding the mediocre level of destruction she had inflicted, Charlie stuck her lower lip out in an immature pout. She was rusty. Which meant she had made a quite excellent decision in arriving early so she could loosen up and refresh her familiarity. This could have gotten embarrassing exceedingly fast, the way she talked herself up. She sent another ball down the lane and knocked over two more pins, leaving two standing. Not bad. Not particularly good, but not bad.

It didn't take much longer to get in the swing of things, pun, as always, very much intended. Within a half hour she had worked herself back up to regular spares. It was just a question of recalibrating her body movements, really. Her muscles remembered those familiar movements. In the end, if you broke it down into its base elements, bowling was just physics. Once she understood the motions, all that was necessary was the math.

Time passed, sets were played, and 7:30 was inching up on her. Over the course of the past half hour an exceptionally loud child's birthday party had taken up residence three lanes over, Tom Jones's "What's New Pussycat" had blared from the jukebox speakers either four or eight times—she honestly couldn't tell—and the man behind the rental counter's expression was even more dead-eyed than it had been when she arrived. Distractions ran rampant. Taking a deep, steadying breath, Charlie went in for another shot. Three steps, swing, spin, release.

The ball sailed down the lane, the curve of its path reminiscent of the golden spiral itself. Contact was made just to the right of the center pin. The sweet spot, if you were right-handed. All ten pins clattered to the ground.

"Hell, yeah!" Charlie shouted, pumping a fist in the air, part one of a more elaborate celebratory jig. "That's what I'm talking about! Nobody fucks with the Jesus!" She spun in a circle, letting the flat surface of the bowling shoes slip against the smooth floor. When she came to a stop, she found herself face-to-face with two sets of surprised eyes. "Oh, hey guys!" she chirped, planting her hands on her hips. "That was comically perfect timing."

"Did you just quote The Big Lebowski?" Stiles asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Um, yeah," she nodded. "Given the venue it seemed contextually appropriate. Plus I am super-good at abiding."

Stiles snorted and nodded with something like approval. "Awesome."

"What's The Big Lebowski?" Scott asked in confusion, glancing back and forth between the both of them. "Is that some guy you know?"

Stiles groaned and rocked back on his heels. "Dude, you have got to start watching some semi-decent movies! It's like an entire part of your knowledge base that's been totally underdeveloped."

"Hold up, flag on the play," Charlie said, lifting a hand for a pause before pointing at Scott. "Are you seriously telling me that you haven't seen Star Wars or The Big Lebowski? How about Pulp Fiction? Monty Python and the Holy Grail? Starship Troopers? None of them? Not a one?" She released a heavy sigh and ran a hand through her hair. "Please, please tell me you're not a Michael Bay fan."

Scott stared mutely, his mouth opening and closing like a fish dying on the deck of a boat. "I—I saw a couple of the Transformers movies. Lots of explosions, but….I didn't love it."

"Oh, man," Stiles said, running his hands down his face. "This is getting embarrassing."

Narrowing his eyes at his friend, Scott let out a frustrated grunt. "The two of you are the worst tag
team of all time." Stiles silently raised his hand in Charlie's direction for a high-five—one which was promptly received—and Scott groaned even louder. "I thought you were here to teach me to bowl, not make fun of my movie choices."

"I can do more than one thing," Charlie shrugged. "I'm great at multi-tasking." Scott's features rearranged themselves into that familiar plaintive expression, all innocence and earnestness in those deep brown eyes. "Don't worry too much, Scott," she relented, patting him on the shoulder with almost no condescension. "Stiles is almost more to blame than you are. Cinematically speaking, you're a newborn baby. He's just letting you make all the wrong decisions."

In that moment, both heads swung around to face her. And they both looked offended. As per usual, Stiles was the first to manage to make words come out of his mouth. "O—okay," he grumbled, still shooting her a fairly pronounced stink-eye. "Are we here to teach Scott to bowl, or what?"

Charlie blew out a long breath and nodded reluctantly. Time to get to work. Waving a hand indicating for them to follow, she moved to the bowling ball-laden racks. She spun on her heel, crossing her arms across her chest as she stared them down. "Okay," she declared, "first things first, let's get all the testicle-related humor out of the way right now."

The boys blinked and traded a look. Luckily the exchange didn't graduate to their eyebrows and they simply turned back to face her. "The what?" they spoke in unison.

"The testicle humor," she repeated, pronouncing every syllable clearly. "You know...'wow these are huge balls', 'hold my balls'—immature dude humor. If you think of it, I've already heard the joke twenty times and made it twice. So get it out of your system or I fully intend to kick you in the balls."

Stiles winced heavily but nodded. "Noted."

Charlie grinned back brightly. "Alright then! Let's get started."

Clapping her hands together eagerly, Charlie fought her impulse to mess with Scott any further and turned to the rack. It was almost laughable, the degree of attention the boy allotted her as she ran through the finer points of ball selection—a turn of phrase that elicited a barely repressed giggle on Stiles's part. But not even the barest hint of mirth escaped Scott's lips. They were set in a stern line as he took in every bit of information. Seeing that intense focus almost eliminated her desire to mess with him its entirety. It was the earnestness that got to her. He was just so….desperate to impress Allison. Not that he was a desperate person—he was just trying to damn hard. It was genuine. It was sweet.

Scott McCall was a good egg. A total weirdo with his fair share of suspicious-ass behavior, but a good egg nonetheless.

Eventually Charlie settled on one ball in particular. Solid black in color, no nicks or notches to redirect its course. Lifting it from the rack, she measured the weight in her hands. A little heavy for her, but for a dude who could send a lacrosse ball tearing straight through netting it would probably do. "Try this one on for size," she said, holding it out to him. Scott took it from her and began swinging it back and forth widely. His concentration was fixed so intently on the ball itself, he failed to notice the tray of french fries being carried past him by an unsuspecting pedestrian. Two more inches and they would have had quite the mess. "O—okay," she said, snatching it back from him. "Let's save that action for the lane, shall we? How did that feel? Too light, too heavy?"

"Good," he nodded. "It feels good."
Charlie shot him a wide smile. "Alright, then. Let's see what you got."

"Okay, cool," Stiles called out, waving at them from the ball rack. "I'll just hang out back here. And do…nothing. It's cool, it's fine, it's good. I still have no idea what I'm doing here, but….yeah." Charlie opted to ignore his outburst. She also chose to ignore the giant crash followed—the one that had the sound of a host bowling balls being dropped to the floor. "I got it!" Stiles's voice echoed not two seconds later. "I'll clean this up. It's good. It's all good."

Stiles's voice faded into the surrounding cacophony as Scott pulled on his rental shoes. While he fiddled with the laces, Charlie took a moment to survey the damage. Stiles had managed to tip over one of the emptier bowling ball racks, sending dozens of pounds rolling across the floor. He scurried after them, trying to minimize the chaos. Charlie pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. Literally all he had to do was stand still and not touch anything. What the hell was she getting herself into with these idiots?

Turning to Scott, Charlie clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Okay, dude. Let's see what you've got to work with. Show me your base throw and we can correct from there."

Scott shot her a feeble smile before getting to his feet. He approached the lane with hesitation, cradling the ball to his chest with all the tenderness one might afford an adorable, squishy newborn baby. The toes of his scuffed, rented shoes tapped nervously against the oiled wooden surface, the rigid soles clacking like a metronome. The breath he sucked in was sharp and anxious, followed by an abrupt bolt towards the lane like he was about to throw the ball overhand. With an odd, jerk-y movement, he released the ball. It caught on his thumb and flew three feet in the air before hitting the lane with a thwack. About a third of the way to the pins, it slid neatly into the gutter.

Shoulders slumped and hand rubbing the back of his head, Scott stared despondently after the ball as it rolled past the pins, all ten still standing tall and proud. Charlie sidled up next to him and found his face contorted into an expression of abject horror—eyes wide and brow furrowed—no doubt envisioning the next day.

"Scott?" Charlie asked tentatively.

"Hm, yeah?" he mumbled, wrenching his eyes away from the erect pins as they were lifted into the air and the machinery swept away exactly nothing. "Yeah, so that wasn't great, was it?"

Charlie blew out a long breath and shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her hoodie. "There's, uh….room for improvement. Let me see your stance again."

He blinked at her. "Stance?"

"You got this, buddy!" Stiles interjected. In the space of a minute and a half he had managed to get ahold of a giant soda, some shitty nachos, and had draped himself over one of the benches, one leg dangling over the seat back while his head hung over the edge. He shoved chips into his mouth with one hand while shooting Scott a thumbs-up with the other. The enthusiasm was lacking in a big, big way. "Yeah, bowling," he deadpanned. "Woohoo."

Rolling her eyes, Charlie turned back to Scott. "Yeah, stance," she continued. "It's all in the math. The angle of the throw, that kind of thing. Stance figures into that a lot."

"Okay," Scott nodded. "Okay, so what kind of stance do I need?"

Charlie stared at him with the steely-eyed stoicism of a guard at the gates of Buckingham Palace. "Alright, Scott, I'm gonna need you to bear with me," she said evenly. "Now to show you the
correct bowling stance, I'm going to have to position you a bit. If I grab your leg, I'm not hitting on
you. I'm trying to teach you to bowl."

Scott pinched his lips together in annoyance while Stiles cackled in the background. "Oh, come
on," he whined. "Why do you have to keep bringing that up?"

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "'Cause it's fun. And fun is generally my prerogative."

"Well can we make bowling the prerogative?" Scott muttered darkly. "I'd rather not be humiliated
tomorrow."

A beaming, and only 30% sarcastic smile painted itself on Charlie's face. "Staying on point," she
declared with an approving nod. "Good. You will do well, young grasshopper."

The next half hour was dedicated stance and strategy. She would demonstrate, Scott would
emulate, and Stiles would offer verbal support and heckling for alternating intervals. Despite his
complaints, out of all of them he seemed to be having the closest thing resembling a good time.
Probably because of those greasy, preservative-laden, disgusting, delicious bowling alley nachos.
And the open opportunity for sarcasm. After another gutterball, Stiles let out a loud groan and
somehow managed to sag even lower against the bench.

"Come on, Scott," he whined. "It's like you're actively trying to not hit the pins."

"I'm trying, dude," Scott shot back, glowering at Stiles over his shoulder. "How's about a little bit
of support?"

"You're getting plenty of that from Charlie," Stiles replied. "I'm just keepin' it real."

"How about you keep it quiet," Scott growled back.

Stiles just made a face and shrugged. "Where would be the fun in that?"

Scott swore loudly, his eyes flashing with something slightly more hostile than that typical
bemused warmth, so Charlie clapped her hands together and slid between the two of them. "Okay!"
she chirped, planting her hands on Scott's shoulders to redirect him towards the lane. "Here's what
we're gonna do. Stilinski, keep shoving nachos in your face hole. It keeps your mouth from making
words."

"Okay," Stiles drawled after a moment. "What else?"

"Nothing else," Charlie sniped. "That is all of the plan. That is literally every last bit of the plan."

"That's not a very well thought out plan."

"Well if you actually shut your face hole, it might just work out okay."

Stiles's discontent with said plan stood more than audible as chips crunched beneath the onslaught
of gnashing teeth. But he did stay quiet. Miracle of goddamn miracles. She turned once again to
Scott. The guy's shoulders managed to be tense even when slumped in defeat. He was psyching
himself out. Which was probably the root cause of his problem. That was one of the secrets to
bowling—half the game happens before you throw the ball. Clearing her throat, Charlie sidled up
next to Scott. At the end of the lane all ten pins were knocked over by the bowling apparatus, the
loud clattering eliciting a wince on her part. "I suck," he mumbled bitterly.

"Eh, I've seen worse." Charlie said with a dismissive wave.
"Wow. Then they must have really sucked."

It felt inappropriate to laugh in the face of his apparent despair, but a snort forced it's way out all the same. Yup. She was an asshole.

"Look, Scott," Charlie sighed, "your problem is that you're treating this like a lacrosse ball. The dynamics are totally different. Lacrosse balls are small enough and can be thrown fast enough that you don't have to worry about any other factors. If there's a bit of a curve to the throw, the ball is moving fast enough that it's not gonna be an issue. It's different with bowling." She moved to the ball return, grabbing her own ball before rejoining him on the platform. "Okay, this time don't watch the ball, watch my hand. See what direction it's pointing when I release."

Sucking in a deep breath, Charlie went for the windup. Three long strides and she exhaled slowly as she released the ball. It made that perfect curve, striking just to the right of the first pin. All ten went down in a cascade and Charlie smiled, forgoing her uncoordinated victory dance. "Did you see that?"

"Yeah," Scott drawled slowly, his eyebrows drawn in concentration. "Yeah, I think so. There was a bit of a twist to it when you threw."

Scott waited for the pins to reset and went in for one more try. He mirrored her movements exactly, down to the slow exhale. No strike, but seven of the pins toppled over. "Alright," Charlie grinned, slapping him on the back. "Now clean it up for a spare."

Never in her life had Charlie seen someone's mood pull a 180 in such a short time. The mask of doom and gloom had been ripped away, revealing a much more familiar face. Innocent enthusiasm bubbled up in him, leaving him bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. "Okay," he nodded. "I'll clean it up for a spare."

"Good job, dude," she smirked, nudging him with her elbow. "Stay out of your head and you'll be great. I'm gonna get some chow."

But Scott wasn't listening to her anymore. His eyes were generating an intense beam of concentration pointed directly at the pins. Leaving him to practice, she plopped down on the bench next to Stiles and reached over to grab one of his nachos. Before she could get one, though, she felt her hand being slapped away. "Hey!" Stiles shouted, swatting at her hand. "Who said you could have some?"

Charlie rolled her eyes, snatching the entire container out of his grip. "I skipped dinner," she replied, ignoring his objections. "If I don't get some disgustingly awesome fake cheese into my belly at this exact moment in time, I might pass out."

Stiles let out a scoff, but resigned himself to being nacho-less. "You know generally people ask before taking other people's food," he groused. "It would have taken like…less than one second."

"Yeah," Charlie replied, "but asking runs the risk of you saying no."

"So you go with thievery?"

Charlie would have answered, but her mouth was already busy chewing frantically. Man, she was starved. Stiles reached over to get a chip of his own, but she let out a squawk of protest and clutched the container to her chest. "Seriously?" Stiles drawled. "Are you for real right now?"

Eyes narrowed, Charlie reluctantly loosened her hold on the nachos, allowing Stiles to snag a single chip. "Thank you," he declared, loud sarcasm occupying his tone. "Really, so generous of you."
"What can I say, I like to give back." While Stiles grumbled, Charlie sat up and craned her neck to get a better look at Scott. He still stood on the platform, ball in hand and toes flirting with the foul line, eyeing the pins like they were on the other side of an old Western shootout. He was nodding to himself, giving off the aura of someone in the middle of a silent personal pep talk.

"Scott, just throw the freaking ball!" Stiles called over. "It's not like they're gonna come to life and seek revenge for their fallen comrades."

An elbow was directed into Stiles's ribs. "Hey, let him be. Everything in its own time."

Taking a steadying breath, Scott backed away from the foul line. One, two, three steps and he released the ball, knocking down the remaining three pins for a spare. He spun around, face flushed with victory and wearing a grin brilliant enough to blind cars passing by in traffic. Relief mixed with excitement. Charlie and Stiles both raised a hand, giving him a thumbs-up. "Good stuff, Scott!" she called over. "Just keep practicing that."

As Scott continued to practice, the nachos claimed Charlie's full focus. She swirled a chip around in the small lake of imitation cheese. As she ate, though, she felt the creeping sensation of being watched. Looking up, she found Stiles eyeing her suspiciously. Frowning to herself, she straightened in her chair, adopting a defensive posture. "Dude, I'll pay you back for the nachos."

Stiles made a face and shook his head. "Nah, it's not that. Well, I mean, it's kinda that, but…I'm just trying to figure why you're helping Scott with this. There's tons of other stuff you could be doing."

Charlie shrugged. "Do I need a reason?" The expression that followed shouted a resounding yes. Letting out a huff, Charlie pursed her lips, eyeing him with an equal degree of suspicion. "Maybe I'm just a gooey romantic who wants Scott and Allison's first non-date to be a peanut butter and jelly sandwich of love and happiness." The mantle of skepticism rested heavily on Stiles's shoulders, showing no sign of shifting, and Charlie bristled. "Fine," she admitted. "Schadenfreude."

Stiles's face scrunched up in confusion. "Bless you?"

"It's Germa—"

Her explanation was cut off by another loud groan. Stiles's head lolled back on his neck to accommodate the exaggerated eye roll. "Great," he muttered. "Now you know German too. You're like the freaking Rosetta Stone. One of these days you're gonna walk up to Hobson's chalk board and bust out some hieroglyphs."

"I know one word of German, okay?" she returned. "Just one. And schadenfreude means the pleasure you might take from someone else's misfortune. In this case, Jackson's. You saw his face—he was practically giddy at the idea of taking Scott down. Sue me if I want to see that insufferable smirk wiped from his face every now and again. Plus I like Scott and I like Allison. They deserve a good ti—"

"Schadenfreude?" Stiles interrupted. "It actually means that?" Charlie gave a nod, at which Stiles collapsed back in his seat, an aura of contemplation hovering around him. "Schadenfreude…that's a seriously awesome word. Who knew the Germans were so good at expressing themselves."

"It's those compound words," Charlie mused sagely. "Smush enough words together and you get nuance."

"Compound words, huh?" Stiles murmured. "Their word searches must be total chaos."
Scott continued his work at the lane. Now that the veil of despair had lifted, he had shifted to a state of complete single-mindedness. And despite his newfound lease on the sport, that twist of anxiety was still visible from a mile away. His thoughts echoed against the walls of the alley, the force of them threatening to shake the mildewed wallpaper free. The boy was altogether way too stuck in his own head. He needed to find some way to loosen up.

"You sure you don't wanna give it a try," Charlie said to Stiles, jerking her head towards the lane. "It might help him ease up on himself."

Stiles's eyebrows assumed their all too familiar skeptical arch. "You are aware that I suck at this, right?"

"That's what I'm saying!" Charlie pressed, her expression all innocence. "If he has somebody next to him sucking super hard, he might unwind a bit."

Stiles let out a scandalized huff, but the upward turn at the corners of his lips proved him to be more amused than offended. "Wow, thank you so much for the vote of confidence, but I think I'll still pass. You see, before school started this year I came up with this rule. It involves me not putting myself in situations where I humiliate myself unnecessarily."

"Oh, really?" Charlie laughed. "And how's that going, Mr. 'We Have An Unspoken Connection'?"

Stiles's mouth dropped open, his jaw hanging so wide that—had Charlie possessed the appropriate medical expertise—she should be able to determine whether or not he had his tonsils removed. God, she was an asshole. An asshole for bringing it up. Even more of an asshole because she really didn't regret bringing it up. And the ultimate asshole because the face Stiles was making….kind of made her want to laugh. She was well and truly the absolute worst. To fight off said laugh, she gritted her teeth into a grimace that hopefully carried an air of apology. "Sorry."

When Stiles's jaw finally began to move again, she was a little worried about what it might say. "You know what?" he declared. "I can't decide if you're just a really sarcastic nice person or a considerate asshole. I mean on one hand you don't tell anybody about that disaster of a situation, for which, you know, thank you. But here you are. Mocking my pain."

"Wha—" Charlie contradicted. "I'm not mocking."

"You're totally mocking."

"I wouldn't dare mock!"

"There is some moderate to severe mocking going on."

"I—"

"You went from zero to mock in like….a millisecond."

Charlie opened her mouth to protest, but honestly Stiles's eyebrows were building too much of a case against her already. She zipped her hoodie up to her chin and sank lower into the garish orange bench, folding her arms across her chest. "Okay, fine," she conceded. "I can be a considerate asshole."

Stiles stared at her a good, long while. "Nah," he concluded. "You're an asshole-ish nice person."

"No," Charlie disagreed. "I'm definitely a considerate asshole. Honestly, I'm here to spite Jackson just as much as I'm here to help Scott. At least 50% of my motives are of the ulterior variety. And
"I'm also a curious asshole. Seriously, I'm nosy as hell."
"Curious about what?"

The grimace returned to Charlie's face, her lips pulling tight against her teeth. She was about to make it awkward. "I just..." she hedged. "Honestly dude, while I get being into Lydia, it just doesn't completely add up."
"What doesn't add up?"

Charlie's fingers twisted in the string that ran through her hoodie winding it tightly until the tips turned purple. "Like...Lydia's great," she said. "She's all kinds of fantastic. Ten out of ten, would befriend again. But like..." she glanced at him questioningly "...from what I can see the two of you have less than zero in common."
"So," Stiles deadpanned. "You and Lydia don't have anything in common either and you two are best friends."

If there was a plausible denial to be offered, Charlie had yet to find it. Letting out a low whistle, she shook her head. "That's fair," she murmured. "Touché."

Stiles let out a sigh. "Look, I know it might seem kind of sad—"

"I didn't say that. You know what, forget it. This beeswax does not belong to me—I do not claim ownership."

"Okay," he drawled, raising his eyebrows at her. "We both know that the waiting room debacle was at least a little bit sad. I've just...I've liked her since I was seven years old. Before I even knew what a crush was. Before she was so into the whole 'social ladder' stuff. And I mean, yeah there are all the usual reasons. She's pretty, she's popular, and if that was why I liked her it would be super-pathetic. But like...behind all that..." He looked at Charlie pointedly. "You know how smart she is, right? Nobody else really sees it, but whenever she dumb herself down in conversation you roll your eyes even harder than usual, so I'm guessing that you know."

Charlie was almost at a loss for words. A crease formed between her eyebrows as she regarded him. "Know that she's a super-genius?" she supplied. "H—yeah, I'm aware. I wasn't aware that you were aware. Or that anybody else was aware."

He gave a non-committal shrug. "I was just paying attention. But I look at Lydia and she's just this...is it cheesy to say remarkable? Like, she's a force of nature. And after she moves on from this high school, fake-shallow version of herself, she's going to be just....incredible. More incredible than she already is. And...I don't know—I guess I want to know that person. And I'd like to be a part of that person's life."

Charlie took a moment to survey Stiles. Every word out of his mouth had thrown her for a loop. She had predicted the pedestal he picked out for Lydia, but the reasons he had put her there—to call herself surprised would be an understatement. She had never expected him to be completely superficial in his interest, but he saw that spark in Lydia that nobody else seemed to perceive. That nobody else even thought to look for. The bit of her that she tried to hide was the part he liked, maybe even loved her for. Stiles knew more about Lydia than Jackson did. He understood her better than her parents did. Which Charlie found tragic—that the people in Lydia's life cared about the part rather than the whole, even though it was by her own design. What a goddamn messy world they lived in. Charlie felt like a kid with her face pressed to the glass of an aquarium—her on the outside watching everyone else within. People. They never ceased to baffle.
In the wake of Stiles's declaration, the air between them filled with silence. His light brown eyes flickered in her direction, filled with uncertainty—waiting for a response. But Charlie didn't have a response to give. To her, Stiles presented somewhat of an enigma. He seemed to just…pick people and care. Scott, his dad, Lydia…he cared vocally and openly, possibly inadvisably. That sort of emotional transparency was foreign to her. The dude was playing poker, but flashing his cards left and right. It made no sense—cards were played close to the chest. So she flipped the hood over her head, retreating further into the cocoon of her hoodie to hide from the emotions. Finally she settled for a single word. "Cool."

Stiles blinked at the half-assed rejoinder. "Cool?" he snorted, the word sounding a bit like a curse on his tongue. "I spill my guts and all you've got to say is 'cool'."

"I don't know what to tell you dude," Charlie shrugged. "Sincerity freaks me out. And you were just all kinds of sincere. You've made your case—your feelings for Lydia make sense. Same page. Whatever."

Letting out a sigh, Charlie glanced at her surroundings. There was a birthday party going on in the far corner—all of the kids with blue icing smeared on their faces, clearly about to go on a massive sugar rampage and possibly rob a bank. Just to the left of them was what looked like a league game—firefighters or police, some uniform-clad profession—getting just a little bit drunk and cursing at each other while the moms from the birthday party glowered pointedly. And then there were a few couples who were clearly on dates, the guys showing the girls how to throw the bowling ball, hovering closely as the girls humored them. With all of the totally disjointed groups, it looked like the Island of Misfit Toys.

"Okay, now it's your turn," Stiles's voice interrupted.

Charlie blinked away her reverie. "Sorry, say what now?"

"I'm talking about reciprocation," he replied. "I just revealed my inner feelings. Now you're up to bat."

"Well the joke's on you, dude," she smirked. "I have been reliably informed by at least three people that I don't have feelings."

"That's a cop out of like…epic proportions," he retorted. The evasive shrug she provided caused him to roll his eyes. Yawning widely, Stiles stretched his arms above his head as his eyes roved around the bowling alley. He studied all its facets, like he was the host of some wildlife documentary. "Okay, whatever," he continued. "Then let's start with why the hell you're so good at bowling. How did you get into this stuff?"

"You trying to unravel my mysterious backstory?" Charlie smirked. The unamused look she received in response had her throwing her hands up in acquiescence. "Fine, fine. My dad did a lot of league playing when I was younger. When he couldn't get a sitter, I'd tag along. I got really good at trash talking by the time I was like...eleven."

"Wow," Stiles mused, his face taking on a wistful, contemplative air. "This explains so much. I could totally see you in pigtails, cursing at a bunch of middle-aged men."

"Shut up," Charlie grumbled, smacking him in the chest. Though in all fairness the image he painted did smack of accuracy.

"No, this is good," Stiles laughed. "I'm picturing an angry Gerber baby. Just waddling up to some John Goodman type and being like, 'You're entering a world of pain!'"
The last words came out with high-pitched, cracked voice of one of the characters from Rugrats. Charlie wrinkled her nose, shooting him a weird look. "Let's forget I just did that," Stiles winced, waving a hand like he was pushing away the thought. "We can ignore that bit."

"Yeah, I'm not gonna do that," Charlie mused.

In the distance, Scott jumped up and down as the pins reset themselves. A seven-ten split had cost him the spare this time around, but he had still managed to get nine of them. He paced back and forth in front of the lane, waiting for his next try. Stiles, on the other hand, didn't seem all that enthused by the goings-on. His hands tapped against every solid surface near him, playing out a syncopated tune on an imaginary drumset. Any still moment his hands might have was offset by the drumming of fingers. The dude was like a shark. If he stopped moving there was a good chance he'd up and die.

"You know, I don't really get the appeal," he declared. "It seems a bit boring. There's a lot of sitting still and doing nothing."

"'Still' not really your style?" Charlie asked, raising her eyebrows at his hands. They were currently drumming some unknown tune against the shin of his crossed leg. Following the line of her sight, his hand froze and he laughed. "Yeah," he nodded. "Yeah, not so much."

"Fair enough," Charlie replied, sliding down in her seat and propping her feet against the ball return. "But it's usually not so much about the bowling itself. It's more about the people. And probably even more about beer."

"Beer?" Stiles inquired, giving her a funny look.

"Yeah," Charlie snorted. "If you ever watch a league game, it's at least 60% drinking. I actually have a theory that you get better at bowling after a drink or two. My dad took me bowling on my fourteenth birthday and bought me my first beer, and after that used to sneak me one. He had a European approach to drinking, learn to drink responsibly at an early age, blah, blah, blah. But bowling became a hell of a lot more fun."

Stiles let out a long, slow whistle and smiled. "Man, your dad sounds awesome. Next time he signs up for bowling, tell me. I'd be down for a cold glass of whatever's good."

Charlie opened her mouth to respond, but snapped it shut just as quickly. Her strategy of sharing the details of her life with exactly negative two people had a way of biting her in the ass. Here she was presented with the main problem with not talking about her dad. Eventually, she would end up in situations like this one. If she talked about it more, or mentioned it at all, word would get around. This puddle of awkward and discomfort might be a less frequent rest stop on life's unending road trip. But then people would know. And it would become a thing. It was a quandary.

Squeezing her eyes shut for a moment, Charlie scratched at her forehead and prepared herself for the puppy dog eyes and high-pitched voice that typically followed. "That's, uh, that's probably not going to happen," she replied, staring at Scott's score on the screen overhead. Two spares in a row. He was getting there. Her eyes flickered to Stiles's for a moment before assuming a more absent gaze. "My dad sort of...he died. Last June, actually. Probably should have mentioned sooner, but I'm not so good at leading with the serious stuff. As you may have noticed."

She could feel Stiles intently studying the side of her face. Snapping into 'compulsive eating' mode, she shoved more nachos into her mouth, chewing frantically as she waited for one of the characteristic 'I'm so sorrys' or 'you poor things' that made her want to run for the hills. When it came to generic expressions of regret, variety was lacking. But no such comment came. After a few
moments, she stopped chewing long enough to steal a sidelong glance at Stiles. His features had taken a very distinct countenance, but it added up not to pity, but to sympathy.

"So is that why you moved to Beacon Hills?" he asked gently. His tone of voice was carefully crafted, making it clear that she didn't have to answer if otherwise inclined. "Did you move because of your dad?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "That's why I moved in with my aunt Mel—who you have both met and spoken to on the phone—which I apologize for, by the way. It wasn't too bad, though. He was in the Coast Guard, so I was kind of used to moving around. Not really much of an adjustment to make."

"You really—look, you really don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Stiles said, giving her a pointed look.

Charlie waved a hand absently. "No, it's fine. I really don't mind talking about him. I like talking about him. It's just...other people. When I bring him up, they get really uncomfortable. As soon as they hear 'dead dad' they stop computing and I get—"

"The pity look," Stiles filled in with a sage nod.

A perplexed crease formed between Charlie's eyebrows. They furrowed into a 'v' as she regarded Stiles. "Y—yeah," she stammered out. It was Stiles's turn to evade her gaze, instead shooting her those fleeting glances he had been receiving not a moment before.

Stiles pressed his lips together in a thin line and scratched nervously at his ear. "My mom," he mumbled quietly. "She—she, uh, yeah."

A breath rushed out of Charlie's lungs, almost enough to form a quiet 'oh'. Her head snapped around, resuming her pointed avoidance of eye contact. In her track record of social interactions, a large number of them had failed spectacularly, but emotionally charged ones were her kryptonite. So she employed the only tactic she knew—the one her dad used when it came to makeup, trigonometry, or any of the other questions he couldn't answer. She clapped a hand on Stiles's shoulder and shook is slightly. Comforting. Right?

Stiles shot her a weird look. Oh. Not right.

"What are you doing?" Stiles asked, his nose wrinkled.

"I have no idea," she said, releasing his shoulder like she might a hot iron. "I'm taking my hand off. I suck at sincerity. Case in point."

Stiles breathed out something resembling a laugh and bobbed his head. "So how's Mel holding up, then?" he asked, glancing back at her.

The fact that his question was a surprising one chafed at Charlie. Most people never really thought past her own problems—little girl orphan stole most of the sympathy. As the primary object of pity, she got the attention by default. 'Orphan' was a heavy word, after all. Mel, though, she probably pulled the shortest straw and it went largely unrecognized.

"She's doing okay, I guess," Charlie said, nodding along with her words in the hope she could agree with them. "She's freaking out a bit. We never really saw each other before, except on skype and holidays. Lots of phone calls and stuff but...I think she's worried about screwing me up. Like I'm going to develop some bizarre social disorder where I start eating glue, and it's gonna be her fault. Honestly, all of this is probably harder on her—I mean we both lost something. But she has to
become something. Now she's got a freaking teenager she's responsible for and she's gonna worry —and I'm just going to...Alright I have no idea what the hell I'm going to do, but whatever it is, it'll be whatever it is that makes things better for her."

With the conclusion of her rambling speech, she found Stiles regarding her curiously. Fuck. Charlie exhaled sharply and ran her hands down her face. "Shit, man," she mumbled. "Unrequited love...dead parents. This crap is getting heavy for a bowling alley. I feel like I just monologued my autobiography."

"Okay," Stiles replied, nodding in understanding. "I mean, your autobiography is apparently two paragraphs long, but we can talk about something else."

"Yes, please," Charlie said, waving her hand eagerly. "Give me a headline."

Stiles squinted in thought. "Okay," he finally declared. "Okay, so would you rather live through an alien invasion or a zombie apocalypse?"

"Pfft, easy," she scoffed. "Alien invasion, hands down. Grand scheme? Humanity is way more likely to make it through that."

The look she received in response could only be described as...offended?

"You think survival in an alien invasion is more likely than survival in a zombie apocalypse?" he spluttered. "Zombies are mindless, slow-moving beasts. They would be way easier to avoid. Pop them in the head and they're done for. Aliens—they've got all those cool futuristic weapons and stuff. They could incinerate you in like half a second." He then proceeded to mime a gun—or phaser—making some sort of laser and explosion noises. "Boom. You're dead. It's over. You can run away from zombies."

The response had Charlie's eyes rolling to the back of her skull. It was the typical, short-sighted answer everyone seemed to revert to, and quite frankly she had expected more from Stiles. "Oh my God," she groaned. "In all the alien invasion scenarios I've ever heard of, the overlord menace has some form of motivation for the occupation of earth. Right?"

"Right," Stiles acquiesced. "So what?"

"So motivation makes all the difference," she declared, poking him in the shoulder. "Motivation means something can ultimately be defeated. Zombies, as you just said, are mindless beasts. They're an infection. There's no reason for them to just up and stop eating people."

"So you can establish quarantine zones and keep them out," Stiles replied, throwing his hands in the air. "As long as they have something else to eat—"

"Exactly!" Charlie exclaimed, snapping her fingers at her apparent foe for emphasis. "All zombies want are brains. All that's left is that primal need for food. They have no thought, no life, no anima, nothing to lose and nothing to win, so they can never be defeated. All they want is that Soylent Green. You can't reason with them, can't negotiate with them. Don't even get me started on incubation period for infected people. It's not something you can ultimately fight against. As for alien invasion, you just have to make the cost of occupation too high, and then they'll leave."

Stiles stared on in disbelief. "You've already thought out an entire line of reasoning for this kind of argument, haven't you?"

"Yes Stiles," she said, nodding her head a bit. "Yes I have."
Stiles let out a loud snort and a smile tugged at the corners of his lips. "You are such a nerd."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I'll bet you have post-zombie apocalypse survival strategy too," Stiles murmured to himself.

"Duh," Charlie replied. "It's just good planning. Semper paratus, bitch. I mean, have you even read 'The Zombie Survival Guide'?"

Stiles's neck snapped around and he stared at her with wide, unblinking eyes. "Um, only about a dozen times."

From that point the conversation spiralled. It began with an alarmingly in-depth discussion of potential survival strategies, ranging from defense techniques to how to best maintain a supply of potable water. From there it veered to hypothetical characters they'd most like by their side before finally settling on zombie movies—a subject about which the both of them apparently felt quite strongly. They ended up fighting over which zombie movie stood victor over all the others. Stiles went classic with 'The Night of the Living Dead', but Charlie stuck with 'Shaun of the Dead'. Things got heated as Stiles continued to insist that 'Shaun of the Dead' should be classified as comedy, not horror, and was therefore not a valid suggestion. Charlie was about to politely suggest that she use his head as bowling ball and throw him down the lane when a loud whoop echoed from a few feet before them.

Scott danced at the edge of the lane, pumping a fist in victory. "Did you see that?" he demanded, jabbing a finger towards the pins. "Did you just see that?!"

Charlie and Stiles exchanged a guilty glance. "Ugh, sure buddy," Stiles replied. "That was something. It was definitely a thing just happened."

"Definitely," Charlie agreed, nodding fervently. "It was…unforgettable."

Scott narrowed his eyes. The most perceptive of people he was not, but their lame attempt at deception was more than obvious. Letting out a groan, he kicked absently at the air. "I just got a strike," he mumbled, waving at the lane. "And I think the game is over." He shuffled up next to them, peering at the television screen above their heads as he tabulated the score. "Ninety-eight," he declared, pointing eagerly at the screen. "That's pretty good, right? That close to a hundred? I should be all set for tomorrow."

"Definitely," Charlie assured him, standing to give him a pat on the back.

"Alright!" Scott grinned. "I feel good." He turned to her and Stiles, a question mark written into the lines of his face. "This is gonna be good, right?"

Charlie let out a sigh. "Scott, you need to calm the hell down," she replied. "The only problem you'll have is nerves if you keep psyching yourself out like this. And even if you crash and burn so hard you cause a mass extinction event, Allison's still not going anywhere."

His head whipped around to stare at her with those deep, soulful brown eyes. "You really think so?"

"Um, yeah," she snorted in response. "Allison likes you. Being bad at bowling was never going to be a deal-breaker. For her, I mean. It totally is for me."

"Really?" Scott asked quietly.

Charlie gave a curt nod. "Absolutely," she confirmed. "Those first few shots—I don't think I've
ever been less attracted to somebody in my entire life."

"What? No. I mean that Allison likes me," he said, prodding for more information. "She told you that?"

"Oh my God," Stiles groaned, injecting a little more reason into the conversation. "Would she be going out with you if she didn't? Would she have kissed you if she didn't?"

"Dude," Scott hissed, shooting Stiles a glare.

"What, it's not like I didn't already know," Charlie scoffed, folding her arms across her chest. "Girls talk. And just so you know, you don't use too much tongue."

The blood drained from Scott's face, his expression closer to abject terror than she had ever seen it. "I was—she—what?"

"Let's just say you've got nothing to worry about and leave it at that," Charlie said, patting him on the back. "Go return your shoes."

Scott nodded and shuffled over to the desk. His tentatively earned confidence had put a spring in his step. Stiles stood over Charlie as she removed her own bowling shoes, hands shoved deep in his pockets. "So a ninety-eight, huh?" he said, watching his friend go. "That's pretty good."

Charlie looked up from her laces, teeth clenched in a guilty grimace. "Yeah, about that…" she drawled. "The point count in bowling is actually out of three hundred. Do you think I should tell him about that?"

A loud, indelicate snort forced its way out of Stiles's nose and his lips pinched to fight his desire to laugh. "Nah," he said, shaking his head. "I think we let him have this moment."

Exchanging the ratty rental shoes for her rattier Converse, Charlie walked with the boys to the parking lot. Pushing through the front doors felt like entering a different dimension, at the very least a different decade. No more 'Greatest Hits of the 1960s' filling her ears….. The sun had set during her time inside, leaving the blues and yellows of the the alley's neon sign to replace its rays. The colors gleamed against the cars in the lot, painting the landscape as some abstract watercolor. Chilly night air filled her nostrils, crisp and fresh. She wasn't sure whether she preferred it or the grease laden fumes inside.

The trek to her car was filled with a stream of thank yous from Scott—each delivered with an earnestness she wasn't entirely comfortable with. Gratitude left her ill at ease. Too much significance was being placed on some minute act of benevolence. She taught the guy to bowl, it wasn't like she cured cancer or saved a baby in a runaway stroller. Still though, Scott stammered out his thanks and Charlie accepted it with the closest approximation of grace she could muster. The three of them were about to split up—go their separate ways—but Charlie had something to ask before they did. Hell, maybe the goodwill she had built up meant she might get a straight answer. Though she doubted it.

"Hey guys," she called out as they peeled away in the direction of Stiles's Jeep. They stopped in place, turning to face her.

"What's up?" Scott asked, giving her a curious look.

Charlie approached them, hands shoved deep into the pockets of her hoodie. She was going to make it awkward. Awkwardness would ensue. It was inevitable given how out of left field the question was. Not to mention how prying. "Yeah, so…." she drawled, glancing between the pair.
"There's actually a question that I've been meaning to ask you for a while. It's a little bit weird, and definitely random, but it's been bugging the hell out of me for a long time."

"Well that sounds interesting and potentially menacing," Stiles said, sounding more interested than concerned. "What is it?"

"What the hell is up with you guys and Derek Hale?"

Their surroundings seemed to hush so the inquiry might hang in the air. Whatever Scott and Stiles had been expecting from her, evidently this was not included on the list. The sputtering which followed didn't do much to ease Charlie's suspicions. The two of them blanched and exchanged a look, giving off the air of two delinquents trying to get their stories straight. Luckily for Charlie, their eyebrows appeared to be just as blundering as their lips, rendering their silent conversations useless.

"W—why do you want to know about Derek?" Scott stammered out nervously. "I mean, why do you think I know him?"

Charlie frowned at his clumsy attempt at a dodge and continued to eye them warily. "As for why I think you know Derek, it might have something to do with the fact that he was looking for you at the party the other day. The whole 'where is Scott?' thing was kind of a give away." Scott began to scratch at the back of his neck guiltily, spurring Charlie on. "As for why I want to know about Derek, it's because of the face you're making right now," she continued, waving a finger in his face. "You look kind of like a scared badger. Plus he drove Allison home that time, and I'm still not comfortable with that idea. Add that to the fact that he always seems to be around when weird shit happens and that for some reason the two of you thought that he killed his sister—"

Stiles twitched violently and wheeled around, looking for other people who might be within earshot. "How do you know about that?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"About what?" Charlie demanded, throwing her hands in the air. She obviously didn't know anything about anything—that's why she was asking the freaking question in the freaking first place.

"About us getting Derek arrested," Scott hissed.

Charlie felt her jaw drop, ignoring Stiles as he smacked Scott over the head and began muttering a stream of expletives. "You WHAT!?"

Scott, who was still rubbing the back of his head where Stiles hit him, looked up at her with surprise. "You didn't—I thought you—you just said that you—"

"I overheard you two talking in the woods when you were looking for the half of her body!" Charlie exclaimed.

"Hey!" Stiles shouted, snapping his fingers and pointing at her. "It's—it's rude to eavesdrop on people."

"Right," Charlie drawled out sarcastically. "Because that's the takeaway here. You got Derek arrested for murderous his own sister. She supposedly died in an animal attack—why would you think he killed her?"

"How did you know it was his sister that died?" Scott demanded, getting jumpier by the second. "Or that it was an animal attack? How do you know about any of it?"
Charlie pushed the hair out of her face, shaking her head in frustration. "You are aware that newspapers exist, right? Stop evading the question. How the hell did you two idiots get him arrested?"

The wonder twins exchanged yet another look. Their eyebrows had regained some of that original finesse, but their hole was far too deep. No way to waggle their way out of this one. "The body," Stiles admitted, his tone resigned. "We found the second half of the body. It was buried on his property."

Immediately, Charlie's thoughts snapped back to that pit in front of the Hale house. She had probably missed the dead body by a matter of hours. "Okay, that's suitably creepy," Charlie murmured, a shiver running down her spine. "Why would he bury his sister on his property?"

"How are we supposed to know that?" Stiles said, pointing between himself and Scott.

"Because!" Charlie shouted waving her hands at them. "He seems to be at the epicenter of all the creepy weirdness that seems to be going on, and as far as I can tell the two of you are the only people who have had any contact with him at all!"

The two of them went silent for a moment, staring at each other and putting their eyebrows back to work. Their damn eyebrows were chattier than they were. "Look," Stiles said finally, adopting a more serious tone. "Derek—he's not a good guy. Just—just stay away from him, okay? For your own good."

"Why?" Charlie growled, throwing her hands in the air in frustration.

Stiles shrugged a bit and cocked his head to the side before planting his hands on his hips. "'C—'cause."

Charlie exhaled sharply and pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. This conversation had proved to be just about as productive as anticipated. A few more details, a dozen more questions, and she was even more confused. Glancing down at her watch, she found that it read 8:56 p.m. Only about a half hour stood between her and the police-mandated curfew.

"Okay," she said, shaking her head. "This conversation has been suitably frustrating. How about we just call it a day and I'll see the two of you tomorrow."

"Yeah! Yes," Stiles said immediately, smiling broadly and nodding.

"Tomorrow," Scott piled on, nodding as well.

Eyeing them suspiciously for one last time, Charlie spun on her heel and marched off towards her car. From behind her she could hear the hysterical whispers of Scott and Stiles as they discussed...something. Son of a bitch. She would hate those two if she didn't like them so damn much. Ugh. Boys were idiots. And according to Mel that would never completely change. They just became taller idiots with deeper voices.

Charlie leaned against her Impala as the two of them took off in the Jeep. The misadventure concluded with an awkward wave from Stiles which she hesitantly returned. Those two and their weirdass evasive behavior. Perhaps the most surprising thing was that nobody else seemed to notice it. Jackson had some suspicions—she knew that much—but they were all birthed from his massive ego. Allison didn't see it. Lydia didn't see it. Honestly Charlie wasn't even sure what she saw, but the closer she looked, the more convinced she became that it was at least a little bit dangerous.
Her rambling internal monologue was cut short by the blaring of her phone from within her bag. Charlie dug around in its depths, the muffled sound morphing to the clear strains of "I Feel Pretty" as she extracted the phone. She punched the send button and pressed it to her ear. "Hey Mel. What's up?"

"Hey, Charlie," Mel's breathless voice crackled from the other side. "I'm almost done closing up the shop."

"Just now?" Charlie demanded, her eyebrows pulling together in confusion. "It's almost 9:00."

"Yeah," Mel said, exhaustion creeping into her voice. "I needed to stay late to do some inventory. I was just wondering if you were done with the bowling thing with your friends."

"Just finished up," Charlie replied.

"Great," Mel mumbled absentmly. "I was just hoping that you could drop by Corleone's for some takeout on your way home. I'm starved and I don't think I can handle another frozen dinner."

"Of course," Charlie said nodding. "Mushroom ravioli?"

"It's like you read my mind."

"Alright, then. You get your cute ass home like...right now. You work too hard." She tossed her phone back in her bag and climbed into the car.

As she ran her errands, Charlie switched into autopilot. While her body did its job, her mind was otherwise occupied. The collective weirdness that was Scott McCall and Stiles Stilinski had lodged itself in her brain. It clung on like that last bit of gum stuck in the tread of a sneaker. Each step it would adhere to the sidewalk, not so much so to become an inconvenience in any practical sense, but just enough to be annoying as hell. She honestly didn't know why it bothered her so much. Maybe it was because things didn't seem to...fit. Like when you know something's off but you can't quite put your finger on it. But in this town 'a little bit off' added up to multiple gruesome deaths. Animal attacks, people being ripped in half, that bus driver—things were starting to get serious in Beacon Hills.

Who would have thought that this sleepy little town would end up being so dramatic.

Within about fifteen minutes a styrofoam container filled with steaming ravioli sat in the back seat and Charlie was on her way home. The smell of it was waking her stomach from its slumber and it grumbled loudly as it regained awareness. Half a serving of nachos apparently did not constitute a well balanced meal. Charlie tapped her fingers against the steering wheel, singing along to the radio as she pressed a little harder on the accelerator. Until something caught her attention.

Something odd enough for her to hit the brakes and slow the car down.

At 9:20 at night, the school should be dead. People were eager enough to get out of there during the day, so sticking around through the dead of night made no sense whatsoever. But as she zoomed past the school on her way home, Charlie could clearly see a figure in the parking lot. Compact but sturdy, the shadow scaled the gate, jumping to the other side and scampering towards the buses. One bus in particular, actually. The one that had spent its morning surrounded by khaki and police tape.

"What the hell?" Charlie whispered to herself, craning her neck as she drove by.

Her car was moving too fast to get a good look at what was happening, but she did manage to make out one very distinctive detail. A blue Jeep parked just outside the gates.
Chapter End Notes

References!

The 'What's New Pussycat' playing on a loop is a reference to John Mulaney's stand-up bit, "The Salt & Pepper Diner"

The Big Lebowski quotes! Bonding!

-----"Nobody fucks with the Jesus!"

-----"You're about to enter a world of pain!"

SOUNDTRACK

Charlie practices bowling before Scott and Stiles join her at the alley.
-----Cake and Donuts Awesome - Freezing Hands

Scott tries his hand at bowling. It...does not go well.
-----Flathead - The Fratellis

Background bowling alley music. Stiles and Charlie chat.
-----You Must Believe Me - Freezing Hands

Charlie drives home and sees Stiles's Jeep outside the bus yard.
-----Hard Time in a Terrible Land - Ezra Furman & The Harpoons
Chapter Summary

A series of irritating chance encounters which result in a particularly frustrating evening.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The weather in Providence, Rhode Island was identical to that of Beacon Hills. Add that to the list of bizarre shit about this town. It had to be the single place in all of California that saw chilly weather in early September. She had moved to San Diego with the promise of sun if not surf, and consistent temperatures that rarely, if ever, dropped below seventy degrees. In Beacon Hills she was met with overcast skies, a chilliness that demanded a closet full of cardigans, and misting rains. Wasn't California supposed to be in a damn drought?

How Charlie found herself holed up in the Argents' bathroom, staring at the foggy Rhode Island night on the screen of her phone, she couldn't quite say. The final bell of her Friday had rung without any definite plans for the evening. Having recused herself from the inevitable disaster that was the bowling date, she had settled into a pair of sweatpants and her green hoodie, heated up some Totino's pizza rolls, and began to watch Donald's soccer game from the previous night before running out on some errands. And then Cyndi Lauper's muffled voice began to serenade her from the depths of her messenger bag. One vaguely threatening conversation about 'friendship duties' later and she found herself in her Impala on her way to Allison's house.

The Argent bathroom was intimidating in its scale. Much like the rest of the house it featured high ceilings and crown moulding, stately to the point of making those unaccustomed to it feel quite small. Throw in the gleaming silver fixtures and a not insubstantial amount of shining granite and it became downright frightening. All surfaces shone brightly, as if they had just been wiped down, no water stains on the counter or flecks of rogue toothpaste marking the mirror. Too much glass. Too many breakable things. Too freaking perfect to be lived in. Lydia and Allison were two doors over, methodically assessing and dismissing various outfits, a task for which Charlie was hapless, hopeless, more or less completely useless. Luckily for her, she brought avoidance to an artform. A half hour with them was followed by ten minutes respite in the bathroom, overbearing though the room was. Charlie huddled on the seat of the toilet, knees drawn up to her chest with one arm wrapped around them and the other extended in front of her, phone in hand and watching the end of Donald's soccer game.

The players darted back and forth across the well manicured field, a soccer ball zipping deftly from foot to foot. Charlie squinted at her phone screen in a futile attempt to keep up. The shaking image did little to help her follow the action, wielded as it was by an enthusiastic nine-year-old. Jade had
picked up on Donald's love of all things television, and had for some time been the designated Price family camerawoman. While her work was typically top-notch, Donald's games usually left her jumping up and down with brimming excitement. The end result was a number of blue blurs intermingled with yellow blurs that added up to complete chaos. Charlie's head swam with colors until the camera swung widely, providing her with a solid view of the ground.

A loud shriek broke through the already raucous sound of the soccer field and Charlie flinched beneath her headphones, dialing back the volume. "Did you see that?" the giddy voice exclaimed as Jade turned to her mother. Diane and Michael Price's faces flickered into the camera frame for about half a second before it swung back to the field.

"Yeah, I saw that, sweetie," Jade's mother replied, a smile in her voice. "He did good."

"He did AWESOME!" Jade chirped.

The camera snapped to the scoreboard. It stood tall and proud in the dense Rhodes Island fog. Bright lights shone in red as the screen blinked momentarily and the score changed. North Providence High School had taken the lead over the visiting team, three goals to two. Seventeen seconds left in the fourth quarter, and Donald had just scored his second goal of the evening. Ostensibly the winning goal of the game. Loud shouts erupted from the team as they leapt up and down, converging into a huddle with Donald at the center.

"Oh my God what is he doing?!"

The elation in Jade's tone was exchanged for mortification at the drop of a hat. Charlie let out a snort, anticipating the scene about to be painted. As expected, Donald had broken ranks with the rest of his team and stumbled his way into the spotlight. Collapsed on his knees under the triumphant beams of the stadium lights, he shouted to the sky in celebration. A fairly standard celebration on its own, but he guaranteed sibling embarrassment now that his blue jersey was off his shoulders and clutched in his hand, whipping in a tight circle like a helicopter preparing to take flight. A hand clapped to Charlie's mouth to repress the giggle. The muted snort bounced off the tiled walls, turning the bathroom into an echo chamber.

"Mom, can you get him to stop doing that?" Jade whined. "We're gonna have to move again if he keeps this up. This is the fourth time."

"How would propose I get him to stop doing that?"

If Jade had a solution, Charlie didn't get to hear it. The door to the bathroom flew open, hitting the wall with a resounding bang. Charlie twitched violently in her seat, her phone clattering to the ground and almost tipping off the toilet herself. She seized the hard edge of the counter for support. "Oh my God!"

A stern silhouette filled the doorframe. Even at five foot two, the figure managed to cut an imposing picture. Lydia stepped into the light, her hands planted firmly on her hips in one of her carefully crafted power stances. Letting out a breath, Charlie scrambled to her feet, hand still clutching the counter edge. She felt the need to wipe off any fingerprints she might leave behind, preserving the bathroom's pristine image. "Lydia, what the hell are you doing?"

Lydia shrugged innocently. "Checking up on you," she chirped. "You've spent so much time in the bathroom tonight I thought you might be feeling sick. I was worried."

Charlie swallowed heavily. "Thanks for the concern. But I'm all good. Completely fine."
"Sure you are….

Charlie's phone sat at their feet on the Argent's fluffy white bath mat. The headphones had come loose, and the acoustics of the room were such that the weak, tinny whoops and cheers of Donald's game seemed to be whispered directly into their ears. Both sets of eyes—one green and one hazel—snapped to the phone at the same time. Charlie leapt forwards to snatch it up, but Lydia could move like lightning if provided sufficient motive. She held the phone before her, all pursed lips and narrowed eyes. "Really?" she drawled, the judgement in her tone more pronounced than usual. "This is what you've been hiding in the bathroom for? You can't be texting a boy or examining your pores super up-close like a normal person."

Letting out a sigh, Charlie plucked the phone out of Lydia's grasp and shoved it in the pocket of her hoodie. "And here I was thinking you were supposed to knock before barging in on someone in the bathroom."

"And here I was thinking I didn't care." She raised a skeptical eyebrow, her eyes lingering on the rectangle bulging out of Charlie's pocket. "What the hell was that anyway?" she demanded, jutting her chin towards the phone. "Please tell me you haven't joined the A.V. club. I can't handle any more 'nerd' from you."

"You know I don't have any extracurriculars," Charlie mumbled with a roll of her eyes. "Donald had a soccer game last night. His little sister sends me the footage."

A fire lit behind Lydia's eyes, her mild frustration graduating to something more vengeful. Her mouth opened and closed in disbelief before her thoroughly glossed lips pinched in disapproval. "Alright," she snipped. "So let me get this straight. I have to skirt the guidelines to the Geneva Convention to get you to show up to the lacrosse game of the school which you currently attend, but you sneak away from a Friday night hangout to watch the game of a school that's thousands of miles away?"

Lydia stared Charlie down expectantly, as if there actually existed some explanation on the planet that could mollify her. Charlie offered a nondescript jerk of the head. "It's Donald's game. Believe it or not I can be supportive on occasion."

"It was Jackson's game," Lydia observed. "You didn't feel the need to support him."

"That's because I don't support Jackson."

"It was Scott's game too."

Charlie didn't think there was a world in which Scott's name would inspire as much frustration as Jackson's, but apparently today was a day of new experiences. Her frustration with the wonder twins hadn't diminished in the slightest since the bowling alley, and both of their names left a bitter taste on her tongue. "I don't know Scott," she grumbled. "I barely know anybody on that team. So if you're trying to draw some equivalency between them and a guy who's known me since I was twelve, I'm sorry but you're gonna come up short."

Giving off a loud huff, Lydia flicked a glossy curl over her shoulder and seized onto Charlie's hand, dragging her out of the bathroom and towards Allison's room. A light nudge had Charlie stumbling past the threshold and onto the carpet. "Look who I found," Lydia sang.

Allison looked up from one of her tops with a dimpled smile. "Charlie, hey. How are you feeling?"

in the face of the redhead's curt tone. "Unless you count a debilitating allergy to all things fun."

The backs of Charlie's knees hit the edge of Allison's bed and she flopped back on the quilted covers, head missing the pillow by a few feet. At the very least Allison's room offered a more welcoming embrace, despite its decidedly unfinished design. Paint samples and pages ripped from Pottery Barn catalogs covered two of the walls while un-emptied cardboard boxes remained tucked in corners, but it possessed a sort of warmth the rest of the house lacked. Maybe because played home to an actual human person and not a fleet of militarized robots.

A high pitched cough sounded and Lydia's face appeared, hovering judgmentally above Charlie's head like God in a comedy film circa 2003. "Charlie," she instructed, "this is supposed to be a bonding experience. You're supposed to contribute."

"Really?" Charlie scowled. "Bonding? 'Cause when I'm being graded on participation, it feels kinda forced. You know what we should do? Paintball. Great activity for building a team dynamic."

Lydia's ears flushed until the camouflaged themselves among her strawberry blonde curls. "Paintball?" she demanded, her voice hoarse with disgust. "Paintball?"

"It's okay, Charlie," Allison's voice piped up. "I got your participation trophy right here." She glided towards the bed, a hanger in each hand, and nudged herself between Charlie and Lydia. "Which of these do you prefer?"

Pushing herself up on her elbows, Charlie surveyed the two options presented. The hanger on the left featured a green top trimmed with a sequined design while the other featured a floral crop top cut with simple lines. "Uh….that one—the green one."


The derisive roll of Lydia's eyes told a different story. "Incorrect," she declared, seizing the the hangers out of Allison's hands. "The answer is neither of them." Her eyes flicked between Charlie and Allison. "Do I have to do everything?"

Allison offered up a sheepish smile and Lydia sighed, returning both shirts to the closet. "Are you sure you're okay, Charlie?" Allison asked. "You were in the bathroom for a while."

Lydia flashed a wicked grin over her shoulder. "She's fine. She was just checking up on her boy."

The concern in Allison's eyes was traded in for a look of salacious intrigue at a speed that could only be described as traitorous. "Boy?" she demanded, her eyebrows assuming an arch resembling Lydia's to an uncomfortable degree. "Charlie has a boy?"

"He's not a boy," Charlie corrected. "He's my drunk uncle."

"I—I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean," Allison stammered. "Is that code?"

"Probably," Lydia sighed, just as Charlie shouted a harsh 'no'.

"Look," Charlie replied, "He isn't 'my guy'. He is a guy who I talk to on a semi-regular basis."

"By semi-regular do you mean twice daily?" Lydia teased.

"I thought you didn't keep up with friends from old cities," Allison piled on. "Is he the exception?"
"As we have established, he is my drunk uncle," Charlie grumbled. "Can we go back to talking about clothes, please? That was absolutely riveting. In fact, I like that one."

She pointed at a black, sleeveless top finished with intricate lace. "I do like this one," Allison agreed. "Do you think your boy would like it?"

"I think Donald doesn't know the difference between Louis Vuitton and Limited Too."

"Oh, so his name is Donald?"

Letting out a grunt, Charlie let her elbows give way and flopped back on the bed. Her eyes followed the slow rotation of the fan above her head, hoping for its hypnotic movement to lull her into some degree of calm. "Can we please pick a topic of conversation that passes the Bechdel test? Let's go back to vetting out clothes—I'm actually begging you."

This time both Allison and Lydia leaned over her, peering down and smiling in the face of her frustration. "You know, she's cute when she's angry," Allison mused.

Lydia nodded. "Agreed."

Charlie glowered up at the pair of them. "I will murder you both."

"Oh, wow, she's radiant."

Reaching above her head, Charlie snatched up Allison's pillow and covered her face. Mostly to shield herself from her friends' combined nosiness, but also giving her the option of smothering herself to death if the situation escalated any further. The pillow's plushness dampened any further teasing into an incomprehensible murmur until the voices drifted away. After thirty seconds of virtual silence, Charlie found the resolve to emerge from her downy cocoon. The girls had migrated back to the closet, Lydia tearing through its contents with vigor while Allison gnawed timidly on her fingernails.

"How about this one?" Allison said, holding up two-tone brown shirt printed with an abstract pattern of vines and flowers. "Charlie, what do you think?"

"I think it's nice." She propped herself back up and tucked her legs underneath her, observing the sartorial selection. The teenage ritual driving the process was somewhat baffling. Anthropological studies could be conducted on the subject, with each time Lydia wrenched a top out of Allison's hands marking a single data point. Judging by the size of the clothing pile at their feet, it would be a very well researched study. As it turned out, the two-tone brown shirt was also to be sacrificed on the altar of scientific inquiry.

"Mmmm, pass," Lydia declared, tossing the shirt onto the ever-growing pile.

"Why is it a pass?" Allison asked, her brow furrowed in mild frustration. "Charlie thought it was fine."

Lydia sneered in derision, her eyes flicking up and down Charlie's form, lingering on the soup stain that marked her old, grey gym sweats. "Are you really going to trust someone in sweatpants to give you fashion advice?" she said, disdainfully inclining her head in Charlie's direction.

"Hey," Charlie snapped, jabbing a defensive finger at Lydia. "I wore a shirtdress to school today. I belted it and everything—I watched that episode of 'Project Runway'. It's not my fault you called after I got cozy."

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"No, thanks," Charlie deadpanned, getting to her feet and pacing across Allison's room. "I'm all set on footwear."

Lydia let out an audible scoff, but Charlie ignored her, instead crouching down to peer into one of Allison's errant cardboard boxes, the word 'books' hastily scrawled across the top. "Hey, is it cool if I check this out?" Charlie called over her shoulder, already unfolding the flaps as Allison gave her 'yes'. Most of the books inside were of the typical variety to be found in a teenage girl's room —'Harry Potter', 'The Hunger Games', 'Are You There God? It's Me Margaret', the 'L' edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica—but as her fingers brushed over the spines they rested on one volume in particular. Its rough, leather-bound spine stood out among the others.

Worn but distinguished, the book had no title to speak of. Brows knitting together with curiosity, Charlie plucked it from the box. It fell open in her hands, kicking a layer of dust into the air and releasing a musty smell of decay and knowledge. Idly flipping through the pages, Charlie squinted at the words in the hopes that the letters would arrange themselves into a comprehensible text. Elements of French cropped up, but not in any dialect that she could make sense of. Medieval—archaic maybe? And accompanying the garbled, yet somehow ominous nonsense were sketches of mythic monsters. "What the—"

"Mmm, pass," Lydia declared from the closet, the judgement forcing her tone up an octave. She pushed through Allison's shirts, tsking with every turn. "Pass. Pass. Uh, pass on all of it. Look, Allison, respect for your taste is, uh, dwindling by the second."

Allison shifted on her feet, the discomfort inspired by Lydia's biting commentary oozing from every pore. If Lydia ever wondered why she didn't have more friends, this moment could serves as a point of reference. "Hey, Allison?" she called out, making the two girls turn around. She lifted the book in the air, pointing at an illustration of what looked to be an ill-proportioned dragon with the head of a goat. "What's with the book? A little light bedtime reading?"

Allison frowned and took a few steps forward. "That must be one of my dad's," she murmured. "He's got a big collection of antique books—heirlooms and stuff. It must have gotten mixed up with mine during the move."

"You not a purveyor of old school mythology?" Charlie snorted.

"Yeah, I prefer reading material that's….you know...readable. And not from yore."

"From 'yore'?" Charlie snorted. "Look who's going full Shakespeare."

Admiration of the antiquities was cut short by the oddly musical sound of Lydia clearing her throat. The girl stood in the entrance to Allison's closet, hands planted on her hips and toe tapping expectantly. "Did I miss something?" she asked, whipping her hair over her shoulder with a shake of her head. "Did we suddenly decide to join Oprah's book club? I thought we were getting ready for a date."

Charlie collapsed back on the bed, rolling onto her stomach as she continued to page through the book. "I was doing no such thing," she declared. "I am not a part of this so-called group date. To be honest, I'm not even sure why I'm here—I'm not going with you guys."

"You're here to help Allison get ready," Lydia replied simply, turning back to the closet.
"You already know that I'm no good at that stuff," Charlie yawned. "And like...what's the point? Scott's already 90% in love with her, and it's not like the dude is frequenting any runways."

Lydia's features reassembled themselves in a conformation that managed to simultaneously convey disbelief, revulsion, and disappointment. "Okay, that is so not the point of this."

"You're here for moral support," Allison offered, her dimples reappearing as she offered a soft smile. "And you know that you can come if you want to. You don't need to be solo on Friday night."

Pressing her lips together in a thin line, Charlie shook her head. Even a plate of shitty nachos couldn't compensate for the drama in store. "No thanks. I'd really rather not be the fifth wheel. Technically that would make me the spare tire strapped onto the CRV. It's clunky, it gets in the way and weighs the car down, and barring any disasters it's completely useless. Jackson and Lydia will be making out and you and Scott'll be all adorable—" Charlie abruptly cut herself off and pursed her lips in consideration. "Actually, scratch that metaphor. It implies I'd be involved in any capacity. Really it's more like you guys are two bicycles and I'm the weirdo behind you on a unicycle with a creepy handlebar mustache and whistling carnival music."

Lydia sighed and shook her head. "Why do you always have to take it to a weird place?"

"Don't kid yourself, Lydia," Charlie deadpanned, idly flipping another page of the book. "You love it."

"We could invite someone else to come along," Allison suggested tentatively. "Even out the numbers, you know? That way you wouldn't be on your own. Danny might be game."

"I could call Aaron Harrison for you," Lydia smirked. "You could make up for that incident at the party. You know, the one where you went full psycho and almost dislocated his thumb."

"I didn't dislocate his thumb," Charlie grunted. "And if I'm forced to spend any prolonged period of time with him I will likely remove that thumb. And select other appendages depending on how handsy he gets."

"How about Stiles?" Allison proposed. "You guys are kind of friends, right?"

Charlie's nose wrinkled involuntarily at the suggestion. Stiles freaking Stilinski, member two of the wonder twins and half of the source of her frustration. "Hard pass on all of it," she replied a little too quickly. "Danny's probably already got plans and I will feed myself to a woodchipper before voluntarily spending time with Aaron Harrison. I'm in my sweats. I have eaten half a family size bag of Doritos. That is a lot of salt, dude. I am not going anywhere that requires actual pants."

Allison spent the whole of the rant eyeing Charlie with mild concern. "Is there something going on with you and Stiles? Are you mad at him or something?"

Charlie frowned and shook her head. "No," she declared, lying like a lying liar. "Why do you ask?"

Allison shrugged. "It's just that this morning during English he was definitely trying to get your attention and you were totally ignoring him. I thought maybe he had done something to annoy you."

It was Charlie's turn to shrug. "Maybe I was paying attention to Mr. Hobson's super-fascinating lecture."

At that Allison let out a rather indelicate snort. "Come on, Charlie. You never pay attention in
Hobson's class—you always have an answer in your back pocket anyway. Hell, he's even stopped trying to catch you unprepared. I can't tell if he really likes you or hates you."

"You either love to hate me or hate to love me," Charlie sighed. "That's just how I roll." Allison, clearly unsatisfied with her response, folded her arms across her chest and raised her eyebrows expectantly. "Fine," Charlie muttered. "Parent-teacher conferences are coming up and I'm trying to behave myself. Mel doesn't need any teachers telling her that I'm insubordinate. She's been working fourteen-hour days at the shop, and I don't want to add myself to the list of things stressing her out."

"While this has all been incredibly emotionally cathartic," Lydia interrupted, tapping her foot with impatience, "can we focus on the task at hand, please? We're kind of on a deadline—we don't have all weekend for this."

Allison, apparently accepting Charlie's explanation, turned back to Lydia and the closet. The explanation was built of stone cold bullshit, but Mel provided a convenient scapegoat. Charlie's avoidance of Stiles and his antics was not born of an effort to behave herself in Hobson's class—though it probably should be. No, her avoidance was a direct result of seeing that freaking blue Jeep parked outside of the gates of the bus yard. Her mild irritation with him had kicked up a notch, settling on pissed off.

Self-aggrandizing though it may seem, Charlie was used to having a good handle on what was going on. She didn't pretend to have intelligence on Lydia's scale—she was no genius—but her moderate cleverness, when combined with her curiosity and stubbornness, usually paved the way. If her mind locked onto something—some mystery or puzzle—her brain had a way of sussing it out. Needless to say she kicked ass at Clue, but Beacon Hills was short on the candlesticks and heavy on the claws. If Stiles and Scott had that nugget of information necessary for her to work out this mystery, they refused to share. And that pissed her off. A lot.

Maybe it wasn't fair of her to expect the wonder twins to share with the class. Maybe that constituted an invasion of their privacy. But in all honesty, she didn't give a shit. Derek Hale and his goddamn shovel and the goddamn pit in front of his goddamn house. Derek Hale being arrested for murder in a case where the girl died of an animal attack. That blue Jeep sitting in front the bus yard that housed the site of yet another such animal attack. Derek looking for Scott. Scott getting Derek arrested. The coincidences added up to a pattern.

Maybe the true source of her irritation was the impossibility of it all. Humans didn't have a tapetum lucidum, and yet according to flash photography Scott and Derek did. Next she factored in the claw marks on the bus—the ones she had snapped a photo of that morning. They had five claw marks. No such animal was immediately conjured up in Charlie's mind. So, as anybody with a slightly obsessive personality would, she arrived at the apartment and spent an hour crouched over her computer keyboard looking for one. The incredibly illuminating answer? Raccoons. Skunks. Freaking chipmunks. So unless the news had failed to cover a massive spill of toxic materials or a horde of adorable woodland creatures had been exposed to an excess of gamma radiation, a part of the picture was missing.

Not knowing was like an itch on her back she couldn't quite reach, constant and nagging. And the only backscratchers in town were a few incompetent morons.

"Huh," Lydia broke in, grabbing a shirt out of the closet and holding it up. It was black, covered in sequins, and projecting light directly into Charlie's eyes. "This one. Charlie, what do you think?"

"Are we trying to make sure Scott can find her in the dark?" she asked. "Because if that's the endgame, this shirt is definitely the way to go."
"It never hurts to be visible, Charlie," Lydia quipped back, holding the shirt to Allison's neck to show it off in the mirror. "Boys don't always have the best attention spans, and in my experience shiny objects attract them. Like magpies. Maybe you should keep that in mind from time to time."

"Oh, I don't think Charlie has any problem being visible," Allison tacked on, shooting Charlie an oddly mischievous smile.


Allison took the shirt from Lydia and stood before the full length mirror. At that moment, Allison's father strolled into the room, a faded green jacket in hand. His tight-lipped smile hid that row of sturdy and oddly menacing teeth, but knowing they were there was intimidation enough. Charlie pushed that old, leather-bound book behind her and perched at the edge of the bed.

"Dad, hello," Allison said in the sweetest 'what the hell are you doing here' voice possible.

Mr. Argent stopped short and scanned the room, somewhat surprised to discover that the room's usual population had been multiplied by three. Charlie pressed her lips together in a wan but wary smile and nodded in greeting. Mr. Argent inclined his head to her, but Lydia's mischievous smirk drew most of the focus. "Right," he declared, gesturing at the door. "I'm sorry, I—I completely forgot to knock."

"That's okay," Charlie declared with a dismissive wave of her hand. "The orgy ended like twenty minutes ago. We've reached the wholesome, parchese portion of the evening."

He shot Charlie a withering look that she returned with a wide, sheepish grin. Meanwhile, Lydia collapsed onto the bed next to Charlie, one hand planted on her hip while the other propped up her head, much like a chanteuse draping herself over a piano. "Hey, Mr. Argent," she chirped, playing with the ends of her hair.

"Dad, do you need something?" Allison asked, her frustration becoming more pronounced.

Mr. Argent laughed lightly and pulled his jacket on. "I wanted to tell you that you'll be staying in tonight."

"What?" Allison demanded, an unhappy frown pulling at the corners of her lips. "I'm going out with my friends tonight."

"Not when some animal is out there attacking people," he retorted.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Mr. Argent interrupted, his tone assuming a new degree of authority. "It's out of my hands. There's a curfew. No one's allowed out past 9:30 p.m."

"Yeah...but that's more of a guideline than an actual rule," Charlie drawled out. A statement which, according to the unamused glint in Mr. Argent's eye, doubled down on that wrath she had already incurred. She let out a small harrumph and shrank back to the bed. "Clearly someone's not a fan of 'Pirates of the Caribbean'."

Allison rolled her eyes heavily and threw the black shirt in her hands back to the bed before folding her arms over her chest and glowering—the ultimate expression of teenage dissatisfaction.

"Hey," Mr. Argent said, inclining his head in warning. "No more arguing." After an about-face he made a move to stride out the door, but paused as his eyes flickered to the book tucked behind
Charlie, open to an illustration of a serpentine wolf. He stepped forwards and plucked it up from the bed. "What's this?" he grunted, brandishing the book at Charlie and Allison.

"It got mixed in with some of my stuff during the move," Allison spat bitterly. "Charlie thought it was interesting. Is that a problem?"

Mr. Argent didn't respond. He simply snapped the book shut and tucked it under his arm, spinning on his heel once more. No explanation given. He exited the room, leaving behind a peeved Allison, a perpetually coy Lydia, and a baffled Charlie.

"Okay," Charlie mused. "He is clearly anti-insubordination."

Lydia hopped off the bed and came to a stop next to Allison, peering at the doorway through which Mr. Argent had just disappeared. "Well," she chirped. "Someone's daddy's little girl."

Allison gnawed on her fingernails, glaring after her dad. She began to bounce up and down on her heels as her uncertainty morphed into steely-eyed resolve. "Sometimes," she whispered. "But not tonight."

Wordlessly, she grabbed a purple knit hat from her vanity and pulled it down over her long, brown curls. One angry glance at the doorway and she made a beeline for the window, wrenching it open and stepping onto the ledge outside. Lydia and Charlie exchanged glances filled with equal degrees of confusion and scrambled to the window, leaning through just in time to see Allison approaching the ledge.

"What are you doing?" Lydia squeaked.

Again without warning or explanation, Allison hurled herself off the ledge, doing a full flip before her feet connected squarely with the soft grass of the lawn. Allison beamed up at Charlie and Lydia, face shining with pride. "Eight years gymnastics," she whispered breathlessly. "You coming?"

Charlie and Lydia shared a look of understanding and turned back to Allison. "Yeah, we'll take the stairs."

Lydia grasped the top of the window, slowly pulling it shut. As it snapped closed, she glanced over her shoulder, eyebrows raised. "Okay, then," she trilled. "On that supremely bizarre note, I think it's time for us to go."

"You're just bitter because she got the dramatic exit."

Grabbing their things, Charlie and Lydia made their way down the stairs to be greeted by Mrs. Argent at the bottom. Through concerted effort, Charlie managed not to jump. The woman had an unsettling way about her. Maybe it was the eyes. They were an icy blue, sharp, intelligent, and featuring some thinly veiled crazy. Just like Allison's father, her gaze was hardened and calculating, potentially configured with Terminator vision. Where Allison had found her softer, kinder expression would remain a mystery. It certainly couldn't be attributed to genetics.

"Hey, Mrs. Argent," Charlie said politely, coming to a stop at the base of the stairs. "We're about to head out. Thanks so much for having us."

"Oh, not at all," Mrs. Argent said, smiling widely. Charlie didn't like the smile—the teeth were too...pointy? White? Blinding? Charlie grimaced into its off-putting gleam. "I'm afraid you've just missed Chris—he's gone on a couple of errands. But he mentioned about meeting you and your aunt for dinner one of these days?"
Charlie opened and closed her mouth several times, but no sound seemed willing to come forth. She settled for a noncommittal 'mmph'.

"Well, we'd love to meet Melody," Mrs. Argent smiled. "How about some time in the next few weeks?"

"Yeah—yup," Charlie nodded, burying the looming terror as deep within her as she could. "Sounds good."

Rapping her knuckles against the sweeping mahogany bannister, Charlie strode to the door, immediately followed by Lydia. "Oh, girls!" Mrs. Argent called out, halting them just as Charlie's hand had grasped the door handle. "Have a safe drive home."

"Oh, we will," Lydia replied slyly. "Safe drive home."

Charlie let out a forced laugh and yanked the door shut behind them. "That wasn't very subtle," she muttered sparing Lydia a scowl.

"Oh, Charlie," Lydia sighed, reaching up and rearranging Charlie's hair. "Since when have I ever been accused of being subtle?"

Rolling her eyes heavily, Charlie marched towards the end of the driveway where her car was parked. Lydia had to run carefully after her, hampered by the heels she insisted on wearing. Charlie smirked silently to herself. Sneakers did have their time and place. "Yo, Allison!" she hissed at the bushes. "It's cool to come out now."

Some suspicious rustling later, Allison appeared from the foliage, her face flushed and eyes twinkling with excitement of teenage rebellion. "Oh my God," Lydia grumbled. She plucked a few errant leaves from Allison's hair, waving them in front of Allison's and Charlie's faces like a prosecutor presenting Exhibit A to a jury. "All I ask for is rudimentary hygiene! What am I going to do with you two?"

Charlie scoffed at the redhead. "How about you sit back and appreciate our awesomeness."

"If she can handle it, that is," Allison tacked on. "There's a lot of awesomeness to be appreciated."

Lydia cackled derisively. "Cute. Now Allison, get in the car. We don't want to be late."

While Lydia piled into her gleaming Beetle, Allison stayed in place. The corners of Charlie's lips twitched into a half smile and she punched the girl lightly in the shoulder. "Hey....." she drawled. "Sorry for, you know...ditching you in your own house. Hiding out in the bathroom was significantly uncool of me."

Allison tucked her hair behind her ears and laughed lightly. "It's okay. I know this isn't really your thing. We still on for jogging tomorrow?"

"Absolutely," Charlie confirmed. "Full disclosure, though. I can get a bit competitive, so...jogging might turn into a race."

"Oh, I've got no problem with that. As long as you're not a sore loser."

A surprised guffaw burst forth from Charlie's lungs. "Whoa, hey there now. Argent's coming on strong with that one. Shots fired."

"If by that you mean I'm faster than a speeding bullet," Allison grinned, "I would have to agree."
A shrill honk shattered the suburban silence. Lydia stared at them through the windshield, tapping at her wrist. Time to get on with it. Allison exhaled sharply and gave a goodbye salute before hobbling to the Beetle's passenger side door. "Last chance, Oswin!" Lydia called out as her engine revved to life. "If you want in, you better say so now!"

"Couldn't even if I wanted to," Charlie replied with a semi-apologetic jerk of the head. "I promised Mel that I'd get some errands out of the way. Our kitchen is just saltines and pickles. I've got to get to the grocery store at some point and it's already—" she checked her watch "—it's already almost 8:00 p.m."

"Okay, then," Lydia sighed. "We'll be busy having fun without you."

The Beetle shot out of the driveway and peeled down the street, leaving Charlie with a face full of dirt and and enveloped in the smell of rubber against asphalt. She waved feebly at the retreating car and marched to her own. Beyond that, 'lame' was the descriptor that could best describe her Friday night. Actually, no. 'Lame' was a euphemism. Pushing around a grocery cart was an activity reserved for those who had graduated from college, and yet here she was, contemplating a box of Cheerios in her sweatpants. Charlie pursed her lips and considered the box a moment before plunking it back on the shelves in exchange for the Cocoa Puffs. When it came to breakfast—as with everything else in life—maturity was overrated. But especially with cereal. Any package bearing the phrase 'contains your daily dose of fiber' was to be rejected outright.

Rounds finished, groceries packed, stamps purchased, dry-cleaning picked up—within an hour she had wrapped up all her errands, but the needle on the fuel gauge pointed directly under the letter 'E'. As she turned the engine on the car gave off a soft 'ding' and that 'E' flickered to light. Shit. Terrible mileage really was the curse of classic cars. Low mileage and constant upkeep.

Charlie cruised to the Google Maps-designated closest gas station, keeping her foot off the accelerator as much as possible, but as she approached the pumps her eyes met something that abruptly brought her foot to the brakes. Putting her car into park alongside the station, Charlie turned off the engine and lights, crouching low enough to peer just over the steering wheel. Was it an unnecessary degree of precaution? Probably. But the scene unfolding a few car lengths over called for wariness.

A shiny, black Camaro—one that exuded that new car smell—sat by one of the pumps as a tall, square-shouldered guy in a leather jacket filled up the tank. In and of itself a normal enough scene—there likely existed a statistical correlation between shiny muscle cars and leather jackets. Charlie herself owned several. Jackets, not cars. But the guy and his Camaro didn't exist in landscape all of their own. His car had been blocked in by two SUVs, one red and one silver, and he stood surrounded by three fellows of a rather threatening demeanor. One of them, a tall blonde man—only the back of his head visible—appeared to be speaking. Charlie reached over to the passenger side door lever and rolled down the window, pricking her ears. No luck. Distance and several giant gas pumps separated her from the action.

Through squinted eyes she managed to make out the blonde man grab one of the squeegees and clean off the windshield of the Camaro in what ultimately proved to be a pointless gesture. The blonde man turned back to his red SUV and one of his goons—mousy brown hair, dirty T-shirt, tire iron in hand—stepped behind the pump. The sound of shattering glass echoed through the night.

"Holy shit!" Charlie hissed, sliding lower in her seat. Her body went liquid, slipping into a puddle at the base of her car until doors closed, engines roared to life, and wheels squeaked against pavement. When no sound remained but the faint buzz of the fluorescents illuminating the station, Charlie poked her head back over the dash. The SUVs had gone. The Camaro remained.
Clambering out of the Impala, she shoved her fists into the pockets of her hoodie and marched to the sleek car. A squeak of surprise ripped from her lips as she rounded the corner to find Derek Hale leaning against the hood, staring into the depths of his broken window. At the sound of her approach, his head snapped around.

In a sensible world, the Derek standing before her would carry all the intimidation of that Derek she had seen at the Target, or even at Lydia's party. But this Derek—behind the baseline anger—just looked tired. And maybe a little sad. "You?" he sighed in frustration. "Seriously?"

"Me?" Charlie returned, her voice tremulous. Her eyes darted about frantically, freezing at the sight of a security camera. Derek followed her gaze, raising his eyebrows pointedly as her eyes returned to his. She, of course, made a face in return. "What about me?"

"What do you think you're looking at?" he snapped.

Charlie instinctively bristled at the hostility and removed her hands from her pockets, instead folding them across her chest. "Well preliminary evidence suggests I'm looking at petty vandalism," she replied, jutting her chin in the direction of the window. "Do you need some help with that? Broom...shovel...dustpan...any household tools necessary? Ya need any of that shit, buddy?"

"I'm not your....'buddy'," Derek said, his voice dripping in disdain. "And I've got it covered."

"So you've got a shovel, then?"

Derek let out a sigh and squared his shoulders in Charlie's direction. Shoulders so broad his ability to fit in that Camaro was a miracle of modern physics. Murderer or not, the guy was built to bulldoze. "Am I supposed to know you?" he demanded.

"Um, yeah," Charlie returned with a sarcastic drawl. "You're the one who ran me over at that party a few weeks back. 'You're friends with Scott', batman voice...ringing any bells? Also, you just said, 'you...seriously'?"

"Is there a reason you're still here?" Derek growled.

Charlie opted for a topical pivot. "So who did this to your car?" she queried, craning her neck to observe the damage.

"Don't know," Derek bit out. "Didn't get a good look."

"Didn't get a good look?" Charlie parroted. "They were literally standing right in front of you."

Derek's jaw twitched. "I'm farsighted."

Charlie's lip curled at his blatant lie. "Well then how about those very, very prominent security cameras that people definitely shouldn't do any illegal shit in front of," she returned, indicating at the gas station security cameras. "I'm sure they got a good look. Pixelated and barely recognizable sure....maybe....but they can CSI that shit these days. Unless television has been lying to us all along....But I trust the creators of NCIS. Who doesn't? That Abby is just delightful."

"I wouldn't know," he growled. "I don't watch NCIS. Because I am not 60."

Well at least Charlie got two pieces of information about Derek from this interaction. He did not watch NCIS and his age could be pinned down to the 'under 60' category. Progress.
"Is there a reason you're still talking to me?" he growled.

Any mounting frustration on Derek’s part was equally matched by the bubble of bitterness rising in her own chest. They were playing a game of poker and the both of them kept chucking chips on the table, calling every bet. The trajectory pointed towards Charlie ending the conversation bankrupt and royally pissed off. "Do you have any other facial expressions, or is it just the one?" she sniped. "I mean, were you the subject of a horrific Botox debacle and are now no longer able to express human emotion? Because you seem a little young for that kind of work."

Derek sighed and pushed himself from the hood of the car, crossing his arms so his posture matched her own. As far as contemptuous displays went, he turned out to be the more practiced party. "What do you want."

"A pony," Charlie deadpanned. "But as I'm stuck in suburbia, odds of that are kinda low. So I'll settle for some answers."

"Answers to what?"

Charlie narrowed her eyes. "What the hell is your deal?"

"That's not much of a question."

"And that's not any kind of answer."

The moody staring persisted until yet another dumbass idea popped into her head. Pulling her iPhone out of her hoodie pocket, she held it up. "Say queso," she quipped. He didn't so much as blink when the camera's flash went off in his face. The result was a perfectly framed photo of Derek Hale, the halo of light surrounding his eyes shining brighter than the illuminated Exxon sign. "There," she said, holding the photo to his face. "Explain that."

Derek's eyes flicked to the photo and then back to her. "I was never very photogenic."

"What's with the damn obtuseness?" she groaned. "Jesus, you're worse than those two morons."

"Which two morons," Derek replied a little too suddenly.

Charlie eyed him carefully, gauging his reactions. "Please, we both know we have two people in common. And we both know that those two people are morons."

Then something strange happened. The corners of Derek's lips twitched slightly, lamely attempting to form something resembling a smile. But it faded as soon as it appeared. "Sure."

"So how the hell do you know Stiles and Scott anyway?" Charlie blurted out.

Derek's lips finally pulled into that smile, but it was bland and joyless. "As fun as this was….let's never, ever do it again."

Without another word Derek climbed into his car, revved the engine a few times, and sped out of the gas station, peeling some rubber and definitely violating the speed limit. A lot of effort and wear and tear for the little bit of drama it introduced. Charlie gave an unimpressed snort and waved at the car's wake. "Bye then." It wasn't till later that her anger subsided enough for her to realize that goading a potentially homicidal Abercrombie & Fitch model might not be the best of ideas.

The fragments of broken glass lay on the asphalt, blinking the colors of a wall of flickering neon signs. Swearing loudly, Charlie kicked at them, sending the bits skittering. Yet another mysterious
incident to add to the ever growing pile. So somebody was harassing Derek now. Violently. And not only did the dude appear entirely unfazed, he seemed to expect it. Tight-lipped, unwilling to go to the authorities—it suggested that whoever had maimed his car had something on him, or he was too afraid to go to the cops. Maybe Stiles and Scott weren't the only ones who suspected him of killing his sister. Maybe someone else was in on the weird, destructive shit going on. Maybe, maybe, maybe. On certainty to be found? There was another player on the board.

The encounter with Derek had left Charlie restless. She returned to an empty apartment and packed away the groceries. She opened the ice cream to dig into it, but it had melted into an almost-soup, furthering her disappointment with the evening. Then she wandered absently room to room, no sense of purpose whatsoever. Mel wasn't going to be back till at least 10:00 p.m.—probably later. A year ago she would have loved having the place to herself for a couple of hours. Apartments with her dad were usually small and cramped—having the run of it was a relief. She'd pull a Risky Business, dance around in sock feet and sing into a hairbrush. Back then an empty house had potential. Now an empty house was just....empty.

Movies. Those filled the silence. When her dad worked late, she'd dig into the collection of shitty VHS tapes he recorded straight from the television in 1990-something. They were horrible quality and she still had to fast-forward through the commercials, but she found herself returning to them many a night. Her dad would usually roll in some time in the last fifteen minutes, drop on the couch next to her, and grab the last handful of popcorn she had saved him. 'Starship Troopers' was a staple. If anything could stop her from crawling out of her own skin, it was Starship Troopers.

The VHS tapes were easy enough to find—Mel's hyper-efficient system of organization ensured that. The woman had made a chart. Hall closet, back left corner. It required some rearranging, but soon enough the dusty cardboard box sat on the hallway floor, movies spilling into piles around it. Her dad's barely legible scrawl decorating peeling labels served as each tape's only identifying marker, rendering them indistinguishable to the untrained eye. But years of cheeto dust and popcorn butter stains shone like a beacon—Starship Troopers was easy to find. A wicked grin split across her face as she pulled it from the stack, but as Charlie snapped it up a crushing weight of realization settled on her. They had kept the tapes, yes, but Mel had no VCR. Because this was the 21st century.

Sighing heavily, Charlie glanced at her watch. 8:57 p.m. and her insides still felt squirmy. Mel had called to say she wouldn't be able to leave the shop until after midnight. Freaking inventory. But apparently running your own boutique while simultaneously designing and constructing a quarter of its merchandise was time consuming.

"Screw it," Charlie muttered to herself. She marched into the foyer and grabbed her keys from the table flanking the front door. Practically storming out of the house, she climbed back into her car and drove into the dark, soon enough pulling into the parking lot of the local video rental place.

Video rentals. The last resort of the Friday night. The store itself was defeated in appearance—walls that time had dragged to the shoddy side of off-white, layers of dust the skeleton staff couldn't keep up with, and carpet in that dingy gray color that concealed just about any type of stain. Netflix and Amazon had banished it to a slow, undignified death. On the plus side it held an interesting cross-section of people—some of them couples too tired or too much in a rut to seek out excitement, desperate housewife types seeking a cheesy rom-com that would pair well with the bottle of chardonnay they intended to kill, stoners eager to watch some mindless explosions between snack runs and hits off the bong....And finally there were people like her. The odd numbered wheels who were by default—or by willfulness in her case—excluded from their friends' weekend activities.
Charlie wound her way down the aisles, chewing absently on her fingernails as she tried to track down a DVD of 'Starship Troopers'. The store clerk directed her to an almost offensively dark corner of the store, lit by a single, lame, flickering fluorescent. On the bottom row—the BOTTOM ROW—she found her copy, case cracked and label rippled with water damage. The place had no respect for classic sci-fi, and her yelp review would say as much.

Snatching up the DVD, Charlie moved towards the checkout line, pausing in front of the massive piles of sweets in front of the counter. She wasn't sure how long she stood there—her love of Snickers beckoned, but the Reese's made a strong argument—but after an untold amount of time a figure sidled up next to her, interrupting her internal struggle.

A sidelong glance provided all the necessary details: close-cropped hair, a constellation of moles, and fingers tapping pathologically against the plastic rectangle in his hands. Charlie squeezed her eyes shut and groaned as her forehead fell against the soda cooler. Avoiding people in this tiny damn town proved to be nigh impossible. And apparently closing her eyes didn't mean he couldn't see her.

"Hey, Charlie," Stiles's voice squeaked.

Charlie cracked an eye and looked at him. He leaned against the shelves of candy, his face featuring a smile so awkward it bordered on pained. "Hey, Stiles," she replied, her tone significantly dampening his enthusiasm.

Stiles faltered, but Charlie raised her eyebrows, prompting him to continue. Might as well get it over with. "So, uh, I meant to talk to you at school today," he grimaced. "But you seemed to be kinda busy."

"I wasn't busy," she replied simply. "I was actively avoiding you."

Stiles blinked in shock and scratched nervously at his forehead. "Why, uh, why would you go and do something like that? Avoid me, I mean. In such an active capacity."

Charlie sighed and straightened to her full height before turning to face him. "Because, Stiles, annoyingly evasive behavior has a tendency to piss me off. Last night you and Scott were annoyingly evasive and I'm petty, so—"

"But that's what I was gonna talk to you about!" Stiles interrupted, gesturing wildly.

Charlie quirked a single eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yes!"

"So you were gonna tell me why you and Scott dropped by the bus yard after our adventure in bowling? I'm guessing you were sniffing around the site of the attack."

Whatever performance art Stiles's wild limbs were gearing up for, they froze mid-air. Charlie sagged against the cooler and smirked at his surprise. She had too much smug in her to stand straight. "How did you know about that?" he muttered through pinched lips.

"You have a very distinctive car. And that wasn't a denial, so call it progress."

Stiles's expression fell. "That's….not really something I can talk to you about."

"Let's add it to the list."
"So there's a list? That...that's great."

Biting down on her lip, Charlie narrowed her eyes at Stiles. His frustration seemed to match her own. The crease between the eyebrows, the twitchier than usual behavior, the wringing of the hands...it was becoming abundantly clear that he didn't enjoy the secret-keeping. And keeping those secrets despite his hating them meant he was even less likely to share. But it also meant he regretted not being able to open up more, and that was something at least. Charlie might be petty, but she wasn't without pity.

"Fine," Charlie mumbled darkly. "It seems like we've reached an impasse and this whole—" she gestured between them "—this whole 'conflict' thing is more effort than I'm willing to give. I'm still pissed, but I'm gonna hit pause."

Stiles blinked and bobbed his head in enthusiasm. "Yes, definitely. Let's do that." He threw his hands in the air in an uncoordinated display of victory. Charlie regarded him skeptically and he dropped them, instead opting to plant them on his hips. "So what are you doing here?" he asked. His head seemed to swivel on his neck in a manner that likely indicated inquisitiveness.

"Um, renting a video," Charlie drawled. "That is the defined purpose of a video store, is it not?"

"R—right, of course," he stammered. "I just thought you'd be off doing 'cool' people things."

"What, like tipping cows?" she snorted. "I'm not sure what constitutes 'cool people things', but I'm pretty sure you can't do them alone. And literally everyone I know is paired up and bowling."

Stiles gave a solemn nod. "Yeah.....The whole 'pairing off' aspect of relationships really does have a tendency to ruin everything for everybody else."

"Insensitive bastards," Charlie muttered. "There should totally be a support group for this kind of stuff. They could call it 'odd wheels anonymous' and hold the meeting Friday nights in this place's basement."

"Sure, because that's not depressing as hell," Stiles laughed. "So what were you planning on watching?" Charlie pulled the DVD from where it remained, neatly tucked under her arm. As she held it up, Stiles frowned in bemusement. "Starship Troopers?"

"Um, yeah. Is that a problem?"

"What—no," he protested. "I just sorta assumed you already had it. At Lydia's party you rambled about watching it with the confidence of someone who knew it was readily available."

Charlie's eyebrows furrowed at his having remembered such an off-hand comment, but chose to move on. "I do have it," she replied. "I just...have it on VHS and seem to have found myself without a VCR."

"You mean because it's not 1996," Stiles chuckled. Suddenly, and without any semblance of reason, his mirth had her hackles raised. "Seriously," he pressed, "why do you even still have tapes? Why don't you just buy the DVD?"

"Because I'm not gonna replace my dad's VHS tapes," she replied snappishly.

Stiles's eyes went wide, and Charlie's defensiveness dissolved as quickly as it had lashed out. He had no way of knowing he just took a giant, squelching step into the quagmire of her muddied emotions. More troubling, though, was how quickly those typically dormant feelings had manifested. She opened and closed her mouth, unsure of how to proceed. "Sorry," she muttered.
"I'd just….rather not buy the DVD."

Stiles paused a moment, and then nodded in understanding. "Uh, sure. Yeah, I get it." He stared down at the floor, but his eyes flicked to her several times. "I actually own 'Starship Troopers' in the super-digitally-remastered version," he offered hesitantly. "You could—you could come see it and save yourself the seven bucks. If you want."

Charlie eyed him carefully, gauging the genuineness of the offer. "Okay, sure," she acquiesced. "Yeah. I don't have anything better to do."

"Really?" Stiles asked, blinking stupidly.

"Yeah," she shrugged. "Why not?"

"O—okay, then," Stiles chirped. "So this means you're not pissed at me anymore, right?"

"Nope," Charlie responded, popping the 'p'. "I'm still pissed. But there's one thing I hate more that annoying evasiveness, and that's boredom."

"Alright," Stiles said, throwing his hands in the air in acceptance. "I'll take it."

It took some awkward negotiating, but Charlie ended up tailing Stiles's Jeep back to his house. While in transit she found herself wondering whether this was the best idea. Quite frankly, Stiles didn't seem to have a ton of one-on-one interactions with those humans of the female persuasion. He was fine—or at least moderately okay—in open, public, well lit places. But on his own...not so much. Which placed his relationship with Lydia in an even more dire situation than she had originally suspected. Oh, well. Maybe a low-stakes, girls-only hang might mitigate that nervousness in future scenarios. And maybe, possibly, the phrase 'we have a connection' would be shelved for all eternity.

The Stilinski house fit more in line with middle class America than the houses Charlie had been frequenting of late. It lacked the absurd size and marble of the Martin household or the stately pillars and exposed brick of the Argents'. Before her stood a moderately sized two story home with a prominent garage and faded blue siding, more function than style. "Okay," Stiles declared, shoving his hands in his pockets as they trudged towards the front door. "This is it. Home sweet home—where the magic happens. No, scratch that, not magic. Just regular stuff. You know, washing dishes, homework, sleeping..."

"It's nice," Charlie said, her earnestness cutting off his insecure rant. The uncertainty in Stiles's eyes as he glanced at her made her roll her own. "Dude, I live in what used to be a one bedroom, one office apartment. Up until four months ago I lived with a single dad. I cleaned out his office once and found black mold all up in the trash can because he forgot he tossed an apple core. Literally nothing will catch me off guard. I'm impervious to dude decor."

Stiles laughed and scratched at the back of his neck. "Well there's no black mold I know of," he mumbled. "So prepare to be impressed."

The house's interior was actually quite nice, if dated in its styling. The wallpaper was kind of bland and the fixtures were about a decade old, but it had a warmth to it. Lots of light wood. The place was lived in, loved, though the decor didn't point towards a woman's touch having been present for quite some time. The 25-inch sea bass mounted on the wall was testament enough to that. Charlie wasn't certain when Stiles lost his mom, but it hadn't been recent.

"So, yeah," Stiles mumbled, waving at his surroundings. "This is home. Bathroom, dining room,
living room..." Stiles held up a finger indicating for her to follow him. They ended up in the
doorway of the kitchen. Stiles's father—Sheriff Stilinski—sat at the kitchen table surrounded by a
mountain of files. They were too far away to make out the text, but dammit she tried.

"Hey, dad," Stiles drawled out, giving a long wave. The sheriff looked up from his work, his
eyeglasses lending him an even more beleaguered air. He blinked in surprise at the sight of Charlie
in the doorway. Stiles cleared his throat loudly before gesturing at her. "This is Charlie."

"Yes, we've met," he said carefully, inclining his head in her direction. "Nice to see you again,
Charlie." Charlie responded with a wave of her hand, but the sheriff immediately turned to his son.
"Why is she here?"

"Ah!" Stiles declared, his head cocking to the side. "Well, you see, the thing is Charlie was feeling
a little nostalgic for some sci-fi goodness. She wanted to watch 'Starship Troopers'. We ran into
each other at the video store and I happened to mention that we have it, so...."

The sheriff's eyes darted between them projecting an attitude with equal parts exasperation and
amusement. "Is there anything I have to be worried about here? Anything I should be monitoring
with that special degree of parental attention?"

Blotches of pink filled in the spaces between Stiles's moles. "Dad!"

"No," Charlie responded immediately. Stiles's head snapped around to look at her, and he
appeared...offended? "What?" she demanded, folding her arms across her chest.

Stiles scoffed loudly and shrugged. "Nothing. I mean you could have pretended to think about it
for half a second before totally writing me off."

"Come on, Stiles," Charlie groaned. "There's nothing for me to write off. Not only do we barely
know each other, but you have confessed to me multiple times that you're in love with one of my
closest friends here."

"You talking about Lydia Martin?" the Sheriff Stilinski inquired lazily.

"Dad!"

"Yup, that's the one," Charlie confirmed.

"Charlie!"

"There's really nothing to be concerned about, Sheriff Stilinski," Charlie declared matter-of-factly.
"If he tries anything, I'll put him in a thumb lock."

Stiles's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "What's a—WAAA-UH!"

Wordlessly, Charlie grabbed Stiles's thumb and twisted it behind his back just like she had Aaron
Harrison, leaving Stiles bent over at the waist, whimpering, and highly confused. Sheriff Stilinski
blinked at her in surprise before releasing a chuckle. "I like you," he said, pointing at her, a slight
smile creeping across his face.

"Well that's great!" Stiles whined. "This is a great bonding moment for the two of you! Now are
you going to let me go or what?" Charlie snorted and released Stiles's thumb. He quickly wrenched
his hand away from her and glared daggers, rubbing the joint where his thumb met his hand. "So,"
he continued, rounding on his dad, "can we watch the movie or are you gonna keep scarring me
during my formative years?"
With professional grade apathy, Sheriff Stilinski waved the pair off and returned to his mountain of paperwork. Stiles interpreted the ambiguous gesture as a 'yes', shooting his dad a double thumbs-up as he scurried backwards out of the kitchen. He scrambled up the stairs to what was presumably his room, leaving Charlie alone with his dad. Charlie opted for a straight three minutes of awkward smiling and nodding before the loud thunk of Stiles's return met her ears.

Stiles skidded back into the kitchen, brandishing his copy of the DVD and grinning ear to ear. "Okay, then! Let's get this started."

Charlie followed Stiles to the living room and plopped on the brown corduroy couch as Stiles crouched at the DVD player. "You're not gonna regret seeing this version," he chirped, glancing over his shoulder as he popped the DVD in. "The picture is so much clearer and the colors will literally blow your mind."

"Not sure about that," Charlie replied. "I like my mid-nineties sci-fi grainy and with the shittiest of shitty CGI. For era authenticity."

"Then prepare to have your worldview rocked to its very core!"

"Shut up, Stiles."

"You betcha."

But Stiles did not shut up. Not even for a second. He turned out to be full of more 'fun' facts than the freaking director commentary. As little as Charlie wanted to admit it, though, he was right. She was somewhat swayed by the improved graphics and vibrant colors. The audio had been improved too, with louder swears and an even more obnoxious Busey—a feat unto itself. Her eyes were glued to the screen, excepting, of course, the times when Stiles poked her in the shoulder to declare it was his favorite part. Which was not infrequent. They had arrived at Rico's first "death" when the sound of Sheriff Stilinski's cell phone went off.

Without any explanation, Stiles scrambled for the remote and paused the film. His neck seemed to stretch in length as he craned it, leaning over Charlie to peer into the kitchen. Her 'what the fuck' was silenced by frantic shushing.

"He's dead?" the sheriff said into the phone. "I thought he was in recovery."

Pause.

"No," he continued, exhaustion creeping into his voice. "No, I'll be there. Just give me twenty minutes."

Footsteps against linoleum had Stiles scrambling back to his seat, grabbing the remote and turning the movie back on. He arranged himself into an impossibly casual position, leg draped over the armrest and staring intently at the screen as his dad walked into the room. The sheriff appeared in the door frame, dragging his feet and rubbing at his eyes. "That was the hospital," he sighed out. "The bus driver, he...succumbed to his wounds. I'm going to head down there—not sure when I'll be back."

"Shit," Charlie swore under her breath, wincing at the curse. "Sorry."

"No," Sheriff Stilinski said, waving a hand dismissively. "'Shit' seems like a fairly accurate assessment." He wiped the sleep out of his eyes and regarded them carefully. Charlie and Stiles returned his gaze with a blank one, as teenagers are wont to do. "Okay," he continued. "The two of you behave yourselves. Charlie, you think you can get home okay?" She nodded. "Good. I guess
I'll head out then. You guys get in trouble, I will find out about it.”

Stiles clapped his hands on his knees loudly. "Noted."

Sheriff Stilinski ducked towards the door. All the while Stiles practically stood up in his seat, his eyes trailing his dad as he left. As soon as the front door closed, he hopped out of his seat and bolted to the window, face pressed against the glass as the police cruiser pulled out of the driveway. It wasn't till the car disappeared that he registered Charlie's continued presence. "Ah," he winced. "You're—"

"Leaving," Charlie filled in, planting her hands on the sofa next to her and pushing herself to her feet.

Stiles shot her an apologetic look and shook his head. "That's not—you don't have to—"

"You're going to go fill Scott in, right?" Charlie challenged. Stiles twitched, taken aback, but didn't contradict her. At least he had the decency not to deny it. "Right….As sneaky as the two of you are, you're really freaking obvious about it." Stiles opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off. "It's fine," she said, moving towards the DVD player, "but I'm taking the movie. I want to finish it."

"S—sure," Stiles nodded. "Wait," he continued, calling after her. "I'll be getting it back, right?"

"I'll leave you in suspense."

She wrenched the door open and jogged down to her car. Bolting seemed like the best option. Better than sticking around to with the drama—it had a high cost of investment and virtually no return value. At some point she just had to step back from the bullshit, and bullshit was the sole commodity Stiles and Scott seemed to be peddling. Charlie opened the driver's side door and was about to slide in, but Stiles's voice stopped her.

"Hey, Charlie?" he called out from his spot at the front door. "I'm sorry."


And with that she clambered into her car and drove home. As per usual, she had a few more answers, and a hell of a lot more questions. But more than anything else, she was driving home with disappointment. And a copy of 'Starship Troopers' she had no intention of returning.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Starship Troopers, one of my forever faves. Also the 'Are You There God? It's Me Margaret?' was a reference to Deadpool lol. Love that movie.

I wanted to include more Donald, but it didn't work out. Happy to say that he will be all over the next chapter!

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CHAPTER SOUNDTRACK

Donald's game plays as Charlie hides out in the bathroom.
Too Many Girls - The Mystery Lights

The girls go through clothes and chat.

Steady Steady - North Highlands

Charlie goes through her chores, and then arrives in the gas station to see Derek getting harassed.

Bon Temps Rouler - Scoundrels

Going to the video store and talking to Stiles.

When A Woman Is Around - Unloved

Charlie leaves Stiles's place and drives home.

My Own Mind - Pale Seas
Sometimes the landscape of Beacon Hills seemed to be ripped directly from the pages of gothic literature. This could in part be attributed to the unilaterally shitty electrical work that ran through the town. Flickering lights and the stuttering hum of bulbs were no stranger. Add in the rolling fog that dropped by on a semi-regular basis, the cryptic woods, and, oh yeah, the series of violent animal attacks, and the town painted the perfect backdrop for a Washington Irving novel. What's more, that general aura of eeriness found a way to infiltrate even the most mundane of places.

The Beacon Hills High School library was creepy as shit. Two open and empty stories, shelves littered with the graffiti of students long since departed, layers of dust covering books whose spines hadn't been cracked in years—past and present seemed to be separated by a thin veil of time. The air was filled with a stagnant silence, interrupted only the occasional ghoulish gasp of the cracked air conditioner. Why, then, did Charlie find herself holed up in this repository of mildew and outdated reading material on her lunch break? It was the last place anybody—anybody being Lydia—would look.

Charlie bit her lip in concentration as she crouched over her chemistry books. Good thing Lydia couldn't see her like this, pens jutting out of a messy bun that was in no way artful and various colors of highlighter staining her fingertips. She ran through chemistry with the fervor of a madwoman. Harris, who apparently had yet to meet his weekly quota of assholery, dropped a shitload of homework on them not fifteen minutes ago. This was not an uncommon occurrence, nor did it typically cause Charlie that much grief, but tonight was not like any other. She didn't have time for chemistry tonight. Tonight she ventured into the belly of the beast—she would stare into the mouth of said beast and wait to be swallowed whole. Tonight she was joining the Argents for dinner.

'Dinner party' was code for interrogation over pseudo-gourmet cooking, of this Charlie was certain. With the Argents, first impressions were out the window and three miles back on the highway. But as Mel always said you only get one chance at a second impression, and given that two thirds of the
Argent family was objectively terrifying, that impression would knock on their door smiling widely and carrying a platter of devilled eggs and chicken sate. Or mini-quiches. Or croquettes of some sort. Which meant that when she got home from school she had to play Betty Crocker, not Bill Nye, and her lunch period was sacrificed on the altar of Mr. Harris's bullshit.

Why the fuck had they planned this dinner on a school night?

Stacks of notes and piles of discarded wadded up paper built up around her, enclosing her in a mausoleum of knowledge that would prove ultimately useless. Her pencil scratched so quickly the friction threatened to set the paper aflame. And yet she continued to scribble. Their half hour lunch period was only twenty-five minutes long after all. Half way through a set of molar ratios and the pencil point ripped through the page of her notebook. The final straw fell on her anxiety-laden shoulders. Charlie's forehead hit the desk with a loud thunk. Her lungs shuddered with a low, plaintive whine. "Ugh, why?"

"Why what?"

"Ah!"

A strangled yelp ripped from her lips, alarm lending her the will to lift her head. She bolted upright and her number two pencil snapped inside her tightly clenched fist. The figure stood between her and the flickering fluorescents, face cast in shadow. As her eyes adjusted, though, the picture was anything but sinister. Awkward, tight smile, moles, unfortunate haircut that lent him a more than passing resemblance to Sid from Toy Story—she found herself staring down one Stiles Stilinski. "Dude," she groaned. "Do not sneak up on me like that."

"Wha—I didn't sneak," he protested. "No sneaking was involved. I just walked across the room. Plus, it's a library—silence is sacred. Technically we're supposed to sneak."

Her eyes did a pointed sweep of the decidedly empty room before settling back on Stiles's with an unamused glower. "Yeah, I'm sure the zero other people in here appreciate the deceptive aura of calm."

Stiles grasped the straps of his backpack, head lolling around and taking in the room like it was his first time seeing it. "Is it just me or does it feel damp in here? I don't think libraries are supposed to be damp. That can't be good for the books. I blame government underfunding."

Charlie pinched the bridge of her nose in frustration. "Stiles, why are you here?"

"Oh, I'm, uh—" He slung the backpack off his shoulders and pulled out the chair opposite her, dropping into the seat. He shifted against the cracked vinyl cushion, trying to find a comfortable position. The loud squeak of ass against chair echoed against the walls. Finally settling in, he looked up at her with a wince. "I was...I was looking for you, actually."

"And you thought the library was the best place to start?" she demanded. "This is my hiding spot—nobody comes here. Ever."

"I, uh, I've got my ways of tracking people down."

Charlie's eyebrows migrated up her forehead until they disappeared into her hairline. The past few days had seen her and Stiles in quite an odd place. They weren't fighting. They weren't talking. They said their hi's and bye's, gave a nod here and a wave there in the hallways, generally acknowledged each other's existence. Hell, they even exchanged the odd sci-fi reference. But seeing as he ditched both her and Starship Troopers to interrupt his friend's group date and gossip
about a hot off the presses dead body….. It was awkward. Also frustrating. And actively seeking out that awkward frustration...bleh. Why?

"Why were you looking for me?" she deadpanned.

"Well....." he hedged. "You've been mad at me,"

Charlie's lips pinched together and she gave a noncommittal wave. "I'm not mad. I'm to chill to be mad. Look at me. I'm alone in the library. Chillin'. As chill people do."

Stiles grimaced. "Chill? Come on, you're a little mad. You were mad at the video store and then you were un-mad and now you're un-un-mad."

"Okay, I'm not mad mad," Charlie sighed. "I'm just like...bitter mad. I'm 'give me a week to get over it' mad."

"It's been a week," Stiles replied.

"It's been five days, Stiles."

"Five days is a business week."

Charlie's lungs heaved with a repressed laugh, but managed to keep silent. "Well, I'm talking a full week," she returned. "All seven days of it. What can I say, I dislike deception and general trickery when I am not participating in it."

Stiles opened his mouth and closed it again. "That's a double standard."

"Yeah," Charlie drawled, her lips twisting into a snide but measured smirk, "as a white dude you're probably used to being on the other side of those. Soak up this feeling and think about every time you've had an interaction with a woman ever."

"Okay, wow," he said, throwing his hands in the air in submission. "When did this conversation become a feminist issue?"

Charlie shrugged. "I am a woman and I currently find you annoying."

"Wow, okay goddammit."

Stiles grabbed his backpack from the floor and set it on his lap. The fabric bulged out at odd angles and it appeared heavier than the usual forty pounds of textbooks high school students were forced to cart around. He unzipped it, extracting an old, beaten up cardboard box and setting it on the table. Charlie raised a pair of questioning eyebrows and he slowly pushed it across the table like he was participating in a ransom exchange. Rolling her eyes, Charlie lifted the lid. Nestled among cracked bits of styrofoam and wadded up newspapers from the late nineties was a VCR. Charlie's breath caught in her throat and her fingers twitched in surprise. Biting her lip, she raised her eyes to Stiles, trying not to look mildly shaken. "What's this?"

"My dad had an old one," he replied. "He was cool with giving it away. Because this is the 21st century and literally nobody uses VCRs anymore. Except you, clearly. So here you go."

"Are you bribing me not to be mad at you?" she demanded skeptically.
"Whoa, hey!" he protested. "Hey, don't go getting all suspicious and apply ulterior motives to what is a clearly very thoughtful move on my part. This is a gesture. If that gesture decides to make you not mad at me anymore, then who am I to question it?"

Her lips twitched with the barest hint of a smile and she quickly repressed it, rearranging her features into a grim mask. But as fleetingly as the expression was, Stiles seemed to notice as his face broke into a large grin. "Thank you," Charlie muttered. "It's a very nice gesture. You didn't have to do that."

"You're welcome," he nodded. "Does this mean I'm getting my Starship Troopers DVD back?"

"Not a chance."

"Sure, sure." He leaned back in his seat, two of the chair legs lifting off the ground and threatening to send him toppling to the ground. But in that 'Stiles' way of his, he managed to skirt the line of the physically impossible. That smile threatened to form again, so Charlie redirected her gaze to her work.

"Okay, so what is going on here," he declared, wagging a finger at the piles of paper surrounding her. "You eat lunch in the cafeteria with Lydia. Why are you hiding in the library? You've got this whole—" he waved a hand at her face, eyes lingering on the Medusa-like hair, twitchy eyes, and smudges of graphite covering her hands "—this whole frantic, Howard Hughes thing going on. Am I going to trip over some jars of urine on my way out?"

Charlie rolled her eyes and tapped his chair leg with the tip of her toe, sending him reeling backwards and grappling for the table edge to keep from tipping over. As he regained his balance, he snatched up one of her discarded wads of paper and smoothed it out, peering curiously at the chicken scratch marking it. Glancing between her and the page, his face twisted into a look of consternation. "You're doing chemistry homework?" he scoffed. "Harris gave us this assignment twenty minutes ago. I knew you were a nerd but this is plunging to deepest depths of nerditude. You're doing offshore drilling to access a larger reservoir of nerd."

Charlie spared him a scathing glance before returning to her work. "I don't have time to do my homework tonight," she muttered. "I'm stuck having dinner with the Argents."

A cough stuck in Stiles's throat and he choked loudly. "The Argents?"

"Yes, the Argents," Charlie nodded. "Who, despite having produced the epitome of sunshine that is Allison, already terrify me on about seventeen different levels."

With her admission, Stiles's eyes widened even further. "Ah, um...why do they terrify you?"

"You have met them, right?" she snorted. "They're the most intensely uptight people I've met, and I've gone to Christmas parties where 90% of the attendees were ex-marines and shit. Plus they don't appreciate sarcasm."

"Whoa. You're really screwed then."

"Tell me about it," Charlie grumbled. "I'm getting this shit out of the way, going home, and baking a million mini-pies so I can bribe them into tolerating me in front of my aunt. She likes making good impressions."

A strangled squeak fought its way from Stiles's throat. He bit down hard on his lower lip to keep himself quiet, but the sudden, desperate laughter he was attempting to suppress shone like a beacon through his wild eyes. "What?" Charlie demanded defensively.
"Nothing," he declared a little too quickly, head shaking with frantic energy. "You just, uh....the vibe you project...you just don't really seem like a baker." She opened her mouth to retort, but he quickly cut her off. "I'm not saying it's a bad thing—I'm sure you're great at it. I just didn't think that pastry would be on your list of hobbies. I would have gone with paintball or yelling at the TV or perfecting your eye roll in the mirror."

"I used to live next to this old woman who would babysit for me all the time," she grumbled. "I spent a year baking and watching NCIS. Plus it helps me chill out when I'm stressed."

"Any knitting?" he prompted, his grin audible in his voice. "Please, please tell me there was knitting."

"Stiles," she drawled, waving at the pile of papers before her. "As much as I prefer chatting to chemistry homework...I'm kinda swamped here. My deadline and my desire to maintain an aura of mystery prevents me from sharing my life story."

"Right, right. That's cool.....I'll just leave you to it then. Good luck surviving you dinner. Save me a mini-pie."

"I'll be sure to do that."

Stiles tipped back forwards, settling all four chair legs on the ground. He drummed his hands against the table with a flourish before pulling back his chair and clambering to his feet. Backpack hanging off of one shoulder, he strode towards the door. Charlie found herself glancing between the VCR and his retreating figure, the dull twist of regret coiling in the pit of her stomach. "Hey, Stiles," she called out. He stopped and turned to face her, an inquisitive frown drawing his eyebrows together. Charlie pressed her lips together in a wan smile and nodded back at him. "I, um, probably didn't seem that grateful back there," she continued, tapping the VCR box with the tip of her pencil. "I suck at emoting sometimes. But...you know...thanks."

The corners of his lips twitched upwards, morphing from a frown to a bemused smile. "Hey, no problem. Not like I was using it. Because, and I can't clarify this enough, nobody uses VCRs anymore."

"Whatever," Charlie said with a roll of her eyes. "You shouldn't have, thank you, blah, blah, blah. Enjoy the rest of your lunch. And if you tell anyone, and I mean anyone, where my hiding spot is, I will remotely hijack your DVR and delete everything that's recorded. All those reruns of Cops? Gone."

Stiles let out a carefree laugh. "Come on, you don't know how to do that."

"You're right," Charlie nodded sagely. The confidence in her tone had the blithely serene expression dropping from Stiles's face. "You're absolutely right, Stiles. I don't know how to do that. But I do know Danny. And Danny kinda likes me and doesn't like you. How hard do you think I'd have to work to convince him?"

"Dammit, I knew Danny didn't like me!" Stiles swore. "Also, please don't do that."

"That's the thing about VHS tapes," Charlie smirked. "Unhackable."

Stiles waved her off with a loud 'pshah', stalking back to the door. "Yeah, whatever," he shouted over his shoulder. "Enjoy living in the dark ages, Oswin."

The door snapped shut behind him, and Charlie found herself grinning down at her chemistry notes, something she never thought she'd do. Stiles was still a deceptive little shit, but he was a
courteous deceptive little shit. And she didn't have to trust or even believe him to be appreciative. Bitterness and gratitude could stand side by side. Wordlessly, she replaced the lid on the VCR's box and tucked it neatly between her history and french textbooks. The bag zipped shut and all thoughts of VCRs and Stiles were zipped within it as well. All else was pushed aside in favor of the much less favorable chemistry. She still had a deadline, after all.

The end of lunch bell came far, far too soon, with scribbled notes and smudged pages. The flat of her fist shone a dull silver from skidding across the page. Her stomach rumbled with hunger, but her book was closed on chemistry. Now the main point of focus was avoiding Lydia and the inevitable lecture on social obligations that would come with her on the way to history. The glint of strawberry hair would have sent her ducking for cover. But alas what she found stalking the hallways was another beast entirely.

Derek Hale always managed to find a way to stick out while he ambled through the general population. The full half foot he had on the assorted high schoolers contributed in no small way. Typically his rigid shoulders and jaw-clenching scowl capped his stature off quite nicely. Today though...today Derek looked less 'biker chic' and more 'walking pneumonia'. Those squared shoulders drooped like a wilting daisy, his skin shone with sweat, and his eyes had the cracked, weary glaze of a two-day old Krispy Kreme.

Charlie stopped dead in the middle of the hallway. The ebb and flow of students jostled her from side to side, but she stood rooted, deer in headlights, as Derek continued his zombie-like shuffle forwards. What to do in the face of a pasty giant? The options presented themselves to her in a multiple choice format.

You encounter a wild Derek Hale stumbling through the hallways of Beacon Hills High School. Do you:

a) Approach him, insert yourself into an already over-complicated narrative, and get lied to most spectacularly.

b) Inform Stiles and Scott of Derek's presence, insert yourself into an already over-complicated narrative, and get lied to most spectacularly.

c) Follow Derek through the halls, miss history class, get a detention, disappoint Mel, insert yourself into an already over-complicated narrative, and still somehow manage to get lied to most spectacularly.

d) Eject and generally get the fuck out of there.

On your average day, Charlie probably would have gone with options a or c. But today she had a damn dinner party. Doing an about face, Charlie scurried down the hallway to her history class the Derek Hale-free way around. "Nope," she hissed under her breath as she glanced over her shoulder at his tottering frame. "Nopey, nope, nope."

Charlie dropped into her seat next to Allison, fishing out her things as a glassy-eyed Mr. Allen listlessly outlined their day's lesson on the board. Given the state of his handwriting, she'd rate today's hangover at about a seven. Allison, whose nose was wrinkled in the face of a sudden bout of nausea on Mr. Allen's part, tore her eyes from him to give Charlie a quick smile. "Hey, Charlie," Allison murmured. "Missed you at lunch. What's up?"

"Nothing," Charlie replied firmly, clicking her pen and touching its tip to her notebook. "Absolutely nothing is up. This day in particular is spectacularly uneventful. It is epic only in the degree to which it is ordinary."
Allison squinted into the light and shrugged. "Weird answer, but okay."


She had many responsibilities, but Derek being creepy in the hallways of Beacon Hills High was not one of them.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit!"

Cursing filled the cramped room as Charlie darted for the sink. She shoved her hand under the faucet, swears streaming from her lips as freely as water did from the tap. A spot of raw, pink skin the size of a silver dollar cropped up on the heel of her palm. Her teeth sank into her bottom lips as she bit back the hiss of pain. Goddamn electric ovens—they were more likely to cook her than the food.

The deficiencies of Mel's kitchen had been obvious in theory. Some college dorm rooms were better equipped. The shallow counters, the complete lack of proper utensils, the easy bake oven that had heretofore been used to store back-issues of Vogue—none of the base elements spoke to culinary competency. In practice, though, the room's failings reached a new level of absurdity. What started as a thoughtful gesture had evolved into two trips to the grocery store, a discarded batch of pastry dough, and a few second degree burns. But alas, all trauma aside, two dozen mini pecan pies were now baking away. But would they survive that piece of shit oven? The convection feature was untested and untrusted, and Charlie was a suspicious son of a bitch. Half of the pies could burn while the other half could remain a doughy mess—chaos in a freaking pan.

Nursing her burnt hand, Charlie set her laptop on the kitchen island. The screen displayed a partially written poetry explication, but was angled so that she might peer over its edge into the depths of the oven. Three guesses which won. That blinking line in the word document had advanced not an inch and she was deep into a culinary staring contest when a jarring beep wrenched her from her reverie. Donald's enthusiastic finger guns had replaced her English assignment.

"Hey," Donald declared the moment Charlie hit the answer key. "So I need you to tell me if something is stupid or not."

"Your mom will find out, and she will kill you," was Charlie's automated response.

Donald gave off a scandalized scoff. "Whoa, hey," he protested. "Who said this is about me? Why do you automatically assume the stupidity is on my part? That offends me. There's a whole manner of stupid out there in the world that I—" he pointed to himself "—I personally have to put up with. Including your stupid, which is in no way insubstantial. I could be talking about literally anything—I could be talking about you. Take responsibility for your part in this."

"Right, sorry for my insensitivity," Charlie replied sarcastically. She gave a flourishing wave of the hand, indicating for him to continue. "What stupidity has the world inflicted on you."

Donald leaned forwards, speaking into his computer with a conspiratorial whisper. "Okay, so we've got this soccer match coming up," he explained. "And the other team has been trash talking us pretty hard. So me and some of the guys are getting together and stealing their mascot costume."

Charlie nodded in approval. "Classic, vintage prank. You're really rounding out the whole high school experience."
"Obviously," Donald barreled on. "Anyway, one of my dudes from the A.V. club is gonna crash the half-time wearing the giant felt onesie and do the worm...good idea or excellent idea?"

"I thought you wanted to know if it was a stupid idea."

"Yeah, well, conversations are fluid," he declared, snapping impatiently. "Keep up the pace, Oz. Roll with the punches. Wheel keeps turning. Good idea or excellent idea—this is the question now."

"Okay one," Charlie declared, "excellent idea. Two, your mom will definitely find out and she definitely will kill you."

Donald fell back in his chair, carefully stroking his chin in contemplation. "Yeah…...she'd probably kill me."

"She'd definitely kill you," Charlie confirmed.

He stared into space, eyes clouding over as he nodded to himself. "And she would absolutely ground me."

"You're probably grounded right now and don't even know it."

"Like Minority Report," he murmured. "Get them before they commit the crime. Except, you know…."

Donald's voice trailed off and his thought dissolved into silence, but his expression filled in where the words left off. His lips, so used to smiling, stretched into a grimace, and his happy, dark brown eyes had misted over. Suspicion crept into Charlie's brain. "Donald…." she drawled out. He slowly faced her, nose wrinkled guiltily. "Donald, you've already done it haven't you?"

Donald's chest puffed under his Star Wars T-shirt - knitted sweater combo as he let out a heaving sigh. Ducking down, he disappeared from view only to return a moment later clutching a bright red felt monstrosity. He slammed it on his desk and pushed it close to the webcam, filling the whole of the screen. The mascot head leered at Charlie with its giant, menacing eyes and cult leader smile, all set in an oddly triangular head featuring one and a half antennae. On instinct, she reeled back from the computer. "Ah! Kill it with fire!"

Donald clucked in an oddly maternal way and patted the monster on the head like one might their favorite pet. "I don't know," he mused. "I think it's kinda cute in a dystopian future nightmare alien creature type way."

Charlie opened her mouth to respond. A good fifteen seconds of dead air filled that mouth until it regained the ability to create words. "What is it?" she finally demanded.

A bemused frown pulled at Donald's lips as he glanced between her and the Sesame Street reject. "It's a lobster," he replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I'm naming him Kevin. And don't judge him, he's trying his best."

"What the hell kind of mascot is a lobster?" Charlie swore. "First it's the cyclones and now it's the freaking lobsters? Where are we living?"

"Wha—are you kidding, Oz?" he demanded with a sarcastic gasp. "How do you not see it? The suburb people are on the cutting edge of mediocre high school sports. These mascots are ahead of the curve." He lifted the head off the desk and slowly settled it over his own. His broad shoulders seemed to shrink under its massive size, reducing his proportions to those of a bobble head. He
gave his shoulders a shimmy, the lobster head tottering from side to side, and Charlie clapped a
hand over her mouth to force back the laugh. "Ugh, it smells like ass in here." Hands grappled
blindly until finding a decent grip on the thing. When Donald reemerged from the felt cocoon, he
wore a scowl. "I have to rethink a lot of life choices that led to this moment."

"You're a moron," Charlie grinned.

Donald tossed Kevin's disembodied head over his shoulder, giving a nonchalant shrug as it landed
with a crash. "True, but irrelevant to this conversation."

"Sure, sure," Charlie smirked. "Well, all in all I'd say six-foot tall crustacean is not your best look."

"No, me in a suit is my best look," Donald corrected. He casually dusted off his shoulders and
pulled his sweater straight. "Have you ever seen me in a suit? I look like Idris Elba. You know
what—you should see suit me. I'm gonna text you a picture of suit me. Suit me is a suave
motherfucker."

"Name one version of you that isn't a suave motherfucker."

"You know, Oz, you make a good point," he nodded.

The oven gave off a soft 'ding' and Charlie jumped to attention. "Oh shit," she swore under her
breath. "Shit, shit, shit." Scrambling off her stool, she collapsed in front of the oven, yanking overs
ized oven mitts down to her elbows. Despite rotating the pan every five minutes, the heat
managed to distribute itself unevenly, leaving half of the pastry a perfect golden brown while the
other half ranged between as pasty as today's edition of Derek Hale and charred like a limbless
Anakin on the surface of Mustafar. Of the twenty-four that went in, maybe fifteen were presentable
—62.5%, barely a passing grade. Her oven-mitted hands extracted the pans, dropping them on the
stove with a clatter. "Welp, Martha Stewart's gonna disown me."

"Oh shit, you're baking?" Donald's voice echoed. "Is this like normal baking? Or are you stress
baking?"

With one violent whip off her arms, the mitts flew off her hands and sailed to the corner of the
room. "It's a bit of both," she replied, plopping back in front of her computer. "I'm trying to impress
some parents."

"Whoa, lost cause," Donald chuckled. "You suck with parents."

Charlie's eyebrows furrowed in defiance. "I do not. I admit I don't have the best track record—"

"You taught our grade how to swear," Donald interjected. "They had to hold emergency parent-
teacher conferences because of you."

"Hey!" Charlie snapped, pointing at him forcefully. "Your mom loves me."

The sheer power of Donald's eye roll had his head lurching back on his neck. "That's because you
physically can't lie to her. It's insane—you're a brick wall with literally anybody else but if my
mom stares at you for two seconds too long you fold like a soggy paper plate at a barbecue. Do
you know how much shit I could have gotten away with if it wasn't for you?"

"Please tell me this isn't another lecture on how I've made your life more difficult," Charlie
groaned. "I've got stuff to do—I'm on a deadline, man. I've gotta become parent-friendly in like
twenty minutes."
"And yet here you are, ignoring your most valuable resource." He spread his arms wide and looked up to the heavens, waiting for light to shine down on him as choirs sang. "Me. Parents love me."

This was an understatement. Loving Donald was not exclusive to parents. Everybody loved Donald. Literally everybody. Mostly because Donald loved everybody in return. Give him two months in a new school and he would have three dozen new friends, about a thousand more followers on Twitter, and be heading up about six different clubs, ranging from homecoming court to academic decathlon to that group of kids in the corner of the cafeteria that still traded Yu-Gi-Oh cards. He had in his arsenal the most potent of social graces: sincerity. Problematic given their current circumstances as sincerity was a commodity in which Charlie was poor, and thus hoarded for special occasions. "If you tell me to just be myself, I'm going to hack your Twitter," Charlie deadpanned.

"Oh, I'm not telling you to be yourself," Donald replied with a shake of the head. "Yourself is a PR nightmare. That tiny ass of yours? I'm telling you to lie it into nonexistence."

"Thanks. Super-helpful."

"Hey, I mean it," Donald insisted. "I don't care if they serve you under-salted, boiled chicken with a side of under-salted, boiled cauliflower—that meal will be the most delicious meal you've ever eaten. Their conversation will be delightful. When in doubt, smile and nod and do not—I repeat, do not—open your mouth."

"But—"

"No!" he barked. "No! No honest discourse. You will be as bland and boring as the boiled chicken-cauliflower dinner. Practice the word 'delightful' in front of the mirror, because that's what you will be. You will be 'delightful'. When it comes to you the parents will be completely ambivalent—that is the sweet spot. They won't think to invite you over again, but they also don't think you're a garbage person."

"Your confidence in my ability to be boring makes me wary."

He shrugged in response. "We've known each other a long time. I'm familiar with your skill-set."

Charlie opened her mouth to retort, but the full force of her verbal wrath was put on hold by the jingling of keys outside the apartment. The rusted hinges groaned their usual greeting as the door was forced open, allowing an agitated Mel to topple inside. The clacking of her heels typically had a measured, steady rhythm to it, but now it held all the syncopation of an orchestra's percussion section being dropped down a flight of stairs.

"Hey, Mel," Charlie shouted into the hallway. "Am I boring?"

Mel skidded to a stop in the doorway to the kitchen. Her typically immaculate hair fell out of its neat bun, framing her face in a soft halo of blonde that somehow managed to render her even prettier than usual. Her panic had a glow to it. "You can be anything you put your mind to," she gasped in reply. "I'm going to go get ready or we're going to be late. I'll lay an outfit out on your bed."

"I'm not twelve," Charlie grumbled. "I can pick out my own clothes."

Mel let out a huff and wiped at the corners of her eyes, presumably to fix running makeup that didn't exist. "Charlie...just....bear with me on this one, okay? Let's not make this complicated and just....do our best to present ourselves as functional, non-disastrous people. Hi, Donald."
And with the echo of clattering heels and a gentle breeze of Dior perfume, Mel vanished as quickly as she appeared. A couture cryptid. Crap. Mel was in panic mode, Charlie was dinner party kryptonite….not a great day for the Oswin clan. And then there was Donald, smiling serenely from the safety of Rhodes Island.

"I’ve said it before, I’ll say it again: your aunt is hot."

"I'm hanging up on you."

This was going to suck. And not just the regular, mildly irritating kind—this was going to be an epic degree of suckage.

Climbing out of Mel's Prius, Charlie stepped on the walkway to the Argent's front door with the hesitation of someone walking the freaking plank. Or stepping in front of a firing squad. Or going to the dentist's office. Her toes stood poised at the edge of the sweeping driveway, one hand clutching a platter of mini-pies as the other pulled at the hem of the dress Mel had picked out for the occasion—blue with a floral print and pseudo-fifties vintage vibe, paired with tights and a pair of low-heeled Mary Janes. 'Mary Jane' as in the shoes, not weed. Shit, she shouldn't even be thinking about weed. Somehow, some way, the Argents would know she was thinking about weed.

Narcotic thoughts aside, Charlie's get-up was cute and entirely proper for the occasion. Which was probably why she felt as if she was wearing someone else's skin atop her own. Proper didn't suit. And wool tights were freaking itchy. Mel stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her, somewhat baffled by the facade of the Argent's house what with its wide, detailed windows and columned porch. People having their shit together generally stood as a point of intimidation for her, someone who had yet to fully self-identify as an 'adult'. "It isn't too late to back out of this," Charlie hissed out of the corner of her mouth. "We could tell them I have the stomach flu. Or explosive diarrhea. I'd even be willing to go spastic colon. Nobody ever questions gastro-intestinal problems—they get too uncomfortable discussing them."

"Charlie, where is your sense of gratitude?" Mel chided. She directed a soft, reprimanding swat and Charlie's shoulder, though the mild fear lurking behind her brown eyes betrayed her mask of calm. "The Argents were kind enough to invite us over to dinner. The least you can do is enjoy it. We're going to do this."

Mel broke the line of the driveway, marching to the front door with determination. Huffing loudly, Charlie shuffled after, trying not to wobble on her heels as she kept up. "Um, general disclaimer," she muttered, "this is going to end in disaster. The Argents don't like me. At all. I mean, Allison does and I don't know about her Aunt Kate, but I get the distinct feeling that her parents—"

"And whose fault is that?" Mel retorted, raising a perfectly groomed eyebrow. "You weren't exactly polite at the lacrosse game if I remember correctly."

Charlie scoffed and kicked at some plants lining the walkway. "Sorry for assuming he had a bit of a sense of humor," she grumbled bitterly. "It was a case of poor judgement."

Mel smacked her shoulder again. "That's exactly the type of behavior that gets you in trouble to begin with. Now I recognize you don't mean any offense by it—you have the same sick sense of humor as David did—but to people who don't know you well you come off as—"

"A bitch?" Charlie supplied.

"No!" Mel replied, sounding scandalized. "No, you just come off as a bit disrespectful."
"Excuse me, would a disrespectful person bring mini-pies?"

"I'll admit, that was a nice touch," Mel acquiesced. "But pie aside, I have a one-step plan to make
the Argents like you. Be polite. Don't say anything inappropriate. Think before you speak—"

"That's three things. That's a three-step plan."

"AND," Mel continued forcefully. "don't interrupt people. That's all there is to it. And then they'll
see you for the kind, clever, generous girl you are. Once you chip away the prickly exterior, that
is."

Charlie frowned as they came to a stop before the front door. Mel raised her hand to the doorbell,
but Charlie stopped her. "Hold on a second. So you're telling me to put up a front so they can see
what I'm like once I take that initial front down? Because that's not confusing at all. I think you just
inception-ed my personality."

"Well it's what you need to do," Mel said definitively. "Sometimes to make a good impression, you
have to put up an act so that people are willing to get to know you and understand you better."

For all of Mel's moralizing, her plan was the same as Donald's. To lie. To lie her ass off. That's all
'manners' were if you thought about it. Strategic lying. And Charlie might not be great at being
polite, but lying was something she could get on board with. "Okay, fine," she sighed in agreement.
"But just so you know, I'm not as layered as you seem to think. Take my snark at face value. I'm a
little shit—you need to come to terms with that one of these days."

Mel flashed one of her warm, knowing smiles and took the final step towards the door. Three
delicate, yet resounding knocks hit the door and life stirred within the house. Muffled voices bled
through the door, one growing louder with someone's approach. Charlie's head tipped towards the
cloudless sky and mumbled a prayer to any deity that happened to be listening that this dinner
might go smoothly and end quickly, devoid of any conflict or bizarre Beacon Hills drama. As it
turned out, the heavens had a sick sense of humor. Lowering her eyes back to earth, she happened
to glance through the window of the garage, and what waited to be discovered on the opposite side
of the glass? A suspiciously familiar red SUV. One that belonged parked in a sketchy gas station in
the dark of night and had no business anywhere near Allison's house. The possible revelation had
Charlie's grip on the platter tightening till the porcelain threatened to break in her hand. "What the f
—"

"Hello!" A bright, enthusiastic voice dragged her eyes to the house's entrance. A cheerful, smiling
Mrs. Argent was greeted with a slack jaw and wild eyes. Charlie quickly snapped her mouth shut
and provided her likely failed attempt at a polite smile. Mrs. Argent opened the door wider, and
waved them through the entry. "It's so nice to finally meet you," she said, extending a hand to Mel.
"I'm Victoria Argent. We spoke on the phone."

"Melody Oswin," the suspiciously functional Mel replied, taking the offered hand. "Thank you so
much for inviting us."

"Not at all," Mrs. Argent said. "I'm just sorry it took us so long to get around to it. We've been so
busy moving in and now setting up Kate's room, we haven't had the opportunity to properly
entertain. I suppose this is a bit of a test run."

Charlie thrust the platter of mini-pies forward with the jerky motions of a rusted tin man. That
stupid, stupid red car sent all of Donald's social wisdom flying from her brain like bat out of hell.
All that remained was awkwardness, inappropriate commentary, and panic. "These are for you."
"Thank you so much," Mrs. Argent said, taking them with all the graciousness Charlie lacked. "They smell delicious." Retreating into the house, Mrs. Argent strode into the rather sizeable foyer. Mel followed immediately, but Charlie hovered at the threshold, discomfort settling in the pit of her stomach. The red SUV still stared at her from the garage window, lobbing questions at her she had no clue how to answer. An abrupt wave of Mel's hand brought her back to the present, beckoning her in through the door. Right. No Beacon Hills drama—tonight was about food and horribly stilted conversation. With one more breath, Charlie stepped through the door and shut it behind her before trailing into the foyer.

"You have a lovely home," Mel declared. Her eyes widened at the sweeping staircase, but gave no other outward signs of discomfort as they scanned the room. "I would have never guessed you just moved in. This place looks like a photo out of Better Homes and Gardens."

Mrs. Argent flashed another frighteningly good-natured smile as she led them into the house. "That's really too kind. We still have a bit of work to do on the upstairs—Allison takes a long time to get settled. And I'm afraid we might be a bit cramped at dinner. We've added another unexpected guest and I had to put out one more place setting."

No sooner did Mrs. Argent speak those words than Charlie found herself passing the door to the living room. Her feet came to a dead halt. In her mind she had conjured up a dozen different ways this evening could go sideways. Earthquake, salmonella, ritual sacrifice, sewer monster crawling out of the toilet—these were a few of the options that presented themselves. So it was with a healthy serving of irony that she found herself staring into the earnest, unassuming brown eyes of the one thing that beat out all other worst case scenarios.

Scott freaking McCall.

So much for normal.

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK

Studying in the library montage & getting interrupted by Stiles.

--------Movin On - Spanish Gold

Baking pies n' shit.

--------Sunder - Hibou

Charlie sees that Scott showed up to the dinner party and freaks a lil bit. I love the intro to this you have no idea.

--------Slang Blade (feat. Senim Silla) - Binary Star
Falling On The Grenade

Chapter Summary

In which the awkwardest dinner ever is somehow even more awkward than anticipated and some actual human emotion is expressed.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

Family portraits were an uncomfortable thing to look at. Possibly because few, if any, of those within the portrait were there by their own free will. Some poor, unsuspecting teenager was shoved between their racist grandpa and anti-vaxxer Aunt Karen while wearing a matching hideous sweater and some man behind the camera with vacant eyes and a sneer shouted 'cheese!'. And yes, everybody in those photos wore a smile, but their eyes screamed, 'help me, I've been kidnapped—please call the police'. This thought, though seemingly random, provided important context the scene unfolding before her. Because though Charlie had seen her fair share of grimaces set against a generic blue background, no photo could be more pained than the setup of that living room.

Scott McCall sat on the plush couch opposite the doorway to the living room, Allison at his side. Charlie knew the pair of them had set up a 'study' date—quotation marks necessary—but its expiration date was set for over an hour ago. They sat side by side, holding hands with a white-knuckled grip and eyes directed towards the carpet as toes tapped nervously. This, combined with Allison's flaming cheeks, added up to one simple explanation. The happy couple had been caught in the throes of 'studying'. Perhaps not 'final exam' level 'studying', but enough to inspire Mr. Argent's 'I'm fifteen seconds from getting my shotgun' face.

Mr. Argent and his fixed scowl sat in the armchair facing the couch, seemingly indifferent to Charlie's arrival. As she cleared her throat, his eyes remained trained on Scott in an attempt to incinerate the boy through the sheer force of his gaze. Next to him, perched on the armrest, was a woman with a light olive-toned complexion, shoulder length dirty blonde hair, and green eyes. Of those participating in the uneasy performance art before Charlie, she was the only one who seemingly noticed her entrance. Her face was the only one not marred by intense embarrassment and/or rage. She cocked an eyebrow as she scanned Charlie from head to toe in appraisal. So this was Aunt Kate. Yet another Argent to judge and dislike her. Huzzah.

Charlie made a move to shove her hands in her pockets, only to be reminded that she didn't have any at the moment, and folded them across her chest instead. "So who's pregnant?" she demanded, nerves bringing out the loud sarcasm in her tone like fish brings out the fruity tones in white wine. "Or am I reading the room wrong?"

The spell holding the room in its awkward suspension broke suddenly and all heads snapped in her
direction. Finding Charlie standing there, Scott's face maintained its terror while Allison's morphed into an expression of relief. Mr. Argent's face, as per usual, held the smugness of someone who expected to be displeased by her presence, and whose expectations were vindicated by Charlie's dumbass behavior. Yes, Charlie had succeeded in being terribly predictable, rendering both Donald's and Mel's encouragement moot inside of three minutes. The only unexpected contribution came from Allison's aunt Kate. Rather than putting forwards a stoic stare or nose wrinkled in disapproval, the woman let out a loud snort of laughter.

"Charlie!" Allison breathed her name like a sigh. Releasing Scott's hand, she pushed herself off the sofa and crossed the room in three bounding steps. Her arms went around Charlie's neck, pulling her into a tight hug.

"Jeeze, Allison," Charlie muttered, awkwardly patting the girl on the back. "Scott's like...right there. Keep it in your pants. Or at least buy me dinner first."

"I'm so glad you're here," Allison whispered quietly into Charlie's ear. "This is my nightmare. My dad—"

Any deathbed confessions were cut short by an authoritative clearing of the throat. Allison physically twitched before releasing Charlie and backing away. Sucking in a fortifying breath, she turned to face her aunt who had materialized right next to them.

"Allison?" Kate asked, raising a coyly inquisitive eyebrow. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend here?"

"Right," Allison said through an uncomfortable laugh. "Charlie, this is my Aunt Kate. Kate, this is my friend Charlie."

Putting on a bemused smile, Charlie held out a hand which Kate took and gave a crushing shake. "Nice to meet you, Charlie," she chirped. She leaned in conspiratorially and gave Charlie a sly smirk. "In case you were wondering about the heavy levels of awkward in the room and sudden change in the headcount for dinner, Chris and I just caught these two lovebirds making out."

Allison groaned as her cheeks flared up once more and clapped a hand to her forehead, but it was Mr. Argent who spoke up. "Kate," he said in that measured tone of warning, oddly similar to the one he used on his daughter. "Kate, do you really think this is an appropriate thing to discuss over dinner?"

Kate scoffed loudly and rolled her eyes. "We're not eating dinner yet, Chris," she drawled. "And they're teenagers. Ten bucks says Charlie here would have found out about Allison and Scott's little garage make out session inside of like ten minutes."

Allison groaned as her cheeks flared up once more and clapped a hand to her forehead, but it was Mr. Argent who spoke up. "Kate," he said in that measured tone of warning, oddly similar to the one he used on his daughter. "Kate, do you really think this is an appropriate thing to discuss over dinner?"

Kate scoffed loudly and rolled her eyes. "We're not eating dinner yet, Chris," she drawled. "And they're teenagers. Ten bucks says Charlie here would have found out about Allison and Scott's little garage make out session inside of like ten minutes."

"The garage?" Charlie muttered, scrunching up her nose. "That sounds like a recipe for tetanus."

With that quip Charlie found herself on the receiving end of an angry stare from Allison—to which she replied with an apologetic wince—but Kate busted out with unrestrained laughter. She slung an arm around Charlie's shoulders, pulling her close in. "Oh, man," she chuckled. "I like this one, Allison. She's got spunk—I bet Chris hates her. Tell me, Charlie, has he called you insubordinate yet?" The pin-drop silence in combination with Charlie's twitchiness was confirmation enough. Eventually Kate released Charlie and stepped back, looking her up and down again. "Damn," she murmured. "Is there something in the water in Beacon Hills? I leave Allison alone for a year and she turns into a runway model. Now this—" she waved a hand up and down Charlie's form "—this is the friend she invites over for dinner. What happened to the awkward teenage phase that I was forced to live through?"
"I'm not sure how to respond to that without sounding like an egotistical ass," Charlie murmured, once again trying to shove her hands in nonexistent pockets. She really wished she was wearing pants. Defensive, standoffish postures were easier to maintain while wearing pants.

"I think that was the perfect response," Kate replied. "But I want to go on the record that I don't approve of this whole 'gorgeous teenager' thing. For real, you look so together—how is this allowed?"

Through Kate's rambling, Charlie glanced back at Scott. He was not having a good night. The red in his face had invaded his neck as well, covering the span from the tip of his ears into the collar of his shirt. The adorably flustered face was almost enough for her to forget about all his dubious Derek-related behavior. 'Almost' being the key word. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously at him before returning to Kate—an expression he noticed giving the abrupt shift in countenance, alarm replacing….slightly less alarmed. "Um," Charlie mumbled, glancing back at Kate, "well, my aunt picked my clothes out so I wouldn't look like a delinquent. So I can't take credit."

"Delinquent, you say?" Kate declared, raising an intrigued eyebrow. "So you like more of a 'bad girl' vibe in your day-to-day...can't say I disapprove. Chris probably does, though."

"So, Aunt Kate," Allison interjected in an attempt to distract her aunt, "are you dating anyone new?"

Kate tutted and wagged a playfully admonishing finger. "Allison, you should know better than that. You never ask a woman on the other side of twenty-five about her love life unless you know it's going to be a positive answer."

"Alright," Mr. Argent broke in, finally standing to his full height from the armchair. Which didn't help much of anything at all. "I think it's about time for dinner. Why don't we all head into the dining room. Allison….come help me with the food, please."

Kate strolled out of the room, popping her hips and oozing an easy confidence with each movement. She was kind of the anti-Mel—self-confidence and sarcasm instead of a soft-spoken, sincere demeanor. Meanwhile, Mr. Argent wrapped a protective arm around Allison's shoulders and guided her out of the room, but not before shooting a vaguely malicious scowl over his shoulder. At first Charlie thought it may have been directed as her, but it was Scott who shriveled under his gaze. Shit. She was seated front row and center for a session of 'meet the parents' in one of its uglier iterations. "Hm," she murmured, moving to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with him. "It looks like he hates you even more than he hates me. And that's saying something."

"Is this how I die?" he demanded, fear flitting through his eyes. Charlie blew out a long breath and shrugged, out of fucks to give vis-a-vis Scott's peace of mind. "He does have a lot of guns. But then again I don't have to tell you that, do I? You've been in the garage. I went to grab sodas for the fridge once. Rude awakening."

"So, so many guns," Scott murmured. "What do I do?"

"Don't know, but I would advise against any sudden movements. And they do say that in the event of a bear attack you're supposed to curl into the fetal position."

Scott groaned and ran his hands down his face. "You're no help."

Charlie sighed and clapped a hand on his shoulder, shaking it a little bit. "I decide when I'm useful and I'm really just not feelin' it tonight."
With perfect timing, Mel's face appeared in the doorway, beckoning the two of them to the table. If the conversation in the living room could be branded 'awkward', this awkwardness was magnified a thousandfold by Mrs. Argent's seating chart. She had set a circular table. Firstly, people arranged in such a manner gave the outward appearance of summoning a demon in a satanic cult ritual. Secondly, it meant that at no instant would any of them be free of scrutiny from one Argent or another. Scott and Allison were sitting together, obviously, and Charlie was seated on Allison's other side. That bit was fine. Mel was seated between Charlie and Mrs. Argent. This was also fine. It was even fine that Kate plopped down opposite Charlie. That malicious edge to her snarkiness aside, the woman was entertaining if not entirely friendly. The awkwardness largely stemmed from the fact that Mr. Argent had sat down directly opposite Scott, intentions pointing towards glaring at the boy through the entire meal. If Charlie were to drop a fork, she probably wouldn't bother picking it up given the very real possibility that Mr. Argent had a gun under the table aimed directly at Scott's groin. Perks of professionally selling guns to law enforcement—plenty of opportunities to freak out the daughter's boyfriend.

The dinnertime conversation began suitably bland. The Argents discussed the logistics of their move, the adults brought up their respective jobs. Mel and Mrs. Argent engaged in a disturbing level of bonding over their respective roles in the fashion industry. One positive outcome? Charlie was barely called on to contribute. All discussion was standard fare—the conversational equivalent of saltine crackers. Until, that is, Mrs. Argent asked a question that could not be more innocuous and all hell broke loose. If hell was passive-aggressive.

"Charlie, Scott, would you like anything other than water?" she asked innocently.

"Nope," Charlie responded, snapping her mouth shut quickly before any inappropriate words were able to escape.

"No, I'm good," Scott declined politely. "Thanks."

"Can I get you some beer?" Mr. Argent demanded, eyes fixed on Scott. Mel's utensils clattered to the plate as they slipped from her grip, looking at Mr. Argent with surprise and alarm.

"That's a trap," Charlie muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "Steer clear of that one."

Scott glanced at her, but his eyes were drawn back to Mr. Argent's. The man's gaze had the pull of a black hole, ready to draw you in and crush you into nonexistence. A few flustered, incoherent sounds tumbled from Scott's lips until the expectant lift of Mr. Argent's eyebrows forced him into focus. "N—no thanks," he stammered, the question mark in his tone betraying his insecurity.

"Shot of tequila?" Mr. Argent persisted, studying Scott with the intensity of a judge at the Westminster Dog Show.

"Dad!" Allison hissed, glaring at her father. "Really?"

"You don't drink, Scott?" Mr. Argent insisted, ignoring an increasingly pale Allison.

"N—no," Scott stammered. "I'm not old enough to."

"That doesn't seem to stop many teenagers these days," Mrs. Argent tacked on.

"No," Scott said, drinking heavily from his glass of water. "But it should."

"Good answer," Kate interjected, the sly smile audible in her voice. She twirled her fork absently with the blasé confidence of a Bond villain. "I mean it was a total lie," she barreled on, "but well played, Scott. You may yet survive the night."
"What about you, Charlie," Mr. Argent said, rounding on her. "Do you drink?"

Charlie had become accustomed to the occasional audience, but never before had she found one quite so terrifying. Her eyes flickered between Mel and Allison, two wide-eyed Bambis in a den of wolves plus Scott. Their discomfort with the conversation became increasingly obvious, Mel nervously pushing asparagus around her plate while Allison's fingers were busy ripping the napkin in her lap to shreds. Oh, well. Courses of action were limited, so she opted to lean into the awkward. "Not a lot," she said, nibbling idly on the asparagus. "I mean, I've had a drink or two at parties, but nothing major. By the way, Mrs. Argent, this asparagus is delightful. Is that a hollandaise sauce?"

"Dead God," Kate drawled in mock amazement, directing a kick to Charlie's shin under the table. "What fine specimen do we have here? Is it the world's last honest teenager? Mel, you've found yourself a unicorn. Congratulations."

Charlie frowned as she poked at her food. "You make me sound like the subject of a wildlife documentary."

Kate reached across the table to pat Charlie's hand. "Oh, and you are, sweetie. You are in the best possible way."

Mel had shrunk in her seat, but straightened to her full height with Kate's accepting words. "Charlie and I have an understanding. I remember some of the stuff I got up to that age… So we agreed to keep it honest. Secrets never help anyone."

"Oh, I don't know about that…." Kate continued. The prongs of her fork rested on her lower lip as her coy glance swept the table. "Secrets can definitely be useful. And even if they're not useful they're so, so much fun."

Those bizarre, cryptic words hung in the air for a moment. And yet the bar for 'uncomfortable' had yet to rise high enough—somewhere in the world existed an Olympic athlete who just might be able to vault it. So Mr. Argent spoke up once more, always ready to do his part. "Do you smoke pot?"

"Okay," Kate snorted, "changing the channel to something a little less conservative…So Scott, uh, Allison tells us you're on the lacrosse team?" He just beamed and nodded, happy to be interrogated by someone that wasn't Allison's father. 'I'm sorry, I don't know anything about that. How do you play?"

Scott cleared his throat and bobbed his head. "Uh, um, well you know hockey?"

Kate took a bite of food and narrowed her eyes curiously. "Mmh."

"It's a lot like that only, um, played on grass instead of ice."

Mr. Argent smacked his lips in contempt, waving his knife to emphasize his point. "Hockey on grass…is called field hockey."

Allison said nothing, but rage had replaced embarrassment in the red of her cheeks.

"Oh, yeah," Scott said stupidly, and Charlie pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. Scott wasn't stupid—she knew this—but sometimes he tried really, really hard. She shot him a sidelong glance to see how much sweat had accumulated at his temples only to observe a cellphone sitting on his lap with the text box open. Okay, not stupid but distracted. Distracted by what? That was the question. Something important enough to risk dinner with Allison's parents. Maybe something that
had him sneaking into bus yards in the dead of night. Suddenly Mrs. Argent's hollandaise tasted bitter on her tongue. Still delightful, but bitter.

"So," Allison added on, steely resolve infecting her tone, "it's like field hockey except these sticks have nets."

"Exactly," Scott agreed.

Kate nodded in understanding. "Can you slap-check like in hockey?"

"Y—yeah," Scott said, reaching for his water. "But only the gloves and the sticks."

"Sounds violent," Kate murmured, another smile creeping across her face. "I like it."

"Scott's amazing too," Allison gushed, leaning towards her aunt. "Dad came with me to the first game. Wasn't he good?"

Mr. Argent gave a noncommittal jerk of the head. "He was fine."

The grinding of Allison's teeth was audible from a distance. "He scored the last shot, the winning shot."

"True," Mr. Argent conceded, "but he didn't score at all until the last few minutes."

"Thanks to Jackson," Charlie snorted. And once again she found herself at the center of attention, Mr. Argent none too pleased by her sudden re-entry into the conversation. But it couldn't be helped—her urge to mock Jackson was too strong, even if it ended up helping Scott which wasn't high on her list of priorities at present. Mel shot her a questioning look and gestured for her to continue. "Jackson Whittemore? The team captain? He's got an ego the size of Texas and generally hates not being the hero so...let's just say he fights dirty even if it's against his own teammates. He told the rest of the team not to pass to Scott, so I'd say that put him at a bit of a disadvantage."

"How did you know about that?" Scott demanded, gratitude and confusion equally present in his tone.

She pursed her lips and shrugged. "Well I've met Jackson, so...logic."

"It really was incredible," Mel interjected in her 'kindergarten teacher' tone. "Beacon Hills was totally done for, and in the last minute and a half Scott scored three goals in a row. Didn't the last one rip straight through the goalie's net?"

Scott nodded simply, and Mr. Argent rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well I think the goalie was playing with a damaged stick."

Allison slammed her drink down on the table with enough force to make Charlie's glass rattle. Charlie's eyes flew wide open and Mel's lids pulled back so far her eyeballs threatened to fall out of her skull. Her lips pinched and twisted in shock, and perhaps even some disdain. Disdain wasn't a shade Mel wore frequently—or at all—but it began to peek out behind her rose linen blush. She had no way to compute the blatant hostility being exhibited at the table. Even Charlie, who prided herself on her ability to thrive in awkward environments, was beginning to succumb to its effects. This was too much. One thing was for sure, the Oswins were desperately wishing that one or both of them suffered from explosive diarrhea.

Allison was moments from snapping. Her knee bounced impossibly fast under the table and her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists. But Scott reached over and covered her hand with his,
drawing some of the tension away. He turned to Mr. Argent, a cheeky smile on his face. "You
know, on second thought, I think I'll take that shot of tequila."

A short moment of silence overtook the table before Charlie snorted into her plate. Not long after,
she was followed by Mel and Kate, and then surprisingly by Mr. and Mrs. Argent themselves.
"You were kidding, right?"

"Yes, sir," Scott said, nodding eagerly.

"Well," Kate declared, banging her hands on the table. "That was intense."

The tension dissolved into the acceptable range allotted to dinner parties. The majority of the
conversation that followed regained a degree of civility, sliding back to the typical topics. Schools,
sports—other than lacrosse—the state of the economy, bears, the possibility of riding a bear like
one might a horse without getting eaten (her personal contribution), but soon enough it veered
towards a topic with which Charlie was in no way comfortable. Namely herself.

As the conversation drifted, Kate directed her attention to Charlie. Head cocked to the side, the
woman's eyes did a full sweep of Charlie's face. Having the full force of Kate Argent's attention
was a disconcerting thing. Like all the Argents—excepting Allison—the tiniest spark of crazy
lurked behind them. "So what's your deal?" Kate declared, pointing an almost accusing finger at
Charlie. "Allison hasn't told me all that much about you."

Charlie forced the asparagus in her mouth down with a heavy swallow. "There's not that much to
say."

"Oh, come on," Kate pressed, nudging Charlie's shin with the toe of her boot. "Hobbies? Interests?
Extra-curricular activities?"

Charlie bit down on the inside of her cheek and shrugged. "I don't know. I play guitar and compose
a bit. Nothing good, but it's decent practice. Umm...I can quote Galaxy Quest with unhealthy
degree of accuracy. I eat more fried food than would probably be advisable. I took Krav Maga for
like six years—"

"Really?" Kate interrupted, surprise edging into her sardonic countenance. "You know Krav
Maga?"

"I'm not an expert or anything, but yeah."

Kate grinned and nodded. "Nice. I like a girl that can kick a little ass."

"I don't know about that," Charlie mumbled, pushing the food around her plate. "I'm definitely out
of practice. Beacon Hills isn't crawling with sparring partners and there are only so many times I
can put Aaron Harrison in a thumb lock before he learns to stop being creepy, so—"

"Well, you've got one now," Kate announced. "I for one would love to see what you can do with
those tiny little fists of fury."

Charlie froze, a deer in headlights. One thing she did not expect from this evening was additional
plans, just suffering with a scheduled conclusion at 10:00pm. "Great," she bit out through clenched
teeth. "Fantastic. But you better bring your A-game—" she pointed her fork at Kate "—I'm not
taking it easy on you."

"Ooh," Kate smirked. "We've got a live one."
"She's also really good at bowling," Scott blurted out. Charlie paused with a fork full of steak poised to be eaten and stared at Scott. Wasn't that supposed to their little secret? She had helped him out with the bowling, and naturally assumed that his instinct for self-preservation would have him keeping that tidbit to himself. She knew the girl code, but some of the clauses had footnotes in really tiny print that she couldn't quite make out. A swooping feeling of anxiety had her stomach dropping, worrying that Allison might take issue or offense. Scott shot a few glances at Allison, a familiar color of embarrassment flushing his cheeks. "Charlie overheard me telling Stiles I couldn't bowl, so she taught me—us—how. She's seriously good. She got like seven strikes in a row. It was awesome."

Allison turned to face Charlie, her face bearing a smile. Phew. In Charlie's mind the revelation could have gone either way.

"You taught him how to bowl?" she asked, her tone appreciative.

"Sort of," Charlie muttered, shrugging her shoulders. "He seemed like he wanted some help."

Scott suddenly twitched in his seat. Brow furrowing, Charlie peered at him only to find his phone once more set to the text function. And the name at the top of the screen? Stiles. Fantastic. More weirdness courtesy of the wonder twins. "I, uh, I need to go to the restroom," he mumbled, glancing between the members of the Argent family. "Where—"

"Down the hall and to the left," Mr. Argent answered immediately.

Scott hopped from his seat and scurried down the hall with the urgency of someone suffering early onset prostate issues, leaving the Oswin and Argent clans to their own devices.

"So you bowl?" Mr. Argent asked in a tone that, for once, wasn't colored by disapproval. "That's an atypical skillset. I used to take Allison bowling."

"David—my brother, Charlie's dad—he was a big bowler," Mel supplied, smiling fondly to herself. "It was one of very few things he took seriously."

"Yeah," Charlie said, a smile creeping across her own face. "He definitely took the whole drinking beer and heckling grown men thing seriously."

"How did he die?" Kate asked abruptly. Charlie's muscles went stiff, her fingers instinctively tightening around the stem of her fork. A tense silence followed, filled only by the ticking clock and clinking of utensils against plates. "I mean, if you don't mind me asking," Kate continued, providing a thin expression apology.

"It's fine," Mel replied quietly. She cleared her throat in that oddly musical way only she could and put her utensils down, folding her hands in her lap before looking up at the table. "It was a hemorrhagic stroke brought on by a saccular aneurysm in the frontal lobe of his brain."

Charlie's eyes widened at Mel's rehearsed, robot-like tone as she listed off the medical buzzwords for what happened to David Oswin. "That's all fancy doctor speak for 'his brain exploded'," she muttered under her breath.

"Charlie!" Mel hissed, giving her a pointed look. Charlie pressed her lips together in a thin line and nodded in apology. The event of her dad's death had her cagey and short of temper. Discussing the man himself was fine, but the way it happened...that put her on edge. Her dad conjured many a good memory. His death only ever brought forth the one.

"And what about your mom?" Kate demanded, digging her heels further in. Charlie's eyebrows
knitted together in disapproval and contempt. Kate Argent was bold, but more than that the woman was aggressive. Her green eyes were the hungry sort of curious, probing around and seeing just how far she could push those boundaries. Charlie opened her mouth to respond, but Mel, whose boundaries were much more restricted, spoke first. "Charlie's mom isn't with us anymore and hasn't been for quite some time," she announced, providing the perfect degree of vagueness to leave everyone unsatisfied.

Kate's mouth formed a silent 'o', finally shrinking back from her conversational offensive. Allison reached out and placed a comforting hand on Charlie's arm. "That sounds like it must have been hard for you. Adjusting to everything."

Charlie pursed her lips and shrugged with as credible an affectation as she could muster. "I mean, I guess. But Mel's more than enough to get me through any sort of adjustment period."

Mel flushed and Charlie smiled warmly. One more thing to add to the list of reasons she was the perfect human person—she was never comfortable with praise.

"Well," Kate interjected, "Mel, I think you're a rock star for stepping up like that. I mean you're what? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight? I know if I got stuck with a teenager—even one that's adorably perfect like Allison—I would probably crap my pants. I wouldn't have the slightest clue what to do."

"Charlie makes it easy," Mel replied evenly. "Sometimes I think she's looking after me more than I look after her."

"Well that's just not true," Charlie drawled out, rolling her eyes good-naturedly.

Kate propped up her head on her hand, eyes darting back and forth between the two of them. "I just can't wrap my head around it, you know?" she mused. "The phone call. The one you get when...." The words trailed off, leaving their minds to fill in the blanks. The proverbial phone call from the hospital or the police or whoever the hell was holding the dead body. Charlie's fingers tightened even further around her fork. The conversation was drifting perilously close to things she did not talk about. That day. She didn't want to go back to that day. She refused to acknowledge that day in its entirety. "I didn't need to get a phone call," she bit out, fighting hard to maintain her 'delightful' veneer of civility. "I'm the one that made the call."

Kate immediately leaned back in her chair, acknowledging that she had crossed a line and effectively backing off the topic. In fact, all of the Argents shifted in their seats, faces pinched with discomfort. To Charlie, the turning of the tables was somewhat refreshing—that they finally found themselves on the defensive. But then there was Mel. Her eyes had glazed over, staring intently at nothing at all. And Charlie knew why. Mel was thinking about her phone call—a terrified sixteen-year-old gasping incomprehensibly into the receiver on a warm Saturday morning.

"Where's that adorable lost puppy of yours, Allison?" Kate broke in suddenly. She pushed back from the table and got to her feet. "I think I'll help him find his way back."

Kate and Scott reappeared a few minutes later, just in time for the dessert. A few minutes without Kate's presence and conversation allowed for a hard detour from anything family-related. Apart from one mildly alarming anecdote from Mr. Argent about a rabid dog, it mostly dabbled in the
normal. Cookies were eaten, compliments were given, and the meal concluded with the adults congregating in the kitchen, cleaning up as they finished their wine. Meanwhile, Allison went to work fetching Scott's backpack from her room so he could exit stage left. He appeared eager to leave.

"I am so incredibly sorry, you guys," Allison gasped as she jogged down the stairs. She shoved Scott's backpack into his waiting arms and gave them both an apologetic look.

Scott threw the bag over his shoulders and furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. "For what?"

Allison released a pained laugh and grimaced. "For that being the worst, most horribly awkward dinner ever in the history of horribly awkward dinners."

"No, uh, it wasn't the worst," Scott replied, grinning at her. "There was this one dinner where my parents told me they were getting a divorce. But this one comes in at a close second."

Allison's eyes sparkled with an upsetting degree of happiness and turned to Charlie, whose face remained blank. "Oh, this was definitely the most horribly awkward dinner I've ever been to."

Sparing Charlie an eye roll, Allison leaned in towards Scott for a goodbye kiss. Before she managed to plant one on him, though, Scott backed away, glancing anxiously over his shoulder. As Mel and Mrs. Argent chatted idly, Mr. Argent cleaned the dishes. Vigorously. While standing in the doorway. Staring directly at them. "Uh, I think your dad's watching," Scott stammered.

Allison smirked and leaned in closer. "Good."

The two of them kissed, seemingly oblivious to Charlie's presence. She made a face and scoffed loudly. "Ugh. The two of you are so sweet, I swear you're going to give me Type 2 diabetes."

Ignoring her—as per usual—Scott reached for the doorknob and opened it a crack, preparing to leave. But before he got the chance, Kate strolled towards them. Her face lacked its usual mocking laughter. "Wait a second, guys," she said, coming to a stop in front of the three of them. "Uh, I have to ask Scott something."

"Me?" Scott demanded, his voice thick with confusion.

Kate reached past him and shut the door, blocking his exit. "Yeah, you." She let out an un-humorous laugh and rocked back on the heels of her designer boots, shoving her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. "What did you take from my bag?"

"What are we talking about?" Mr. Argent asked, moving into the foyer.

Kate sighed heavily. "My bag was open in the guest room and when I left it was shut," she explained, looking pointedly at the floppy-haired wonder. "Scott comes in to use the bathroom. He leaves. My bag's open."

Allison blanched, the mortification in her expression an upgrade from that she had been showing all night. Less, 'oh crap, my family is embarrassing me' and more 'oh man, I got caught'. Scott's face bore a similar shade of 'oh shit', but his menu seemed to offer more 'terror' than 'embarrassment'. "What?" he asked, his eyes wide.

"What did you take from it? Do you need me to repeat the question? Maybe enunciate more clearly?"

"What are we talking about?" Mr. Argent asked, moving into the foyer.

Kate sighed heavily. "My bag was open in the guest room and when I left it was shut," she explained, looking pointedly at the floppy-haired wonder. "Scott comes in to use the bathroom. He leaves. My bag's open."

"H—he didn't take anything," Allison breathed out nervously. Charlie glanced at all involved
parties, taking in their appearances. Allison was clearly panicking, Scott was a deer in headlights, and Kate showed no intention of letting up. Hell, the woman appeared to be enjoying herself. Scaring the shit out of teenagers? Quality entertainment.

"Something was taken from my bag," Kate continued, barrelling over Allison's protests. "Now I hate to be the accuser here, Scott, because I really do love those adorable brown eyes, but I don't know if you're a klepto, if you're—"

"It was a tampon!" Charlie's words echoed against the tiled floor, repeating themselves over and over. All eyes turned to her as she slapped a hand over her mouth, doing her level best to look guilty. After a few moments she pulled her hand from her face, having already assembled an apologetic wince beneath. "I'm so sorry," she said, turning to Kate specifically. "I had a code red emergency, and—and I couldn't find any in the bathroom and Mel just got me this dress and I figured i would just....." She let the sentence trail off and averted her eyes. Chewing nervously on her thumbnail, she sent Kate a few flickering glances, careful not to maintain eye contact for too long. "It was an invasion of privacy, and I'm really, incredibly sorry. But I just—I needed—"

"Why didn't you just ask?" Kated demanded, her eyebrow assuming a skeptical arch. "We're all ladies here."

"Come on," Charlie whispered, staring at the ground and bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. "No girl wants to admit she's on the rag.... And growing up I kinda was conditioned to avoid the topic. Single dad and all that...it wasn't really up for discussion. I guess now that I'm living with Mel I don't have to, but....I just wanted to avoid the conversation. Which is really ironic given what's happening now."

Kate gave her an appraising look, but nodded slowly. Charlie didn't leave her much room to retort. The 'dead dad card' was the trump card in most if not all disagreements. Use it sparingly, and it would serve her well. "Okay," Kate murmured in a low, vaguely dangerous tone. "Okay, Charlie. I'll let it go just this once. But if you ever go through my things again, I won't let you off so easy."

Slowly, Kate turned on her heel and strode back to the kitchen. Mr. Argent soon followed, but not before sparing a look of contempt. Hatred solidified. She was a goner.

Letting out a long, calming breath, Charlie turned back to Allison and Scott. "One or both of you owes me big."

"Thank you!" they gushed in unison. The collective relief inspired no small degree of curiosity. Charlie narrowed her eyes at the couple and studied them. Both faces wore their relief in equal measures. Both were hiding something. "Allison, you should probably go make your tampons impossible to find," Charlie muttered. "Try and make me look like I'm telling the truth."

Allison gave a curt nod. "Right." One kiss to the cheek and whispered goodbye and she left Scott, flying upstairs to cover up the lack of evidence.

Scott's face went blank—dazed—as she kissed him and his eyes followed her up the stairs. Charlie rolled her eyes and snapped her fingers in front of his face, dragging him back to the present. When he finally focused enough to take in her face, he twitched at the irritation written into its lines. "You know," she grunted, "bailing you out of shit has become almost reflexive. I gotta up my pettiness level, I'm disappointing myself."

"What, uh, what do you mean," Scott stuttered.

Charlie folded her arms across her chest. "Do you really want me to start airing grievances? In Allison's house?"
"I'd really, really rather you didn't."

Charlie heaved a sigh, her head lolling on her neck as she deflated. "I honestly don't know how I keep ending up witnessing your bullshit, man. Seriously, you and Stiles are the worst at being sneaky. Why am I making things easier for you?"

"Maybe you just wanted to make it better for Allison?" Scott offered. "I mean, you're a good friend."

Charlie's head perked up, peering at Scott. "Yes," Charlie agreed, slowly returning to her full height. "Yes, thank you, Scott. I wasn't helping you, I was helping Allison. Helping you was an unfortunate byproduct."

"No problem," he replied. "And thanks for the unfortunate byproduct."

Charlie reached forwards, pressing a single finger against his lips to silence him. "Shhhhhh," she hissed. "I did nothing for you. Do not thank me."

Scott's eyes went crossed as he looked at her finger in bemusement. "Uh, okay," he mumbled.

"So who were you texting at dinner?" Charlie demanded, withdrawing her hand and once more regarding him with suspicion.

Scott blanched, his eyes shifting right and left as he sought an escape route. "Uhhh, my mom."

At this point Charlie had reached 'I'm not mad, I'm disappointed' levels of exasperation. The deception was bad enough on its own. The fact that she couldn't unravel the mystery of Stiles and Scott in the face of their obvious incompetence was a slap in the face. "Oh my god," she groaned, "you could have just said you were texting Stiles and I would have had zero reason to think you were being annoying and evasive, and yet here you are, being both of those things."

"It was, I was—"

Charlie threw her hands in the air in exasperation. "NOPE! I'm not going in for the full edition lying after I've already had the Sparknotes version." Her eyes narrowed to the point that had practically shut, Scott's figure obscured by a layer of mascaraed lashes. "This isn't over."

"What—what isn't over?"

"I'll see you on the other side, McCall."

"What other side?"

Charlie, using her index and middle finger, pointed at her own eyes before jabbing them in Scott's direction. The furrow between his eyebrows deepened. "What other side?" he repeated. "Are you going somewhere?"

Charlie's arms collapsed to her sides in defeat, frustration taking its toll. "Dammit, just...just let me have a dramatic moment, okay?"

"Uh, okay. Sure."

"Okay," she nodded.

Charlie had dialed herself up to intimidation level eight, but Scott was either immune or wholly ignorant to it, simply presenting her with a lame wave. "Have a good night!"
"Jesus Christ, you suck at this."

With a irritated scoff, Charlie trudged up the stairs in Allison's wake. The click of the latch told her Scott had said his goodbye. She arrived in Allison's room to find the girl in a frenzy, stashing tampons under her mattress. Charlie shut the door and Allison twitched like a skittish kitten, whirling around. At the sight of Charlie, she collapsed against the wall with a relieved sigh. "Thank God, it's you—for a second I thought my parents were up here."

"Nah, you're safe," Charlie replied. "For now anyway."

Covering her face with her hands, Allison let out a loud groan, sliding down the wall until she found herself on the floor. Charlie made a beeline for the stereo, turning it on to muffle their conversation before flopping on the bed. She stayed quiet, allowing Allison some time to work through her temporary freakout. Soon enough, Allison pulled her hands from her face, but her face bore a grimace. "I am seriously so sorry about that," she apologized for the thousandth time. She dragged herself to her feet and collapsed on the bed next to Charlie. "About all the weirdness with Scott and my dad, and Kate...I love her but she's not great with boundaries and—"

Charlie patted Allison's shoulder, shushing her quietly. "Really, Allison, it's fine." She stole a sidelong glance at her friend. Her wide, brown eyes, usually crinkled at the corners with a hint of a smile, stared vacantly at the ceiling. Maybe she had PTSD. Charlie rolled over onto her stomach and propped her head up on one hand. "So what did you take from Kate's bag?"

Wincing heavily, Allison grabbed a pillow from above her head in a feeble attempt to smother herself. "A condom," was her muffled reply. "I took a condom."

Charlie let out a long, low whistle. "Really? So when you say 'I'm going to go study with Scott', is this a course in human anatomy? Because I don't remember that being on the curriculum. Is this some Learning Annex bullshit?"

"Shut up," Allison groaned, lobbing the pillow at Charlie's face. "I didn't say I was going to use it. I just...thought I should have the option. In case Scott and I wanted to...you know...."

"Rip off each others' clothes and do the horizontal cha-cha?" Charlie interjected. "What brought this on so suddenly? The two of you haven't gotten past the doe-eyed staring phase yet." Allison's cheeks flamed red, and Charlie held up a hand in submission. "Hey, no judgement. Don't get me wrong—you do you.....or, you know...you do Scott."

Allison sighed heavily. "I don't know. I just really like him. I don't want him to get bored, you know? Plus I was talking to Lydia earlier and she suggested that—"

"Let me stop you right there," Charlie broke in. "Any plan that begins with the words 'Lydia suggested' needs a lot more vetting, because it will probably end in disaster. Lydia is a rare specimen. What works for her doesn't work for most people." Allison let out a low whine and rubbed her temples and frustration, so Charlie deployed her go-to move and patted her lightly on the top of her head. "There, there. Scott's not going to get bored. Did you see what he just went through for you? That dinner was across-the-board terrible, and he still left with a smile on his face. He's one sweeping emotional realization from being completely in love with you."

Allison peeked through her feathered eyelashes. "You really think so?"

"For the last time, yes!" Charlie groaned.

"Okay." Allison rolled over on her stomach as well. She reached and grabbed the stuffed bear from
the head of her bed and wiggled its arms, off daydreaming in her own little world. Three guesses what was on her mind. Until her mind seized on a fresh, less than pleasant memory. Could someone give themself second-hand embarrassment? Allison's beet-red cheeks said yes. She buried her face into the stuffed animal, squeezing it so tightly Mr. Bear threatened to explode into a pile of stuffing. "I can't believe how terrible that was. I mean, even before Kate went all weird and intense, my dad….he glared at Scott the whole time."

"Yes, he did," Charlie confirmed. "At one point I put Scott's likelihood of survival at like 30%. I'm still kind of surprised he made it out of there alive."

"Ugh, parents are the worst."

There wasn't even a beat for Charlie to breathe. With a violent frenzy Allison scrambled up, her face stricken. She had finally made an error in her conversational moratorium on the topic of 'parents', a slight fissure appearing in the eggshells she had been tiptoeing on. The girl was nimble to be sure—Charlie barely noticed the tap-dancing—but every so often the corners of her lips would twitch with a question that went unasked. Just a tiny slip. But now she had tripped. By the time her mouth had opened, an apology poised on the tip of her tongue, Charlie had a hand raised to dismiss the need for it.

"Oh my God," Allison whispered. "I didn't think—I'm so—"

"Do not worry about it," Charlie reassured her. "Bitching about the shit your parents pull is the inalienable right of all teenagers across this fair nation."

"But I didn't think," Allison barreled on. "It was really insensitive."

Charlie rolled her eyes. "Having a life that you sometimes want to talk about makes you insensitive? Come on, Allison."

Allison opened her mouth and closed it again, grabbing a pillow and hugging it close to her body. She peeked at Charlie bashfully, and the corners of her lips gave that characteristic twitch once more. Only this time she actually followed through. "Hey Charlie," she said hesitantly, "this is probably totally out of line and like...less than none of my business, especially after tonight, but I was wondering..."

"Go for it," Charlie declared with an encouraging wave. "Dude, you're already thinking about it. You might as well be informed."

Exhaling sharply, Allison nervously tucked a curl behind her ear. "It's just....I've heard you talk about your dad a lot, but you never mention your mom. I'm sorry about Kate today, but I was just wondering when...."

"My mom's not dead or anything," Charlie deadpanned.

Allison blinked in surprise. "She's not?"

Charlie shook her head in a decisive negative. "She peaced out when I was a baby. I don't really remember her at all. I think she ran off to join the Peace Corps. Not 100% on that one, though."

As far as 'doe eyes' went, Allison's usually managed to maintain their endearing quality, rarely venturing towards irksome. But as she stared, all sadness and alarm, that itchy feeling washed over Charlie. She was dangerously close to being irked. "So you never knew her?" Allison whispered. "Like...not at all?"
Charlie shrugged, hoping her casualness would temper Allison's shock. "Nope."

"Charlie..." Allison murmured. "I'm sorry."

"What's there to be sorry about?" Charlie scoffed. "I mean, you can't miss what you never had, right? And hey, at least I know it's nothing I did. I mean honestly I'm glad she couldn't deal right off the bat. I find it comforting that she never tried to love me instead of trying and failing. Some people just aren't built to be parents."

Allison didn't appear convinced. "I guess that's a way to look at it...."

"I love my dad," Charlie replied. "I had a great childhood. I was happy. I'm not sure what else I could ask for. So...let's not...let's not make this a 'thing'. Literally nothing has changed."

"I know, I just..." Allison heaved a sigh. "I just...sometimes I feel bad complaining about stupid stuff when actual, real stuff has happened to you."

On many levels, Charlie had reconciled herself to 'the pity look'. At its core, it stemmed from anxiety and basic human decency. For most the base urge was to try and make it better. Was it a misplaced sense of obligation? Yes. Did it arrive from people's desire to absolve themselves of some bizarre sibling to survivor's guilt? Absolutely. Feelings were icky and people wanted them to go away as quickly as possible. This was something Charlie understood wholeheartedly. And Allison, staring at her with nothing but sincerity and goodness, wanted to help and had jack all to do. Allison's 'pity' look was an outlet for good intentions.

This type of situation called for one thing, and one thing only: a massive, abrupt shift in topic.

Charlie pushed herself up on her elbows and shot Allison a sympathetic smile. "Hey," she declared. "I know what we should do. It makes literally everything better."

"Okay," Allison murmured. "What should we do?"

"Prank call Jackson," she replied as if it was the most obvious answer in the world. "You just have to set up a dummy skype account and dial out so he doesn't recognize the number. It costs a bit of money but it is so worth it."

"Charlie—"

"Just wait till you hear him yell," she barrelled on. "It'll be the funniest thing you hear all year, I swear. I've been calling him about a past-due invoice for penile enhancement since early August. I'm thinking tonight is the night I'll threaten to get creditors involved."

"Are you serious?"

"I am absolutely serious! Now are we going to do this or not?"

They did not prank call Jackson. But Allison's disapproving disbelief was contradicted by the smile tugging at the corners of her lips. She might have gone for it had Charlie pressed. For the remaining twenty minutes, before Mel's polite knock on Allison's door, all was well. The Oswins departed with a few more bland smiles and 'delightful' platitudes (a.k.a. flagrant lies)—'I had such a great time', 'let's do this again sometime'. The front door shut behind them with an echo. Wind hit their faces, a crisp scent of pine needles replacing the now soured smell of hollandaise and the chattering of birds filling in for dinnertime banter. In unison, the two of them released a large breath—one they had been holding since they entered the damn house. One sidelong glance and 0.2 seconds of eye contact had them erupting into a fit of giggles.
"Come on," Mel sniggered, looping her arm through Charlie's to pull her further from the house. "Come on, we can't let them hear how relieved we are to be out."

But on the car ride back, Charlie felt something off in Mel's behavior. Mel was a naturally reserved person—the shyest former homecoming queen in history—but she'd never stay quiet quiet unless something was bothering her. Charlie stole a few glances in the rearview mirror and sank lower in her seat, frowning to herself. That little line formed between Mel's eyebrows, a symptom of troubled thoughts. The dinner had been dicey, but the majority of the inappropriate behavior had, quite shockingly, originated with the Argents. Charlie had been positively civil. Nothing so terrible as to inspire this reaction.

When they got back to the apartment, Charlie exploded through the front door. Stumbling into the living room, she hurled herself onto the too-large couch. "Let's never, ever do that again," she mumbled into the Febreze-drowned cushions. Mel's heels clacked loudly against the cracked floorboards of the entryway, slowly coming to a stop as she leaned against the doorframe.

"It wasn't that bad," she murmured, eliciting a disbelieving snort from Charlie. "I'm serious," Mel insisted, never one to pass up an opportunity for generosity. "I mean...yes...all that stuff with Scott was inappropriate and...odd...but bringing boys home to your dad never goes well. And Kate seemed nice, if a little pushy."

"If you performed three miracles, I'd nominate you for sainthood," Charlie mumbled. "Oh wait, you survived that dinner, so only two miracles necessary." She maneuvered herself so she sat up straight on the couch—her ass finding that well-worn indentation—and kicked off her Mary Jane heels before propping her feet up on the coffee table. Grabbing the remote, she switched on the TV. "Is there something you want to watch? I think they're airing some Planet Earth reruns."

But Mel didn't respond. She stood in the doorway, silently watching Charlie, that same pained expression painted across her face. Charlie's heart felt as if it dropped into the pit of her stomach, the acid slowly beginning to digest it. "What's wrong, Mel?" she asked, her voice getting low and quiet.

Mel opened and closed her mouth a few times, searching for the right words. "It's...it's something Kate said at dinner, or rather something you said to Kate—it got me thinking again."

Charlie switched off the TV and took her feet off the coffee table, planting her elbows on her knees as she leaned in Mel's direction. "Thinking about what?"

Mel rubbed at her forehead like she was trying to stave off a headache and released a deep, rattling breath. She flicked a strand of hair out of her eyes, trying to maintain her composure. "The...the day your dad died," she continued quietly. "You still haven't talked to anybody about it—about what happened. Not to me, not to your friends as far as I can tell—not even Donald—not to Dr. Hamilton—"

"What does Dr. Hamilton have to do with anything?" Charlie snapped. "I haven't seen her in over a month."

The air around her grew thick—un-breathable even—and Charlie's hands involuntarily curled into fists. Mel blinked at the edge of hostility in Charlie's outburst. "Dr. Hamilton said you were withholding," she whispered. "She said you never opened up in your sessions. You haven't cried yet. Bottling this kind of thing up doesn't work, it never has. Trust me, I know."

"On the contrary," Charlie declared, getting to her feet. Her voice shook, but she did her best to keep it steady. "I think that keeping my business to myself is working out just fine. I've got good
friends, I'm doing great in school, my hair is shinier than ever—"

"I'm not telling you to go on the loudspeakers and announce you problems to the whole school," Mel protested. She took a few steps forward to place a comforting hand on Charlie's arm, but Charlie withdrew instinctively. Mel exhaled sharply, hurt by the reaction, but continued. "I just want you to talk to me, Charlie," she reasoned. "There's a full day of your life that you just...never talk about. I feel like you've got a giant ball of darkness inside you and instead of letting it go, you're just keeping it there. Holding onto it."

"And you think that me telling you about that—that day...you think that will help?"

Mel let out a relieved sigh and nodded, apparently interpreting this as a breakthrough. "Yes. Yes, I think it will help."

"He was making breakfast and then he was on the floor," Charlie deadpanned. "I already told you that. I told the paramedics that, I told the doctors that, I told everybody that—"

"We both know it was more than that," Mel murmured. "You were so panicked on the phone that day—I want you to share it with me. All of it. I want to carry it with you. It doesn't have to be just you."

Charlie folded her arms across her chest, her fists tightening until her fingernails bit into the skin of her palms. "No," she said simply.

"W—what?"

"I said no. I don't want to think about it and you don't actually want to hear it, so I'm saying no."

"Yes, I do what to hear about it,' Mel exclaimed. She stepped forwards, gripping her niece's shoulders. "I want to know—I want you to share it with me! I don't want to be wondering what you're thinking about all the time when you're staring out a window with a vaguely sad look on your face!"

"Okay, well, statistically speaking I'm probably thinking about food or Discovery Channel documentaries."

"Charlie, be serious!" Mel cried. "We need to talk about this!"

"We really don't."

"Yes, we do!"

"NO, WE DON'T!" In her head the words were spoken, but they left her lips as a scream. She hadn't meant to yell. She hadn't meant to put that look on her aunt's face. Mel was picking the lock to a door that Charlie would rather keep shut. But it was too late now. The lock had been cracked, and the hinges screeched as it swung open. Charlie stepped back from Mel and ran her hands down her face. Her breaths were coming out quick and sharp. She bit down hard on the inside of her cheek until it began to bleed and her mouth filled with the taste of pennies. Charlie swore before shooting a few fleeting glances at Mel.

"You don't want to hear it, Mel!" Charlie bit out, trying to keep her voice from slipping into a shout. "You don't want hear about how I did CPR for like fifteen minutes before the ambulance showed up! You don't want to hear about how I felt two of his ribs crack under my hands, but kept at it anyway because I didn't know what else to do! You don't want to hear about how I couldn't ride with him in the ambulance because I was in the middle of a full-scale panic attack and kept
puking in the sink! You don't want to hear it, and I don't want to think about it! Ever! Not ever!"

Her voice reverberated against the walls of the apartment, echoing down the empty hallway. Charlie's eyes, which had been focused intently on the floor, finally made their way back to Mel's face. Her brown eyes shone and silent tears coursed down her face, leaving dark tracks of eyeliner and mascara as they fell. Charlie's eyes, though, they were as dry as ever. Her body wouldn't let her cry. Three months in and her tear ducts still ran drier than the California drought.

The air solidified around her, leaving Charlie to choke on it. In that moment she knew she had to get out. Without another word she brushed past Mel and ran to the front door, grabbing her bag and her keys from the bowl, slamming the door behind her. It occurred to her as she scrambled down the driveway that she wasn't wearing any shoes, but she wasn't willing to go back for them. Instead, she got into her car and peeled out of the driveway.

Charlie had no idea where she was going. Anywhere. Somewhere. Nowhere. She flew down the wooded roads, probably violating the speed limit by a wide margin. The windows were rolled down all the way, the wind whipping at her hair. It threw strands in her face, stinging her skin and eyes, but at least she could breathe. Her eyes fell on the St. Christopher's medal hanging from her rearview mirror and that same kick hit her stomach all over again. A primal, wordless scream wrenched itself from her lips and she pounded her fists against the steering wheel. She wanted it to go away—for that hollow ache to leave her alone for half a second.

That day. Charlie kept it stowed away in the back of her mind like that last, dusty box of her dad's stuff in the closet. Was it the healthiest way to deal with loss? No. But it worked. For here, for now, it worked for her. She didn't look at it, think about it, or feel it. It didn't hurt quite so much. But Mel opened the box. Mel ripped off the bandage. And as it turned out, the wound underneath hadn't healed at all.

If someone asked her how long she had been driving, Charlie wouldn't have been able to give a proper answer. She pulled over to the side of the road on one of the dozens of streets in Beacon Hills named after birds. Engine idling, she sat there, the moonlight shining on her pale hands as they gripped the steering wheel. The skin was drawn so tight over bone they looked like they belonged to a skeleton. The cold flooded around her with the night's breeze, giving Charlie a reason to shake. Little bits of dust danced in front of the headlights of the car, refracting the golden light in strange, mobile patterns. It was quite beautiful, actually.

She turned the engine off.

In the passenger's seat, the clasp to her purse had come unlatched, its contents strewn across the car's interior. Loose change, chapstick, and, ironically, spare tampons filled the floorboards. Her phone remained on the seat. Hand darting out, she snatched up her phone and pressed it to her ear, her heart hammering in time with the rings. The voice on the other end was harsh and raspy.

"Oz, what the hell, man?"

The time 10:47 pm blinked from her dash in glowing, blue numbers. Charlie swore under her breath, hand clapping to her forehead. "Shit. Shit, I'm sorry, Donald. Time zones. I forgot. Just...sleep well."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." The protest came out slow as a slow drawl, his voice rough as he dragged himself out of sleep. "What's—what's going on with you? You sound weird—are you okay?"

Charlie swallowed hard, but nodded. Her throat ached with screams forced down and tears that refused to come. "Yeah," she murmured, the crack in her voice betraying her. "Yeah, I'm fine—I'm
always fine. Go back to sleep."

"I'm not going back to sleep when you sound like that," Donald grumbled. "What's going on?"

"I…." Words didn't come. No explanation presented itself. Alone on the side of the road, her heart seized with emotions she couldn't understand or define. If she couldn't find words to describe it, if she couldn't name that tightness in her chest, how in the hell could she do anything about it? She was ill-equipped. Charlie curled into a ball, her knees tucked under her chin, and rested her head against the sill of the open car window. "Can you just…..talk?"

"Uh...yeah," Donald replied hesitantly. "Talking's something I can do. About what?"


"Okay," Donald replied. His voice was still groggy, but it held a hard edge of determination. Even ripped from the depths of sleep, he seemed to understand. How he knew what to do when she didn't was lost on Charlie. "Have I told you the saga of how we liberated Kevin the lobster?"

"No," Charlie whispered. "Not in detail."

"Well then, Oz," he declared, a smile already invading his tone. "Prepare yourself for a glorious tale of teenage delinquency. I'm talking the high school equivalent of Ocean's Eleven. Okay, so—"

Donald's voice wrapped around her like a warm blanket. She closed her eyes, and let the words fill her ears, pushing her own thoughts further back into the crevices of her own mind. They were still there, but lurking. Quiet. Dormant. Donald prattled on between sleepy yawns and snorts of laughter. She'd never met anyone else who was so good at being happy. Character trait or practiced skill, he seemed to wear it so easily. That enthusiasm, always infectious, had her lips twitching into a faltering smile.

Donald's rapidfire rambling washed over Charlie in waves, at some point making a segue to dramatic retellings of truly atrocious movies. Of his many brands of rant, those were her favorite. The dude was a wordsmith. With his master craftsmanship, even the shittiest of shitty plots broke out of its cocoon, flapping its wings as a brilliant and colorful comedic masterpiece. "...and these stupidass Winnebego-driving assholes are sitting around the table," he prattled, "and they're totally about to eat this food that's oozing this disgusting green shit that's gonna basically turn them into goblin food. For real, it looked like Shrek's blood. Maybe they thought it was kale—whatever. And the kid's trying to get them not to eat this toxic shit, so what does he do? He freaking...like...freezes time and stands up on his chair and just...pisses. On everything. It's all up in the pie and green beans. Now keep in mind, that means his whole family has now seen his junk."

Charlie's lungs spasmed with either a spluttering cough or a violent guffaw. "What in the actual hell?"

"I know!" Donald declared giddily. "People paid money to make this movie. It's hilarious."

"And what's it called?"

"Troll 2."

"Troll 2," Charlie repeated, the word 'two' carrying an especially dubious taste. "So you're telling me they made two of these."

"Oh, no, no, no," Donald corrected. "There's no Troll 1. They just named it Troll 2 because there's this famous movie called Troll, and they were trying to con people into thinking it was a sequel."
There's not even any trolls in the movie. Just goblins."

"It sounds like a trainwreck."

"It's modern art."

Charlie's faint snort of appreciative laughter had Donald sighing in relief. "Now there we go, that's better—sad Oz freaks me out," he mumbled into the receiver. "Just knowing she's out there, not using that deep reservoir of sarcasm to make people painfully uncomfortable….it bums me out. Regular Oz is a magnificent, horrifying creature who belongs out there in the wilderness, making people question their will to live with terrible puns and inappropriate questions."

"Yeah, well I'm never out of commission for too long," she chuckled. "Making people uncomfortable is a passion."

"Right…." His voice faded away, that warm mirth filling the conversation between them along with it. The end of sad Oz time ushered in serious Donald, the rarest of all Donalds. "This was about your dad, right? Because last time—"

His words cut short. Neither of them needed a reminder of last time. Her, curled up in a ball and shivering in a cold hospital waiting room chair. Him, across the country and ranting into the phone about how Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull was fanfiction of the scientology origin story. Her dad, in an operating room down the hall behind glass doors and a sadistic orderly. Charlie bit her lip and inhaled sharply, which Donald took as an affirmative. "So...no pressure—less than none—but...you know you're going to have to talk about it some day. Don't get me wrong, you compartmentalize like a boss, but just to put this in terms literally nobody but you would understand...'compartment syndrome'. I read about on WebMD. Basically if one body compartment goes bad and there's increased pressure in it, then blood flow stops and every last bit of you dies, so...metaphor—"

"No, I know what compartment syndrome is—we're all clear on that metaphor." Charlie wiped at her eyes instinctively, like the rest of her body knew she should be crying even though her eyes disagreed. "I know. I get it. But I'm not ready to de-compartmentalize."

The reluctance in the pause that followed was palpable, but Donald didn't press. "If you're not ready, you're not ready," he acquiesced. "But some day you're gonna be. And when you are, you can call me. Even if it is two in the goddamn morning."

"Thanks, Donald. I...thank you. And I'm sorry for waking you—I shouldn't have done that."

"It's cool. You'd do the same thing for me." The smothered yawn that followed did nothing to assuage that twinge of guilt, but Donald's voice remained as good-natured as ever. "So I gotta get a bit of sleep in. You…..take a while before you drive back home, okay? I'm gonna call Mel and tell her you'll be back soon."

Charlie ran a hand through her hair, nodding to herself. "You're a stupidly good friend."

"Any time, Oz. Any time. But in the future I'm hoping that time is before two in the morning."

"Goodnight, Donald."

"Goodnight, Oz."

After Donald hung up the phone toppled from Charlie's hand, falling safely on the passenger seat cushion. Lips pinched together, she released a slow, steadying breath. Donald was calling Mel.
Mel, who she had screamed at and abandoned in a cramped apartment a half hour ago. Mel, who was the person who least deserved to be treated that way. Mel, who was probably sitting on a couch and blaming herself for everything that went wrong.

Shit.

Charlie rolled up the windows and turned on the heater as she drove back to the apartment. Without the roaring wind, the drive was quiet. Her hands held the steering wheel loosely, poised at ten and two. But the stillness that replaced the swirling eddies of emotion failed to invite inner calm. Each revolution of the car wheels brought her back to face the mess she had left. She sprinted out of the apartment with tidy hair and ironed clothes, and returned a tangled, wrinkled mess. Hard not to see that as a metaphor...

Pulling back onto her street, the outward appearance of normality only served to heighten Charlie's uncertainty. As much as it felt like something should have changed, nothing did. The driveway stood empty, waiting for her return. The flickering pink glow from the highest window told her Mel was in the living room watching TV. Awake. Waiting for her. Charlie sat in her car a few minutes longer, summoning the courage to go inside. Finally picking her way up the narrow steps, she entered carefully, peeking around the corner.

Mel sat on the couch in her pajamas, wrapped in a plush blanket with a carton of ice cream in hand. Her grip on the spoon tightened with the creak of the front door swinging open. Her eyes were still rimmed in red but her face had been scrubbed clean, all traces of her mascara-laden tears wiped away. Mel's eyes flickered to Charlie for a moment before returning to the screen. She stayed still, afraid to spook Charlie like one might a wounded animal.

Charlie turned away from her aunt and moved to her room. With slow, deliberate motions she prepared herself for bed. She changed into her own pajamas and washed her face, brushed her teeth and pulled her hair into a loose bun. Her reflection in the mirror could have belonged to any other day. All that noise, but nothing had really changed. Instead of curling up underneath her covers, she padded back down the hall. Taking one detour by the kitchen for a spoon, and she collapsed on the couch next to Mel, reaching over and taking a big spoonful of ice cream from the carton. The two of them sat in silence, eating ice cream and watching When Harry Met Sally.

"I got orange juice all over me," Charlie said suddenly. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mel's head snap to look at her, but she continued to stare forwards. There were only so many ways she could face it.

"Seriously," she continued, "it soaked through my pants and got all over me. And in the hospital the only thing I could think about was how annoying it was that I had gotten orange juice all over me when I tried to get him to stand up. Most people pray and that kind of crap, right? I didn't. I just kept thinking about how I'd have to spend hours covered in sticky orange juice before he woke up and I got to go home. It never even occurred to me that he'd actually die. That wasn't the deal." She paused for a moment, running a hand down her face. "You're right, I haven't cried since dad died. Still can't. And I think maybe I can't cry because I haven't forgiven him yet."

"Forgiven him for what?" Mel asked, her voice small.

"For dying." Charlie bit her lip, finally turning to face her aunt. "I love you. You know that, right?"

Mel's lips twitched with a smile that managed to be half-hearted and heartfelt. "I know, Charlie. I love you, too."

Mel wrapped her arm around Charlie's shoulders, and Charlie nestled into her side. Mel was warm
next to her, and the cold enveloping her began to thaw. Charlie settled her head on Mel's shoulder. A heartbeat thumped in her ear, slow, steady, and certain. Handing Charlie the ice cream carton, Mel pulled her chenille blanket so it covered Charlie as well and pressed a quick kiss to the top of her head. "You know," she mused, digging her spoon into the increasingly soupy ice cream, "every time I watch this movie I think to myself, this is it—this is the time I'll find Billy Crystal attractive. He's the romantic lead, I should find him attractive. But it just….never happens."


Chapter End Notes

Welp, this one was an emotional rollercoaster...I hope you enjoyed, and comments/reviews are always appreciated!

SOUNDTRACK

Charlie walks into an already hella awkward dinner party and meets aunt Kate.

~~~~~~~Eviction - The Slackers (love me some groovy tunes)

The dinner

~~~~~~~Absolute freaking silence because you guys need to steep in the awkward

Allison and Charlie hide in Allison's room and chat.

~~~~~~~Her Favorite Story - Birkwin Jersey

Charlie sits in the car after driving off from her apartment and calls Donald.

~~~~~~~Tourist - Clementine & The Galaxy

Arriving back at the apartment, Charlie walks up the stairs and settles next to Me.

~~~~~~~Juniper Arms - Adam Torres
What time was it?

Time had lost all semblance of meaning. Charlie glanced at the lock on the wall behind her. 7:32 p.m., a whopping six minutes since the last time she checked. The flow of time ran sluggishly, the river stagnant and polluted. Lives could be lived between minutes. She was stuck between seconds, clawing her way forward. The hands of the clock seemed to fight any progress, each tick sacrificed reluctantly.

7:32 p.m. on a Sunday. Charlie sat at the blocky, IKEA desk in her room, leaning over her notebook and gazing unseeingly at the page. 7:32 p.m. and she was already in her pajamas—a pair of blue sweatpants and an oversized Star Wars T-shirt. Her hair fell out of her bun in messy chunks, all traces of makeup scrubbed from her face. Hardly her most glamorous moment, but studying for Harris’s tests didn't usually invite a red carpet frame of mind. Charlie sighed heavily and tapped her pen against paper. Sixteen chemistry problems down, another thirty-two left before she worked through the text book's entire set. And she would probably still feel unprepared. There was no denying it—Mr. Harris was a dick.

Swearing loudly, Charlie slammed her book shut and chucked her pen on the desk, ignoring it as it rolled off the edge and clattered to the floor. Usually she could power through these things through sheer force of will, but today saw her restless. The ticking of the clock rang especially loud in her ears and the air in her lungs felt dry and stuffy. Her whole body rebelled against the idea of stillness, fingers drumming against every solid surface and knee constantly jumping up and down. This antsiness was probably born of the fact that she basically hadn't left the house since the disastrous Argent dinner. Being stuck behind closed doors had her skin itching, but she stayed put. For Mel.

That weekend had seen Charlie and Mel spending quite a bit of time together. In the short period that passed, a pattern had developed. Charlie would sleep in late, Mel's usual protests never voicing themselves. She'd pad into the kitchen to find the island covered with an artful selection of pastries from the nearby bakery, coffee in the pot, and a carafe of grapefruit juice. Orange juice was conspicuously absent from the spread. They would curl up and read their respective books and/or magazines. Perhaps play a board game. Lunch would pass, Charlie would make dinner, and the
evening would conclude with some romantically-inclined movie. Neither of them mentioned the confrontation—things said, yelled, or revealed.

For conversational purposes, the night of the Argent dinner ended as soon as they climbed into Mel's Prius on the way home. Charlie's outburst never happened. But on the broader spectrum of their interactions, the consequences were clear. It was, after all, the primary motivating factor behind their renewed attempts at aunt-niece bonding time. Each genuine smile couched an appraising gaze, one Oswin gauging the other's state of wellbeing.

Letting out a sigh, Charlie stooped to snatch up her pen. It rolled under her desk, forcing her to crawl and face several dust bunnies large enough to be beloved family pets. The light, acoustic guitar playing from her computer speakers was suddenly interrupted by the jangling ring of FaceTime. Charlie sat up suddenly, her head connecting with the hard edge of her desk. Swearing loudly, she scrambled up to her chair to find Donald's finger guns pointing at her, almost judgmentally.

"Hey, have you watched my game yet?"

Charlie blinked at the image that appeared on her screen. Instead of the usual post at his desk, Donald had opted for a more covert location, wedged in the tight space between his bed and the wall, haunted by his massive poster of The Fifth Element. The room was dark around him, his face illuminated exclusively by the dim glow of his laptop screen. The Blair Witch Project had better lighting. "Why are the lights out?" she demanded. "You know this isn't what they mean when they say 'dark web', right?"

"I won't dignify that pun by rolling my eyes at it," he muttered evasively, sparing a glance over his shoulder. "Have you had the chance to watch it or not? It may or may not have some bearing on my current circumstances."

The email notification appeared in her inbox earlier that morning, but had yet to be clicked, along with the rest of the weekend's messages that didn't come from her aunt. "Sorry, no," Charlie winced guiltily. "I haven't gotten a chance yet. Things with Mel are weird. We've been playing a lot of Jenga."

Donald opened his mouth to comment, but seemed to think better of it. "Okay, normally I'd ask you to elaborate on that, but I only have so much time to talk."

"Have you contracted a terminal illness?" Charlie asked.

"You could kinda put it that way," he muttered. "My social life is on its death bed. I got grounded."

Charlie rolled her eyes, head lolling on her shoulders. The new, secretive post now made all kinds of sense. After such a display of grade A idiocy, she'd hide from his mother too. "I take it Kevin the lobster of nightmares made his debut last night," she drawled. "What did I say—I said your mom would definitely find out and she would definitely kill you."

"Hey!" Donald protested. "Do not besmirch the plan. The plan was solid. I was only caught due to some unforeseeable, musical circumstances."

"You played 'Jump Around' by House of Pain, didn't you?"

Donald opened his mouth, only to close it once more. "Am I really that predictable?"

"Yes." His scoff of protest went unacknowledged. "When does your grounding start?"
Donald glanced up over his shoulder again, as if expecting some specter to swoop down and accuse him of wrongdoing. "Technically it started like as soon as the game ended. This call is an act of rebellion. I am making a stand—a brave one—against the institution of parenthood. Because it's about time these adults know that we're not to be fuc—"

"Donald?"

"SHIT!"

The door to Donald's room squeaked on its hinges and a sliver of yellow light hit the wall above his head. A switch flipped and brightness flooded the room. With a hiss, he burrowed further into the crevice between bed and wall to escape detection by any invading forces. Frustration echoed in the dull thud of plodding footsteps that approached, stopping at the edge of his bed.

"Donald!"

The two syllables that formed his name, when spoken by his mother, supported the weight of an immeasurable amount of exasperation. Donald let out a squawk as the laptop lifted into the air, his scandalized expression growing more distant as the computer withdrew. "Donald, what did I say? Computer for schoolwork only for the next week."

A swirl of bright colors that added up to Donald's room filled Charlie's eyes as the computer swung around. Finally, it settled on Donald's mother. Even at 10:37 p.m. on a Sunday her dark hair was pulled back into a neat, efficient bun, highlighting her stern, but kind eyes, smooth brown skin, and lips that, on occasion, pulled into a smile every bit as brilliant as Donald's. The T-shirt she wore—one from Jade's old elementary school—appeared to have been ironed, crisp and wrinkle-free. The woman was all precise corners, everything in its place. She had never shown anything but warmth, but Charlie still found herself mildly intimidated.

"Hi, Charlie. You're looking well."

"Hi, Captain Price, uh—thank you," Charlie stammered. "As are you. I mean, you always look well, but right now especially."

A distant groan filled the speakers. "Oh my God, you are such an ass kisser," Donald whined.

"Shut up!" Charlie snapped, heat flooding her cheeks.

Donald's mother let out a beleaguered sigh. "Charlie, I've told you a dozen times you can call me 'Diane'. And you'll have to excuse my son. Lately he's been too busy engaging in disruptive and irresponsible behavior and needs to focus on things like good judgement and impulse control."

Suddenly, Donald's face popped up behind his mother's shoulder. "Hey, that halftime performance was not an impulse!" he protested. "I worked really hard on that! It took time, commitment, planning, resources, choreography—"

"Really, that's the response that you're going with?" Captain Price scoffed. "That you put a lot of effort into your delinquency? That's supposed to comfort me?" In the background Donald rolled his eyes theatrically, and his mother's eyebrows shot up with the velocity of an F-18 fighter jet. Slowly, she turned her head to survey him. "Donald, you are aware that if the camera sees you I can see you, right? Now say a polite goodbye to Charlie and come do the dishes. It's your turn."

"Okay, I get it, I'm grounded," Donald conceded with a shrug than managed to express defeat and defiance in equal measures. "But what if Charlie needs me, hm? Do you really want me to be the kind of guy who bails on his friends in their time of need because he got grounded? That would be..."
punishing her for my mistakes—that doesn't seem fair. Not fair at all."

Captain Price turned back to Charlie, her dark brown eyes shining with both keen perceptiveness and a heavy dose of skepticism. "Charlie, are you in a time of need?"

Charlie opened and closed her mouth, words rushing forward only to pull back, like waves crashing on a beach. "I….ah….um…no," was the only response she could muster.

Donald threw his hands in the air in frustration. "Iago."

"Well I suppose that settles it." Captain Price placed the computer on the edge of the bed and retreated to the doorframe, pausing for one more moment. "Donald, you get two minutes, then come down to do the dishes."

"Okay, mom, that's great—byeee." Donald shut the door behind his mother, his head falling against it with a loud thump. A low, plaintive groan escaped him before he yanked his head from the surface and scrambled to his computer. His face sat so close to the camera her whole screen was filled exclusively by a set of highly judgemental eyes. "Come on, Oz, what is the deal! You just can't lie to her. What the holy hell?!"

"I—I don't know man," she spluttered. "I just don't want to let her down! She flies planes! She's like the coolest person I know."

The gigantic eyes blinked in disbelief. "Um, you know me."

"I took you into account."

"I'm not cooler than my mother?!!" His face pulled back just enough for her to add a derisively wrinkled nose to his set of features. "Ugh, you're useless," he sighed. "I'll see you in a week."

"But your mom said you have two minutes."

He withdrew a few more inches from the computer, revealing the full face of his disappointment. "You don't deserve those minutes."

"Okay, wow, harsh."

"Truth stings, Oz," he declared, the calculated grumpiness in his tone undercut by the jovial shrug of his shoulders. "And I've gotta do the dishes. We had lasagna and the sauce sticks to everything, so thanks for that."

"How is it my fault you guys had lasagna? And that you didn't soak the dishes—everybody knows to do that."

"Try not to miss me too much in your days of a Donald-less existence."

"But—"

"Coming, MOM!"

With no further concluding remarks, Donald grabbed the top of his laptop and pulled it shut. Charlie's own screen cut to black, leaving the conversation with a conclusion even less satisfying than the series finale of Lost. Huffing loudly, she scrambled for her cell phone, shooting him a "U suck" in retaliation. As she hit send, though, her failings as a friend, which Donald had been on the cusp of listing, were rendered slightly more pointed. The cause of this dull twinge of guilt? The
three unanswered text messages from Lydia that had arrived over the course of this gloomy Sunday.

4:14 p.m.: Are u dead?

5:13 p.m.: I understand aunt-niece bonding but STOP BEING A HERMIT

6:33 p.m.: um...HELLO?

If any one particular person suffered from Charlie and Mel's new pattern, it was neither Mel nor Charlie. It was Lydia. One Oswin family crisis had utterly obliterated all drafts of her weekend plans. Friday night movie? Cancelled. Saturday shopping trip? A no-go. Sunday brunch? Charlie was unavailable. With each invitation declined, Lydia leveled up in both anger and disappointment. Such negative emotions found some relief, however, through passive-aggressive Instagram tagging and regular phone calls to inform Charlie exactly how much fun she wasn't having. And, low and behold, just as Charlie opened Lydia's message to respond, 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' began blasting from her phone.

With a sigh, Charlie hit 'send' and pressed the phone to her ear. "No," she immediately declared into the receiver.

"That's how you answer the phone?" Lydia's voice crackled from the other side. "No wonder you don't have a boyfriend yet."

"I'm not going out with you tonight, Lydia," Charlie said, ignoring the jab. "I told you I couldn't do anything this weekend. I've got dinner with Mel and I have to study for Friday's chemistry test. I'm up to my ovaries in those molar ratio problems Harris gave us right now."

"You know those problems are optional, right?" Lydia drawled out. "As in you don't have to do them. As in you're wasting your time. You've got an A in the class anyway!"

"This shit doesn't come easy for me—I'm getting an A because I'm doing to optional problems," Charlie replied dryly. "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration, and I'm really sweating chemistry right now, so—"

"Jesus, Chuck," Jackson's voice chimed in. "You're even nerdy when you're talking about how much of a nerd you are."

The scratching of Charlie's pen against paper paused, her hackles rising at the sound of Jackson's sneer. "Lydia," she bit out carefully. "Am I on speaker phone?"

"Yup," Lydia chirped. "And don't worry about me trying to make you have fun. You're free to stay in your room and do homework like a creepy hermit with no life. I was just calling to see if you were alive and hadn't been eaten by your future cats who will soon be your only friends while Jackson gets his ass in the store and rents us a copy of The Notebook."

"Oh, no, no, no," Jackson interjected, abject terror standing in for his usual contempt. "No, Lydia, I told you already, Hoosiers—"

"Ooh, I love that movie," Charlie murmured absently.

"See!" Jackson spluttered. "Even Chuck likes it."

"Well, Charlie isn't here, is she?" Lydia bit out sarcastically. "She's too busy being boring."
"Who cares about her!" Jackson countered. "Hoosiers is not only the best basketball movie ever, it's the best sports movie ever made."

"No," Lydia replied simply.

"It's got Gene Hackman and Dennis Hopper," he insisted, his voice thin and ready to snap like a rubber band pulled too tight.

"No."

"Lydia, I swear to God you're going to like it!"

"No."

Not much imagination was required to conjure up an image of Jackson's face. He directed his constipated 'bitch face' her way with enough frequency she could freehand an oil painting from memory. "I am not watching The Notebook again!"

During the dead silence that followed, Charlie could have whipped up a second oil painting, this one featuring Lydia's patented 'scolding' expression. Jackson's lip curled with derision, her serene, yet demanding smile—she could hang them on the wall of a museum, two pieces of Renaissance-era artwork, steeped in romantic discord and glowering at each other till the end of time. "Did you guys call me because you need some sort of relationship counselor?" Charlie demanded in an arch tone. "Because I charge $120 an hour. Sorting out your problems...I don't have that kind of time and you don't have that kind of money."

"Shut up, Chuck," Jackson spat. His incoherent grumbling graduated to colorful swears which only silenced with the slamming of a car door. Charlie shoved a fist in her mouth to fight back the laughter. Had she more energy, she might have tried to pity Jackson. In the time she had known him, Lydia had demanded at least six viewings of The Notebook. He didn't have the luxury of ducking for cover like she did. Yes, she could pity Jackson. But laughing at him provided so much more satisfaction. Schadenfreude.

Charlie let out a wide yawn and idly twirled her hair. "So where do you keep his balls?" she mused. "Do you carry them around in your purse or did you have them bronzed and set on your mantle at home?"

"I like his balls just fine where they are," Lydia replied. "They're not of much use elsewhere."


"Has anybody ever told you that you're a bit repressed?" Lydia scolded. "Boys have balls. And vas deferens. And penises. I mean, you wouldn't know it from personal experience, but you must have taken a class by now."

"I'm not repressed," Charlie shot back. "It's just like I told you earlier. I prefer to think of Jackson as a Ken doll without the ability to perpetuate himself in the gene pool."

"You steered to conversation towards my boyfriend's balls. If you don't want to go down that road, then don't take the exit." Her words reached Charlie on a lag, slow, choppy, and interspersed with the telltale snap of a camera shutter going off. Charlie pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. "Lydia, are you taking selfies right now?"

"Um, yeah," she replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.
Charlie heaved a sigh and scratched absently at her forehead. "Why are you taking selfies?"

"Do I need a reason to take pride in my appearance?" Lydia bristled. "Is there something wrong with appreciating myself?"

"Nooooooo," Charlie grumbled. "Nice to have your full attention, though."

"Please, it's called multitasking. You know, the thing where you're capable of doing more than one thing at a time. Like getting your schoolwork done and hanging out with your magnificently awesome best friend in the whole world." There was a short pause followed by the snap of another photo. "I miss you," she whined. "I haven't seen you outside of school all week. It's ridiculous. Ditch Mel and the chemistry and come watch The Notebook with us. My mom's in L.A. for the weekend—she won't be back till tomorrow. We have the whole house."

"I thought you weren't going to try and make me have fun."

"Well sue me for not wanting you to turn into one of the agoraphobic chicks from Grey Gardens," Lydia retorted, snapping another picture. "Seriously, blow off chemistry. You've got one of the highest grades in the class."

"Again, that's because I study my ass off," Charlie grunted. "Not all of us have a freaking encyclopedia in our brains. Some of us have to work for it."

Charlie waited for Lydia's next snappy comeback lamenting her lack of social life or railing against her wardrobe, but it never arrived. This, on its own, was no cause for alarm—Lydia had long since weaponized 'the silent treatment'—but the shutter of her camera had fallen silent as well. "Lydia?"

Three noises happened at once, sudden, chilling, and echoing together as a violent cacophony in Charlie's skull. Prying them apart, she discovered the shattering of glass, a piercing scream, and a deep, animalistic rumble. Charlie's intestines writhed inside her like a bag of snakes, encircling her organs and choking her from within. "Lydia?!" she cried into the phone, her voice cracking with fear. "Lydia, answer me! Lydia!"

The only sound more harrowing than what had just filled her ears was the silence that followed. The line went dead. Charlie stared at the phone in the palm of her hand, her thoughts racing at a million miles a minute. Panic and adrenaline flooded her veins, setting her nerve endings alight. Her mind was on fire as her body remained frozen. Fight or flight? She did neither. Shit, shit, shit, shit. What was she supposed to do? Help. She was supposed to help. How was she supposed to help?

Without thinking, Charlie grabbed her blue Converse from below her bed, pulling them over her bare toes. Sockless and with shoes unlaced, she snatched up her messenger bag and tripped out of her bedroom. The hallway, clear though it may have been, became an obstacle course to her stumbling feet. Charlie careened towards the front door only to be waylaid at the kitchen. Mel stepped into view, bowl and drying cloth in hand.

"Charlie?" she demanded, eyebrows drawn together in concern. "Charlie, is everything alright?"

"Y—yeah," Charlie managed to stammer, eyes flicking to the front door. Her sudden urge to disappear into the night required an explanation. Mel was a trusting guardian, but she took her duties seriously and allowing to Charlie to drive off to what at that point may very well be a crime scene was not a likely turn of events. And that was exactly what Charlie intended to do. Hence, lying. "Yeah, everything's fine," Charlie continued, keeping the panic in her tone to a minimum. "I just got off the phone with Lydia. She wants me to come over to her place. She and Jackson had a
fight and she wants to watch The Notebook, eat chocolate, and complain loudly about him. You know me—bagging on Jackson is one of my favorite extracurricular activities."

"Yes, and you excel at it," Mel replied with a sage nod.

Charlie released an awkward chuckle and bounced up and down on her feet with impatience. "That I do. That...I most certainly do."

Mel's eyebrows drew closer together and her lips twitched. Each and every one of her facial features appeared equally baffled by Charlie's jumpiness. "Have you finished your chemistry work yet? You said you were nervous about that test."


"Okay, then," Mel drawled, eyeing Charlie curiously. "I guess you can go. But be sure to be back by 10:30. The police still haven't lifted the curfew and I don't like the idea of you being on the roads late. And parent-teacher conferences are tomorrow and I need as many positive academic vibes as possible in this house."

"Yes. I'll be back by 10:30—absolutely."

"Alright," Mel replied, her tone still uncertain. "Drive safe."

Charlie's nervous chuckle graduated to uncomfortable laughter. Providing Mel with a salute, she slid past her aunt and darted down the length of the hallway to grapple with the door handle. Each step down the stairs felt like a fall, her stomach lurching with dread. Finally reaching her car, she chucked her bag in the passenger's seat, and practically threw herself in before revving the engine and taking off down the street. As she hit the vacant highway, she leaned over, rummaging around in her bag till her fingers found her phone. Her fingers trembled as they found the numbers 9-1-1.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

The unfamiliar voice possessed a cheerful lilt that had no business being on the answering end of an emergency call. Using her shoulder to keep the phone propped up to her ear, Charlie reached down to shift the car to a higher gear. "H—hello," she stammered into the receiver. "I'd like to report an attack at Video 2 C on Spruce Street. You need to get someone out there right now. I mean immediately."

"Slow down, ma'am," the inappropriately chipper voice replied. "What is the nature of the attack?"

"What is the nature of the attack?—I don't know the freaking nature of the attack! I just know that you need to get someone down there now!"

"Miss," the woman said in a placating tone, "miss I'm going to have to ask you to calm down and explain calmly to me wh—"

"I'm not going to be freaking calm!" Charlie shouted.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to lower your voice."

Charlie's heart hammered against her lungs. Each breath she took shuddered. "All I know is that I was on the phone with my friend who was renting a video. There was a big crash, she screamed, and—Just get somebody over there! Please!"
"Alright," the woman replied calmly. "Alright, just stay on the line as I dispatch someone to that location."

With a loud click, the woman left Charlie with the station's 'on hold' music playing in her ears. It was 'I Shot The Sheriff' by Bob Marley. "You've got to be freaking kidding me," she muttered. After an eternity of that song, she heard the click of the line engaging again. "Miss, I'm being told that officers are already on the scene. We've received multiple reports from that area."

"Can—can you tell me what happened?" Charlie demanded. "Do you know if my friends are okay? Can you—"

"I'm afraid that's all the information I have at this time. Now if you'll just remain ca—"

"Fuck that."

Charlie abruptly hit the 'end call' button and quickly punched in Lydia's number. The phone rang. And rang. And rang. No answer. Swearing loudly, she tossed her phone aside and pressed harder on the accelerator.

Twenty minutes. For some reason to get anywhere in Beacon Hills required twenty minutes, regardless of the reading on the speedometer. Roads seemed to stretch and lengthen as she drove them, the rumble of her car engine a hollow laugh in the face of a cruel joke. By the time Charlie arrived at the parking lot, a small crowd had gathered before it. The typically dingy storefront was now decorated by yellow tape and flashing lights. And an ambulance.

Charlie flew into the parking lot with more speed than advisable given the number of police officers and pedestrians present. She slammed on the brakes and skidded to a halt, tires screeching as they left tracks of black rubber behind them. Her car found a strange angle, diagonally stretched over three separate parking spots. She violently threw the gear shift into park and clambered out, not bothering to lock the doors before sprinting towards the building. Hurtling forwards, she shoved her way through the group of onlookers, using her elbows to carve herself a path. As she neared the storefront, she craned her neck for a better view.

The video store appeared completely vacant—more so than usual, even for a Sunday night. The front window had been completely shattered, shards of glass projecting a good ten to fifteen feet into the lot, some of the pieces resting on Lydia's shiny Beetle parked out front. A tiny voice in her mind pointed out that whatever had caused the commotion broke out of the store rather than in, but the sight of Lydia's empty car pushed the observation to the deepest recesses of her mind. Her eyes slid across the scene, searching, until they fell on the ambulance.

Lydia was perched on the bumper, head bowed and knees drawn close to her chest. Without her heels the girl probably wouldn't be permitted to ride most roller coasters, but Charlie had never seen her look so small. Jackson stood next to her, his hand clutched in hers as they spoke with the policemen and paramedics milling about them. Charlie released a breath, expelling all the air from her lungs and leaning over at the waist. She gulped down more air, slowly reinflating herself until her breathing returned to normal. The wave of relief nearly knocked her to the ground, but her heart slowed and the blinding panic dulled from a piercing stab to a faint ache.

They were okay. Perhaps traumatized, but physically okay.

Charlie took another step towards the store, breaking the invisible line formed by the onlookers. Two steps in and a khaki uniform blocked her path. "I'm sorry, ma'am," the man declared, holding out an arm. "I can't allow you past this point."
"What?" Charlie asked, blinking stupidly. "No, you can't, I have to—those are my friends. I need to make sure they're okay."

"I'm sure they'll be fine," he replied, a vaguely sarcastic, know-all tone filling his voice. He smiled wanly down at her, like he was instructing a small, confused child. "The EMTs have checked them out and there won't be any lasting damage. Right now we need to take their statements and get this mess sorted. It shouldn't be too much longer."

Letting out a huff, Charlie retreated back into the line of onlookers. Jesus, she was cold. In her rush to get out of the apartment she hadn't had the foresight to bring a jacket. And, as it turned out, she would have to stand in the cold for a very long time. As it turned out, that deputy was a liar. She stood at the fringes for at least an hour. More and more cars arrived, the crowd of curious citizens swelled in size. Each inquiry she made was swiftly shot down by the deputy, usually accompanied by a smug smirk. With each dismissal, her anger dial ticked upwards. Perhaps the rage bubbling in her veins wasn't justified, but the residual adrenaline when coupled with extreme punchability of the deputy's square jaw had her teetering on the edge of something drastic. Charlie pushed her way forward once more, only to be stopped by the same deputy. "Listen here, Dudley Do-Right," she growled under her breath. "I know you're just doing your job, and under normal circumstances I would respect that, but that's my friend over there, and if you think—"

Her rant, which in all likelihood could earn her a 24-hour hold in lockup, was cut short by a familiar and highly confused voice. "Charlie?"

Her head snapped around to see Stiles in the passenger seat of a nearby police cruiser. He scrambled over the console to the driver's side and rolled the window down the rest of the way so he could hang out of the car, his entire torso sticking out the window. "It's okay, Sean," he said, waving his hand at the deputy currently pouting at her. "She's with me."

Sean let out a loud snort and raised his eyebrows skeptically. "Is that supposed to mean something?"

Stiles opened and closed his mouth a few times and jerked his head to the side. "Well…yeah."

Deputy Sean's eyes flashed angrily, but he took a step back. "Stay behind the line. Both of you." He shot them one more warning look, gesturing between his eyes and theirs, before turning back and stalking towards the store. Stiles glowered at his back, miming bickering after him before facing Charlie. He looked her up and down, a question mark written into the lines of his face. It was only then that she remembered she was essentially wearing her pajamas—that giant, ratty old Star Wars shirt and sweatpants—with no makeup and hair falling out of a bun whose structural integrity was completely dependent on a Bic pen.

"Are you okay, Charlie?" he asked, opening the door and climbing out of the car. He glanced over her shoulder and his forehead wrinkled. Charlie followed his plane of vision and was confronted with her spectacularly abysmal parking job, complete with the skid marks leading to it. Stiles cleared his throat and scratched at the back of his neck. "You know, I'm pretty sure you can get ticketed for that."

Charlie let out a nervous laugh and pulled the pen out of her hair, letting it spill down to her shoulders and shaking it out, ignoring the highlighter that clattered to the ground as well. Stiles cleared his throat once more and planted his hands on his hips. "So what are you doing here?"

"I felt a sudden urge to catch up on Breaking Bad," Charlie drawled. She pushed herself up to her tiptoes, peering over Stiles's head at the commotion behind. Jackson was speaking with Sheriff Stilinski. Even at this distance the anger behind his eyes was visible. He was about to blow. Her
view was obstructed, though, as Stiles snapped his fingers in front of her face.

"Earth to Charlie," he sang out. "Seriously, what happened?"

Charlie's eyes shifted back to his face, fixing him with a withering gaze. "It doesn't feel good when people are withholding, does it?"

"Just tell me what happened!" Stiles practically exploded. He retreated immediately, slapping a hand over his mouth. "You know, if you want to, I mean. No pressure. But whatever it is, you're going to have to tell the cops and my dad is just going to end up telling me anyway. So, you know, you might as well just tell me now."

"Are you kidding—I've met your dad," Charlie shot back. "He's not going to tell you a damn thing. Not on an open investigation." His crestfallen expression was enough to verify her claim. And Charlie contemplated leaving it at that. With Stiles's extensive secrecy, payback wouldn't be unreasonable. But all of his twitching could potentially be a lead-in to a stress-induced seizure. So she caved. "I was on the phone with Lydia," she sighed. "She was forcing Jackson to watch The Notebook and trying to drag me into that hell-hole with them. We were talking, I heard a crash, she screamed, the line went dead—"

"Did you hear anything else?" Stiles interrupted.

Charlie's lips twitched into a frown. "Hear anything else like what?"

"L—like a growl. Like a mountain lion growl. Or roar. Or anything else like that."

Charlie thought back to that preternatural, echoing rumble. It didn't belong to a mountain lion. To answer Stiles in the negative walked the line between truth and lie. "No," she replied with a shake of her head. The non-truth was worth the look of relief that crossed Stiles's face. Another data point to throw on the ever growing pile of Stiles/Scott/Derek-related secrecy. "No, it's like I said," she continued. "The call cut off and I came straight here."

"So what you're saying," he declared, waving his hand in her direction, "what you're saying is that you hear a violent, scary attack and your first instinct is to what? Hop in the car and drive towards the danger? Because that sounds like a great idea."

"I called the cops on the way here," she shrugged.

Stiles shook his head and let out a grunt—a grunt she was fairly certain concealed the word 'stupid'. Charlie frowned and punched him in the shoulder. A strangled yelp split the air and Stiles grabbed at the point where she hit him. "That's too hard!"

"What the hell was I supposed to do, huh, Stiles?" she demanded. "Was I supposed to just sit there and wonder if Lydia was okay? She wasn't answering her phone—she could be bleeding out for all I knew! So yeah, Stiles, I hopped in the car and drove straight towards the danger! In the middle of the night, in my pajamas! Do you have a problem with that?!"

"Those are your pajamas?" he asked, looking her up and down again.

Charlie clenched her jaw and folded her arms across her chest. "Stiles! Focus here. I asked you if you had a problem with that, and there's only one acceptable answer."

"Nope," he answered, shaking his head fervently. "Nope, no problem here. Completely problemless zone. It's actually pretty cool that you would—I mean what I'm saying is that not a lot of"
people would—" He wrinkled his nose, shying away from her. "You're not going to hit me again, are you?"

"That depends," Charlie muttered darkly. "Are you going to keep saying stupid things?"

"Probably, yes," he nodded. "Odds of that are high."

Charlie glowered in return, but her lips reluctantly twitched into a faint smile. "Well, I'll do the best to contain myself."

Stiles blew out a breath and shrugged. "You can try. The ladies always seem to have trouble containing themselves around me—it's a problem." Charlie stared at him for a moment before a loud snort forced its way out of her nose. Stiles pressed his lips together in a resigned smile and nodded. "Okay, okay, we get it. You don't have to laugh that hard."

Coughing a few times, Charlie slapped her hand over her mouth. "Sorry."

"Yeah, right."

"It's just when you said you were going to keep saying stupid shit, I didn't think you'd keep your promise that quickly."

"Thanks for that. That makes me feel awesome about myself."

Charlie shivered and wrapped her arms around her waist to guard herself from the cold. Stiles blinked in something like realization before shrugging out of his jacket. Charlie, suddenly aware of what he was doing held up a hand. "You really don't have to do that."

"Please," Stiles scoffed. "You're freezing your ass off. Plus we get to reinforce some gender stereotypes, and that's always fun." He held out his jacket. When she didn't take it, he began shaking it in front of her face. "Seriously, Charlie? Are you really going to get frostbitten because it would violate your delicate feminist principles? We can sweater swap on Monday if it makes you feel better."

Charlie gritted her teeth, actively fighting a smile as she snatched the jacket from him. "There you go," Stiles said, gesturing at her as she pulled it over her shoulders. "Was that so difficult?"

"I smell like curly fries."

"You're welcome."

Charlie shoved her hands in the pockets and bounced up and down on her heels. "Thank you."

Stiles faced the crime scene, leaning on the police cruiser, and gestured for Charlie to stand next to him. She rested her arms on the hood of the car, her elbow barely touching Stiles's, laced her fingers together, and rested her chin on her hands. Her eyes roved around the scene for what felt like the millionth time in an attempt to conjure some picture of the events from the three or four remaining puzzle pieces. The window had shattered outwards, not inwards, meaning it wasn't a break-in—something had hurled itself out. The store's interior was largely obscured by policemen, but her straining eyes observed a mess—shelves overturned, videos strewn everywhere. Her tentative conclusion: another animal attack.

Stiles did the same as her, observing in silence, but his fingers tapped frantically against the metal of the car. "Would you stop that?" she muttered, grasping his hand to still it. "I'm trying to concentrate here, and your twitching is kind of making me want to tear my hair out." The moment
her hand touched his, he stopped moving, jolting in response. The questioning look he shot her inspired a swoop of guilt. That had been a little harsh. Sighing heavily, Charlie twisted around to face him as she offered an apology. "I'm sorry. I've had a kind of a stressful evening. Studying for chemistry was bad enough, but thinking that Lydia might be dead for a solid twenty minutes didn't really help restore my chi or whatever."

Stiles bobbed his head in understanding. "That's okay. After a phone call like that you're entitled to freak out."

"I did not freak out," Charlie muttered back. "I exhibited rational concern."


"No, I didn't."

His eyebrows adopted a skeptical arch. "You looked like you were about to punch Sean in the face," he deadpanned, jerking a thumb in the deputy's direction.

"Yeah," Charlie shamelessly agreed. "Because he was being an ass."

"Hey!" another disembodied male voice shouted. "I heard that!"

"Well then let it be a lesson on how you present yourself to other people, Sean!" Stiles shouted back before turning to Charlie. "So you think punching someone in the face constitutes a 'rational response'," he said using air quotes.

Charlie crossed her arms defensively and shrugged. "Depends on the context. And how annoying that person's face is."

Stiles shrugged and made a strange face at her. "There was a little bit of freaking," he insisted, holding up his thumb and forefinger to indicate.

"There was no freaking!"

"You're freaking out right now."

Charlie opened her mouth to retort, but thought better of it. Instead, she turned to the crime scene once more, focusing not on the destruction, but on the girl curled up in the ambulance. Physically Lydia looked fine, but the psychological aftershocks were written on her face as plain as day. Jackson's obnoxious shouting was doing nothing to restore her state of mind. As headstrong as she was, Lydia didn't cope well with trauma. Her picture of the world was clear and constant. Having it altered or questioned spelled nothing but negatives. Stiles, apparently noting Charlie's own internal turmoil, wrapped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a one-armed hug. "Hey, Charlie, it's okay. Lydia's fine, you're fine, Jackson's fine. Everybody's f——"

The words dropped from his lips like lead as a pair of paramedics wheeled a gurney out of the video store. On it rested a lumpy load covered by a single white sheet. Charlie wrapped her arms around her waist once more, Stiles's jacket being unable to protect her from this brand of cold. Bungee cords were strapped near the top and bottom of the gurney, revealing two distinct bulges. Anybody paying the minutest amount of attention would identify them as the head and feet. And if there were any doubts to be had, they were dispelled as the paramedics pushing the gurney hit a bump. Jarred loose by the impact, a limp arm fell from beneath the sheet. Even under the red glow of the store's neon sign the fingers had a grey, bloodless hue. Charlie swore loudly and glanced at Stiles whose arm had dropped from her shoulder. "You were saying?" she muttered.
Stiles, the master of subtlety that he was, gaped at the gurney. "Oh, whoa, is that a dead body?" he shouted. A low, worried murmur washed through the crowd of onlookers and Sheriff Stilinski looked to his son, his face a mask of sheer, unadulterated exasperation. Stiles, realizing his error, shrank sheepishly behind the car. Meanwhile, Jackson caught sight of Charlie and frantically waved her over.

"Chuck!" he shouted bitterly. "Chuck, get over here!"

Charlie frowned and glanced to the sheriff for confirmation. With a defeated sigh, the man stepped forwards and lifted the line of yellow police tape, gesturing for her to duck under. Charlie whispered a quiet 'goodbye' to Stiles and pushed through the line of deputies, knocking a little harder into Deputy Sean than was probably necessary.

"Fantastic," Jackson spat bitterly as she approached. "Oswin, your dad was a member of the lower middle class, right? Can you please translate so this mall cop can understand what I'm trying to tell him? I. Want. To. Go. Home. Get that through your freaking skull!"

Charlie couldn't help the involuntary sneer that pulled at her lip as he shouted at the sheriff. "Jackson, if you don't stop yelling I'm going to shove my foot so far up your ass you'll be chewing the remnants of the gum that's been stuck there since last Tuesday," she said in a calm, even tone.

Charlie moved towards Lydia, grabbing one of her cold hands and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Lydia, how are you doing?" she asked quietly.

"I'm fine. They said I'm fine."

Charlie wasn't even close to believing her. She gave Lydia's hand one more squeeze before turning to the sheriff. "Charlie," he said quietly, nodding in greeting. "What are you doing here?"

"I was on the phone with Lydia when that happened," she said, pointing at Lydia's Beetle. "She wasn't answering her phone after, so I came to see if she and the walking, talking tub of hair gel standing next to me were okay."

"Her phone is in the car," Jackson spat. "Both of ours are. If they weren't I would have called someone to get us away from this carnival of incompetence we call a police department."

Both Charlie and Sheriff Stilinski ignored Jackson's exclamation. "So you heard the attack?" the sheriff asked, flipping open his notebook and poising his pen to write. "Is there anything you can share with us that might help? Miss Martin hasn't really been able to tell us anything."

Charlie glanced over her shoulder at Lydia, who was still grasping her hand. All boldness and self-assurance had fled, leaving behind a quiet, scared little girl staring forward with unseeing eyes. She had never before looked so much like an actual sixteen-year-old.

"No," Charlie answered quickly, shaking her head. "I really wish there was something. One second we were talking, then there was a crash and a scream and the line went dead. I can get you a pretty exact time of the...incident...but beyond that I don't think i'm going to be much help. I'm sorry."

Sheriff Stilinski nodded slowly, unable to hide his slight disappointment. "Well, if there's anything else you can think of—"

"Great!" Jackson snapped. "Now that you've harassed all of us, can we go?"

"The EMTs still say that you might have a concussion," the sheriff responded in a carefully moderated tone. "You can't drive home until—"
"I've already gone through all the bullshit procedures," Jackson growled. "The flashlight in my eyes probably gave me cataracts. 'What's your name', 'what year is it', 'who's the president'? Now the only question left is whether or not I need to call my father—who is a lawyer—to get me out of this hellhole!"

"I can drive them home," Charlie suggested, making Jackson and the sheriff face her. "I mean, if that's the only issue here, I can drive both him and Lydia home. I've got my car over there—" She gestured in the direction of her Impala. Sheriff Stilinski raised his eyebrows at the parking job and she just shrugged her shoulders unremorsefully. "I was in a hurry. Anyways, I can take them both home and swing by to pick up Lydia's Beetle tomorrow when the crime scene is all cleared out."

Sheriff Stilinski scratched at his jaw absently in consideration before nodding. "Okay," he mumbled. "Okay. Leaving the car where it is might give us a better idea of how this all happened anyway. Some glass fragments seem to have landed on the windshield."

Within fifteen minutes, Charlie, Jackson, and Lydia had all loaded into the Impala and were rattling down the road. Jackson had taken the front seat, as it was best positioned for an unnecessary rant regarding the incompetence of the Beacon Hills police department. Lydia sat in the back, still quiet. Eventually Jackson ran out of synonyms for the word 'idiot' and fell into a brooding silence. This brand of brooding, though, was not of his typical variety. More pensive than pissed off, it was the form his face took on the rare occasions that he thought seriously on a topic. Or when he glowered at the back of Scott McCall's head.

"What happened in there?" Charlie asked, glancing between him and the road.

"It was an animal attack," he shrugged. "What else could it be?"

"You know what I mean, Jackson," Charlie murmured seriously. "I mean specifically. What happened in that store?"

Jackson's eyes began to twitch, darting back and forth like he was speed-reading a book. This was his tell. He was trying to seek out a plausible lie. "Fine, Chuck," he growled. "I walk into the store and find the clerk guy with his throat ripped out. The lights went out, something growled. I hid behind some shelves, it pushed the shelves onto me, and then it jumped out the freaking window. Story over."

"That's it?" Charlie asked in disbelief. "You didn't see the animal?"

"You mean the mountain lion?" Jackson spat back. "No, I didn't see it. I was working pretty damn hard to make sure it didn't see me! Also, did you miss the part where I said the lights went out?"

"Can we talk about something else, please?" Lydia's voice interrupted from the back seat. Both Jackson and Charlie immediately stopped talking. Jackson twisted in his seat to observe Lydia while Charlie studied her in the rearview mirror. Her eyes were still hollow, but her face was no longer set in a hardened mask of fear. It had relaxed into an expression of indifference, a change that didn't comfort Charlie in the slightest. "Well?" she demanded, raising her eyebrows expectantly.

Charlie blinked in confusion. "Well what?"

"Put on some music," Lydia replied abruptly. "And make sure it has a beat. I don't want to listen to any of your emo, acoustic stuff right now."

For the rest of the car ride, the radio replaced conversation. They finished the trip in silence,
Charlie watching the road, Lydia staring absently out the window, and Jackson inexplicably rubbing the back of his neck, right behind the collar of his designer jacket. But regardless of the stillness and the silence, an unnamed tension filled the car. Charlie could feel it against her skin, crackling like static electricity. One wrong move could bring a violent shock.

Charlie dropped Jackson off first, but not before he and Lydia shared long, passionate, saliva-filled kiss. Not that Charlie could blame either of them. It was a 'thank God we're alive kiss', which could apparently get pretty intense. So she just sat quietly, feeling a bit like a voyeuristic creeper, while they chewed each other's faces off in celebration for not being eaten alive. Eventually Lydia slid into the front seat and they made their way home.

As she pulled up on their block, Charlie turned the music off but let the engine idle. The lights of Lydia's house were off and the driveway was empty. It was the third night that week that Mrs. Martin had been conspicuously absent from the house. For such a big, beautiful house, it always seemed empty. Lydia stared at the exterior, her eyes filled with hesitation.

"Your mom is out of town tonight," Charlie stated simply.

"Yep," Lydia replied, popping the 'p'. "Big surprise there."

"Haven't the cops called her? She hasn't called you yet?"

Lydia shrugged and flicked her hair over her shoulder. "She's at some benefit in L.A. tonight. They're saving the wetlands or something. The event is on a boat. Somehow the irony of pumping pollutants into the water while saving sea turtles is lost on them. It should come with a nice gift bag, and probably no cell service."

Comfort didn't come naturally to Charlie. She used so many words so much of the time one might expect she could arrange them into some suitable configuration, but now those traitorous words hid from her. Forcing herself to open up was challenge enough. Getting someone else to open up to her? Complete freaking mystery. She glanced at the clock. It read 9:26pm. "Hey, do you want to hang for a while?" she asked. "My curfew isn't up for another hour."

"Sure," Lydia sighed. "Why not?"

Lydia's walk to her front door was lethargic, her characteristic strut nowhere to be seen. A wearied scrape of heels against asphalt replaced that confident strut. Charlie followed at a distance. Standing too close, too far, give Lydia space, hug her till her eyes popped out like one of those stress balls—the protocol had yet to be determined. Entering the Martin house, their footsteps began to echo. When it wasn't overflowing with party guests, the building felt hollow. "Home sweet home," Lydia muttered, flipping the light switch on. Leaning down, she removed her shoes and padded her way up the stairs, stilettos hooked over her fingers. "I'm going to go get changed, seeing as you've already decided tonight's dress code is 'elastic waistband' casual. That jacket is exceptionally terrible, by the way. I hope it's not new."

"Mom's got leftover hors d'oeuvres in the fridge. That usually adds up to dinner."

Charlie wondered if she should follow Lydia. Would her presence be welcome? Would she be prying? Reluctantly, she stepped away from the stairwell banister and moved to kitchen. The room
was beautiful, built more for form than function. All the appliances had the gleam of twice-used stainless steel. Charlie yanked open the refrigerator door to observe the contents. Mama Martin's hors d'oeuvres, as expected, came in portion sizes that could viably feed a mouse or creatures of similar size. After a thorough search of the kitchen, she managed to amass one onion, an unopened bottle of balsamic vinegar shockingly close to its expiration date, penne pasta, and some type of cheese that cost $38 per pound. It would do.

By the time Lydia made it back down the stairs, the kitchen was filled with the sound of boiling water and the scent of sauteed onions. She floated into the room clothed in a lace-laden nightgown and wrapped in a pink satin robe, holding two insanely full glasses of what looked to be her mom's favorite chardonnay. "Um, Lydia," Charlie mumbled, waving her stirring spoon at the wine. "What's this?"

"It's girls' night in," Lydia replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Here you go," she declared, waving a hand absently. "I'll clean it up later."

The shift in Lydia's behavior could only be described as radical. Charlie placed her wine glass on the counter and studied Lydia's face. Any hint of distress had fled her features, leaving behind a placid serenity and hugely dilated pupils. Her eyes held all the innocence of a cartoon cat, which usually meant one thing. Drugs. "I thought 'girls' night in' meant a crapload of ice cream and complaining about guys."

"A light, musical laugh burst forth from Lydia's mouth. "Don't be silly, Charlie. This is the suburbs. We don't have ice cream. We have Xanax."

"Xanax?" Charlie repeated.

"Yeah," Lydia nodded enthusiastically. Reaching into the pocket of her robe, she extracted a small orange bottle and twiddled it between her fingers. The pills inside rattled like maracas. "The desperate housewives like dear old mommy pop them like tic-tac's. I found this in her underwear drawer. How cliché is that?"

"Super-cliché," Charlie said carefully, taking the bottle away from Lydia. "Let's put that back, shall we?"

Lydia released the pills with no objection, but took a long sip from her glass. "So what are we eating? I think there was some caviar left over."

"Fancy mac n' cheese," Charlie replied. "Emphasis on the cheese. And carmelized onions."

"Oh my God, mac n' cheese," Lydia gushed. "I used to love mac n' cheese so much. Do you have animal shapes?"

"Uh...no..." Charlie mumbled. "No, we don't have animal shapes."

Lydia stuck her lower lip out in a pout and hopped up, perching on the edge of the counter. She kicked her feet back and forth like a child, but her hand never strayed far from her wine glass. Charlie kept an eye on her as she strained the pasta. Every bit of her cried out to ask Lydia about the attack—about why she felt the sudden urge to pop xanax and drink wine—but Lydia's peace of mind would not be the sacrificial lamb on the altar of her curiosity. She forced those instincts down, packed them away. Instead she monitored Lydia, ensuring the girl wasn't too far gone.

With a bowl of mac n' cheese in hand, Lydia finally relinquished her wine for a moment. Charlie
subtly pulled it away from her, tipping some of its contents into the sink. The move proved futile as Lydia produced the bottle and topped off the glass. "You're not a terrible cook, you know that," Lydia giggled. She abandoned her post on the counter, wobbling slightly as she moved to the stool at the family breakfast bar. "I've had worse meals."

"I'd credit the $38 cheese over my ability to boil pasta," Charlie smirked.

Lydia giggled, only to interrupt herself with a hiccup. Her hands clapped to her mouth, those dainty, uncalloused fingers pressed to her lips. Her eyes went wide and her lips trembled. A full-scale cackle burst forth from her mouth and she teetered on her stool. Charlie rushed forwards, planting a hand on her shoulder to steady her. Lydia looked up at Charlie, her eyes filled with an openness that sober Lydia never allowed. "You know," she declared, "I got so excited when pretty, stylish shop lady told me her niece was coming to stay with her. I was like…..finally somebody objectively cool to hang out with! So naturally when I saw you I was disappointed."

"Of course you were," Charlie nodded sagely. "Who wouldn't be?"

"Exactly," Lydia concurred. "That T-shirt you were wearing…it was bad. It was so bad. Oh my God, Charlie, you are so annoying. You have no idea how annoying you are. I'm getting forehead wrinkles from making faces at you."

"I have been reliably informed," Charlie replied. "You tell me how annoying I am pretty much on a daily basis."

Lydia nodded in agreement. "And you are. So annoying. Ugh, thank God you're here."

Charlie blinked in shock. "What?"

Lydia groaned and leaned back her her seat. Given that her stool had no seat back, Charlie darted behind her, again grasping both her shoulders to ensure the girl didn't topple over. "It was sooooo boring before you showed up," Lydia whined. "I mean you make me want to weep with tears of frustration constantly, but at least you can hold a conversation. I mean before you got here, who was I gonna talk to? Christine? Monica?" Lydia, wine glass in hand, gestured widely and more chardonnay decorated the floor. "I mean, what was I going to talk about with them?"

Charlie took Lydia's glass and placed it back on the counter. "I'm gonna be straight with you," she said through gritted teeth, "I have no idea who those people are."

Lydia looked up at Charlie with wide, American Girl Doll eyes. "Exactly!" she exclaimed. "Eeeexactly!"

"Okay, why don't you eat."

Charlie slid the bowl of mac n' cheese directly into Lydia's view, and the girl finally began to eat. The meal began well enough, with limited depth perception issues and Lydia's fork successfully arriving to her lips a solid 92% of the time. Charlie grabbed the wine glass from her hands whenever possible, leaving behind a not insignificant number of spills. As far as coping mechanisms went, drugs and booze were a strategy unfamiliar to Charlie. Her go-to was straight-up repression. Though Lydia's blithe smiles in the face of the night's hardships didn't dispute her method's effectiveness. But gradually Lydia's figure began to stoop. She leaned against the counter, head propped up on her hand, and continued to droop till her curls threatened to dip into the cheese.

"Okay," Charlie muttered, sidling up next to Lydia. She drew a loose arm over her shoulder, gently lifting the girl out of her chair. "Okay, I think it's time to get you to bed."
"Wha—nooooooo," Lydia protested. She lurched out of Charlie's grasp, but the momentum of the move had her tipping over. Charlie grabbed hold of her and pulled her to her feet, ushering her towards the stairs. "Come on, now, Loopy," she muttered, patting the strawberry blonde locks. "Let's get you to bed."

"But there's still wine left!"

"Yes, and it's going to stay there."

Lydia offered some incoherent refusals, but she was in no condition to fight the inevitability of sleep. Charlie half-walked, half-dragged the girl up the stairs to her room. Lydia's loose, limp form hung heavily in Charlie's arms, her arms burning with effort despite the petite form. As they neared the edge of the plush, queen size bed, Charlie collapsed backwards, heaving Lydia along with her. Next Charlie dragged Lydia's legs onto the bed, helping her snuggle into the mountain of satin throw pillows that decorated the surface. "In you go," she murmured, pulling back the covers and tucking Lydia in. The girl let out an oddly happy sigh. Charlie sat on the edge of the bed for a few moments, staring at her friend. Vulnerability hung about her in a weary haze. The tranquil picture she painted, bundled up in bed, was nothing short of terrifying. What the hell had happened in this video store? Because it was definitely more than either she or Jackson was saying.

Reaching up from her cocoon of blankets and pillows, Lydia attempted to pat Charlie's cheek—a sweet gesture rendered less so as she ended up almost sticking a finger up Charlie's nose. "You're pretty."

"Wow," Charlie muttered under her breath. "How much did you take? You are super-high right now," Lydia shrugged, burrowing deeper into the covers. Charlie studied her carefully. "Lydia, are you okay?" she whispered.

"I'm fine, monkey," Lydia mumbled, patting her hand. "You take such good care of me." And then she began to snore. Not the light, dainty snore one would expect from a pert little nose—her snore belonged to a hibernating bear. Biting her lip reluctantly, Charlie clapped her hands on her knees and stood.

"Okay, then."

Charlie moved to the door and flipped off the lights, checking her phone for the time. 10:03pm. If she left then, in that very moment, she'd be able to get back in time to make Mel's curfew. She'd arrive home to a brilliant smile, a platter of cookies (store bought), some freshly made hot cocoa, and an episode of The Daily Show. And Lydia? Lydia would have an empty house. Charlie paused at the bedroom door, her eyes dragged to Lydia's sleeping figure. A sliver of light peeked into the room, illuminating that typically pristine face in all of its drool-covered glory. The day's makeup smeared against the pillow. Her skin sat pale beneath the assorted powders and blush and the residual gloss stained her lips, but the circles under her eyes were more exhaustion than eyeliner. Dammit, she looked sixteen. Sixteen in an empty house.

Before she knew it, her phone was in her hand and running. "Hey, Charlie," Mel chirped, her aura of calm contrasting sharply with everything else that had happened that night. "So you survived watching The Notebook for the fourth time. Are you about to head back?"

Charlie retreated to the hallway, gently closing the door to Lydia's room behind her. "Yeah, about that," she whispered. "We didn't end up watching The Notebook."

"You didn't? I thought you'd sound more relieved if you got out of watching it."
"Yeah," Charlie breathed out in a poor attempt at a laugh. "Look, um, so when she was renting the video, Lydia was in an accident."

"O—oh my God," Mel stammered. "Is she okay, is she hurt?"

"She's fine," Charlie assured. "I mean, she's not hurt or anything. Her mom's out of town, and I ended up bringing her home. She was pretty shaken up by the whole thing."

"Poor thing," Mel murmured. "What kind of accident was it?"

Charlie's reply was hesitant. "It was….it was an animal attack."

"Animal attack?!"

"Kind of gnarly stuff. And Lydia—she's asleep now, but she's the only one here. I was wondering if I could crash here? I know parent-teacher conferences are tomorrow, but I don't want her to be alone in the house. I'll wake up early and get home before school to get ready—I just think I should be here in case she needs something. And technically crashing here follows the terms of the police curfew, so—"

"No, of course you can stay," Mel interrupted. "Of course. Be with your friend."

Charlie released a breath, her head bobbing absently. "Thanks, Mel. I'll see you first thing tomorrow."

"Just make sure she's okay."

"I will. I love you."

"Love you too."

Ending the call, Charlie wandered down the stairs to clean up the evening's mess. She dumped the rest of the wine, disposing of the bottle in the across-the-street neighbors garbage can. Within a half hour the spills were cleaned, the food was stowed, the pills were back in Mrs. Martin's underwear drawer, and all evidence of Lydia's indiscretions had been concealed. Charlie was about to leave the room as a sudden chiming noise rang. Her eyes scanned the room, searching for the point of origin, until they fell on Lydia's cell phone where it lay on the counter. Frowning slightly, Charlie picked it up and looked at the screen. It was a text message—one from Jackson.

10:28pm - U ok?

A bitter snort escaped Charlie's throat. Even in his attempts at comfort, Jackson's 'boyfriend qualities' proved shitty and shallow. A massively traumatizing event earned Lydia a whole three letters. What would a bouquet of flowers cost her? Charlie exited the text function and made a move to deposit the phone where she had found it, but froze. Lydia had another application open on her phone.

Video recording.

Charlie's finger hovered above the 'play' button. She really shouldn't be doing this. Lydia was upstairs, fast asleep. This was an invasion of privacy. This was her taking advantage of a vulnerable moment to satisfy her own curiosity. This was not something that good people do. But the question raged inside her, ravenous, and only sated when it got its answer. Her finger tapped gently against the play button a few times, never hard enough to actually push it. Until she slammed it down.
The video file was cheap and pixelated, featuring only the dingy grey and dirty glass of a storefront. The outdated poster The Hangover II in the window display identified it as the video rental store. That boring exterior shot didn't last long, though. Within milliseconds the glass front shattered. The shards fell like a curtain, revealing a huge, monstrous creature careening forwards. Black fur and red red eyes.

Jackson's caginess, Lydia's silence—they came with good reason. No words existed to describe what they saw—at least none that made sense—because that was not a mountain lion. That was most definitely not a mountain lion.

This was something new entirely.

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK

Charlie studies for chemistry, super-bored and generally despairing with life, and filled with nervous energy. Donald calls.

--------A Message To You Rudy - The Specials

Charlie runs out to her car, clambers in, and speeds to the video store only to find it covered with cops. This might also play over the trip back from the video store—it's just got this low key ominous feel, idk.

--------Red Red Roses - Stones Jack Jones

Charlie looks after Lydia, cleans up after her, etc. I just wanted something super minimal and chill here. You don't really ever see Charlie and Lydia around each other when they're not bickering, so I thought something gentle would be good.

--------No Clouds - Lost River/Old River

Charlie finds the video….dramatic moment…..her casually realizing everything that's going on…. (love this song…)

--------At Midnight - Caroline Rose

Comments and reviews are always appreciated!
There's No Such Thing As Werewolves

Chapter Summary

Sneakiness is afoot and oh, how the turn tables....... 

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ding.

Ding ding ding.

Ding ding ding ding ding. Ding ding. Ding ding ding ding ding ding.

The text notifications on Charlie's phone went off with such determined rapidity, the person on the other end may have resorted to communicating their message via morse code. Each small 'ding' chipped away at her sleep, dragging her into consciousness. Such frantic correspondence could be coming from one of two people. Mrs. Martin was out. Charlie had intercepted a call from her in the early hours of the morning and explained what she could of the previous night's events. That left one other person. A person who happened to be both persistent and an idiot. Heavy-lidded eyes slowly blinked open, providing her with an image unfamiliar upon waking: a sideways view of the Martin's living room.

A few weak, rogue rays of light filtered through the heavy curtains, informing Charlie that day had arrived. She lifted her head from one of the over-stuffed pillows—a head she didn't remember laying to rest in the first place. The video may have only been twenty seconds long, but hours were lost watching it, memorizing each detail. The teeth, claws, unearthly snarl, and burning red eyes were etched on the inside of her eyelids, leering at her whenever they closed. Not a great recipe for peaceful dreams. Nightmarish material aside, though, somewhere between the dull grey of dawn and faint blue of 'unreasonably early in the morning' they had drooped, and a blank canvass of unconsciousness wrapped around her. But not before fear, awe, and bad judgement compelled her to forward the video to Donald's phone as well as her own.

Ding. Ding ding ding. Ding.

Grunting, Charlie hauled herself into the sitting position. It took several swipes at her eyes to brush the weariness from them. Her bleary vision finally focused on her phone and the forty or so text messages that had rolled in from Donald. The majority consisted of long strings of exclamation points and emojis, a few keyboard smashes, and expressions of manic glee. Apparently three thousand miles of distance between him and...whatever was on that tape diminished the 'terror' factor and left behind a healthy helping of 'awesome'. And then there were the last few texts.
YOU BEST NOT BE SLEEPING WHILE I'M TEXTING U

WAKE UP OZ!

WAKE UP WAKE UP WAKE UP.

WAKE UPPPPPP!

Ok, fine. Don't wake up. I'm getting reinforcements.

Charlie frowned down at her phone. After a series messages with less than two minutes separating them, a chasm of ten full minutes lay between her and the cryptic finale. Knowing Donald's impatience, such a gap should be viewed with the utmost suspicion. "What the—" she muttered under her breath. "Reinforcements?"

Her confusion wasn't allowed time to settle, her mind still muddled with sleep and the impossibility of everything she witnessed the night before. The phone in her hand blared with the jarring sound of Facetime. Fingers twitching with alarm, she fought the instinctive urge to throw it across the room. Rubbing her eyes once more, she hit the answer call function and held the phone before her. "Hello?" she croaked.

What greeted her was not Donald's frenzied grin, but a wall of grey tile. "I—I don't understand," an unfamiliar male voice protested. "I thought you said we were going to an office."

"We are," Donald's voice declared. "We're going to my office."

"But this is the bathroom."

"You know, buddy, you are really perceptive."

"But why do we have to be in the bathroom to talk about your friend's movie?" the voice continued. "And we've got like two minutes till the bell rings. I can't be late for trig, Mr. Nester'll kill me."

Charlie swore loudly, slapping a hand to her forehead. "Donald, please don't tell me you've been showing around the video—I showed you that in confidence."

"Don't worry about that, Oz," Donald announced as the picture righted itself. His face settled into frame next to one she presumed belonged to the new voice. It featured a pair of rather skittish brown eyes hidden behind round-framed glasses, skin left bloodless and clammy under a somewhat rosy complexion, and a mop of dark hair brushed back with a compulsive neatness. "This is my dude Vincent from our A.V. club. I recruited him to help with that student film you're working on. You know—" he gave a wink so gratuitous Charlie's eyes rolled back until she was staring at her own occipital lobe "—you know that special effects sequence for the film that you wanted to submit to a couple of local competitions. Vinny here is a film buff. He's got all kinds of insight. Isn't that right, Vinny?"

If Vincent did, in fact, have any insight to provide, it died somewhere between his vocal chords and the tip of his tongue. He stared at her a moment, lips pinched in a thin line, before abruptly reaching forward and angling the camera away from him. "Dude," he hissed to Donald. "She's a hot girl! You didn't tell me 'your friend Charlie' was a hot girl! I was expecting some guy in an Invader Zim T-shirt!"

"So what if she's a hot girl," was Donald's blase reply. "She's a gross human like the rest of us. Look at her, she's got a bit of drool in the corner of her mouth and all that smudged mascara has got
her looking like a mime school reject. You can't tell me that's attractive to you."

Charlie let out an unappreciative scoff. "It's five in the morning my time—leave me alone," she grumbled under her breath. But all objections were lost in the rapid-fire nonsense that was Vincent's stammering.

"I don't think this is a good idea—I—"

Though the camera was still aimed at two pairs of sneakers, Charlie knew Donald had planted a steadying hand on his friend's shoulder. "Look, Vinny," he said evenly, "I feel like your fear of talking to girls is mostly rooted in a fear of rejection. I get it, it's rough. But that also means that you're putting every single girl in the 'romance' box, and I'm sorry dude, but that is a pretty backwards ass way to treat people. When we look at Charlie, we don't see a girl. We see a nerd who is occasionally funny. Like you! Trust me, she's actually super-lame."

"Shut up, I'm awesome," Charlie growled.

Vincent let out a heavy groan. "Oh my God, she heard all that!"

"Of course she did—just because you can't see somebody doesn't mean they can't hear you. Object permanence, man."

"But—"

"Dude, chill," Donald reassured. "We're here to talk movies. Which is something you know how to do better than anybody else I know. Except maybe me. We good?"

The indistinct mumbling that followed apparently indicated in the affirmative, as the camera slowly angled back to the boys' faces. Some of the pink returned to Vincent's cheeks, though the flush of embarrassment was likely not his ideal alternative to the previous pallor. "Right, uh, so the movie..."

"Sure, yeah, the—the movie," Charlie mumbled, wiping at the corner of her mouth. "What, uh, what did you think? Of the video."

Vincent opened and closed his mouth, eyes flicking to Donald as if seeking permission to speak. Donald's eyes widened and inclined his head towards the camera. "Uh, it was...really good," Vincent finally stammered. "I mean usually found footage films end up being pretty meh, but every once in awhile you get one like Chronicle. But for a student film, the effects are...impressive. I mean people have struggled making a viable looking werewolf for years."

Charlie swallowed down a cough, a giant air bubble lodging itself in her throat. "The w—the what now?"

"Yeah," Vincent nodded, his comfort with the topic lending him confidence. "Yeah, like if you look at the early Buffy stuff, it's just terrible. Like, you put a guy in a fur suit and—"

"Whoa now," Donald interjected. "We're still talking about movies right? Because if not, I don't wanna know any of you that well. No kink-shaming, but, you know, please stop talking."

"Y—yeah, man," Vincent mumbled awkwardly, fidgeting in place. "We're still talking about movies. A—anyway, if it's a dude dressed up as a wolf, the movements are all wrong because, you know, people don't walk on all fours. And CGI can only do so much on a budget. But this...it looks almost real."
Charlie’s eyes moved from her own phone to Lydia’s lying on glass coffee table. All she had to do was punch a few buttons and she’d find that contorted face and cold, gleaming eyes. So vivid, and so upsettingly real. A small part of her clung to the idea that it was fake. Or that it was actually a mountain lion. Or any plausible, rational explanation for this shit. But it appeared that rationality was something to be abandoned at the Beacon Hills city limits. "You sure it doesn’t look like shitty CGI?" she said through a weak laugh.

Vincent shook his head earnestly. "No, not at all," he replied. His reassurance acted in opposition to its intended effect, and Charlie sank lower into the couch cushions. "Like, normally I can’t deal with the found footage stuff because it’s been done to death, but like...damn."

Donald elbowed him in the side, urging Vincent to continue. "But specifically," he prodded. "What about it screams ‘werewolf’ do you. You’re our focus group here—we need to know what works so we can build off it."

"Uhhh, I guess gait," Vincent continued. His voice jumped up a note or two as a certain eager glint entered his eyes. "I mean, you guys obviously don’t have the budget for actual CGI in this sort of thing, so I’m assuming you used practical effects. Is it a suit? ‘Cause whoever is in it knows how to move. I mean they start out on all fours and it doesn’t look like a dude crawling around. But the transition from quadrupedal to bipedal is seamless. And then, you know, there’s the fact that it actually looks like a monster. Some movies go the cop-out route and have them just look like regular wolves, nothing supernatural about it. But the red eyes...that is...haunting."

Charlie tensed, fighting the cold shiver running down her spine. "That’s, uh, that’s great to hear," she replied. "Realism...was what we were going for."

"How did you do it?" Vincent demanded. "’Cause some of the guys and I are working on a spec script for this horror movie, and honestly those kind of special effects could elevate it to a whole new level."

Charlie opened her mouth to protest, but Donald beat her to it. "No, sorry man," he said without missing a beat. "That’s proprietary information."

Vincent bobbed his head, disappointed but understanding. "Ah, okay. That’s fair, I guess, but—"

The school bell rang out and Donald clapped a hand on Vincent’s shoulder, ushering him out of the stall. "Aw, would you look at that man. Time for you to go. You know how Mr. Nester gets when you’re late for trig." Vincent, only moments ago so reluctant to join the conversation, hesitated at the thought of leaving. A pained look flitted through his eyes as he glanced at the door. "I hear we’re doing vectors today," Donald pressed. "And they suuuuuuck."

"Right," Vincent murmured, shifting in place. "Right, well, um...good luck with the movie. Let me know how it turns out."

With an awkward wave, he ducked out of camera frame and retreated for the door. Donald peered after him, waiting for the click of a closing latch before facing her. The Joker-like grin had returned to his face. "Werewolves, Oz. Werewolves."

Charlie let out a heaving sigh, her head sagging on her shoulders. "I heard what he said, Donald."

"And?"

"And it’s ridiculous."

He raised his eyebrows pointedly. "But..." he drawled. "Because there needs to be a ‘but’. You saw
that video, and that shit is not normal. That's some SyFy channel bullshit, and it's happening in
your backyard."

"I know," Charlie replied, running her hands down her face. "Believe me, I know."

"What are you gonna do?"

Charlie nibbled on her lip, her mind wandering to the girl dozing just upstairs. To that girl's phone,
lying on the table before her, its battery almost drained. To the not-mountain lion. To the two
idiots who definitely knew more than they were saying. What was she going to do? About Lydia,
she had no idea. But about the rest of it... "I've got a few ideas," she murmured. "It's a working
plan. More like a stratagem. I'll let you know how things pan out."

"You friggin' better." The second school bell rang out, making Donald glance over his shoulder.
"That's second period. If my mom finds out I'm late to classes while I'm grounded I will never see
the light of day again, so I gotta go. But text me, okay? Bye."

"Bye, Donald."

Hanging up the phone, Charlie closed her hand in a fist around it and pressed it to her forehead.
Rather than watch the video again, she squeezed her eyes shut. Donald had accepted the idea of
this new world in stride, but his ability to suspend disbelief was something he prided himself on.
The key to good storytelling was an open mind, after all. As for Charlie...nothing in her could deny
that what she had seen was miles beyond the normal day-to-day, her brain still rebelled against the
idea of the supernatural. Astrology, Ouija boards, slenderman—none of it had ever even been a
question to her. The concept of Santa Klaus had been relinquished at the tender age of five when
she found the price sticker on a set of Hot Wheels, and the likelihood of elves outsourcing to
Target was rather low. Charlie believed in what she could see and she could touch. Now
though...now the things she saw were pretty unbelievable. And getting close enough to touch them
might spell a death sentence.

Charlie's reflection stared up at her from the polished glass of the Martin's coffee table. Donald
hadn't lied—she looked like shit. The circles under her eyes, further darkened by rings of mascara
and eyeliner, brought out the bloodshot in them. Her hair was held in its loose bun by virtue of an
intricate series of tangled knots. Between her freckles her skin lay ashen. Grabbing Lydia's cell
phone, she pushed herself to her feet and trudged in the direction of the stairs. She stood at their
base, staring at the floor above with apprehension. With her reflection looking the way it did, what
could she expect to find in Lydia's room?

To find the Martin house empty was not an uncommon occurrence. Between the divorce and
Lydia's mother's various social engagements, the girl was used to being alone. Quiet, on the other
hand, was an intruding force. No cheerful music, no idle chatter—the hallway above sat in
shadowy silence. The stairway itself was too well maintained to creak under Charlie's feet as she
ascended, but the moment felt as if it called for such dramatic flair. The door to Lydia's room was
cracked open, light snores spilling out. Charlie rapped her knuckles against the surface three times
before pushing it open.

Lydia lay sprawled across her bed. Her hair, somehow still as glossy and perfect as ever, hung over
her face like a curtain, fluttering softly with each breath. Her actual curtains remained flung open,
the increasingly bright light of day doing nothing to rouse her. Charlie cringed. On her bedside
table sat not one, but two little orange pill bottles. Charlie leaned over Lydia and gently brushed the
hair from her face. Her features were smooth and free from worry. Narcotics had purchased her
temporary peace at least. Charlie grasped her shoulder and shook her awake. "Lydia," she
whispered. "Hey, Lydia."
Lydia gave a small whine of complaint and burrowed her face further into her pillow, but her eyes blinked open to reveal still-large pupils and a hazy gaze, like she was focusing on something behind Charlie. A small frown tugged at her lips as she tried to focus. "You're blurry," she declared, patting the bed as an indication for Charlie to sit. "Come over here."

Charlie approached, perching on the edge of the bed and turning on the bedside lamp. A glimmer of recognition passed through Lydia's eyes. "Hey there, Charlie," she slurred, patting Charlie's arm. "Where did you go? I was looking for you earlier. We never watched The Notebook."

"I was downstairs," Charlie replied. "You fell asleep before we got to watch any movies. I would have said goodnight, but you were...well, you were kind of unconscious."

"Was I?" Lydia murmured quietly. "Hm." She reached up and began to play with the loose pieces of hair falling out of Charlie's bun. "Your hair looks like black licorice. It's pretty. But probably tastes gross. Black licorice is gross."

Charlie removed Lydia's hand from her hair and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Lydia, are you okay?"

The silly smile on the girl's face stretched wider. "I'm fanunnntastic," she drawled. Withdrawing her hand from Charlie's, she held it up to the lamp, letting light pour through the gaps in her fingers. "Light is pretty," she giggled.

"You bet it is," Charlie murmured. Her hand tightened around the cell phone still clutched within. "Lydia, what do you remember from yesterday?"

Lydia looked at Charlie like she was a complete idiot, an expression accomplished with just as much skill stoned as sober. "What had a girls' night in," was her blunt reply.

"Yeah," Charlie returned carefully. "Yeah, I was there for that part. I was talking about the bit I wasn't there for. The bit at the video store." At the mention of the store, Lydia broke her unsteady attempt at eye contact, focusing instead on a stuffed giraffe. "Lydia, what did you see there?"

Charlie pressed. "You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but if you wanted to..."

A dark shadow crossed Lydia's face, and something in her eyes changed. Less hazy, more lucid, yet she still stared into nothing. "It was a mountain lion," she mumbled.

"What?"

Lydia rolled onto her side and looked up at Charlie with wide, innocent eyes. "A mountain lion," she insisted, her voice more sure of itself.

Charlie sucked in a sharp breath. Last night the cops, the EMTs, even Jackson had maintained that the animal in question was a mountain lion. With the drugs in her system and her natural assuredness stripped away, those voices informed Lydia's now. "Are you sure about that?" Charlie prompted one last time. "I'm asking for real, Lydia. Are you sure?"

"A mountain lion," Lydia parroted.

Charlie's hand was clammy around Lydia's phone, the plastic slipping against her skin. She could just delete the video. If she deleted the video, Lydia could go on thinking the video store was some freakish hallucination. It could be a blip—a point in time moved past and forgotten, even if the fear and self-doubt lingered a little. The second option was to show her the video. To make her confront...Charlie still hesitated to call it reality. Lydia could stare once more at the thing that drove her to put herself into a coma, or she could forget. Charlie now had that choice. It was way...
too much pressure.

Either way, Lydia was in no state to be holding serious, potentially life-changing conversations. At least she had some time to weigh her options. And for her plans to play out.

Charlie plugged in Lydia's phone, setting it to charge on the far end of the bedside table, out of the girl's reach. She returned to the bed and rearranged the pillows into a more comfortable configuration. "Get some sleep, Lydia," she murmured. "I'll come check in on you after school. You can borrow my notes if you need them."

A garbled cackle erupted from Lydia's mouth. "You're funny."

"Fantastic," Charlie deadpanned, tucking Lydia into the covers. "Do you need anything—food, water, tea?"

Lydia pulled the covers up to her chin and flopped over, burying her face into the pillow. "Thanks, Charlie. Always taking care of me."

Charlie's eyes strayed back to the phone and she let out a bitter laugh. "I'm not so sure about that."

Lydia's breathing slowed and her light snores overtook the room once more. Charlie moved to exit, but paused at the door frame to regard her friend. That door sat neatly between a rock and a hard place. No, that wasn't true. Ethical dilemmas weren't geo-locked—wherever she happened to stand the conflict of conscience would be equally daunting. Lying to Mel, making decisions for her friends she had no right to make. Morally questionable at best, straight up betrayal at worst—this position sucked. And the unsteady lurch of her stomach told her she would have to get used to it—that she'd be standing here for a while.

An abrupt slamming of the front door jolted Charlie out of her reverie. A chaotic clattering of heels and series of high-pitched screeches announced Mrs. Martin's arrival. "Lydia!" the woman exclaimed. "Lydia!"

Tearing herself from the doorway, Charlie descended the stairs. Mrs. Martin spilled into the foyer, her usual glamour somewhat frayed by stress. Her elegant cocktail dress hung wrinkled on her frame, her hair, so meticulously kept in place, had frizzed, and her makeup had bled and collected in the lines beneath her eyes. Whether it was tears that caused her mascara to run, Charlie couldn't say for certain. She didn't know Mrs. Martin well enough to comment. The woman blinked in surprise at the sight of Charlie, which was probably to be expected. Charlie could count on both her hands the number of times she had met Mrs. Martin and on one hand those she had actually spoken to her. "Um, hello," Mrs. Martin gasped between breaths. "It's Charlotte, right?"

Charlie folded her arms across her chest and bobbed her head. "Um, yeah. We spoke on the phone earlier."

"How is she doing—is she alright?" Mrs. Martin demanded, her words tripping over themselves in their rush to leave her mouth. "I would have gotten here sooner but there was no reception at the fundraiser and by the time I got them I had had so much wine that driving—How is she?"

Charlie's eyes flicked to the top of the stairs. "Lydia is...she's doing okay, I guess," she murmured. "Physically she's completely fine—nothing happened to her. But—"

"But what?"

Charlie shifted under Mrs. Martin's earnest, wide-eyed gaze and swallowed heavily before continuing. "She, uh, she was pretty stressed out by the whole thing. I think there might've been
some Xanax in the house. She took some to calm her nerves, and she's...very calm."

Mrs. Martin gave a solemn nod. "I see."

"She's okay," Charlie interjected. "But, uh, but I think she might need to take the day off school to sleep it off. The trauma, I mean. Not the, uh, not the—"

"No, I understand."

The two stood still, regarding each other hesitantly, the air stagnant and still between them. Charlie pulled nervously at the sleeves of the jacket covering her shoulders and inclined her head towards the door. "I, uh, I should probably get going and get ready for school," she mumbled. "It's parent-teacher conferences tonight. Probably not the best day to be late. I'd like to come see Lydia later tonight, though, if that's okay?"

"Of course. You're more than welcome. And thank you for looking after her last night."

Mrs. Martin stepped aside, clearing Charlie's path to the exit. Offering up a wan smile, Charlie ducked her head and scurried to the door. The Impala sat in the driveway, waiting to carry her home. Her limbs felt heavy as she sank into the seat, a second wave of weariness hitting her like a wall. The urge to curl up in a ball next to Lydia and sleep the day away was all too real, but she had work to do. So she shoved her keys into the ignition and twisted.

If there was any indication that proved the absurd earliness of the hour, it was that Mel had yet to get dressed by the time of Charlie's arrival. One foot in the door and she found herself enveloped in a hug rendered warmer than usual by the plushness of her aunt's pink bathrobe. Charlie would never classify herself as a 'hugger', but she found herself leaning into Mel's embrace, allowing her weight to be supported by the woman's surprisingly strong arms. "How is Lydia?" Mel asked as she pulled back. "I read about the attack in the paper this morning. You didn't tell me somebody died!"

Charlie had already constructed a lie to sooth her aunt's worry. "Really?" she murmured. "They must have collected the body before I got there. Lydia's not too keen on talking about it, but I don't think she actually saw anybody get hurt."

"That's a cold comfort."

"I know," Charlie nodded. "She's going to take the day off of school today to deal. Her mom got there this morning, so she won't be alone. I'm stopping by this afternoon."

"Of course," Mel murmured. Her eyes scanned Charlie's face carefully, seeking out any indications of malady. "Charlie, are you sure you're okay? You look dead tired."

Charlie's body cried out for the comfort of her bed. The dull ache of exhaustion radiated from behind her eyes until it filled her entire skull. Fatigue had attached weights to her eyelids, dragging them closed. But she forced herself to stand right. Certain events had to be laid in motion. Steps had to be taken. She dragged her feet to the kitchen and collapsed onto one of the stools. "Nothing a few gallons of coffee can't fix," she called over her shoulder. "Plus parent-teacher conferences are today. Gotta look alive."

Something resembling a swear slipped from Mel's lips as she followed Charlie into the kitchen. She circled the kitchen island and grabbed the coffee pot. "Parent-teacher conferences," she groaned, a grimace painting her features. "You mean that thing where I get to have one-on-one conversations with your teachers and find out exactly what you think of you?"

"Yup," Charlie replied, popping the 'p'. "That's the one."
Fetching a mug, Mel filled it to the brim with coffee and handed it over. The steam hit Charlie's face and the scent filled her nostrils. The promise of caffeine brought her spine straight, like a wilting plant that had been watered. Mel perched on one of the stools across the counter and stared into her own cup with a hollow dread. "Is it bad that I'm probably more terrified than you are?"

Charlie made a face and shrugged. "Probably."

"It's been a decade since I had to talk to high school teachers," Mel mused. "I did not miss it." Clearing her throat, she took a long, fortifying sip. "So, what can I expect to hear?"

"Oh, good things," Charlie nodded earnestly. "So many good things. All my teachers have already offered to write college recommendations—I've made quite the impression."

Mel let out a snort. "It most certainly is," Charlie deadpanned. "It surprised me too. Especially with all the mouthing off I've done in Mr. Hobson's class."

Mel's eyebrows pulled together in a frown and she planted her hands on the counter, pushing herself to her feet. "You've been mouthing off in Mr. Hobson's class?"

Charlie winced theatrically and hid her face behind her mug. "I was really hoping I'd be able to slide that one in with a joke."

"Yeah, I'll bet you were," Mel grumbled, her eyes still narrowed suspiciously. Backing away from the kitchen island, she made her way to the door. "I've got to get ready for work, but I'll call in to the school and let them know you might be a little late for homeroom. After a night like last night, you deserve at least that. You've got a few hours before class—try and get some sleep."

"Nah, I think I'll get there early. I'll be super-polite all day long. Maybe I'll pick up a bag full of apples to give them before class. You know, soften them all up and make them love me before they talk to you."

Mel smirked widely, moving into the main hall and leaning against the doorframe as she watched Charlie. "You'll probably need something a lot better than an apple if you want that big of a shift in opinion."

Charlie pursed her lips in consideration. "How about a shot of whiskey?" she asked drolly. "Do you think that'll help?"

Mel snapped her fingers and pointed down the hall to Charlie's room. "Go take a nap. I mean it, put that coffee on hold for a while and get a bit more sleep. You look like you're about to keel over."

"You got it!" Charlie declared, raising her mug in salute.

Mel nodded and disappeared through the door, retiring to the bathroom. Charlie waited for the hiss of the shower head before plodding to her room. The clock on the wall read 6:26 am. It hadn't even been twelve hours yet. She came to a halt in front of her mirror and took in her appearance. Stiles's jacket still hung on her shoulders, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows and the scent of curly fries hanging around her in a cloud—just another reminder of last night's activities. Underneath the smudged makeup and sallow skin, she looked no different than she had the day before. Sometimes she liked to think that if you knew a secret, it would show—there would be some external manifestation of the knowledge, the new truth would be written into the lines of your face. But she looked the same.
Charlie didn't nap. Instead she snuggled into a nest of pillows and blankets, her laptop perched on the edge of her bed, and opened up a file labeled 'Weird Shit'. The 'Weird Shit' file was a fairly recent addition to her extracurricular activities, dating back to not long after she moved to Beacon Hills. All evidence of inexplicable, X-files level crap found a home in that file. The photos of lens flare surrounding Derek and Scott, the bloodied images of the destroyed bus, the articles about the Hale fire all took up residence there, now to be joined by possibly the last bit of documentation she needed. Charlie downloaded the video footage from her phone to her computer, expanding the image and flipping through it frame by frame. Maybe she had missed something in her first thousand or so viewings. But the image itself just became more blurry. She didn't have the tech savvy to increase the resolution.

Mel tiptoed around the apartment as she prepared for work, careful not to interrupt Charlie's nonexistent sleep. Only the click of the front door liberated Charlie from her cocoon of bedding. Free to move without the weight of Mel's curious gaze, Charlie trudged to the kitchen and downed two cups of coffee before her tongue registered the scalding heat. After showering, she dressed quickly and blindly, groping in the dark corners of her closet in a way that would make Lydia cringe. The end result was an oversized, black-and-white striped sweater and slim cut jeans tucked into a pair of combat boots. The outfit came together in a lackadaisical fashion, but she took care with her makeup, dabbing cover up under her eyes to mask the bruised purple of her exhaustion. Just a day like any other.

A few cars dotted the Beacon Hills High parking lot as Charlie arrived. She couldn't afford Mel's offer of a late arrival—everything had to appear to be business as usual. As such, she fulfilled her morning routine to the letter, stopping by her locker to drop off her afternoon class textbooks, as well as Stiles's jacket which was set to be returned only at the most strategic of times. The sight of her chemistry book had her wincing. Lucky that she began studying early. Today's objective had nothing to do with school. Finally, she stood straight and slung her messenger bag over her shoulder. She turned to find Allison stalking down the hallway, glancing around with a level of paranoia uncharacteristic of her doe eyes.

"Hey, Allison," Charlie called out, waving her over.

Nodding in acknowledgment, Allison approached with hesitation in her step. Observing the hunched shoulders and quiet shuffle, 'meek' was the first descriptor that came to mind. Allison's hard-won confidence appeared to have hit a 'reset' button, returning her to the first day of classes. "Hey Charlie," she mumbled. "How's it going? I heard what happened last night—how is Lydia holding up?"

Charlie's words couldn't give an honest answer, so her shoulders responded with a shrug. "I really can't say for sure. Physically, she's fine. But she's still freaked out."

Allison gnawed nervously on her fingernails. "Well that's understandable. I don't know how I'd react to something like that. I mean I knew the animal attacks were happening, but...not like that."

Charlie pressed her lips together in a thin line. "Lydia will be fine. If anybody can get over something like that, it's her. She's way too stubborn not to." Allison bobbed her head in agreement, but Charlie's attention was drawn to the pendant hanging around the girl's neck. Silver and antique, it featured an imprint of a snarling wolf walking beneath a shining sun. Or moon. "What's that?" she asked, gesturing to the necklace. "It's beautiful—is it new?"

Allison's smile strengthened from tentative to genuine and she clutched at the pendant. "You like it?" she inquired happily. "My aunt Kate gave it to me this morning. Kind of as an apology for being so weird at the dinner slash happy bir—" She froze mid-sentence, and her eyes flicked from
the necklace to Charlie. They went wide with worry. Charlie folded her arms across her chest and raised her eyebrows expectantly. Allison groaned and scratched nervously at the back of her head before continuing. "It's—it's kind of my birthday."

A small line appeared between Charlie's eyebrows as they furrowed together in a frown. "You really should have told me Allison," she muttered. "I would have gotten you someth—oh, wait a second." She reached into her bag and pulled out a small, poorly wrapped box. Gaping in mock shock, she presented it to Allison on the palm of her hand. "What's this? It seems to have your name on it. What could it possibly be?" Allison gave a huff of amusement as she snatched the small package from Charlie's waiting hand. "Sorry it wasn't wrapped any better," Charlie continued. "I'm a little bit terrible at those kinds of things."

Allison spun the box around in her fingers a few times before shooting Charlie a suspicious look. "How did you know?"

"I really thought you guys would have figured it out by now," Charlie scoffed. "I know everything." Allison's suspicion morphed to skepticism, and Charlie released a loud harrumph. "Okay, fine. Lydia's the one who knows everything about everything, but she tells me about all of it so it's basically the same thing. Go on, open it." After a few moments consideration, Allison ripped into the mediocre packaging, glancing around the two of them self-consciously. She quickly shoved the decorative paper into her pocket to hide any evidence of festivity before turning to the tiny box. Within she found a necklace and hooked a finger under the chain, lifting it up to dangle in the dim, fluorescent light. "Oh my God, Charlie," she whispered through a growing smile. "It's gorgeous."

At the end of the silver chain hung a pendant featuring a silver bow and gold arrow affixed to a jet black crystal. "At dinner Kate mentioned you were a fan of archery," Charlie said. "I thought you might like it."

"I love it."

Charlie clapped a hand on the girl's shoulder, shaking it warmly. Pretty much the most affectionate move she was comfortable with. "Happy birthday, Allison."

As soon as the words left Charlie's mouth, Allison's initial skittishness returned in full force. She tugged at the ends of her curls, eyes roving as if she expected trained snipers to burst from nearby lockers to stage their attack. "Listen," she whispered conspiratorially. "Do you mind keeping it to yourself—the fact that it's my birthday. I really don't want people to know."

Charlie's lips tugged into a frown. "Why not?"

Allison cringed. "I'm seventeen."

"Oh," Charlie replied simply. "Okay."

Allison's nose wrinkled and she took a step back, regarding Charlie with curiosity. "You're not going to ask me why I repeated a year?"

Charlie sighed and slammed her locker door closed. "Did I ever tell you that I had to go to summer school twice to keep up with the changes in curriculum between schools? My dad was in the Coast Guard, remember? A lot of moving around. I get it. Sometimes you get lucky and you've already read the book, sometimes you're like twenty chapters behind. Nothing you can do about it."

"Right," Allison sighed with relief. "Well, will you still promise not to tell anyone else?"
"Absolutely," Charlie said with a definitive nod. "My lips are sealed." She mimed locking her lips together and tossed aside the imaginary key.

Allison's head sagged on her shoulders, the tension leaving her body. "Thank you. Maybe we can get together for a small party near the end of the week when Lydia is feeling better. How does that sound?"

Charlie attempted to say 'any excuse for cake' while keeping her lips pressed together. Nonsensical mumbling was the end result. Allison frowned in confusion. "What are you doing?" A bit more mumbling roughly translated to 'I told you, my lips are sealed', and Allison, realizing the nature of the theatrics at hand, rolled her eyes. "Has anybody ever told you that you're a bit of an idiot?"

Charlie smirked. "It's one of my better personality traits if I do say so myself."

"Ugh, I bet you were one of those kids who actually enforced that whole 'jinx' thing when you were a kid."

"Absolutely I was," Charlie said, nodding soberly. "You can't give me that kind of power over another person and expect it not to go to my head."

The final warning bell rang, giving Allison a start. "I've still got to stop by my locker," she said, brushing past Charlie. "I'll see you in class."

But Allison never made it to class. As Mr. Hobson launched into his lecture, her seat remained conspicuously empty. 'Kidnapped by mole people' was the working theory, and said theory would have remained in place had another absence not revealed itself. As the class filled in, Scott's seat was left vacant as well. This mystery did not require spades of deductive reasoning. They had ditched. And while under normal circumstances Charlie considered herself pro innocuous teenage delinquency, Scott had walked out with one half of her explanation. She glanced over at Stiles, silently inquiring after them. He just shrugged. Yup, they ditched.

Sticking out her lower lip in a pout, Charlie kicked at the back of the chair in front of her. Its occupant was in no way pleased, but Charlie couldn't bring herself to give a shit. She had much bigger things on her mind. With Scott gone, the plan still worked, but she was not grateful for the reminder of life's unpredictability. This needed to work. She needed this to work.

By the time chemistry class rolled around, Scott and Allison were still on the lamb doing whatever nauseatingly cute shit they could come up with. Jackson was missing too, as a matter of fact. For all his grandstanding, all his screaming at the cops, he was just as terrified as Lydia. All in all, the absences disrupted the natural seating arrangement in Harris's class. The seat next to Stiles remained empty. As she walked in, he gave an awkward wave and gestured at the chair, inviting her to take it. Pretending not to see, Charlie stopped short of Stiles's desk and slid into Jackson's empty spot next to Danny instead.

"Hey Danny," she declared, offering a smirk. "Long time no see. How's life treating you."

"Well, we've got a chemistry test tomorrow, parent-teacher conferences tonight, and a giant man-killing beast on the loose and terrorizing our friends," he drawled sarcastically. "So all-in-all I'd say I'm fantastic."

"Oh, Danny," Charlie sighed, patting him on the arm. "Just because you look too cute to be smart doesn't mean that you aren't smart. You'll survive that chemistry test. And just look at those biceps! If any giant animals attack you, then you can just flex them into submission."
Danny stared at her hard for several moments before shaking his head. "Why is it that every time we talk, I feel like you're flirting with me?"

Charlie made a face at him. "How is that flirting? I am merely stating objective facts. You are a highly symmetrical and extremely handsome dude, and if 'most likely to beat up a mountain lion' was a yearbook superlative you would be a lock. I'd vote for you."

Danny sniffed in derision. "Okay, well I feel objectified."

"Um, did I not just say you were more brilliant than the sun?" Charlie groused. "Any time you want to discuss literature or the latest tech-y stuff you're so good at, I look at you and all I see is a giant brain, leaking extra-cerebral fluid all over the place."

The barest twitch of the lips betrayed Danny's amusement. "So you'll always objectify me?" he asked. "I just have to choose whether I want to be physically or intellectually objectified?"

"Now you're getting it," she declared in a patronizing tone, patting him on the arm again. "And speaking of that giant brain of yours, I was wondering if I could ask you a favor."

Danny eyed her suspiciously. "That depends on what the favor is."

"Do you not trust me, Danny?" she asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"No. Not even a little bit."

"Well, that hurts my feelings."

"Wait, you have feelings? I thought you were a robot that ran on sarcasm and the tears of small children."

"Mel found a bunch of old home videos," she lied. "I was thinking about restoring them, maybe editing them together into a nice reel for her birthday. She's the nostalgic type."

Danny's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "That is uncharacteristically considerate of you."

"Wha—I can be considerate!" Charlie spluttered. "I am considerate a lot of the time. Or at the very least some of the time. I have been known to be considerate on occasion."

"Sure, just keep telling yourself that."

"Look," Charlie grumbled, "are you going to help me or not?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "Fine, whatever, I'll help you. Some time next week. I've got too much crap going on this week."

There was no contesting Danny's assessment of her patience. The idea of waiting a week for a better look at her mystery monster had her skin itching. Gritting her teeth, she forced a smile of
gratitude and gave a quiet 'thank you'. To hide her disappointment, she ducked her head over her chemistry notes, but a sharp jab of Danny's elbow brought her back to attention. "You picked Jackson and Lydia up from the vid—from where it happened, right?" he murmured. "Do you know what happened? Jackson isn't really talking to me."

A quick glance over her shoulder informed her that she and Danny were not the sole two participants in the conversation. Stiles had his head angled away from them, but his entire body had gone still, not a fidgety movement in sight. They had an eavesdropper. And while anger was probably the warranted emotion, it was vindication that hummed in Charlie's veins. Not much longer now.

"Yeah," she murmured to Danny, her voice just high enough for Stiles to hear. "Yeah, I picked them up, but I didn't really get to see anyth—"

The final bell interrupted her and Mr. Harris turned from his chalkboard, the universal signal for them to shut the hell up. "Just a friendly reminder," he declared. "Parent-teacher conferences are tonight. Students below a C average are required to attend. I won't name you because the shame and self-disgust should be more than enough punishment." He paused next to Scott's empty desk and stared at his vacant seat. "Has anyone seen Scott McCall?"

Harris's menacing steps came to a halt before Stiles, his posture even more rigid than usual and no doubt about to verbally eviscerate Stiles for his friend's absence. Stiles was afforded a reprieve, though, by the echo of the classroom door slamming shut. Jackson froze in the doorframe as all heads snapped in his direction. For once his chest didn't puff up at the prospect of being the center of attention. In fact, he shrank, all stooped shoulders and shuffling feet. A small swoop of guilt kicked Charlie in the gut. Behind the hostile shouting and grandstanding, she had failed to realize exactly how shaken up Jackson was. Eyes bloodshot and shadowed, clammy skin, sweat at his temples, he appeared to have slept less than she had. And she had barely slept at all. Even his hair flirted with the idea of 'unkempt'. Head bowed, Jackson slipped into an empty seat and stared straight ahead.

On this day of increasingly uncharacteristic behavior, Mr. Harris placed a comforting hand on Jackson's shoulder and leaned in close. "Jackson," he said in a low, placating tone, "if you need to leave early for any reason, just let me know." But by the time Harris straightened to his full height, he had readopted his position as class dictator. He sauntered to the chalk board. "Everyone, please start reading chapter nine. And yes anything covered in the class today will be included on your test tomorrow."

The muffled groans hid among the rifling of papers as students pulled out their textbooks. 'Please'. Harris's use of the word inspired a bitter sort of amusement. The word sounded like a foreign language when it fell from his lips. No actual choice was ever offered, so his pleasantry was lies in pretty packaging. Charlie spent the first few minutes of the class diligently poring over her chapter notes while Harris peered over the students' shoulders.

"Isn't the point of having a teacher for someone to explain the material instead of just watching us read it?" she muttered to Danny under her breath. "Harris isn't a teacher, he's a drill sergeant with a pocket protector and laser pointer."

"Shut up before he tries to blind one of us with that laser pointer," Danny hissed.

Shooting him a glare, Charlie turned back to her books. Honestly, the setup was probably for the best. Nothing short of Mr. Harris breathing creepily down her neck could make her focus. And even that came up short. Fifteen minutes in, she found herself sketching that angry, contorted face in the margins of her notebook. Then, all of the sudden, a figure appeared over her shoulder,
casting shadows over the ghastly snarl.

"Ms. Oswin," Harris drawled in his uniquely passive aggressive tone. "While we are all blown away by your mediocre artistic capabilities, this is chemistry class. We do chemistry in chemistry class. I believe that concept is simple enough for even your pubescent brain to grasp."

Charlie bit down hard on her lip to cage in the retort already prepared to fly. Any satisfaction she might gain from mouthing off in this class would be dearly paid for in detentions and marked down grades. She flipped to a blank page of her notebook and began running through practice problems. After a few moments Mr. Harris let her be, continuing to patrol the room. He stalked up and down the aisles with his hands clasped behind his back, searching for his next victim. The man actively tried to look like a prison warden.

"Mr. Stilinski," he called out. "Try putting the highlighter down between paragraphs. It's chemistry, not a coloring book."

Danny gave a laugh, and Charlie elbowed him in the side for his lack of student solidarity before lobbing an apologetic grimace Stiles's way. Stiles grinned back, the highlighter cap still stuck in his mouth. Throwing his head back, he blew the cap a few feet in the air before catching it easily. Charlie snorted at his unwarranted pleased expression and turned back to her books. This meticulous review of her notes was soon interrupted, however, by one of Stiles's not-so-subtle whispers.

"Hey Danny," he muttered, "can I ask you a question?"

Danny's instinctive reaction to Stiles's voice was to roll his eyes. "No."

Stiles gaped for a moment, considering adhering to Danny's wishes for exactly 0.1 seconds. "Well, I'm going to ask anyway. Um, did Lydia show up for homeroom today?"

"No," Danny grunted.

"Lydia's taking a personal day," Charlie hissed back, catching Stiles's attention. "She's still a bit freaked out from yesterday." Stiles's jaw went slack, stricken by this news, maybe even more so than Charlie herself. Oh, right. He was in love with her. That supposedly gave rise to emotional involvement in other people's well being. "Hey, she's going to be fine," Charlie assured him. "She just needs a bit of time."

Stiles pressed his lips together in a thin line and nodded. Charlie turned to her books once more, but Stiles's voice interrupted yet again. "Can I ask another question?"

Danny's mounting annoyance could be measured by the clicking of his jaw. "The answer's still no."

"Does anyone know what happened to her and Jackson last night?"

Danny finally tore his eyes from his books, exchanging a sidelong glance with Charlie. They both had the same answer: neither Jackson nor Lydia had breathed a word. But Charlie wasn't stumbling in the dark like Danny. She had a flashlight. But she wasn't going to illuminate Stiles, not until she leveraged her way into a freaking floodlamp. Danny cleared his throat and went back to highlighting his book. "He...he wouldn't tell me."

Stiles turned to Charlie and she shook her head in the negative. His mouth fell open in disbelief, looking between them. "But they're like your best friends."

"Doesn't mean they felt like sharing," Charlie drawled.
"One more question," Stiles persisted.

When clenching his jaw was no longer sufficient, Danny spun in his seat, showing Stiles the full face of his frustration. "What?!!"

"Do you find me attractive?"

Deeming a facepalm inadequate, Charlie fell forward, slamming her head into her desk with a heavy thunk. Never one to be out-spazzed, Stiles leaned forwards to leer at Danny until his seat tipped and sent him crashing to the floor. This resulted in yet another passive aggressive scolding from Mr. Harris. The looming specter of detention kept them silent for the remainder of the period.

The ring of the lunch bell sent a wave of relief crashing through Charlie's body. Finally, she could get around to 'the stratagem'. The class spilled into the hallway, tripping over each other in the mad dash towards the liberty of the cafeteria. Charlie, however, took the opposite route, stopping by her locker. She fished out the jacket Stiles lent her and went to shut the door, only to find a dour face directly behind it.

"Son of a bitch!" she swore, practically jumping out of her own skin. Her hand flew to her heart, keeping it in her chest where it belonged. The person staring back at her was none other than the perpetually sour-faced Derek Hale. "Well, isn't this just fan-freaking-tastic," she declared, gesturing up and down his form. "Now I've got to deal with you too. FYI, if this is a 21 Jump Street situation, you're doing a really crap job of blending in with the rank and file. Try brooding less—throw the word 'dude' into the conversation."

"You were at the video store last night," Derek growled, his expression impassive. "You talked to the cops—what did you see?"

Charlie folded her arms across her chest and squared her shoulders, bringing herself as close to his height as she could. "Why do you care?"

Derek took a step forwards, forcing her back against the lockers. "What. Did. You. See."

"Nothing," Charlie spat back. "I didn't see a damn thing."

"Say it again," Derek insisted. "But this time more calmly and slowly."

"Do you also want me to pat my head and rub my belly at the same time," Charlie replied, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "Seriously, dude, what do you want from me? I wasn't there for the attack. I showed up afterwards. And I ask again—what is it to you?"

Derek's eyes scoured her face with the same frustrated intensity one might afford a boring book on French existentialist philosophy. Without a word he brushed past her, his shoulder knocking into hers as he marched by. Charlie scoffed and rubbed at the point of impact, glaring at his leather-clad back. "You know, there's a real disconnect in the 'question-and-answer' aspect of our meetings!" she shouted after him.

Derek didn't respond. Charlie didn't expect him to. But this time her frustration was kept at bay. She didn't need him to give her answers. She was about to get them anyway.

By the time Charlie arrived in the cafeteria, the lunch line had dwindled. Her tray piled with food quickly and she turned to the room. Her usual table with Lydia at the center of the room sat vacant, almost as if out of deference for the queen bee's absence. She scanned the room for Stiles until her eyes found him at one of the peripheral tables, this time minus his conjoined twin, reading from his chemistry book. Charlie stomped in his direction and plopped her tray down opposite his. Stiles

"Well, my friends abandoned me for lunch," she replied. "Since it looks like you're in the same boat I figured we should try for some solidarity." She pulled his jacket out from under her arm and held it out to him. "I figured I should give this back to you. I guess I kind of ran out with it last night. Sorry about that."

Stiles waved off her apology as he took it from her. "Please. You had other things on your mind—I think everybody did."

Charlie gave a noncommittal jerk of the head and stabbed absently at her 'federally mandated serving of fruit'—it had all the hallmarks of canned peaches, but one could never be sure. "So where's your better half?" she demanded, waving a skewered mystery fruit in his direction.

"You mean Scott?" Stiles mumbled. "He's currently ditching with Allison." He suddenly looked up from his peas, eyes squinted in offense. "Wait, excuse me, what do you mean 'better half'?"

"Ditching the day of parent-teacher conferences," Charlie drawled, ignoring his displeased glower. "That's pretty ballsy. That is the brand of truancy that could get you in some serious trouble."

A wheeze of laughter threw the pout from his face. "Truancy?" he demanded, his eyebrows arching in amusement.


"Yeah, I know what it means. I just haven't heard it used in conversation by anybody under the age of seventy-five."

Charlie stopped chewing her theoretical peaches and narrowed her eyes at Stiles. "Are you saying that I'm not down with the lingo of today's urban youth?"

Stiles snorted into his tray and shook his head. "Has anybody ever told you that you're an idiot?"

"Says the guy who nearly fell out of his chair asking a gay guy if he was attractive," she snarked back. "Danny's way out of your league, by the way."

Stiles released an offended scoff. "What are you talking about? I'm adorable!"

"Sure you are," Charlie drawled.

"Hey! I totally am."

With their efforts directed to a series of elaborate eye rolls and sneers, a short silence took up residence between them. Somehow, inside of those ten seconds, it was as if a curtain fell, revealing the host of serious and severely unfunny events currently unfolding. The repressed smile twisting Stiles's lips faltered, his eyes flicking between Charlie and his tray as he summoned the courage to ask the question that had likely been plaguing him since the night before.

"So what's going on with Lydia?" he mumbled in a consciously unaffected tone.

Charlie bit down on her lip before answering. "After the...incident...she was pretty shaken up. She got silly on some overpriced chardonnay, but she didn't want to talk about it. She's not really much of a 'sharer'. The only person who can answer questions about how she's doing is her."
He nodded in understanding and gazed off into the distance. His clouded eyes and downturned lips illustrated a fairly high degree of concern. He was preoccupied. This worked in her favor. Time to put the plan into motion. Charlie cleared her throat, snapping Stiles back to attention. "Hey Stiles," she mumbled tentatively. "I actually think I might know something that could help."

His eyes widened to an almost theatrical degree and he dropped his fork. "What, um, what is it?"

To count lying as one of her talents was an object of personal conflict for Charlie. She excelled in it. Lying came easily, naturally even—quick words, steady hands, and a blank face. The ability to deceive was not something she took pride in, but as with all weapons one can hope never to use it, but it's always best to have it available. "I mean it's probably nothing," she said, her tone a careful balance of casual and anxious. "I just remembered that when I was on the phone with Lydia—before she and Jackson were attacked—she was taking selfies. She's been a bit out of it, so she might not remember. I was just thinking...maybe she caught something on camera. Something that could help out the cops. Your dad said to tell him if I remembered anything. I figured I should let you know."

Stiles's eyebrows furrowed into a look of intense concentration, his demeanor reminiscent of a robot assimilating new information. Charlie was suddenly highly aware of her phone in her back pocket—of the video file just a few clicks away. It would be so easy to just pull it out and confront Stiles head on, but he would clam up. He would protest. Head on wouldn't get him to show his cards. She had to take the back streets. Behind her superficial glance, Charlie scrutinized his face, gauging his reaction to this new wrinkle.

"That's good to know," he declared, his head bobbing with a manic energy. "That could be a real help. If she managed to get a usable picture."

Charlie blew out a long breath and slumped back in her chair, looking at him expectantly. "Well aren't you going to call someone?"

Stiles swallowed heavily, and proceeded to choke on his soda. "Why—why would I need to call anybody?" he demanded. "Who would I call?"

"Your dad," she prompted, fighting back a smirk. "You might want to call the guy who requested the information in the first place."

A nervous laugh burbled from Stiles's throat. "Right, of course. My dad." He pulled out his phone, strategically angling the screen away from her as he punched in the number. Stiles held up a finger, indicating for her to wait as it rang. The person on the other end didn't pick up, and as expected the muffled voice mail message held neither the gravitas nor the exasperation belonging to one Sheriff Stilinski. The greeting had the upbeat intonation of a much younger guy. Someone her age. Someone kind of like Scott. Charlie bowed her head, giving no indication she heard anything suspicious.

"Hey...pops," Stiles drawled. "I'm at lunch with Charlie and she might have a lead for us—you. We—you should check out Lydia Martin's phone for pictures. She might have something on there that could help out with what happened last night. Okay. See you tonight. Parent-teacher conferences. Yay. Okay, then."

When Stiles hung up, he slammed his phone to the table with more force than necessary and beamed. The bizarre elation he seemed to be experiencing to Charlie's eye translated as panic. Charlie smiled back just as widely. And the smiles stuck, neither one of them willing to admit defeat or show any crack in their Cheshire cat facade. By the time the lunch bell rang, Charlie had the satisfaction to back up that smile. She planted the seed in his mind, and if her judgement of his
character was in any way correct, by the time school ended it would have sprouted an Amazonian forest.

Given the bar set by recent events, the rest of the school day was fairly uneventful. She went to class, ignored the lectures, and then desperately pleaded with her neighbor for notes. Except for Finstock's class. He didn't so much lecture as shout facts at the class through a megaphone. All in all, it checked each box of your typical high school day. Only the final bell didn't bring on that rush of relief. This time as she backed her Impala out of its parking spot, her stomach twisted with a sense of foreboding.

When Charlie pulled to the curb outside the Martin household, she found exactly what she expected—manicured lawns, flower gardens worthy of Versailles, gleaming luxury cars, and one crappy blue Jeep. She would have smiled in celebration of her apparent psychic capabilities, but her facial muscles were paralyzed, leaving her with a scowl. That celebratory part of herself was equally matched by the self-disgust accompanying the severe manipulation of people she cared about. But this was the only way she could think of to get Stiles to fess up.

Charlie sank lower in her seat, opened her chemistry notes in her lap, and waited. There was no telling how long Stiles would be in Lydia's house, and while she intended to be ready for him there was still a goddamn chemistry test tomorrow. It took thirteen molar ratio problems for him to emerge—by her estimation about twenty-five minutes. His pinched expression of concern had Charlie's heart seize in her chest. An expression like that meant Lydia was probably in about as good shape now as she had been that morning. Which meant not fantastic.

Charlie's first move should have been to check on Lydia, but she was more selfish that. The burning need for certainty was eating an ulcer into the lining of her stomach. She reached for the door handle, the words of her impending rant queueing up in her head, but before she could so much as crack the door, the strains of "I Feel Pretty" blasted from her bag. Swearing under her breath, Charlie snatched up her phone and hit the send button. "Hey, Mel," she muttered quickly, "now's not really the best time."

"I am a terrible aunt," Mel announced into the receiver. "I am actually the worst."

The nervous tremor in her voice gave Charlie pause. "Wait, what?" she demanded. "Mel, what the hell are you talking about?"

"I am about to do something terribly selfish."

Charlie ground her teeth as her eyes flicked to the Martin's front door. "Oh, I don't think I'm going to agree with you on that one. What's wrong?"

"I...I need you to come with me," Mel stammered. "To the parent-teacher conferences. I know that you're miles away from having a C in any of your classes, but I've had this recurring nightmare about my Calculus final since I was eighteen and I'm not sure I have it in me to face down disapproving high school teachers on my own. I need moral support. Please. I'm sorry."

Charlie's teeth sank into her lower lip, biting back the initial protest. Across the street Stiles had already clambered into his car. The engine clanked ominously as it roared to life, but within moments he pulled out of the Martins' driveway and was heading down the street. Rubbing at her forehead to stave off the impending migraine, Charlie glanced between the shrinking Jeep and Lydia's front door. Shit. Time to hit pause.

"Charlie?" Mel pressed, her voice full of remorse. "I'm really sorry to ask this, but I honestly don't know what I'm doing."
"Um, yeah, sure," she acquiesced. "I'm just going to check in on Lydia, then maybe we can grab dinner or something? Or just eat a bunch of ice cream to emotionally prepare."

"Ice cream. I choose ice cream. It's always gonna be ice cream."

"Okay, then," Charlie chuckled. "It sounds like we have a plan."

"I love you."

"Love you more."

Hanging up, Charlie finally climbed out of her car. Before crossing the street, though, she collapsed against the driver's side door and stared down at her phone. Navigating through the apps, she selected one of several Lydia had installed one Friday night when she stole Charlie's phone. Always proactive, Lydia was. Always ahead of the game. But even someone as brilliant as her couldn't divine a way to be in two places at once. Charlie stared down at her phone screen, the winding roads of Beacon Hills sketched out before her. That little green dot that represented Lydia's phone zoomed down Fairfax Avenue, ensconced as it was in a blue Jeep. Who needs the FBI if you've downloaded 'Find My Friends'? Even with the weight the knowledge she held threatening to crush her, a bubble of smugness ballooned in Charlie's chest.

Pushing herself off of her car, she marched towards the Martin's door. She might have have hit 'snooze' on her reckoning, but someone would have to face the music soon enough.

"Alright, Stiles," she smirked to herself. "You made your move. I have the next turn."

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK

Charlie wakes up at the Martin House, still disoriented.
--------Bored + Lazy - Jamaican Queens

After composing herself, Charlie checks in on Lydia only to find her still hopped up on Xanax.
--------All This Time - Belle Mare

At school Charlie talks with Allison and goes about her day, things are deceptively calm.
--------Botanist - Guineafowl

Charlie and Stiles talk at lunch, sets him up. Plays over to the next scene where she's scoping out his Jeep outside Lydia's house.
--------Tied Up - Little Ceremonies

End chapter. Charlie silently promises Stiles that her investigation isn't over.
--------Cherry Bomb - The Minutes
We Don't Need No Education

Chapter Summary

So who thought that teachers and marauding, murdering supernatural creatures could possibly be stressful?

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

Patience was not a virtue Charlie carried in bulk. She fast-forwarded through commercials, she set slow pedestrians on fire in her mind, she damn near popped a blood vessel in her eye glaring at a stop light to make it turn green. No, her supply of patience was meager at best. It was a candy aisle the day after Halloween. But if you stacked it against Donald's, she was a freaking Costco.

Ding. Ding ding ding ding. Her phone exploded with notifications, each text message featuring inquiries that ran in a similar vein. What had she found out? Seriously, what had she found out? What was going on? Why wasn't she responding? Seriously, Oz, what the hell? OZ! OzOzOzOzOzOz! Do not underestimate how annoying I can be! OZZZZZZZZZZZ! Donald's need for answers seemed to surpass hers. But telling him to calm the hell down and wait would only invite a different flavor of indignation, so she muted her phone and kept her eyes trained on the map tracking Lydia's. The little red dot wound its way through the streets of Beacon Hills, approaching a somewhat familiar landmark. One that housed a nerd she found particularly irritating at present.

"I mean, I'm a mature adult," Mel declared, her voice breaking through Charlie's haze of focused distraction. "I'm a capable person. I run my own business, I'm responsible. Sure, I'm not completely certain that I'm doing my taxes right, but the IRS hasn't complained so far, so I think I've got that covered. Right?" She exhaled sharply. "Ugh, why am I asking you? You already know how to do taxes. But I am an adult in some ways."

"Hm?" Charlie mumbled, tearing her gaze from the phone. "Yeah, of course. It's all good."

An icy edge hid behind the golden brown of Mel's eyes as they met Charlie's in the rearview mirror. "Charlie, please don't turn me into one of those people who complains about teenagers being on their phones. Those people are obnoxious. I am determined to not be obnoxious."

With the push of a button, Charlie's phone screen darkened and she shoved it in her jacket pocket. The route of Lydia's phone had already been written—time to focus on her own. A street sign whizzed past, informing her they were fast approaching the school, a proximity which explained the uptick in Mel's commentary. Anxiety. Stiles could wait. Donald could wait. Mel needed her now. "Sorry," Charlie muttered. "Sorry, I'm a bit distracted with all the Lydia stuff."
The ice melted and Mel's features softened. At the mention of Lydia, guilt overwrote frustration in the crease of her forehead—not the expression Charlie had intended at all. "No," Mel shook her head. "Don't be sorry. I'm sorry. I'm the one here projecting all my—" she waved her hand absently "—all my insecurities on you. You're doing everything right. You've got straight A's. I'm dragging you along to make me more comfortable, and that's not fair."

"It's fine, Mel," Charlie protested. "Seriously, I'm happy to come. If I wasn't I would have complained—I'm very good at complaining. Something to do with inherent negativity….."

"Well your willingness, while appreciated, doesn't make me any less grateful," Mel said, angling a definitive nod in Charlie's direction. "I'm just not prepared to face a bunch of functional adults on my own."

Charlie scoffed. "Functional? Have you met Lydia's parents? If you put them in a room together it makes The Real Housewives look classy. Trust me, you're good."

The grim set of Mel's lips broke for a humorous twitch, but the mood in the car still read as somber. Perhaps because the lights of the lacrosse field announced their impending arrival. Mel's mouth began to move with a whispered mantra. "You are a mature and capable adult. You run your own business. You are responsible. You are impressive. You are a mature and capable adult. You run your own business——"

Mel's fingers drummed nervously against the wheel as they pulled into the Beacon Hills High parking lot. It had already almost completely filled, leaving scant parking opportunities. As they wound their way through the packed lines of cars, the tapping increased in speed. "We're not late, are we?" she murmured anxiously. "I checked the email a dozen times—it said 6:30 pm, I'm sure of it."

"We're not late," Charlie assured her. "It's not 6:30 yet, we're good."

Mel's eyes continued to scour the parking lot, not trusting the 6:23 pm blazing from the car's dashboard. As she observed the stream of people slowly filing towards the front doors, her grip on the wheel slackened. Releasing a long, calming breath, she pulled into one of the free parking spots near the edge of the lot and turned off the engine. Immediately her hands went to her face, pushing back some flyaway hairs. "My hair is all wrong, isn't it? I shouldn't have worn it down. I look older when I wear it up. I should have done a tight bun—it makes me look more professional."

Charlie tugged on some strands of her own coiffe—a haphazard ponytail with almost as much hair dangling loose as was contained by the elastic. "You don't look a day under twenty-eight," Charlie assured her. "And you are a professional."

Mel gnawed on her lower lip, carefully examining her reflection. Suddenly a hand appeared under Charlie's nose, palm faced expectantly upwards. "Give me your hair tie."

"I don't have a hair tie—give me your hair tie."

Nose wrinkled in confusion, Charlie pulled the elastic out of her hair and Mel snatched it up before she had a chance to hand it over. A hairbrush then manifested—seemingly out of thin air—and Mel yanked it through her absurdly soft, honeyed locks, twisting them back into a smooth, almost perfectly spherical bun. Charlie gave an approving nod. "Nice. You look like a C.E.O. Or a hitwoman. Or a hot librarian." Mel spared her a scathing glance and did one more button on her
shirt, hiding any hint that she even had the potential to show cleavage. "I didn't mean 'hot librarian' in a porn-y way," Charlie spluttered. "I just meant you look like a librarian. Who happens to be hot."

Mel released a breath, making a move to tuck her hair behind her ears only to find it had all been successfully tied back. "Fine. That's as good as it'll get, I guess." Finally tearing her eyes from the mirror, she regarded Charlie. "Are you okay?"

Charlie shrugged. "Ready when you are."

With a final grimace, Mel reached for her door handle and climbed out of her Prius. Charlie scrambled after her, the dull scrape of her Converse trailing after the determined, if not confident, clack of practical yet stylish heels. Somehow Mel's already perfect posture seemed to improve. She looked every bit the part, clad in a crisp, baby blue collared button down tucked neatly into a black pencil skirt. Throw in one well starched blazer and she may as well have been running for Congress. But her hands kept running down her front, brushing away layers of imaginary lint and cat hair. Should she remind Mel they didn't have a cat? Because at this point Mel might think they had a cat.

As they approached the front doors, Mel's steady gait faltered. Steps became uneven and slower until she came to a complete stop before the front doors. Charlie fell in line, glancing at her out of the corner of her eye. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Mel said, her head performing a strange diagonal jerk as if she couldn't decide to nod or shake it. "Yeah, it just kind of...feels like the first day of school all over again. I never was good with teachers. Just...give me a quick second, okay? My stomach feels like that time I shame-ate a bag of dusty candy corn after breaking up with my boyfriend. Which happened in high school. Where I am. Again."

"You were shame-eating and you went with candy corn?"

"It was all we had in the house—don't judge me."

Charlie bobbed her head in understanding and withdrew a few steps so her aunt could collect herself. Mel's lips moved silently with her most recent self-actualization. But not two sentences in, she was interrupted.

"Are you new?" a kind, female voice asked. Charlie and Mel both jumped, but as they discovered the source of the inquiry it became clear that neither of them had cause to. The voice belonged to a woman of the age Mel wanted to appear—old enough to have given birth to a high schooler without any hint of scandal, but bright-eyed and beautiful. She had dark, curly hair hanging loose at her shoulders, tanned skin, and deep brown eyes that conveyed an encouraging amount of friendliness. "Sorry if I startled you," the woman said, giving Mel an awkward wave of greeting. "You just looked a little lost."

"She's new," Charlie said, jerking a thumb in Mel's direction. "I'm a battle-hardened veteran of this establishment."

Mel released an uncomfortable chuckle. "Yes, I'm new. But I'm more psychologically lost than anything else. It's been ten years since I've been to high school. Or any school." She exchanged a look with Charlie. "We, uh, we have a fairly recently established situation here..."

Mel's words trailed off, leaving behind multiple pairs of furrowed eyebrows, Mel's in uncertainty and the woman's in confusion. Some thesauruses might list the words as synonyms, but the
distinction here was concrete. "This is my aunt," Charlie declared, angling her head in Mel's direction. "She looks too young to have given birth to me because she is. Or she's a highlander. Too soon to tell. But if you see Christopher Lambert wandering around with a broadsword you should let us know, because she might have to make a hasty exit or decapitation may be imminent."

The woman's mouth dropped open to respond, only to close once more. "I...don't know what that means."

"That's fair."

"Charlie," Mel murmured, "I don't know what that means either. You really need to stop casually bringing up decapitation. It can make people uncomfortable. Most people, actually."

"It was a reference! Wait, hold up—Mel, have you never seen Highlander? How are we related?!"

"Is that really an issue that needs to be discussed now? I already have a stomachache." Mel turned back to the woman, her frustration activating a capacity for bluntness. "I'm Charlie's guardian. She moved to town a few months ago."

Any surprise in the woman's reaction faded quickly into good-hearted understanding. "So...fresh meat, huh?" she replied, a smile illuminating her face. "The whole queasy stomach thing is normal. I remember my first parent-teacher conference back in kindergarten. Leading into it I had this recurring nightmare that I'd sit down in this ugly plastic chair and a teacher would tell me my son was eating glue and that I was a terrible mother. Then I accidentally ran into the men's bathroom. My middle school history teacher was in there. Worst way to wake up....ever."

Mel's eyebrows shot up. "What about now?" she asked. "Now that your son's in high school."

"Oh, I have the same dream. Only he's a lot bigger and the teacher is a lot more judgemental." The clouds of Mel's anxiety parted long enough to give passage to a bark of laughter. The woman beamed a smile of warmth and satisfaction, as if putting people at ease was her profession. She extended a hand to formalize the introduction. "Melissa McCall."

Melody took the proffered hand and gave it a firm shake—a perfect execution of the TED talk handshake Charlie had caught her studying up on. "I'm Melody Oswin. This is my niece, Charlie."

A shadow of recognition darted through Melissa McCall's eyes and they flicked up and down Charlie's form. "You're Charlie Oswin?" she asked. "I think you're a class with my son. Scott. Scott McCall."

Charlie blinked in surprise. She hadn't put much thought into what Scott's mother would look like. The picture being painted had an intuitive flow. General kindness, good intentions, they had the same timid, slightly lopsided smile. The weirdass behavior was the sticking point. In that Scott's mother didn't appear to exhibit any of what, for Scott, was a defining characteristic. Where Melissa McCall was an impressionist masterpiece, Scott was a less anatomically correct version of a Picasso. Melissa McCall, while perhaps too much the embattled single mother to be perfectly poised, radiated an aura of calm. Scott...did not. Scott jumped at every backfiring car or unanticipated question. Charlie had yet to see Scott 'calm'. His abnormal conduct at virtually every turn had woven itself into quite the rich tapestry. She could knit him a sweater, one stitch per bizarre encounter, and it would suit him well. His mother, on the other hand, appeared comfortable in her magenta, cotton v-neck from Anne Taylor.

Ugh, too many metaphors.
"Yeah," Charlie said, shaking herself back to attention. "Yeah, I've got a few classes with Scott. You're his mom? You're more….serene….than I expected."

"Thank you," Mrs. McCall replied, the statement ringing more like a question. "You're more...female than I expected."

Charlie let out a beleaguered sigh, her head falling back on her shoulders. "Why do people always assume I'm a guy? How do I come up in conversation? Oh, that's my pal Charlie who enjoys peeing while standing up and watching Spike TV."

"Not exactly," Mrs. McCall chuckled. "He's mentioned you a few times in passing. Mostly that you were cool but he was a little bit afraid of you."

"That holds up. I have a strong presence—it can be intimidating. People don't know what to do with it."

She nodded sagely. "I can see that."

"Scott's the lacrosse player, right?" Mel asked Charlie quietly. "Allison's boyfriend?" Charlie nodded in confirmation and Mel turned back to Mrs. McCall. "We saw Scott play at the last lacrosse game. He was incredible. I swear, some of those moves defied the laws of physics—I've never seen anything like it."

"Thank you," Mrs. McCall replied, her voice lacking the anticipated tone of pride. The flash of a watch face appeared from under the sleeve of her sweater and her eyes scanned the parking lot, looking for someone. Not finding the object of their search, her lips twitched down into a frown. "My son the star lacrosse power was actually supposed to meet me here, but his phone seems to be shut off and he is….not here."

Charlie bit her tongue, unsure of whether revealing Scott's and Allison's birthday plans would help or hurt in this scenario. For him or his mother.

"I'm sure he'll be here soon," Mel assured her.

Mrs. McCall checked her watch again and scratched absently at her forehead. "The two of you should go on in. It's probably time to start. Do you know who you're going to see first?"

Mumbling a soft 'oh', Mel rumbled around in her bottomless purse until she extricated the email she had printed in preparation. "It's uh……a Ms. Flemming," she said, squinting at the small print. "Math teacher. That's fun, we get to start with my least favorite subject."

"That's a good place to start," Mrs. McCall reassured her. "Ms. Flemming has never been anything but reasonable. A good one to ease you into the process."

Mel released a long, slow breath. "Here's to hoping. It was nice to meet you."

"You too."

Charlie clapped a hand on Mel's shoulder as they pushed through the entrance the high school. The doors closed behind them, but not before the overtones of Mrs. McCall's annoyance snuck through. "Scott, this is your mother. Again."

Shit. One more reason she was glad she wasn't Scott. But, as the latch clicked shut, it became less clear which of them was worse off.
The sight of the school after hours was mildly unsettling. The fluorescents burned more harshly in the night, no ray of hopeful sunshine to aid them. Reality seemed to have shifted, as though they had strolled into a parallel dimension. Hallways had been swept clean, the sharpie graffiti scrubbed from the walls. Layers of Febreeze covered the usual combination of body odor, teenage pheromones, and despair. Yup, the administration had done its damnedest to make the school 'parent friendly'.

About six other parents were stationed in front of room 134 by the time Mel and Charlie arrived. All of them older than Mel, all of them in couples, and none of them with their own child. The blonde's shoulders went rigid once more as she sat in one of the garish orange chairs, tucking one ankle behind the other and laying her hands in her lap. The 'Princess Diaries' leg cross. Nerves were definitely getting the better of her. And they weren't assuaged when the classroom door opened to reveal a striking, stylish couple striding out into the hallway. A few moments later, a woman with a long face, light brown skin, and dark, curly hair stuck her head out to observe those waiting. "Mr. and Mrs. Reyes," she said, scanning the line. "If you'd please join me."

The couple next to Melody, significantly more rumpled than the one that had just left, got to their feet. Charlie immediately took the now-vacant spot next to her aunt. Mel's foot began to move on its own accord, the tap tap tap of her heel echoing against eggshell walls and corkboard ceilings. The sound drew the attention of other parents. From the pinch of her lips, Charlie could see Mel noticed the unwanted attention, but her foot continued to tap nonetheless. It was a nervous response. No helping it.

"If they ask why you're here, can we just say it's because I'm trying to be responsible?" Mel muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "I feel like telling them I'm scared of them isn't really such a good game plan."

"That is a-okay with me," Charlie nodded.

Mel's shoulders released some of their tension, but enough remained to keep her spine more rigid than a piece of rebar.

"Maybe we should sketch out a game plan," Charlie murmured. "You like preparation, right? So let's prepare."

Mel's eyes, trained on the 'Hang In There' kitten poster, broke away long enough to toss a glance in Charlie's direction. "Okay. What's there to know?"

Charlie filled Mel in on the situation at Beacon Hills High. The reasonable teachers, the bizarre ones, the psychotic ones, the over-caffeinated and under-caffeinated ones, the sadistic ones. Mel blinked rapidly, nodding her head as she assimilated the information. By the time Ms. Flemming stuck her head out to call her name, the tapping of her foot had stopped.

ROUND ONE: MATHEMATICS

Ms. Flemming sat Charlie and Mel down in front of her desk, her expression neutral but not unwelcoming. The entire scene smacked of stagecraft. A pile of books set on one corner, an apple on the other, her hands folded on a stack of files equidistant between the two. It was all too orderly to be normal. At least that's what Mel thought, according the the suspicious glint in her eye. She sought some kind of nefarious twist. A trap-door that led to a vat of molten lava? Perhaps. Or, even more frightening, some insightful commentary into Charlie's academic performance and/or psychological or emotional status.

Ms. Flemming's smile as she faced them both down could only be described as enigmatic. "I must
say, I'm surprised to see the both of you here," she said. "Students are only required to attend parent-teacher conferences if they have a C average or below in one of their classes. It's my understanding that Charlie is doing well across the board."

Mel smiled awkwardly and shrugged, shooting Charlie a quick glance. "I'm new to being my niece's guardian. My priority is ensuring she does well here. I think her perspective is as important as anybody else's. Probably more important. So….yeah. She's here. With me. To….discuss…and learn…and…grow. I'm the sun, you're the watering can, and she's the little pea plant that could."

Charlie opened her mouth and then closed it again. "Yup," she exclaimed brightly. "And we—" she gestured between herself and Mel "—we are two peas in a pod…..except Mel is also the sun….and I am the whole of the pea plant….so as metaphors go this one isn't ideal. Sorry."

Mel paused for a moment—long enough for her ears to hear what her mouth and Charlie's mouth had just said. "I'd—I'd like to reiterate that I was talking about rhetorical growth," she chuckled uncomfortably. "Like growth as a student and a human being. She's tall enough already. I'm going to stop talking now."

Ms. Flemming's head tilted with bewilderment, but any less than positive feelings were hidden behind a mask of placid agreeableness. "A—Alright then. Well, it sounds like we're off to a...start. I'm always happy to have an honest and open dialogue. It's admirable that the two of you are working so hard to ensure an easy transition."

Ms. Flemming pulled the file from the top of the stack and flipped it open. "Alright, so let's begin."

ROUND TWO: AMERICAN HISTORY

"Okay, so you're about the hundredth parent I've had to talk to today."

Mel blinked at the brusque disinterestedness that rolled off of Mr. Allen in waves. Bloodshot eyes, messy hair, skin pale enough to see the veins beneath, and a face that could either be twenty or fifty….Charlie honestly never had any idea what to make of the man. But tonight's performance of his usual blase attitude even caught her by surprise. In class was one thing, but in front of parents….he had fewer fucks to distribute than Charlie had anticipated. He leaned back in his chair, pulling an embarrassingly out of date issue of Newsweek onto his lap.

"The kid's got an A," he drawled. "So I'm going to mentally prepare myself for the next helicopter parent while you watch a video on conflict resolution."

Mel open her mouth and closed it again, exchanging a look with Charlie. "I'd actually really like to discuss—"

Mr. Allen pointed a remote at the bulky television in the corner and turned it on. The screen flickered, soon revealing a 1980s export clad in high-waisted, pleated khakis.

"So your body is changing…"

"Um, Mr. Allen," Charlie murmured. "I don't think this is the right video."

He flipped the page in his magazine.
ROUND THREE: ECONOMICS

Student files were strewn across the desk, papers swirling into a hodgepodge of academic records, the handwriting on every page indecipherable. It appeared that Coach Finstock’s filing system was as jumbled and mixed up as his commentary on the lacrosse pitch. He sat at the other side of the desk, inquisitiveness matching the manic energy behind his eyes. His entire face pinched as he looked between Charlie and her aunt.

"Right, so—" Coach Finstock checked the name hastily scrawled on the file in his hands "—so Charlotte seems to be doing just fine in the class. Grades are good, no tardiness, participation…." he squinted at Charlie, as if trying to identify her face in a crowd "...I can't remember, so I'm gonna go ahead and say average…."

He sat back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest. Jutting his chin out, he nodded suspiciously, allowing an unnerving and uncharacteristic silence to fill the room. "I—I'm sorry," he spluttered. "Are you pulling some teen movie B.S. where you try and pass off your cool, hip neighbor as your parent? 'Cause I'm telling you, kid, you're doing it wrong. Point A, if you're gonna pull a fast one, pick someone who's not like five years older than you. Two, your grades are fine, so what is the hell is the point? What are you trying to achieve here? 'Cause this little...charade you've got going seems like it's 31 flavors of useless."

"E—excuse me?" Mel stammered. "I'm her aunt!"

Coach looked her up and down with a wary eye, his paranoia channelled towards the most benign of circumstances. "Huh," he responded. "Okay, well where are her parents? Pretty sure they're called 'parent-teacher' conferences, not 'aunt-student-teacher' conferences. I've done my fair share, so I know how it goes. The 'it takes a village' mentality is nice and all, but we're really supposed to talk to a mother or father. So where are they?"


"Dead," Coach scoffed. "Please. They're supposed to notify us about that stuff. You can't just—" He opened the file, suddenly going very still. His eyes widened beyond their typical buggishness until they occupied the majority of his cartoon-like head. "Huh, here it is. Father deceased."

Flipping the file shut once more, he clasped his hands together and rested them on the desk.

"Well this just got awkward."

ROUND SIX: ENGLISH

A flutter of apprehension took up residence in the pit of Charlie's stomach. Rounds four and five—P.E., again featuring the illustrious Coach Finstock, and French—had passed without notable incident, but they were now approaching rockier territory. She had allowed Mr. Hobson to witness just a bit too much of her actual personality and Harris….he was a straight-up sadist. Everything up to this point had been smooth sailing. Relatively speaking.

The herd of parents had begun to thin by the time they reached the English classroom. Mel may have been grateful for their disappearance, but an empty Beacon Hills High bore a striking resemblance to the set of numerous slasher flicks. The door flung open and a balding head appeared, peering at Charlie and Mel from behind a pair of bifocals placed just low enough on the bridge of his nose to project his an air of tacit judgement. "Miss Oswin, I presume?" he tutted, inclining his head in Mel's direction.

"Um, yes," Mel replied, offering a lame wave. "That's me."
Mr. Hobson's lips pinched together, his face unreadable. "I see that Charlie is here as well. I didn't expect her to be joining us. Her grades are well within the acceptable range to be excused."

Mel's fingers fidgeted, playing with the clasp to her purse. "Yes, I have been informed of that.....I just thought that given our situation it would be best for us to both be here."

"I understand the reasoning," Mr. Hobson responded with a nod, "but I spend an hour with Charlie five days a week. I'd rather talk to you one-on-one."

Mel's eyes widened ever-so-slightly. "Oh," she chirped, her voice jumping several octaves. "I....I can see how that might be best."

Mr. Hobson opened the door further, waving Mel through. She stepped forwards, but not before shooting a panicked look over her shoulder—one which Charlie returned in full measure. The door closed between them with a dramatic slam that reverberated down the hall. Shit. Charlie collapsed in one of the plastic chairs and rubbed at her forehead. She hadn't behaved too terribly in Hobson's class, had she? There couldn't be too many criticisms or accusations being leveled behind closed doors, right? Ah fuck, if she was having an existential crisis, Mel must be falling apart at the seams.

Charlie sank lower in her seat, kicking her feet out in front of her and picking nervously at her fingernails. She could almost make out the voices in the classroom. The muffled, disapproving drawl of Mr. Hobson could be distinguished from Mel's high-pitched tones, but the words themselves stalled on their route to Charlie's ears. Instead she focused on the clock a ways down the hall, eyes tracing the path of the second hand as time tick, tick, ticked by. At least a week passed within the first two revolutions. By the time Mel left the room, she would find a mummified corpse that used to be Charlie.

The spare reserves of patience Charlie had to begin with depleted quickly. Shimmying in her chair, she shifted herself closer to door. She reached for the handle, turning it slowly. A wince marred her features as the hinges squeaked, but neither of the room's occupants appeared to notice. The voices were quiet, but a strained neck and piqued ears brought them just into the audible range.

Mr. Hobson's voice was the first to slip through. "—you misunderstand me, Miss Oswin. This was in no way a preface to bad news regarding your niece's academic standing." Charlie heard a sharp exhale on Mel's part, followed by a chuckle from Mr. Hobson. She, however, felt neither relief nor amusement. Because from Mr. Hobson's reassurance dangled a 'but', and 'buts' rarely preceded a positive conversational pivot. "Now that this particular fear has been laid to rest," he continued, "I feel that I should tell you that Charlie has adapted quite well to Beacon Hills, at least where academics are concerned."

"She's been doing well socially too," Mel interjected. "She's formed some good friendships. Solid ones, I think."

"Yes, I have witnessed her....rapport with Ms. Argent and Mr. Stilinski—"

"Stilinski?"

"Ms. Oswin, Charlie is an intelligent girl—quick, clever, witty, and highly analytical. She likely has a bright future ahead of her."

Hearing a compliment fall from Hobson's lips took Charlie aback, but her disbelief was tempered by the 'but' still waiting to be dropped. Mel, though, didn't share her hesitation. "She was always a precocious child," the blonde declared brightly. "I remember once—she must have been six or
seven—I pointed out a rainbow and suggested that we go look for the pot of gold. She told me I was being ridiculous. That it was just light being broken apart by water droplets."

When Hobson replied, his voice had a slight edge to it, like he was humoring Mel. Charlie's hackles raised along with her unease. "Like I said, Charlie is a clever girl. But—" there it was "—but Ms. Oswin, Charlie's academic record is not what needs to be discussed. There is, however, the matter of some minor behavioral issues."

Charlie's chest tightened as Mel's earlier exhale of relief was negated by an anxious inhale. "Wh—what—I mean, Charlie has always behaved responsibly at home. She has a knack for sarcasm and can sometimes be confrontational, but I don't see her doing anything that could become overly disruptive."

"The question isn't how disruptive she is," Mr. Hobson replied. "Short of a few lapses with Ms. Argent and Mr. Stilinski, she largely keeps to herself in class. When she's asked a question, she answers it succinctly, though with more...flare...than might be necessary. The real issue is how she addresses teachers when she does speak to them, both in and out of the classroom."

"How, um, how does she address them?" Mel stammered out.

"Charlie...." Mr. Hobson muttered. "Let's just say she seems to have a certain degree of disregard for authority. Nothing so direct as questioning the authority of our staff, but she often speaks to them with little to no deference, as if they were peers rather than teachers. Now I understand how the death of a parent might create somewhat of a void in discipline, and that it must be difficult for someone as young as yourself to fill that void, but I believe it might have led to some level of....let's just say impertinence. If you were to exercise more discipline at home, then—"

Melody cleared her throat loudly, effectively cutting him off. Charlie twitched in surprise at the move. It was so definitively un-Mel. Interrupting Charlie came with an apologetic grimace, but interrupting a teacher? She scooted her chair closer to the door her neck straining as she brought it closer to the door. "Mr. Hobson," Mel said, her tone apologetic and placating. "I do apologize if Charlie has caused any trouble, but I feel that I should tell you that the typical student-teacher or child-authority dynamic is never going to be on that Charlie conforms to."

Mr. Hobson let out a huff. "Really?" he asked, a tinge of passive aggression entering his tone. "Why is that?"

When Mel spoke again, her voice was barely audible. "Charlie idolizes her father. Because of that, she doesn't really notice some of the ways he failed her." Every muscle in Charlie went rigid. Only a staring contest with Medusa could improve her impersonation of a stone statue. Mel's words, despite their gentle and unsteady cadence, rang in her ears like a gong being smashed over and over. "I love my brother," Mel barreled on. "In many ways he was a wonderful father. The best someone could ask for. But he worked a lot. Long hours, holidays, weekends. Charlie ended up fending for herself a lot. Sometimes she fended for both of them. I mean, last year she did their taxes. What sixteen year old knows how to do taxes? I don't even know how to do my taxes. Which, I guess, is kind of a failure on my part. But, you know, that's not the point."

"Alright." The word rolled off Mr. Hobson's tongue in a questioning, almost Southern drawl, as if he had moved to Texas and eaten a full serving of molasses. "Can you elaborate on your point, please?"

"My point is that if Charlie ever looks at adults as peers rather than authority figures, it's because in a lot of ways Charlie already is an adult. And I'm not saying she shouldn't be treated like a teenager, because she is a teenager. Of course she needs that structure and discipline. But if you
look at a bunch of those technical milestones to adulthood, for her it's kind of...'been there, done that'. She's been the person calling the internet service provider or on hold with the credit card company. So...yeah. If she talks to adults like peers, it's not disrespect. It's just how she's dealt with the world."

Mr. Hobson went quiet for a long while. "Thank you for your candor, Ms. Oswin. I will take it into account."

They continued to speak, but their conversation was overtaken by the buzzing of the fluorescent light bulbs overhead. The sound grew until the drone filled her head, a thousand angry hornets nesting in her ears. She gently pulled the door shut and dragged her chair back to its original position before drawing her knees to her chest and tucking them beneath her chin. She squeezed her eyes shut. The lights shone a little too brightly in her eyes. The draft from the stuttering air conditioner hit the back of her neck with a cold, unwelcome caress. Too much. Sensory overload. Her surroundings were loud. Not loud enough, though, to drown out her thoughts.

None of the words Mel spoke sounded true. Her dad had always been there for her. Her dad was excellent. Her dad made her happy. Nothing Mel said sounded happy. But as she picked through the words, she couldn't locate a distinct lie. It all happened. Just not like that. It needed more context. Mel knew the context, didn't she? Or if she didn't, someone did. Donald must. Right? Yes. No. Maybe.

Across the hall a brightly colored inspirational poster interrupted the dingy off-white wall. A group of hands rested on a globe, to the left of it printed the words 'Together Everyone Achieves More'. TEAM. Those posters never made any sense. Group projects were never not a crapshoot. The lacrosse team was a dysfunctional mess. But slap on a pithy statement in a semi-professional font on the word and suddenly it became something profound and got plastered on a wall. She always thought of her and her dad as a team. Like the Gilmore girls, but with more swearing, less narcissism, and no fancy relatives. They were there for each other, they helped each other, they didn't keep secrets. Now she thought of her and Mel as a team. But they did have secrets. On both sides, apparently.

"Charlie?"

The voice in her ear made Charlie jump in her seat. Mel stood at her shoulder, her expression indecipherable. This is what Mel looked like when she was hiding something, apparently. Nervous and mildly constipated. Charlie ran her hands down her face, wiping the bleary haze from her face if not from her mind. The door to the English room had already closed behind Mel, leaving them alone in the hallway. According to the clock, Mel and Hobson had needed over half an hour to discuss her. And she had only been privy to the first six minutes.

"Hey," Charlie chirped, wincing internally at the false note of cheeriness in her tone. "How'd it go?"

Mel let out a weak laugh and scratched at her forehead. "Okay, I think. It's a good thing you're smart, because otherwise this experience would be a lot more traumatizing for me."

"Yes, I study for the sole purpose of minimizing your trauma. Not, you know...college and scholarships and stuff."

Mel rolled her eyes and offered up a smile which Charlie returned. But as she walked past—not without a gentle hip-check—that lopsided smirk instantly dropped from Charlie's face. "So Harris is the last teacher?" Mel called over her shoulder. "Chemistry?"
Charlie gave her head a quick shake to clear her thoughts and trailed after her aunt. "Yup, last one."

"And which one is he again?"

"He's the psychopath."

"Great."

The closer they ventured to Harris’s room, the shorter Mel’s steps became. By the end of the hallway she was one pair of pointe shoes from those dainty little ballerina steps. Charlie’s pace slackened as well, but not with such conscious effort. Her eyes were cast down, but didn't see enough of the ground to keep from stumbling. Thoughts clouded her head, none tangible enough to grasp, a chorus of whispers that blended together only allowing one or two words to break through: 'The ways that he failed her'. It didn't make sense. Mel couldn't really think that.

Suddenly, a sharp scream pierced the veil of introspection. Unsure of what she had heard, her gaze snapped from the waxed floor to Mel. Her aunt stood completely still, eyes wide under furrowed brows and lower lip caught nervously by her teeth. "Did you hear that?"

That initial scream was followed by a shout, then a shriek. The scattered sounds grew and joined together into a veritable orchestra of panic that rattled the doors to the parking lot. Charlie’s eyes went straight to the handle. Mel's voice sounded behind her, tight and wary. "Charlie….Charlie don't—"

Her feet were already moving, hands shoving the door open. The empty hallway gave way to chaos. Figures scurried around the parking lot, their shadows writhing under the bright stadium lights like a Rorschach inkblot that refused to settle into a single shape. They weren't running in any particular direction, darting to their cars, back to the school, or floundering around without direction, fear having short-circuited their internal GPS. Amidst the screams, a deeper note reached Charlie's ears. A gravelly roar. Between the cars, low to the ground, stalked a shadow darker than the rest, its movements slow, steady, and executed with purpose. Predatory. And certainly not human.

A single word slipped from Charlie's lips. "Shit."

All hell broke loose when the cars began revving to life. Under fumbling hands their movements were erratic. The various yelps intermingled with the screeching of tires against asphalt and honking of horns. Amid the tumult, several silhouettes stood unnervingly still. Even more unnerving? Charlie recognized them. Allison stepped aimlessly between the cars, eyes wide with confusion. Hadn't she left hours ago? What the hell was she doing here? Charlie cupped her hands to her mouth and shouted. "Allison! Allison—get back to the school!"

Allison didn't hear her, the pleas lost in the din. Her steps of quiet fear took her right into the path of an oncoming car. Charlie's heart stopped.

"Allison!"

Charlie's cries were matched by someone else's. Scott suddenly materialized out of nowhere. Flying forward with superhuman speed, he grabbed Allison by the waist and yanked her to safety. Her sigh of relief is met with a hand squeezing her shoulder. "Oh, thank God," Mel murmured behind her.

With Allison secure, Charlie's sought out the second figure. Sheriff Stilinski's head was visible between the remaining parked cars. His head was angled downward, eyes squinting in
concentration as he scoured the lot. His movements, not unlike those of the predator, were calculated. After one resounding roar, he found his target. His steadiness gave way to action as he ran towards the sound, waving bystanders aside. "Move! MOVE!" He rounded a line of cars, but was knocked suddenly from view.

The car's lights were on. The car moved. The car hit him. "Sheriff Stilinski?!!"

Charlie darted forwards. Mel's hand closed on the collar of her shirt, but she surged out of her aunt's grasp. She dodged through the crowd like a salmon swimming upstream, battling the current of human bodies hurling themselves towards the school. He was on the ground when she found him, collapsed on his side. The twist of dread in her heart may not have been so strong had he been wearing his uniform. In his uniform he was Sheriff Stilinski. He still wore a khaki jacket, but it wasn't government issued. The label probably read 'L.L. Bean' or 'The Gap'. Tonight he was just a dad. Stiles's dad.

Charlie dropped to her knees next to him, his face coming into view in the glow of car brake lights. Probably the car that hit him. He clenched his jaw to keep the pain from occupying the whole of his expression. And yet when he looked up at her, exasperation managed to override the pain. "Kid, get back to the school. It's not safe."

He made a move to stand. As he shifted, the creases in his face deepened into a grimace. "Whoa," Charlie exclaimed, holding out a hand indicating for him to stop. "You just got hit by a car—you're not supposed to move after that! They need scans and stuff. I'm gonna call an ambulance." As she reached in her pocket for her phone, he continued to sit up. "Stiles would kill me if I let you move," she mumbled. The sheriff ignored her.

Charlie punched 9-1-1 and pressed the phone to her ear. As it rang, another roar filled the parking lot. The sheriff reached for his ankle, pulling up the cuff to reveal a gun strapped to his ankle. Despite the dire circumstances, the coolness of that had to be acknowledged. But before he managed to fully wrestle it from its holster, two shots pierced the night air.

Then it was quiet.

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

Chapter End Notes

Comments and reviews are welcome....possibly even encouraged!

Soundtrack

Mel and Charlie walk into the school and begin the rounds of parent-teacher conferences.

~~~~~~~~~Don't Need Another Problem - Adam Jones

Charlie overhears Mel's conversation with Mr. Hobson and lands ends up on an emotionally contortionist pose....

~~~~~~~~~So Long, so Well - Dalton

The shitteth hath hitteth the fan. Also gunshots and stuff.

~~~~~~~~~You Can Run - Adam Jones
Suspension of Disbelief

Chapter Summary

After having hit the fan, the shit gets real.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Wait, so it was an actual mountain lion?"

Charlie wasn't well versed in the Beacon Hills nightlife, but if this evening was any indication, the hospital was the place to be. For such a small town it generated a hell of a lot of patients. None in dire circumstances, mind you. At least not for now. A few bumps and bruises, a couple of scrapes here and there. Not too terrible given the night's events. Relatively speaking.

Three times in a month now Charlie had wound up at the hospital, this time explicitly by choice. Ambulance lights flashed at the emergency room entryway where she stood, drawn back against a concrete wall, arms wrapped around her middle to ward off the cold. Her head throbbed as she tried to arrange the clusterfuck that was parent teacher conferences into a coherent picture. Start with the corners, build your way in. A predator stalking between cars, mass chaos, two gunshots that didn't come from the sheriff's weapon. Slow steps towards the circle that had gathered a few yards before the school doors. An animal wheezing its last few breaths in a pool of its own blood while smoke wafted from the barrel of a gun. Allison's hands clasped over her mouth in horror. Scott's wide, terrified eyes. Mr. Argent's tight-lipped stoicism as he stood over his kill, the glint in his eye as cold as the steel of the gun in his hand.

"Yo, earth to Oz," Donald's voice insisted. "It was an actual, honest to God mountain lion?"

An empty gurney shoved by, giving Charlie a start. "Uh, erm, yeah," she muttered, keeping her voice low. Hospital staff darted past her with too much purpose to be listening in, but better safe than sorry. "Yeah, Donald, it was your standard mountain lion. No 'zoinks' or 'jinkies' or anything. Just your garden variety mountain lion attacking a school parking lot. You know, as mountain lions do."

"Wait, so the thing in the video—"

"Was not what I saw in the parking lot," Charlie said, shaking her head. "Definitely not the same thing. The mountain lion was small, skinny. It didn't have a snout. And it's eyes weren't red."

"Ugh, thank God."

"Thank God?"
"Well, yeah!" Donald scoffed. "After all this build up if it ended up being something as friggin' lame as an actual mountain lion that would be disappointing on an epic level."

A quick glance through the hospital doors invited a view of couples huddled together, stroking hair and whispering comforts. "Trust me, normal shit can be plenty damaging. Plenty of people get hurt by normal."

Regret impregnated the pause that followed on Donald's end of the line. "...Right..." he murmured. "How is the sheriff doing? The paramedics said he'd be okay, right?"

Charlie's eyes flicked back through the emergency room doors. Sheriff Stilinski had kicked her out of his room ten minutes ago. Which...you know...fair enough. Grilling the nurses about how they were coding the insurance did her no favors. Nor did jokingly asking him for his credit card information as she filled out his forms. Hell, he objected when she climbed into the ambulance with him to begin with, but between her firm insistence that Stiles would want someone with him and Mel's quiet acceptance—encouragement even—she fought her way in. And at least when Stiles got the call, the other end had a friendly voice. Whatever cold comfort that might bring.

"He should be okay," Charlie replied. "He landed hard on his spine, but the paramedics didn't think there would be any permanent damage. We're waiting for the stamp of approval for the doctors. They're gonna do some scans and stuff."

"And you?" Donald pressed. "How are you doing?"

Charlie shrugged. "I'm fine. I steered clear of any fender benders."

"You know that's not what I mean."

Charlie squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed at her forehead. Yeah, she knew that wasn't what he meant. Trip to the hospital. Someone's dad under the proverbial knife. The experience checked plenty of triggering boxes. But none of that had her insides twisted with doubt. To say her heart didn't beat faster when she climbed into the ambulance would be a lie. To deny that the heart monitor's beeping made her nerves hum with anxiety would be pointless. But as the ambulance doors closed between her and Mel, relief untied one of the many knots in her stomach. After overhearing her conversation with Mr. Hobson, she needed time to herself. Time to process. Which made this exercise a whole lot less selfless than initially intended.

"Hey Donald," she murmured. "I had a good dad, right?"

"What?!" he demanded, taken aback.

She pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. "Never mind. Ignore me. It's stupid. It's just been a...weird night. Lots of weird stuff. I'm good."

"Oz, you sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "Yeah, Donald, I'm okay. I've gotta think about some stuff, but I'm okay."

"No bullshit?"

The screech of tires against asphalt interrupted the concerned overtones of Donald's voice. A blue jeep hurtled into the hospital parking lot, jerking to a stop across several parking spaces. The lights cut out immediately and a door swung open, allowing a lanky figure to topple out. "Ah, shit," Charlie swore into the receiver. "Stiles just got here. I've gotta go—I'll fill you in on everything tomorrow."
"Alright, alright. You still gonna go through with the master plan? I mean, with his dad in the hospital and everything...it adds a new wrinkle. In that, you know, it would be a total dick move."

Charlie's features contracted into a pained wince. The sight of Stiles's frantic scramble from the Jeep did little to alleviate the mounting pile of guilt. "I guess I'm going to be a dick then," she muttered. "I can't not finish this. Lydia's still probably hopped up on mommy's little helpers. This has got to end. Tonight."

"Whoa," Donald whistled. "You really know how to bring out the ominous in a situation."

"Good thing I live in a town where there's occasion to use it."

"Yeah, whatever," he groused. "Stop showing off. You have fun Scooby Doo-ing or whatever. While I sit here. Impotent. A Scooby Doo-nothing. BUT I expect updates."

"You'll get them when they're there. I gotta go."

"Don't go to hard on him."

"I won't. I'll try not to."

Charlie shoved her phone in the pocket of her jacket while Stiles bolted up the ramp to the emergency room, clutching the handrail to simultaneously keep himself upright and drag himself forward. Charlie stepped out of her designated shadow, hands extended outward to steady him. With good reason. Stiles tripped forwards, mistaking her arm for an extension of the railing, and nearly took her down with him. "Whoa there," Charlie mumbled, one hand grasping his elbow and the other beneath his shoulder. "You okay?"

His skin was pale beneath his freckles and small droplets of sweat collected at his hairline. His breaths came out heavy and halting, like he had run to the hospital rather than driven. Stiles blinked a few times before his eyes focused. "Charlie? What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "I called you, remember?"

"Yeah, but—Nevermind. How's my dad. Have you seen him? Is he okay?"

A shadow hovered behind his eyes. Usually a light brown, they had darkened with worry and darted back and forth across her face as if reading a book. Like it was an encrypted message and the twitch of an eyeball or a light sniffle could give him what he needed to decode it. Charlie moved her hands to his shoulders, gripping them firmly. It was almost imperceptible, but he trembled beneath them. "Stiles."

"I—I meant to get here sooner, but my car—"

Most of the time, Stiles reminded Charlie of a rubber band. He could twist and turn and trip his way into positions that shouldn't be physically possible for any solid human being. He could hurl himself into a wall and bounce back up with minimal, if any damage. But he stood before her an elastic drawn too tight, the color fading as it stretched beyond its capacity. He was so freaking pale. She squeezed his shoulders tighter, trying to provide a grounding force. "Stiles, breathe. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Deep breaths."

His eyes snapped to hers, eyebrows pinching together until they almost touched at the bridge of his nose. It may have been the first time she'd seen him completely still. Charlie held his gaze a few moments, giving a slight nod. When he returned it, shaky though it was, she slowly released his shoulders. "The doctor saw your dad already," she said, careful to keep her voice steady. "A car
backed into him and he hit the base of his spine kinda hard when he fell. No medical professionals seemed to be freaking out, nobody's yelling 'code blue'—it looks like he's going to be fine. They're gonna do some scans and x-rays and stuff, but he's okay."

"Yeah?" he asked, still panting.

Charlie nodded emphatically. "Yeah. He kicked me out of his room and told me I was being a pain in the ass. Which is like...super-normal based on all four interactions of our interactions. So call that a win? He's not wrong."

Stiles sucked in a breath so deep his lungs might pop like an overfilled balloon, but some of the tension left his body. The rubber band could move once more. Which left Charlie strangely relieved. "Do y—do you know what room he's in?" Stiles asked.

"Yeah," Charlie nodded. "Follow me."

Charlie turned to pass through the doors, but as she did, Stiles lurched forwards. Arms around her torso, the point of a chin digging into her shoulder, close-cropped hair brushing against her cheek, she found herself enveloped. A moment passed before she realized it was a hug. Several more flitted by before her own arms moved, providing an awkward pat of solidarity. "He's okay," she murmured. "You're both okay."

Stiles withdrew suddenly, clearing his throat. "Yeah. Um, sorry."

She patted his shoulder in reassurance. "It's cool. Come on—he's this way."

The pair wound their way through the hospital corridors until they arrived at the sheriff's room. Stiles sucked in a breath at the sight of him through the window, frustrated scowl on his face and pudding cup in hand. A part of him hadn't believed his father alive and well until that moment. He took a bounding step for the door, but reconsidered halfway through and somehow managed to redirect himself in mid air so he once more stood before her. "S—sorry," he stammered. "I should have asked earlier—you're okay too, right?"

Charlie's brows knitted in confusion. "What? No, I'm fine."

"No, I didn't mean—I know you're fine physically. But, like, you saw an animal get shot and stuff. That could be potentially traumatic maybe. So I figured I'd—" he absently waved a hand up and down her form "—I'd check in, you know. Emotional health and stuff…."

A faint smile took hold of Charlie's lips. "I'm not sure what unit of measurement is used to gage emotional health, but tonight didn't shift the scales for me," she replied. "If you're gonna worry about anybody, worry about Allison. She's the one who watched her dad shoot the thing."

Stiles's expression suddenly hardened and his spine went rigid. "Allison was there?"

"Um, yeah?" Charlie murmured.

"Was Scott there too?"

"Um…yeah, he was there. I think they had just gotten back from ditching."

Stiles jutted out his chin and bit down on his lower lip, nodding stiffly. "Right, right," he muttered darkly. "I'm just gonna—" he jerked his head in the direction of the door. Wordlessly, he turned his back to Charlie and strode through the door.
The severe set of Stiles's features softened as soon as his foot crossed the threshold of his father's room. The sheriff looked up from his bed find a familiar jovial smile. Easy and breezy. But as he dragged a chair to the edge of the sheriff's bed, that smile pulled tight at the corners of his lips. A convincing forgery. Charlie had dealt out enough of that brand of smile to recognize one on someone else's face. Stiles stooped over his father, hands gripping his knees with white-knuckled force. Nothing easy or breezy about that.

Guilt settled more heavily on Charlie's shoulders. Her stomach lurched as if she were standing at the edge of a cliff. Which in a way she was. And she was going to jump, dragging Stiles along with her.

Fuck.

Retreating from the doorway, Charlie pressed herself against the eggshell walls of the hallway, making herself as small as possible, both to avoid the steady flow of foot traffic past her, the occasional nurse ducking into the sheriff's room, and to squash any temptation to eavesdrop. She had already done a bit too much of that this evening. No good could come of it. But with Stiles and his dad talking quietly next door, it was difficult not to feel unwelcome. No, not unwelcome. Forgotten. As she should be. It wasn't her father in a hospital bed. She had no right to any emotional investment. Neither Stiles nor the sheriff were responsible for the haunting familiarity of waiting outside a hospital room.

Suck it up, Oswin.

The minute hand had dragged its way to a half-revolution when nurse Gladys and her scowl swaggered by, depositing the sheriff's chart in the wall file outside the room. She entered the room for a few moments, exchanged a few words with its inhabitants, and stomped out once more. An uncontrollable urge had Charlie snatch up the chart, paging through the notes to see the extent of the sheriff's injury. The file was filled with words like 'contusion' and 'soft-tissue damage', but no sign of any permanent injury.

"Hey, Charlie!"

She jumped at the sudden sound of the sheriff's voice. She stuck her head around the corner and peeked inside. The sheriff's ruddy complexion had a perfectly healthy hue against the starched white of hospital bedsheets. Between him and Stiles, she would have guessed the latter belonged in the hospital. His anxiety had dropped several notches, but a faint green tinge remained in his cheeks. She kept her voice light as she grinned at the pair. "You rang?"

The sheriff's expression anticipated her entrance, all sardonically raised eyebrows and lips pinched in resignation. "You can come on in. And bring the chart with you."

Charlie's teeth clenched into a guilty grimace and she stepped into full view, the chart clutched in her hands. "It looks like the nurses still didn't code the x-rays to insurance," she said, waving the clipboard lamely. "You might want to talk to them about that. Pretty sure you can claim injury in the line of duty too, so that should cover any bills. I think."

Stiles's face scrunched into his first recognizable expression of the evening. "Insurance codes?"

"Um, yeah," Charlie shrugged. "You know, the country's broken health care system and all that. Gotta be vigilant, or the real invasive surgery'll be to your bank account."

"Right," Stiles responded, head bobbing as he regarded her strangely. "That. Topical social commentary. Uh...thanks."
"I live to serve."

"Somehow I doubt that," the sheriff interjected. "But thank you all the same."

Charlie stepped forwards, depositing the clipboard at the foot of the sheriff’s bed. "Anyways, that's enough of me violating your privacy. Did, uh, did they set up the scans for you?"

"They'll be wheeling me off in about a half hour," the sheriff confirmed. "In the meantime my son here is going to take you home."

"Home?"

"Yes, home," the sheriff confirmed.

"Wait, you want me to leave?" Stiles spluttered, rounding on his father. "I basically just got here!"

"You got here a half hour ago," the sheriff said sternly. "And you've been reassured by multiple hospital staff members—and me—that I am going to be fine." Stiles opened and closed his mouth, squawking in protest, but the sheriff waved him off. "The hospital knows full well how to do an x-ray."

"Yeah, but you'll need me for like….emotional support and stuff!"

"I can wait," Charlie interrupted, eyes jumping back and forth between them. "I really don't mind."

"But your aunt probably does," Sheriff Stilinski answered without missing a beat. He reached to the foot of his bed to retrieve his chart, grunting in discomfort at the move.

Stiles's jaw twitched at the mild wince on his father's face. "Dad, I don't think—"

"It's not up for discussion," the sheriff declared. "Now get me my reading glasses so I can look over the—" he spared Charlie a glance that managed to mix exasperation and appreciation "—the insurance coding, and then you'll escort this young lady back to her house. Do you understand?"

Stiles narrowed his eyes at his father for a good long time, but finally nodded in acquiescence. "Fine, I understand."

Charlie cleared her throat, attracting their attention. "I'll give you guys a minute. I'll just, uhhh..." she jerked her thumb towards the door "...I'll just be by the vending machines."

Doing an about face, she marched out the sheriff's room, through the waiting room, and to the hallway where Bob resided. Good old trusty, broken, overly generous Bob. If one thing could get her through this clusterfuck of a night and its layer cake of anxiety, guilt, and obligation, it would have to be chocolate. Lots and lots of chocolate. Also self-loathing and moral relativism, but she had access to those already. The one thing missing was chocolate. A few quarters, buttons punched, and a hard whack to the side of the machine later, two snickers fell to the base with a satisfying clunk.

About half her candy bar had disappeared by the time Stiles turned the corner into the hallway, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his red hoodie, shoulders stooped, and feet kicking out in front of him with unnecessary force. He came to a stop before her, eyes squinting like he was trying to formulate a sentence. Charlie didn't speak. Instead she held out a snickers bar. His features slackened with relief as he took it from her and quietly jerked his head in the direction of the parking lot, indicating for her to follow.
Outside the hospital, the night was still—shining stars, hooting owls, the picture of rural serenity. Pretty fucking ironic given what happened. And what she was about to make happen. Why did a freaking mountain lion have to materialize in the Beacon Hills High parking lot? Why did the sheriff have to go and get hit by a car? Why couldn't she just confront Stiles in relative peace? Why couldn't something in her life be relatively goddamn simple for once?

The last piece of her snickers disappeared as she hauled herself into Stiles's car. The interior was just what she would have expected from him. The leather seats were worn but well cared for, the duct tape lining some creases had been applied with precision, red rust decorated the hinges, but but they didn't squeak. He battled the effects of time in all small ways he was able. Plus it smelled like curly fries. Stiles took his place in the driver's seat, still unnervingly quiet. The keys sat in his hand, but he made no move for the ignition. Charlie was reluctant to break the silence, but one of them had to. "Hey," she mumbled, "hey, so….I'm sorry this all had to come from me. I know it's some personal shit and there's probably a lot of other people you'd rather have around right now but —"

"Thank you." Stiles looked directly at her. Intently. Firmly. His eyes practically bored holes into her own under the force of his stare. Charlie blinked rapidly at the sudden insistence of his gaze, but he tipped his head forwards, doubling down on the sincerity.

Oh, hello, fresh wave of guilt. Charlie scratched at her forehead in an excuse to break eye contact. "Don't, uh, don't mention it. I figured you might not want him to be alone before you got there, so…"

"Seriously, Charlie. Thank you. This means a lot. I know you might not understand how much—"

"I understand."

"No, I mean it—"

Finally, she returned his look with equal vehemence. "Stiles," she enunciated carefully. "I understand."

It was his turn to blink. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess you do….Thanks for the snickers."

"Don't mention it."

A flicker of a smile—a genuine one—played at the corner of his lips as he shoved the keys in the ignition. "You know, you can be okay at sincerity sometimes." He twisted the keys and the car roared to life, sparing her a response. "So where to?"

For the remainder of the car ride, the only point for discussion was directions. Right on Maple. Left on Atlantic. Veer right at the fork on the highway. About three quarters of the way to their destination, Stiles's suspicion became pronounced enough to note. The slight raising of the eyebrows as she told him to make a right onto Oxford Court. The awkward scratch at his neck when they made another right onto Adams Drive. "I guess we're neighbors, then," he joked after a left onto Glenoaks Boulevard. She smiled placidly and shrugged, pretending not to note the beads of sweat forming on his upper lip. By the time the Jeep pulled to a stop across the street from his own home, his nerves had frayed. "Charlie," he asked, staring out the windshield, "why are we at my house?"

"I wanted to visit Lydia," Charlie replied, forcing her voice to sound conversational. "She was really shaken by what went down at the video store, and after what went down tonight I wanted to make sure she's still doing alright." She turned to Stiles, eyes all innocence. "You saw her this
afternoon, right?"

Y—yeah," Stiles stammered. "How did you—? Yeah, I went to visit her earlier. From what you said she was pretty messed up—I wanted to make sure she was okay. I don't see what the hell that has to do with us being in front of my house."

"Because that's where her cell phone is."

The blood drained from Stiles's face for the second time that evening. "Wh—what?"

"You've heard of that app 'Find My Friends', right?" she deadpanned. "I mean honestly to me it seems like a bit of an invasion of privacy. But it turns out to be really useful if someone steals your phone. Or if someone steals your friend's phone." Unbuckling her seatbelt, she shifted to face him directly. "So tell me Stiles, when you visited Lydia today, did you find everything you were looking for?"

"I—Charlie, I don't know what that's supposed to mean."

There it was. The last denial. The lie she'd been waiting for him to drop since that morning. Not quite the catharsis she had hoped for given everything that had happened in the interim, but a small bubble of victory filled her chest as she reached into her pocket and pulled out her own phone. "Are you sure about that?" she demanded. A few taps on the screen opened the video file and she held it to his face. He paled even further beneath his freckles and his jaw dropped. Charlie allowed herself one snort of bitter satisfaction at his response. Once the video played through, she shoved the phone in her back pocket and levelled Stiles with a serious look. He stared back in wide-eyed horror. "I'm pretty sure this isn't how you expected your day to end," she drawled.

"Th—that...that was—"

"Lydia's video from the rental store?" Charlie supplemented, raising her eyebrows at him. "Yes. Yes, it was."

He flailed in his seat, pointing between her face and her jacket pocket. "Y—you've been sitting on that...all day. You had that at lunch. When you told me about her selfies."

"When you panicked and called Scott instead of your dad? Yup, I did."

"Y—you—"

"Set you up?" she filled in. "Yes, I did."

Stiles gaped at her, and based on his roving eyes was searching for an escape route from his own car. Charlie smiled placidly in response. "Hey buddy, why don't we head inside and talk this out."

Stiles's mouth flapped open, searching for the ability to make actual words. "I—I don't think—"

Her smile gained teeth and her voice dropped to a more dangerous octave. "That wasn't a suggestion. We're going inside. Now." Charlie held Stiles's gaze steadily, unblinkingly. "Stiles, I've had this video for a full day. And it's been a long freaking day. Lydia's probably still passed out, your dad's in the hospital, Allison's just shot a freaking lion in a parking lot, Mel....and I— " she pointed at herself "—I have been on the verge of losing my shit for all of it. I'm not waiting any longer. So unless you want this—" she waved her phone in his face "—all over YouTube, we're going to go inside and have a little chat."

Stiles's forehead fell against the steering wheel. Jarring car horn filled the night air. As he lifted his
head once more, the beep was replaced by a low, drawn out groan. "Crap."

"And there's the reluctant acceptance I was looking for."

"Grudging acceptance," he scowled, waving a finger in her face. "Not reluctant, grudging. Unwilling."

"Yeah, take comfort in your thesaurus all you want," Charlie muttered. "Now let's go."

Charlie leaned against the side of the Jeep waiting for Stiles's slow exit. The engine was warm against her back, a welcome respite from the chilly night air. And the cold knot of dread that never seemed to quite go away. Stiles dragged his feet to the front door, muttering something like 'this is blackmail' under his breath. Which...again...fair. She followed Stiles through his house, past the couch where they watched Starship Troopers, and into the kitchen. He collapsed behind the kitchen table, head in his hands, and released another plaintive whine. Charlie took the seat opposite him, carefully folding her hands on the table. Was this an interrogation? Was she supposed ask dramatic questions? Call him a no-good punk? Mirandize him?

When Stiles slowly raised his head to face her, a hand covered most of his face, like he was physically trying to cage the words in his mouth. "Well?" Charlie demanded. "What the hell is going on here?"

Stiles raised his hands, leaving them suspended in the air in some facsimile of a shrug. "What do you mean?"

The eye roll that ensued was so heavy Charlie's chair threatened to tip beneath her. "You don't get to do that anymore," she said, shaking her head. "Not anymore. You saw the video. Do you really think there's any going back from that? We can't just waltz around saying it's a mountain lion. I've suspected as much for a while, and we both know you know better."

Charlie braced her hands against the table and stared Stiles down. His eyes were determined to look anywhere but at her. He stayed silent, but beneath the lacquered wooden surface his leg bounced up and down so quickly the air resistance alone might cause it to spontaneously combust. She new him well enough to tell when the words were about to burst forth. A bit of prodding and the dam would break. After a few moments of intense glowering, Charlie exhaled sharply and pushed herself to her feet.

"Fine," she snipped. "Fine, if you won't tell me what you know, then I'll tell you what I know. I know that a mountain lion isn't behind the animal attacks. Case in point, the video. I know that you and Scott are investigating the animal attacks—"

Stiles's head jerked up suddenly and he opened his mouth to interject—no doubt to deny her claim—but she held up a hand. "I saw your Jeep outside the bus yard the night after the driver was attacked," she explained before barrelling on. "I also know that Derek Hale has been poking around the animal attacks. The Derek Hale that you got arrested for one of the attacks. I know that the animal attacking people is not normal. Again, I cite the video. And I know that Derek and Scott aren't fully human."

With that conclusion, Stiles twitched so violently the chair legs screeched against the tile floors. "How did you fi—I mean, why would you say something like that?! That's crazy talk, that is. Why would you—"

"You know it's not just me," she interrupted. "Jackson's pretty sure something is up too."
"Jackson's just upset that Scott's showing him up in lacrosse," Stiles stammered out. "Just a bruised ego. His is gigantic so that's a lot of surface area for, you know, bruising…"

"Jackson might be an idiot, but he's not stupid," Charlie shot back. "And if you're discounting him as a potential threat, then you're the idiot. Anyways, he's not the only reason I think that." She extracted her phone once more, placing it on the table and swiping through the photos of Lydia's party. "There," she declared, pausing on the photos of Derek and Scott. "You see that? Every photo has the eyes blurred out."

"It's a bit of lens flare!" Stiles protested. "Who cares about that?!"

Charlie scoffed and shoved her phone across the table towards him. "Do you really think I'm dense enough to fall for this?! That's not lens flare. That is the reflection you get off a tapetum lucidum in flash photography."

"What the hell is a tapetum lucidum?!"

Charlie groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's the reflective part of the retina in animals that helps them see in the dark!"

Stiles got in a few more moments of his obligatory gaping and shook his head in disbelief. "How do you know this stuff? Honestly, who knows this stuff?"

"I told you I watch a lot of the Discovery Channel. Enough to know that people—like...human people—they don't have tapetum lucidums. You know who does? Super primitive primates and non-primate animals. Mountain lions, for example. Now, I haven't had the time to go do a family portrait for every freaking household in Beacon Hills, but I'm pretty sure Scott and Derek are the only two people out there with that abnormality. They're not related—hell, as far as I can tell they hadn't even met till a month ago. So go ahead, Stiles! Explain this to me. Please. Because I'd love to have some alternative scenario that makes me stop thinking the things I'm thinking. Because what I'm thinking is freaking insane!"

Stiles abruptly snatched up her phone, his features contorting with concern as he studied the image. He held it up to her with an air of accusation. "Where did you get this picture?"

On the screen was a blurry image of Derek under the neon lights of the local Quik Trip. Stiles's chastisement flipped the switch from frustrated to defensive and Charlie leaned against the kitchen counter, arms crossed over her chest. "I ran into Derek at a gas station," she shrugged. "I asked him the same questions I'm asking you and snapped a pic to make a point. Oh, and also some guys bashed in his car window."

Stiles jumped up from his chair and took several steps towards her. "Charlie, you can't do that! Derek's a dangerous guy—we told you that! You need to stay away from him!"

"And why is that, hm?" she countered. "Why should I trust him any less than I trust you? Neither of you are telling me the truth! Does him having larger biceps than you make him inherently more suspicious?"

"Okay, that was both rude and completely unnecessary."

"I'm serious, Stiles," Charlie said through gritted teeth. She advanced till only a few feet separated them. "You and Scott found one body and broke into multiple crime scenes. Derek buried his sister in a weird and creepy way. Which you and Scott dug up! So far by all objective criteria you're kinda winning on the creep-o factor. And even with all the stuff I'm throwing at you, you're still..."
refusing to tell me the truth! So what exactly makes you more trustworthy? Enlighten me."

The ardent denial in Stiles's eyes faded, replaced by something resembling regret. His jaw tensed and twitched and he rubbed at his eyes in frustration. Stepping back from her, he dropped back into his chair, his whole body going slack in exhaustion, like a marionette with nobody to pull its strings. Sensing a shift in the room, Charlie returned to her seat as well. His neck straightened and he looked at her, revealing the full extent of his fatigue. Bloodshot eyes framed by purpled circles, fingernails bitten down to the quick. Much like her own. Her ordeal was his as well. They had built it for each other.

"Charlie," he murmured lamely. "It's...it's not my secret to tell."

Charlie's head sagged. She got a good long look at her scuffed Converse before staring back at him. "It's not your secret to keep anymore," she replied in a calmer, saddened tone. "My friends are getting hurt. I've seen that video. I've seen too many things that I can't explain. There's no going back for me. I'm already in this, whether you like it or not."

"It's dangerous," Stiles insisted.

"Really? All the dead people didn't help me deduce that," she drawled sarcastically. "I know it's dangerous, Stiles. But all those people who died? They weren't in on the secret, were they? They didn't know a damn thing, and blissful ignorance didn't stop them from getting dead. Me knowing isn't going to make me any more or less vulnerable than they were."

The pair of them sat in silence for what felt like an era. It was probably only a few seconds. Time apparently had no speed limit. It flew by or dragged to a tedious pace of its own accord, yo-yoing back and forth until her head spun. But regardless of how long they sat, Charlie felt something change in her. Over the past few weeks a bubble had been growing inside of her, fed by anger, frustration, and likely some amount of thai take-out. It filled until it pressed on her heart, her stomach, her lungs, strangling them with uncertainty. Tonight that bubble popped. Her heart beat freely and her lungs had room to breathe, but her chest was left hollow. Charlie released a long breath, her shoulders sagging as she deflated. Anger was gone. Fatigue had taken its seat. When she lifted her eyes to Stiles's once more, it wasn't a demand. It was a plea.

"Please, Stiles," she said, a pathetic croak cracking his name in two. "Please. I need to know what's going on here. I feel like I'm looking at a puzzle, and I've got almost all of the pieces. And the picture—it's getting clearer and clearer, but the clearer it gets the less sense it makes. And the things I keep thinking and that D—that the picture keeps telling...there are only two options for me right now. Either I'm about to have my worldview completely upended, or I'm certifiably batshit crazy, and I don't know which one it is. Stiles, I really need someone to tell me which one it is. You need to tell me which one it is."

Charlie wasn't quite sure how to describe Stiles's face at that point. Torn. Tormented. Terrified. All of the above. Guilt gnawed at her for putting him in that position, forcing him choose between loyalty to his friend and confirming her suspicions. After it having been just the pair on them in on it—Stiles and Scott—for so much time, bringing someone else in was probably damn near impossible. Stiles groaned loudly, rubbing at the back of his neck. Then, finally, he looked at her, his brown eyes holding her hazel ones. And then he spoke a single word.

"Werewolves."

Chapter End Notes
Reviews always appreciated. Like a lot.

SOUNDTRACK
Charlie talks with Donald at the entry to the emergency room.
--------Nimble Girl - Hotel Eden

Charlie waits outside the sheriff's hospital room.
--------Open Up - Those Lavender Wales

Charlie confronts Stiles about the video in his car.
--------Young Hunter - Burning Palms

End Chapter. Stiles says the word 'werewolves'. Honestly I just picked this song because of the spooky 'howling wolves' sound effect because i am not above some cheesy shit.
--------Bait - Mr. Yote
Occam's Razor

Chapter Summary

Time for some awkward conversations.....

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The word hung in the air, echoing against the faded wallpaper of the Stilinski kitchen, bouncing around inside Charlie's skull. Blood rushed in her ears. She squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to process the admission. Beyond the dull thudding of her heavy thoughts, Stiles's sharp breaths were all that reached her ears, reminding her she wasn't alone. When she built the resolve to open them, Stiles regarded her with eye-twitching insecurity.

Charlie had anticipated some form of satisfaction at finally forcing out the truth. Some form of catharsis or relief. She had perhaps even expected a sense of finality—the story coming to a close. She has thought...oh, hell she had no idea what she thought. That was her problem. She always focused on the short-term goal and put off thinking about what would come after. That was all well and good with tests and papers and normal, everyday responsibilities. This though....there was no short term goal. There was no conclusion. This was not the end. It was very much a beginning. A scratch on the surface. And below that surface lay teeth and fangs and blood.

Fun times.

"Werewolves," she repeated, her voice midway between a question and a statement of confirmation. Stiles's jaw tensed, and he nodded jerkily in response. "Mmph. Werewolves."

Charlie rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, driving her fingers into the loose hair and pulling slightly as they raked through to the ends. She glanced back at Stiles, squinting carefully to gage the honesty of his answer. "Werewolves?"

"Yup," Stiles replied, popping the 'p'. "Werewolves."

"Mnhmm," Charlie murmured. Her head bobbed absently and she bit down on her lower lip. "I think I need to sit down."

Stiles's eyebrows contracted into a 'v'. "You are sitting down."

"Then I need to stand up."

She remained seated, tracing the swirling grains of the wooden kitchen table with her fingertips. Her silence only seemed to agitate Stiles more—quite the feat. Each moment that dragged by, the
jumpier he became. "You're, uh….you're not standing up," he pointed out.

"No, I don't seem to be." Charlie shook her head, not in disbelief but in...something. She opened and closed her mouth, lips searching for words of substance to deliver. They eluded her. Only one remained in reach. "Werewolves," she repeated in a baffled whisper.

"No, hippogriffs!" Stiles snapped in frustration. He pushed himself up from his seat and began to pace back and forth, hands gesticulating wildly. "Yes, Charlie! Werewolves! There are a bunch of freaking werewolves running around Beacon Hills and killing people! And he's probably gonna kill a lot more people, unless somebody stops him—unless we stop him!"

Stiles suddenly ceased his pacing, landing directly to her left. His lungs heaved from his outburst and he planted his hands on his hips, staring directly at the ground, actively not looking at her. There was something odd in his expression. It was torn between relief and worry—relief at having finally been given the freedom to talk about a long-bottled secret and worry at her reaction. He lifted a hand to his mouth and gnawed at his fingernails before casting a hesitant glance her way. "So...isn't this the part where you tell me I'm crazy and storm out of the house?" he asked. He settled on his index finger, biting the nail down to the quick. "I—I mean, aren't you going to say something?"

Charlie blew out a long breath and scoured the kitchen around her. Each detail was the same as a few moments before, but reality had shifted around them. Everything had suddenly tilted on an odd angle, unstable and threatening to topple. Her skin prickled where Stiles's eyes were trained. She planted her hands on the table's surface and slowly pushed herself to her feet. Her gaze met Stiles's. "Where do you keep your colander?"

Stiles's face twisted with bewilderment. "What?"

"It's like a bowl but with holes in the base," Charlie elaborated, moving towards the cabinets. "You use it for straining pasta."

"Uh, okay," Stiles muttered. "It's in the bottom cabinet next to the fridge. Why?"

Charlie didn't respond. Instead she made a beeline for the cabinet indicated and yanked the door open. Within sat a plastic white colander along with an assortment of pots and pans. Jackpot. She pulled out a number of stainless steel materials, placing them on the counter above her head. "How about a cheese grater? You got one of those?"

"Wha—of course we have a cheese grater. I gotta say I'm a bit confused as to why you need a freaking cheese grater."

Charlie moved to the fridge. "To grate cheese, obviously. I'm assuming you have cheese." Lo and behold, behind the fridge door sat cheeses of several varieties, spanning from whizz to Monterey Jack. "Perfect."

The fridge door closed and Charlie spun in the direction of her burgeoning work station, only to find a rigid and concerned Stiles blocking her path. "Okay," he declared, giving his hands a flourishing wave. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"I don't know—looting? I'm kind of waiting on an important response here!"

Charlie's eyes fell shut and she exhaled sharply. "Cooking, Stiles," she snapped. "I am cooking. I cook when I get stressed out. And do you know what I am right now?!"
Stiles's nose wrinkled. "Stressed out?" he posited.

"Yes, Stiles!" Charlie exclaimed. "I'm stressed! So just let me make my mac n' cheese!"

Taken aback by the ferocity of her response, Stiles stepped to the side and gestured for her to pass. With a single, distinct nod, Charlie marched past him to the growing collection of kitchen implements. "The, uh, the cheese grater is in that drawer over there," he murmured with a weak swing of his arm.

He stood back as she marched around the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets and drawers with undue force. Perhaps he was afraid of getting sucked into and potentially injured by the tornado of motion. Perhaps he was giving her time to process. But his eyes tracked each of her motions beneath studiously contracted eyebrows. By the time the pasta was boiling on the stove, though, the vigourougness of her movements had diminished and he began to venture forwards from the sidelines.

"So, uh, is this all the reaction you have?" he demanded. "Just trying to make everything clear here...this is it? I tell you that Beacon Hills has been invaded by marauding, murder-y werewolves, and your response is to what? Start 'angry cooking'?"

Charlie paused, finally releasing her tight grip on the Stilinski's stirring spoon. She found herself leaning against the counter, fingers pinching the bridge of her nose. "For some reason I thought I'd be less freaked out when you told me," she murmured. "I was sure I was prepared for it. I don't know why I thought that—now that I think about past me thinking that knowing that werewolves were a thing would be..less stressful...wow, past me is stupid."

A warm body settled itself against the counter next to her. When he spoke this time, his voice had shifted from anxious to comforting with an anxious edge. "You're not stupid, Charlie."

Charlie's hand dropped from her face and she cleared her throat. Her eyes met Stiles's for a moment, but the knowing expression behind them made her break that connection. Immediately, she turned away, busying herself with grating a pile of Monterey Jack. "Agree to disagree," she mumbled. "But for now, I am going to just...channel all this anxiety into a productive coping mechanism."

Stiles stayed in his place, giving her a wide berth. "And that's cooking," he submitted.

"Yes, Stiles," she confirmed, "that's cooking."

"Hey, I get it. Embracing a new version of reality can be....a lot."

Charlie stirred the bowtie noodles, sparing him a glance over her shoulder. "We are going to talk more about this," she said. "This conversation only just started. I just—I need a minute, okay?"

Stiles's head flopped on his neck in a loose, but accepting nod. Charlie dug out the saucepan, milk, butter, bread crumbs, and cheese, mixing them together frantically in a pan. The liquid sloshed over the side, spilling onto the stove. Slowly, it melted into a giant, gloopy, fragrant mess. Every so often she felt Stiles watching her. He waited patiently at the table. Or not patiently per se. He drummed his fingers, peeked at the clock, but stayed seated and stayed silent. He was just as unsure about how to proceed as she was. They were unmoored, floating through uncharted territory.

Charlie poured the cheesy concoction over the pasta in a dish and shoved it in the oven. Taking a place at the table opposite Stiles, tension still filled the air between them. Any hopes that the
culinary time out could somehow improve upon the situation were unceremoniously dashed. "Feel better?" Stiles asked, the corners of his lips twitching with the optimistic delivery of a joke.

Charlie sighed, drawing a knee up to her chest. "Maybe," she muttered with a weak shrug. "Not really. Werewolves are real. It's just a whole jumbled mess in my head. I mean, what does this mean for ghosts? Vampires? The Loch Ness monster? Bigfoot? Are they all real now? There's no way to count them out. Stiles, is the Easter bunny real?"

"Whoa, slow your roll," Stiles said, holding out a steadying hand. He regarded her hesitantly. "So...you're saying that you believe me—the whole werewolves thing? You're totally on board? Just like that? Because it's like of a big leap—I mean, like, huge. Like there's a Grand Canyon-sized hole you have to jump over to get to believing this stuff and you've pole vaulted all the way to Bigfoot?"

Charlie ran a hand through her hair, tugging on the tips as her fingers came to the end. "Stiles, have you ever heard of Occam's Razor?"

Stiles blinked in surprise and nodded. "Uh, yeah. My dad talks about it sometimes when he's trying to solve cases. Once you've eliminated the impossible, the simplest answer left, no matter how unlikely, is pretty much always the one that's true. Something like that. Is there a reason for this philosophical segue?"

"My point is that since I got here, the bar for what's possible and what's impossible has kind of been blown to all hell. And if I stack the weird bits and pieces on top of each other, the 'werewolf' explanation ties them all together with a neat little bow. So yeah, Stiles, I believe you. Just like that."

Stiles's mouth dropped open and he gaped at her a moment, shaking his head in disbelief. Which to Charlie seemed strange as, given the conversation's subject matter, if anybody had a right to be disbeliefing, it was her. She crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair so that she might be able to peer down her nose at him. "What?" she demanded, her voice not devoid of a hostile edge.

"Nothing," he said quickly. His chair rocked back on its back legs, tipping slightly, and he laced his fingers together behind his head. For the first time that evening his body relaxed. "It's just...I thought that if I had this conversation with someone...I saw it ending differently."

"Differently how?"

"Differently like the other person slowly backing away, then sprinting away, and then signing me up for electro-shock therapy."

"Yeah?" Charlie snorted. "Well, Mel tells me that if someone invites you into their home, it's rude to have them committed."

Stiles scoffed heavily and quirked a sardonic eyebrow. "If I recall correctly, I didn't invite you into my home. You threatened me and marched me in here on the other end of a pitchfork."

"So I guess you're still fair game then," Charlie blinked innocently.

Stiles narrowed his eyes. Charlie widened hers. This could only last so long, though. Not one minute went by before those eyes crinkled at the corners. With a few more moments came the twitching of lips. Small fissures formed in their composure before the laughter broke through, full and hearty. It was a release, really, the guffaws filling the room after such an extended silence. But it didn't last long. It couldn't. Too much remained to be discussed. Soon the chuckles faded into the
walls, and the dilemma remained. What the hell were they going to do? Charlie couldn't proceed until she had all the facts in. Lucky for her she had a reservoir of information sitting across the table, and he was finally prepared to share.

"So Scott and Derek are werewolves, then," she drawled casually.

Stiles twitched, suddenly back on the defensive. Protest had become a reflex. Deny, deny, deny. "Who says that Scott—?!" He cut himself off immediately, acknowledging the futility. "Right," he muttered, gesturing at Derek's chiseled face on her phone before waving at his own eyes. "You know because of the 'tapping leeches'."


"Whatever." He muttered under breath, rubbing at his forehead. "I can't believe you know all this random crap. Your trivia skills are really becoming a pain in my ass."

"Yeah, I apologize for being well-read," Charlie deadpanned. "Now does all this mean that Derek actually is a creepy murderer person and they just ruled Laura Hale's death an animal attack because he was all...wolfed out...when he attacked her? Did he actually kill his sister? I mean, it might explain the whole 'burying the body in his backyard' thing...but...why would he kill her?"

Stiles shook his head. "It wasn't him. Scott and I—we thought it was him at first. I mean, obviously since we got him arrested for it. Now we think it's someone else."

"Someone else?" Charlie asked quietly. Stiles nodded. She swore under her breath. "So there's a third one."

"Yup. And he didn't just kill Laura Hale. It was her, the bus driver, and now—"

"The clerk at the video rental place," Charlie finished for him. She snatched up her phone, summoning the Lydia's video footage and allowing it to play through until the beast—the werewolf—made its debut. Placing it on the table, she spun it around on the table to face Stiles. "So this—"

"Is the killer," Stiles concluded.

Charlie wrinkled her nose at the figure on the screen, its blood red eyes and menacing snarl. "So this is what Scott and Derek turn into? I wanna sign it up for a manicure and facial." She ran her hands down her face. "Ugh, maybe I've been spending too much time with Lydia."

"Nah, that's not what Scott looks like," Stiles murmured. "He grows this—this hair on his cheekbones and gets these fangs and claws. It's freaky, but not that freaky. Plus his eyes are more of a yellow."

"Shit," Charlie mumbled. "No wonder those lacrosse players thought he was on PCP."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Anyways," Stiles continued, pointing at the screen. "That's what Derek calls—"

"So you guys and Derek are all good now?" Charlie snorted out. "After you got him arrested for murdering his own sister?"
"Hey, we had a perfectly good reason for thinking that!" Stiles shot back heatedly. "And can we focus here?! Seriously, I'm being all open and forthcoming and stuff. That window only stays open for so long before the shock fades and my better judgment kicks in and why am I telling you that right now?"

Charlie waved a frantic hand, wiping away her previous qualms. "Derek who? Who cares about Derek? Derek is boring and uninteresting and uses way too much hair product and smells like an 18-wheeler of Axe body spray." She pointed to her phone screen. "Who is this asshole?"

Stiles shot her another odd look out of the corner of his eye before redirecting them to the photo. "Derek says this thing is an alpha," he explained. "It's bigger, stronger, more powerful. Meaner. That's why it's got the red eyes."

A shiver ran down Charlie's spine. "So," she murmured, clearing her throat, "so this is an alpha. But that's what it is and not who it is…. So who is it?"

Stiles's hand clapped to his mouth, seemingly trying to smother himself to death. When it fell from his face, it released a shout. "We don't know!" he exclaimed. Charlie startled at the force of his voice, prompting an apologetic frown. "That's….that's what we're working on now. Trying to find that out. The alpha's the one who bit Scott and… Anyways, we don't know who it is, or where they are, or what their motive is, or why they killed Laura Hale—she's another werewolf….or was...and we don't know when they're going to attack again, or...anything. We don't know anything. And until we find out something it's just going to keep killing people and there's nothing we can do to stop it."

Stiles's voice cracked under the strain of the last few syllables. His hand darted out, flipping her phone over to hide the alpha's face. And that's when it hit Charlie. The last few weeks for her had been an adventure. A scavenger hunt. A highly stressful, but largely non-fatal hobby. For Stiles it had meant literal life and death. A supernatural creature had been terrorizing the town and he had the most information. In possessing that information he had been deputized in a manner of speaking. Responsibility had been foisted upon him. But when it came down to it, there was still nothing he could do. Hell, his dad was a cop and he couldn't even share it with him. Watching this crapstorm unfold must have been been torture.

And Charlie had just signed herself up.

Reaching across the table, Charlie clapped a hand on his shoulder. Stiles looked up at her, surprised by the gesture, but didn't shrug her hand off. She offered what she hoped was an encouraging smile before pushing forward in her line of inquiry.

"So where do the Argents fit in to all of this?"

"Oh, come on!" Stiles shouted, throwing his hands in the air in frustration and forcing her hand from his shoulder in the process. "How could you possibly know about them? Are you psychic? Is that it? Because there is no way I can tolerate more weirdness in the freaking hurricane of weird that is my life right now!"

Charlie shot him an admonishing look. "Stiles?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut up."

"You got it." He gave her a wearied salute of agreement, but only allowed for about ten seconds of
silence before exploding again. "Okay, how could you possibly know about the Argents?"

"I didn't. You just confirmed it for me." Before she subjected herself to another frustrated tirade, she barreled on in elaboration. "The other day when I saw Derek at the gas station—when I took that photo—some dudes broke in the window to his Camaro. One was blond, tall-ish, drove a red SUV….sort of like Allison's dad…who just blew the head off a mountain lion….and who kinds of scares me. Like, a lot."

"Damn you and your logic," Stiles mumbled to himself. Charlie raised her eyebrows expectantly, and he gave a defeated sigh. "Okay, fine. Whatever. As far as we can tell, the Argents are werewolf hunters. I mean, we know Mr. Argent is seeing as he shot Scott and stuff—long story, don't ask. We don't think Allison knows."

"I bet Kate wants her to, though," Charlie muttered. "All that crap about liking a girl who could kick a little ass. She was definitely eyeing Allison kind of weird. Like...pointedly…. She's at least four types of crazy. Probably five."

"Wait, who can kick a little ass?" Stiles inquired. "Allison? Because if Allison is kicking people's asses—"

"Relax, I'm the ass-kicker," Charlie replied. "At least according to Kate. Allison is more of a prospective ass-kicker." She rolled her eyes at the dumbfounded expression on Stiles's face. "I have like six years training in Krav Maga. Don't worry about it."

Stiles scooted his chair a few inches further from hers. "Trying not to."

"Whatever. I'm not important here. But Allison's got like eight years gymnastics and knows a hell of a lot about archery. She might not be in on the family business yet, but she's being primed for it."

Stiles groaned loudly and slammed his head against the table again. "Could this get anymore complicated? First Scott's a werewolf and now he's sleeping with the enemy." He paled slightly and glanced at Charlie self-consciously. "Well not sleeping with per se….I mean, they're not—I mean as far as I know they haven't—"

"I don't think Scott and Allison's sex life is something we need to address right now."

"Agreed," he replied quickly. "I think never is a good time for that. I'll pencil it into my schedule right between hell freezing over and the Cubs winning the world series."

Charlie's lips twitched faintly. That Stiles managed to retain some of his sense of humor in the face of the death, destruction, the occasional mauling, et cetera was something to be grateful for. But her appreciation was supplanted by a feeling of dread as her gaze fell on her phone, sitting ominously between them. The murderous face and blindingly red eyes were hidden, but the knowledge of their existence was enough. Her mind went to the drugged-up red-head lying comatose in her bed.

At this point, Charlie was confronted with an uncomfortable truth. With this newly obtained knowledge, she was going to be forced to make decisions. Decisions not just for herself, but on behalf of other people. Decisions of which those people would remain ignorant. She'd be playing God, the arbiter of information affecting them. Information about them. That was way, way too much responsibility, especially for someone as emotionally ill-equipped as her. She reached for her phone, flicking it so it spun across the table.
"So what are we gonna do about the video?" she asked. "You can't keep Lydia's phone. Believe me, she will notice it's missing."

Any calm that had returned to Stiles's face fled. Slowly, he rose from his seat and trudged up the stairs, only to return with Lydia's own phone. He dropped it on the table next to her own. Charlie's reached out, taking it in her hand. It weighed heavily on her palm, like a brick of lead. "You saw what Lydia's like now," she said, sparing him a glance. "She doesn't know what she saw. I'm not sure she wants to know. She's kind of falling apart right now."

A look of intense regret crossed Stiles's face. He rubbed at his jaw and fixated on the phone, the war waging within shining through his eyes. "Nobody can know about Scott," he said, refusing to look up at her. "Nobody can know about any of it. The more people who know about it, the bigger the risk of it getting out. And I can't be responsible for that. I shouldn't have told you, but you were —"

"An aggressive bitch?" Charlie supplied.

Stiles released a humorless laugh and shook his head, still staring at the phone. "I was going to say 'persistent'."

"That's very generous of you."

He pressed his fingers to his lips, his leg resuming the frantic bouncing beneath the table. His awareness seemed to be limited to that phone, everything else in the world falling away. Suddenly years piled on his shoulders and the lines of his face wrote the story of someone much older than sixteen. Not older in the sense that his cropped hair had a dusting of grey and the laugh lines around his mouth had deepened into wrinkles, but he looked….experienced. Haunted. Like someone who had seen more than any teenager should be allowed. He had been here before—weighing the welfare of his best friend against that of someone else he cared about—and it clearly was not a position he cared for.

An impulse seized control of Charlie's muscles. She flipped over Lydia's phone in her hands, fumbling with the keys until she found her way to the video, and then, before her resolve faded, the delete button.

'Are you sure you want to delete?'

'OK.'

She quickly slammed the phone to the table and raised her hand to her mouth, biting down on her finger.

"Wha—what was that?" Stiles demanded, looking between her and the phone. "Why did you just do that?"

"Because it needed to be done." She had hoped her voice would emerge strong and confident, if only to convince herself of the words, but it left her lips as a broken whisper. "It did—it needed to be done," she said, nodding along so her bodily movements might lend her confidence. "Somebody had to do it. And you didn't want to."

Stiles's eyes finally chose between her and the phone, staring at her with a strange intensity. Self-consciousness only allowed her to hold his gaze for a few moments before breaking under the scrutiny. She looked away and began twisting loose strands of hair around her fingers. She wrapped them so tightly, her fingertips purpled. "Look," she bit out, "my guess is that you've had to
make a lot of calls like that lately. Am I right?" She took his silence as an answer in the affirmative. "That situation sucks. A lot. Especially when it's Lydia.... Well, this time you didn't have to make the call. Because I did."

Stiles's blinked rapidly, shaking his head like he was shaking off a dream. "I….can't believe you just did that."

"What can I say?" she mumbled. "I'm a wild card. But...this is the best thing for Lydia. It is. The idea of werewolves put her in a day-long coma. The reality of it? She doesn't want to live with that. And she shouldn't have to."

Stiles shot her a skeptical look. "Are you sure that's not just a rationalization?"

"No," she answered honestly. "But I can't take it back now."

Charlie was spared a response by the beeping of the oven, informing her that the macaroni and cheese was ready. She hauled herself to her feet and wandered to the oven, pulling out the gloopy mass of pasta. A gust of savory-scented air hit her in the face, and her stomach churned in hunger.

Stiles craned his neck, peering over the counter to get a look at the steaming platter. If anything could curb his existential crises, it was food. He was practically standing in his chair when she called over to him.

"I'm assuming you want some?"

His head bobbed so excitedly on his neck, it threatened to pop off. "Um, yeah. Yes please."

"Plates and utensils?"

The chair legs screeched against the floor as Stiles hurled himself up. By the time Charlie had turned around, mac and cheese in hand, he had already managed to set a full, albeit basic, table. The platter had yet to hit the table before he threw in a giant serving spoon and dragged a massive serving onto his own plate. By the time Charlie had a hold on the serving spoon, he was shoveling impossibly huge bites into his mouth. His hunger seemed to correlate with stress, and the snickers was long gone. "'Dis is really good," he mumbled in thanks.

"It involves a shitload of cheese. Of course it's good."

More questions lined up on Charlie's tongue, but she kept them at bay. Stiles needed time to breathe. Though little breathing seemed possible as he continued to shove forkfuls of macaroni into an already full mouth. Charlie picked at her own food, pushing it around the plate and lifting it to her lips at infrequent intervals. Stiles seemed to take note of this, eyeing her beneath a furrowed brow. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You're not eating. You never don't eat."

Charlie sighed and jerked her read to the side noncommittally. "Just...I don't know...waiting for the rest of the story."

Stiles paused, another huge fork of food poised halfway to its destination. He carefully placed it back on the table. "What is there left to tell? You've already deduced everything with you deduce...i...ness." He waved his fingers in her face and she slapped them away, levelling him with an unamused look.
"I don't mean the facts, Stiles," she said, raising her eyebrows pointedly. "I already know the facts. I mean the narrative—the story. I want to hear the story. I already know about all the dots, so why not connect them? In for a penny, in for a pound, right?"

Stiles, who had just picked up his fork, put it down once more. He regarded Charlie with hesitant, appraising eyes. And for a moment she thought he would say no. But then….. "Okay, so the night before school started, we went out looking for half a dead body——"

And thus began the tale. How they were looking for Laura Hale's body when Scott was bitten. Scott's full moon freakout the night of Lydia's party, Stiles's baffling call the day of their first lacrosse game. He told her of their worries that Scott had attacked the bus driver (he didn't) and why she had seen them breaking into the bus yard that night (psychic werewolf dreams: cool but creepy). And then there was Derek Hale—the initial suspicions, the tentative truce, the bizarre Mr. Miyagi mentorship beginning to unfold—something neither Stiles nor Charlie appeared to wholly comfortable with. Then, after a long and complicated story about how Kate shot Derek and some odd new insights into the most uncomfortable dinner party of all time (and how Charlie's tampon ruse may have saved multiple lives), they came full circle, settling on the previous night at the video rental store.

As Stiles's twenty minute monologue came to its conclusion, Charlie finally began to eat. It helped with the whole stunned silence thing. Chewing saved her from talking. Knowing everything about everything was turning out to be a bit of a double-edged sword. On one hand werewolves existed, which was terrifying and awesome and fascinating and the weight of uncertainty had lifted from her shoulders. On the other hand, another heavier weight had taken its place—that of responsibility. She was one of maybe five people in Beacon Hills who knew what was going on. Meaning she was one of maybe five people who could actually do something about it. That was….a lot.

Charlie looked over at Stiles, her lips pinched in a thin line. "I…..should probably head home."

Stiles's face had set the stage for an entire cast of emotions that night, but disappointment finally made its debut.

Charlie sucked in a breath, her chest tightening. "It's just—" she glanced at the clock "—it's getting a bit late. Mel is still in her overprotective phase. I don't want her to get too concerned or whatever."

"No, yeah, right," Stiles stammered, nodding his head. "Don't want anybody getting suspicious. I'll, uh, I'll give you a ride. I mean obviously you don't have a car so I have to give you a ride so I'll….do that…now. I'm just gonna—" he waved his hands at the mac and cheese "—I'll just put this away. Meet you in the car?"

Charlie gave a sober nod and extracted herself from the kitchen, but not before taking hold of Lydia's phone. Stiles's hands clenched as it was enveloped in hers. Was it worry? Guilt? Anxiety? Whatever he felt, she'd have to familiarize herself, because no doubt she'd be sharing in it before long. Her footsteps as she retreated were heavy and hesitant, and a glance over her shoulder found Stiles defiantly stowing the food in the fridge.

The empty car was a relief to Charlie as she closed the door behind her. For a moment at least, she could exist in a bubble. Just herself and the anxious, intrusive thoughts. Her hand, still clutching Lydia's phone with white-knuckled force, opened, allowing it to rest on her palm. Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the cool glass of the window. "Well….." she whispered to herself "...here's hoping I did the right thing."
A few minutes later Stiles yanked open the driver's side door, making her jump in her seat. He pressed his lips together in a wan smile. "So...." he asked hesitantly "....are we actually gonna be going to your place this time?"

Charlie exhaled sharply, almost a laugh. "I tell you that, all sense of adventure is lost."

"Fair enough."

Stiles twisted the keys in the engine and pulled out of the driveway, taking to the roads. Charlie mumbled a few directions here and there. They pulled up to an abandoned intersection, the red light holding them in place despite there being no other drivers in sight. Charlie, who had been carefully studying her fingernails for the majority of the venture, finally found it in her to look at Stiles directly. The red of the traffic light made his skin glow with a pinkish hue. For the first time since he burst through those emergency room doors, he wasn't pale.

"So what do we do now?"

Stiles's head snapped on his neck as if it was spring-loaded. "What do you mean?"

"I mean what do we do about the alpha?" Charlie elaborated, solemnly inclining her head towards him. "What's our next move? What's the game plan? What can I do to help?"

The light turned green but went completely disregarded, even shifting to yellow before Stiles's gaping mouth managed to speak. "I...what?" he stammered. "Charlie, you don't have to do anything. This isn't your fight. This isn't a problem you have to solve."

Charlie blinked. "You're....kidding, right? How could I not do anything? Did you really think I'd harass a confession out of you and then bounce? I meant what I said before—I am in this now. No takebacks."

Stiles raised his eyebrows at her. "No takebacks? We're going with playground arguments?"

Charlie scoffed, her hackles raised. "Sue me for phrasing it in a way I thought you'd understand."

"Wow, that was unnecessarily hostile," Stiles shot back, his eyebrows disappearing into his hairline. "Charlie, I meant what I said before. This is dangerous stuff."

"I know that."

"Then why the hell do you want in?!" he said, throwing his hands in the air. "Over the past month I've seen a ton of dead bodies, was almost killed by my best friend—several times—I freaking almost had to chop a guys arm off! I'm here because of Scott, but you..."

The jarring honk of a car behind them jolted them back to reality. The light had gone through several cycles, settling back on green. Stiles waved an ornery hand and shifted gears to move forward. Not quickly enough, apparently, as the offended driver zipped around, a prominently displayed middle finger sticking out the window as they passed. "Okay, well that was an overreaction," Stiles mumbled to himself.

Charlie shifted uncomfortably in her seat as they moved forwards. "Look," she sighed, head tilted towards the window so her face was partially hidden, "I...never really had all that much growing up. Not like I was poor...though honestly this town is still bonkers to me...but...all that moving around my dad and I did...I never really had a ton of friends. I had one, but I haven't seen him in person in like five years. Anyway...I never really bothered making friends because what was the point, you know? I'd be moving like four months later. And then there's all the 'goodbye' stuff and
crying and promising that you'll keep in touch when you already know you won't. So I just....didn't do it. It sucked, but I was okay with it. It's how things were. I had my dad, and that was good enough. I was happy. Not skipping in the meadows happy, but content, you know?"

She paused for a moment and bit down hard on her lip as she assembled her thoughts. It was then she realized that Stiles had come to another stop, not in front of a light but at the side of the road. And he was looking at her. Like....a lot. That degree of focused attention was not something to which Charlie was accustomed, and frankly was part of why she hated confiding in people. They would just...look at you...like they knew you. Because they did. Because you were telling them about yourself. Voluntarily. Charlie squirmed under Stiles's stare. It was off-putting. But she knew all of Stiles's secrets now. It was only fair he got a baby secret out of her. One good turn deserves another and all that bullshit.

"Look, when my dad died, I pretty much lost everything," she blurted out before she had a chance to stop herself. "I just sort of assumed he would always be there. And then he wasn't. And a chunk of me was like...that's it, my life is over at fifteen. But then I came here, and I found something else. Mel, Lydia, Allison, Danny, even you and Scott—you guys...having something to fall back on is the only thing that makes him not being here kind of okay." She looked at Stiles, her expression earnest and firm. "If what I found here is being threatened, I'm going to do something about it. I don't care if its dangerous. I can't fight an aneurysm, but this...this I can fight. And I'm damn well going to do it, with or without you and Scott."

"Mmph," Stiles mumbled, his lips clamped shut so as not to laugh. "You really think now is the moment for an obscure 80s movie reference?"

"Stiles," she replied stoically, "it's never not the time for an obscure 80s movie reference."

He made a face and jerked his head to the side in consideration. "You're not wrong." He let out a sigh and rubbed at the back of his head, a nervous gesture that had made a number of appearances over the evening. Any more additional drama and he'd run the risk of early onset baldness. "So," he murmured, "so where do we go from here?"

"Um, my place isn't that much further," Charlie replied. "You just take a left on Washington and —"

"No," Stiles interrupted. "I didn't mean like that. I just meant...you know now. I'm not sure what the next step is."

Charlie's lips formed a quiet 'o' and she nodded her head. "Right. Next steps. Well...I'm guessing Scott should know that I know. Next step, you tell him I'm on the team."

Stiles's nostrils flared in sudden indignation. Sincerity successfully neutralized, though not in the manner Charlie had hoped. "Um, pardon me?" he spluttered. "So not only do I get the Law & Order treatment from you, I also have to tell Scott that you cornered me in my own kitchen and yelled at me till I folded like a damp paper towel?"
"Yes," Charlie said with a bob of the head. "Because you're his friend and he'll be less freaked out if it comes from you. Also, I don't want to."

"Yeah?" Stiles scoffed, his face hardening beneath the dim light of the nearby street lamp. "Well maybe I don't want to talk to him either. Scott spent the day ignoring my calls and then let my dad get hit by a car."

"W—wait," Charlie said, shaking her head. "What do you mean he let your dad get hit by a car? What was he supposed to do?"

"I don't know, something?!" Stiles growled. "Or maybe call me? At some point? Let me know he's alive, let me know my dad is alive. Or that he got hit in the first place. Scott left me high and dry today, so...just...table it. We can figure out next steps later."

"O—okay. Sorry."

Stiles pinched the bridge of his nose and sucked in a deep breath. "No," he murmured. "It's not—never mind. Don't be...I just...." He dropped his hand from his face to reveal a wearied expression. The night had taken a toll. "You said left on Washington, right?"

"Um, yeah," Charlie nodded. "We're just a couple of blocks away."

Stiles shifted the car into drive and pressed on the accelerator, taking the car back onto the road. It rumbled beneath her. The shocks must have worn down—something that needed to be fixed, but at present the vibrations had a calming effect. Like one of those beds that soothe babies to sleep. But despite the tranquility of the gentle hum, Stiles remained tense, knuckles tight and jaw twitching. Not that Charlie could blame him. At least 40% of that tension was of her making. For some reason she thought that, when they were on the other side of this confrontation, she and Stiles would be all good. And they had been. Or at least she thought they had been. And now they weren't? Stiles being angry with her didn't fit her preconceived narrative. Her skin felt itchy again.

As he pulled up in front of Charlie's apartment building, she expected him to let the car idle, waiting for her to climb out and then continuing on his way. Instead he turned the engine fully off. The move was deliberate, almost a statement in itself. When he spoke, his voice was softer than she had last heard it. "Look, I'm sorry for getting all aggressive and stuff. It's not—never mind. Don't be...I just...." He dropped his hand from his face to reveal a wearied expression. The night had taken a toll. "You said left on Washington, right?"

"Um, yeah," Charlie nodded. "We're just a couple of blocks away."

Stiles huffed and dropped his head. When he lifted again, some of the clouds behind his eyes had
rolled back, allowing the familiar mischievous glint to shine through. Unbuckling his seatbelt, he turned so he could face her fully. "Look...I know this is a lot, but Charlie...you can't tell anybody else about this. I'm serious—nobody else can know."

As if by divine providence, her phone chose that moment to chime, that moment for the screen to light up, that moment to receive a text message from contact 'Prettiest Dude in this Contacts List, Don't Lie'. Charlie's teeth clenched in a guilty grimace.

"Yeah...about that....."

Chapter End Notes

SOUNDTRACK

Charlie sits in the car with her head resting against the window. Stiles joins her. They drive in silence.

-------------Rabid Bits of Time - Chad VanGaalen

After Charlie and Stiles squabble in the car (and sincerity is neutralized) he drives her the rest of the way to her apartment. When he stops, he turns off the engine and they talk.

-------------Pues - Brazos

Charlie receives a text from Donald and remembers that there someone else who knows Scott's secret. Whoops.

-------------Bad Ritual - Timbre Timbre
The A-Team

Chapter Summary

Stiles meets Donald. People are unbearably smug. It's a whole big thing.

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: 'Teen Wolf' isn't mine. Shocking, right? But it's true. If there are any similarities in content or dialogue, it has probably originated with the show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie didn't pretend to be a neat person. Piles of laundry were known to accrue. Dishes took up residence in the sink for questionable amounts of time. The odd tupperware abandoned in the back of the fridge may or may not have spawned their own civilizations once or twice. Chaos had taken easy advantage of a two-person household that put in a lot of overtime. But where her external surroundings might bear a passing resemblance to a Black Friday Walmart, her brain had the order of The Container Store in the early spring.

Compartmentalization was great. Charlie had an accountant's office worth of filing cabinets in her brain. Each drawer belonged to a city, each file in that drawer to a person who lived their. Most were locked. The only one left open was Donald's—he made a habit of being her exception. The system was flawed but effective. It made it easy to move on and move forward. Yup, compartmentalization was great. Until two drawers opened simultaneously, the papers got all out of order, and nothing made any freaking sense.

Stiles was meeting Donald, someone was walking around The Container Store mixing the red pens with the blue pens, sticking wrapping paper in the stationary section, and she did not care for it.

Bright yellow rubber gloves covered Charlie's arms from fingertip to elbow. She had originally intended to scrub the kitchen sink, but somehow ended up vacuuming the living room carpet. Priorities were muddled. The apartment wasn't even messy. Sure, Mel wouldn't be renting out the space to Better Homes & Gardens, but it possessed a refined simplicity that even Charlie couldn't utterly lay waste to. Elegance was her aunt's close personal friend. The very worst Mel managed to accomplish was a vaguely dusty windowsill. On top of that, Charlie didn't need to clean up for Stiles—she had seen his house. Twice. Nothing remotely intimidating or particularly neat about it. But she grabbed that swiffer pad anyway.

Why did she agree to this? As fun as confronting people could be, avoiding confrontation counted among Charlie's most treasured skills. Dragging this out till next Thursday could have been easy. One day is what she managed to buy herself. A measly fourteen hours to be exact. And all that added up to her 'Donald universe' crashing into her 'Beacon Hills universe' in….fifteen minutes. Shit.

The doorbell came as a surprise. Stiles had more of a 'roll up fifteen minutes late in the midst of a
panic' than an 'appear for appointments early and expect people to keep to the schedule' type vibe. Swearing loudly, she stripped off the rubber gloves and shoved them and the swiffer pad beneath a couch cushion. The vacuum cleaner was stowed hastily, hopefully most of her anxiety with it. The doorbell rang once more before she could reach it, judgemental tones occupying its obnoxious clang. Her lips wanted to frown, but were too strongly set in an expression of casual unconcern.

Exhaling sharply through her nose, Charlie pressed the button opening the building's front door. Her lungs stilled as she waited. Welp, here went nothing. Or everything.

Stiles’s footsteps dragged on the way to her second floor apartment. His knock at the door was hesitant. "Uh, Charlie?" he asked, his voice faltering. "This is your place, right? Charlie?"

Charlie yanked the door open, revealing a Stiles whose eyes sat as fidgety in their sockets as hers did. She breathed again, filling her lungs solely for the purpose that she might reply. "Yeah, it's my place," she answered. "Your GPS did not steer you wrong."

He nodded uncomfortably. "R—right. I just, um, thought that the entrance was downstairs. It threw me off. Walking...up...the stairs...Plus the stairway was kinda dark. I was afraid I got turned around."

"There's only one upstairs apartment on this side of the duplex."

"Yeah....."

Silver lining: Stiles appeared as off-put by this scenario as she was. Clearing her throat, Charlie stepped aside, waving an arm to welcome him through the doorway. Stiles stepped past the threshold practically on tiptoe. His eyes darted around the room, almost as if looking for clues. He took small steps and kept his arms close to his side, hands shoved in the pockets, afraid to let his limbs stray too far lest they break anything. The overstuffed couch, the vaguely artistic black-and-white prints, the sleekest light fixtures IKEA had to offer, it all came under a baffled brand of scrutiny. "Nice place," he mumbled.

"It does its job," she replied. "There's, um, muffins and stuff in the kitchen if you're hungry."

Stiles scrunched up his face, his unease placed aside just long enough for a little light teasing. "You made snacks?"

Charlie let out a huff and scratched absently at her forehead. "I don't know the protocol for this shit, okay? Snacks were made—there's no need to question it."

"Not questioning it," Stiles said, holding his hands in the air. "Just clarifying."

"Right."

Charlie's nerves had no reason to be so rattled. It was just Stiles. And it was just Donald. Introducing the two of them should have no significant impact on their respective relationships with her. Hell, they would probably like each other. Possibly. Maybe. But she would prefer they met under different circumstances. Social ones. This arrangement possessed a performative aspect that Charlie didn't like. It felt like an audition. But she hadn't prepared for the production and Donald...he had definitely prepared. And made props. Which was objectively terrifying. Charlie clapped her hands together and glanced around the room. "Well anyways," she declared, "make yourself at home, I guess. I told Donald we'd be calling in about fifteen minutes. Or we could just call him now. He's probably already online. He's pretty hyped to meet you."

Stiles blinked, eyes narrowing. "Wait, he knows about me? Like you talk to him about me?"
"Of course I talk to him about you Stiles," Charlie deadpanned. "If I didn't talk to him about you we wouldn't be in this painfully awkward situation to begin with."

He made a move to lean against the wall but seemed to think better of it, instead shoving his hands back in his pockets. "But, like...what did you say?"

Charlie shrugged. "I don't know, the basics? I mean he knows everything I know. I talk to him a couple of times a week."

"You talk to him about me a couple of times a week?!!"

"What?" Charlie frowned. "No. But you and Scott are magnificently unsubtle, so he knows about most of the weird shit you've pulled. He might think you're a moron, so let's put some effort into that first impression."

An offended scoff shook the whole of Stiles's body. "Why would he think I'm a moron?"

Charlie wrinkled her nose at him. "We only have fifteen minutes before the call—let's not commit to that topic. And don't worry. Your best friend is a werewolf. No matter how much of a moron you are, to Donald you're cool by default. You get to be a cool moron. That's a step up, right?"

Stiles responded with a mildly deranged chuckle that slowly disintegrated into quiet muttering. "Donald," he grumbled, rolling the name around in his mouth like he was trying to work out the shape of it. "My fate is in the hands of a dude named Donald who lives in Rhodes Island. That's just fantastic. This is exactly the situation I want to be in. You know the other day I was just thinking to myself, 'wouldn't life be better if some shadowy figure named Donald knew all the darkest secrets of my life,' and look at that! I wished it into being! Scratch that one off the bucket list. I should totally make one of those vision board things."

As nervous as Charlie was, she had left behind some room for frustration. Reaching over, she flicked Stiles's ear, making him jump. His mouth fell open in a silent and exaggerated screech of pain. "What was that for?!" he shouted, clapping a hand over his ear.

"Donald isn't a sith lord, okay?" she grumbled. "He is the same level of moron as you are. And the entire reason you're here is to meet him so you can chill the hell out. He can be trusted. He's my Scott."

The mention of Scott did nothing to improve Stiles's soured expression. Apparently trouble still reigned in paradise. He clucked his tongue disapprovingly. "Not really a big confidence booster."

Charlie let out a groan, her head sagging on her shoulders. "Fine. He's not my Scott, he's my you. Whatever. Are we going to do this or not?"

Stiles threw his hands in the air in submission as if he was personally offended by every element of the conversation. "Alright, fine. Lead the way."

With a definitive nod, Charlie spun on her heel and moved towards her room, Stiles trailing behind her. "I can't believe you flicked my ear," he muttered bitterly. "I mean what are you—twelve? That freaking hurt."

Charlie hid the Cheshire-like smirk stealing across her face.

As they reached the door to her room, Stiles stopped short. He seemed to have a bizarre phobia of immediately crossing thresholds. He had to stop, stick his head through, and assess the new venue for possible booby traps and the like before putting a toe over the line. He entered Charlie's room
squinting with a scientific degree of intensity. Charlie didn't fear his judgement, but little about the past few days left her feeling easy. She crossed her arms defensively across her chest as he walked one full revolution of her room, scouring each element, before stopping at the center. "This makes more sense," he declared.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

In reply Stiles just waved a hand around the room and flailed it in the direction of the hallway, too distracted to formulate an actual sentence. "Is that an original Tron movie poster?" he demanded, pointing at the wall.

"Yup," Charlie nodded. "You know me. Always down for the cheesy 80s sci-fi."

"Nice…." He continued to study her room, hands still in his pockets and head bobbing to the tune of an inaudible song. Her guitar was the next thing to catch his attention. "You play?" he asked, picking it up from the stand.

"I've been known to, yeah," Charlie replied.

Stiles inspected the guitar carefully, taking in the nicks and aging stickers decorating it. "It looks pretty old. Was it your dad's?"

"Mom's," Charlie corrected.

Stiles slung the guitar over his shoulder and began to idly strum. None of the notes rang correct. It needed tuning. Damn, it had been a long time since she played. Charlie's arms tightened around her waist and she regarded Stiles from beneath pointedly raised eyebrows. "You about done?"

Stiles suddenly bit his lip theatrically and rocked back on his heels, miming some fairly elaborate air guitar. A smile threatened to break the casual disinterest written into her features. Maintaining her passive indifference was the product of a hard fought battle. "Nice moves, Jimi Hendrix," she drawled. "But if you want groupies, you're actually going to have to learn how to play."

"Hey!" Stiles said, snapping and pointing at her. "Don't discount the swag. Style is like 95% of the equation."

"Is that so?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "Absolutely. How else do you explain boy bands?"

"Please. Boy band members rarely play their own instruments."

Stiles pointed at her again, the force of the gesture almost enough to dislocate a shoulder. "A-ha!" he declared. "I rest my case. The guitar is not necessary. Point proven."

Charlie paused. "Dammit."

An absurdly pleased chuckle burbled from Stiles's throat as he removed the guitar from his shoulder and replaced it on the stand with adequate reverence. "So your mom used to play?"

"Wrong tense. She still does as far as I know."

Stiles's answering expression mixed surprise and horror. If the desperate twang of a snapping guitar string could be visually translated, he had successfully achieved it. He scratched uncomfortably at the back of his neck, a pink flush creeping up from under his shirt collar.
"Oh…..Sorry. I just sort of thought that your mom was—"

"Dead," Charlie supplied, sparing him the awkwardest word of the sentence. "Most people assume that. It's usually easier to go with that and not correct them. She left when I was a baby. I never really knew her. And it's weird watching strangers be more bummed out about her absenteeism than I am, so..."

Stiles immediately schooled his look of sympathy into a hastily cobbled together mask of calm. "Sure, yeah. People. Who needs them?"

Charlie moved to the guitar and picked a single string, allowing it to hum till it stilled. "Not sure why I keep it, though," she mused. "I should probably get a new one. The neck is splintering a bit. I should have replaced it a while back."

"Well there's nothing wrong with wanting a connection to something you've moved on from," Stiles answered. Charlie's eyebrows shot up her forehead and Stiles offered an apologetic wince. "Sorry, I just mean...you don't have to like something to want to remember it. You know, like when people pass kidney stones and then keep them as a souvenir." He opened his mouth only to close it again, lips stretching into a pained grimace. "That's...that's not the same thing."


"Don't mention it. I mean that literally—never mention it. I was trying to be insightful and that was weird so I just...overcorrected. And I'm still talking about it. And I'm going to stop that...right now."

Charlie trapped her lower lip in her teeth, biting back a laugh. An ineffective maneuver as her chest heaved with a restrained guffaw. Stiles rolled his eyes heavily. "Yeah, fine, laugh it up at my expense," he grumbled. "Aren't we supposed to be doing something right now? You know, something that's actually a valuable use of our time?"

"You don't think my mockery is valuable to you?" Charlie deadpanned. "But Stiles, how else will you learn?"

His eyes went wide and he shook his head with an almost manic energy, like his skeleton was about to vibrate its way out of his skin. "Oh my God, I hate you so much right now."

Charlie sniggered under her breath, but relented. Turning to her desk, she grabbed her laptop and opened up Facetime. Lo and behold, Donald had already logged in. The moment she became available, her laptop began to ding frantically as he inundated her messenger with meaningless caps lock keyboard smashes. Not a single actual word appeared. Just Donald shrieking noiselessly into the abyss. She glanced over her shoulder at Stiles. Yeah, there was a 98% chance this was not going to end well.

"Well here goes nothing."

She and Stiles dragged up a set of chairs, settling themselves in front of the webcam. A feeling of imminent doom sat on Charlie's chest as she hit the 'call' button. She hoped to get a few rings in to prepare herself, but not one shrill beep was allowed to reach its conclusion. An image appeared on the screen, the pixels slowly filling in like puzzle pieces. The end result? Donald's face, bearing a manic grin. And wearing glasses? Which were not under normal circumstances a harbinger of chaos, but in Charlie's mind served as a clear indication that things were already out of hand.

Stiles, who broadcasted his anxiety like it was the title of his memoir, managed to hold it together...
long enough to offer a lame wave of greeting. Charlie, on the other hand, was already on the verge of losing her shit. "Donald, I told you not to be weird. You're being weird."

Donald's grin morphed into a smirk. "I don't know what you mean."

"You're wearing glasses. Why are you wearing glasses?" She turned to Stiles. "He doesn't need glasses."

Stiles's eyebrows drew together. "Uh, okay?"

Stiles's bemusement was etched into every line of his face. Of course he was confused. Because unless you were a scholar in all things Donald, none of his small choices added up to anything nefarious. But they did. Oh, how they did. "It's a power move," she elaborated. "He's misrepresenting himself in a small and stupid way."

"That makes no sense."

Charlie rounded on the screen. "No. No, It doesn't. So why are you doing it?"

"You told me not to intimidate him with my handsome, symmetrical features," Donald drawled casually. "And my features are super-symmetrical. I took it to heart."

Stiles's eyebrows underwent a series of acrobatics, taking them all the way into his not entirely unreceded hairline. "Wait, hold on, you thought I'd be intimidated by him?" he demanded.

Donald's smirk widened. "Hey, greater men than you have gotten lost in my eyes." He gestured at his face. "You should be grateful for these."

"Grateful that you're wearing your dad's bifocals?" Charlie scoffed.

"Charlie," Donald chided. "You're ruining my mystique."

"We're discussing werewolves! There's already enough mystique!"

Charlie collapsed forwards, head in hands. She should have drawn up an itinerary. And talking points. And an escape route. Holy shit, why did she agree to this? Maybe if she sat there, eyes covered, they would disappear. Except they wouldn't, because fucking object permanence was a thing. And the longer she left them unsupervised, the more catastrophic the potential consequences. She yanked her head from her hands and plastered on her most smile-like grimace.

At least Donald had taken off the glasses.

"Okay," she declared, clapping her hands together like a camp counselor on the first day of summer. "How about we start over. Stiles, this is Donald, a raging egotist who happens to be one of my best friends."

"Bestest friend," Donald corrected. "I made bracelets."

"And Donald," Charlie barreled on, "this is Stiles. He runs with the wolves and shit. Behave."

No sooner had the word 'behave' left her mouth, Donald opened his. And what followed was, by definition, the opposite of 'behaving'. Donald peered at Stiles through narrowed eyes, weighing and measuring from three thousand miles away. "How tall are you?"

Stiles exchanged a confused glance with Charlie. "Um...I'm five foot nine?"
Donald fell back in his chair, conspicuously and theatrically disappointed by the response. "Huh. I was hoping you'd be taller."

"Wha—I'm sitting down," Stiles spluttered. "I look taller when I'm standing. Also five foot nine isn't short. How tall are you?"

Donald shrugged. "That's immaterial."

"He's five foot eight."

"Charlie, don't be a narc. You're better than that."

Stiles's eyes darted back and forth between Charlie and Donald at an alarming rate. "Yeah, I'm unclear as to what's happening right now."

"Nothing's happening," Donald replied. "I just thought…lacrosse, werewolf bestie…I was kinda hoping for someone bigger for when Charlie gets herself into trouble."

This was a wrinkle. Charlie expected some mild antagonism of Stiles, but the conversational shift to her was a particularly displeasing turn. She blinked at the reply and glowered at her computer screen with an intensity that might set it aflame. "Whoa, excuse me?" she balked. "Since when am I a freaking damsel in distress?"

Donald's continued casualness only infuriated her more. "You're not. I'm just saying if you're gonna get yourself into a stupid situation—which you will—I want you to have backup, not one of those inflatable dancing tube men they put up outside used car lots."

"Whoa, hey man," Stiles stammered. "Uncalled for on so many levels."

Donald barrelled on, ignoring Stiles's flailing protests. "Ideally I'd be your backup," he continued, gesturing to himself, "but that's not happening. So if I had a choice I'd rather the person who bails you out of your stupidity be able to bench 220 and do parkour."

"You know that I know self-defense," Charlie snapped.

Donald rolled his eyes. "Yes, Charlie, I'm fully aware you can kick my ass. But you're not gonna be able to karate chop a werewolf to death."

"Oh my God. Where the hell is all the paternalistic bullshit coming from?"

"It's not paternalistic!" Donald shot back. "If I could hire Ripley from Aliens to be my own personal bodyguard, believe me, I would. 'Get away from her you bitch!' Classic. Awesome. Badass."

Charlie could feel the beginnings of a cluster headache forming at the center of her forehead. "This isn't a movie, Donald," she replied, massaging her temples.

Donald shimmied in his seat, bringing it closer to the desk. "Look," he declared in a matter-of-fact tone. "I'm over here and you're over there. I just want to know that, in my absence, somebody's looking out for you. That when the chips are down and your back is to the wall, that someone's gonna—"

Stiles rolled his chair up to the desk, edging Charlie to the corner of the frame. "Look, I've got her back, man," he said, shooting a glance at her over his shoulder. "She's saved my ass a couple of times now. I'm gonna return the favor. I'm no Ripley, but I'm scrappy. You'd be surprised. Plus I've
got some insults tucked away that could seriously damage any assailant's self esteem. Long enough
for her to surprise them with a karate chop to the face."

Donald studied Stiles carefully. The jovial, almost teasing tone that had painted his face moments
ago fell away, allowing something more serious to take its place. He leaned further forwards,
placing an elbow on the table and balancing his chin in his hand. His capacity for gravitas, though
rarely used, was not unformidable. "You best not say that unless you mean it," he declared,
inclining his head towards Stiles.

Stiles's eyes went wide and twitchy under the force of Donald's stare. "I, uh, I do."

Donald held Stiles's gaze. With each moment that ticked by, the tension thickened, filling the
room. Until the stern set of Donald's lips split into a blinding grin. "Excellent!" he exclaimed, his
body regaining its usual looseness as he collapsed back from the computer. "Now that we've gotten
that out of the way, I'm working on a screenplay, and I have many questions."

The conversational whiplash had Charlie's head spinning like a Coney Island Tilt-A-Whirl. Stiles
too, given the light green tinge coloring his cheeks. Donald did always have a way to turn a
conversation on its head. Bait the opponent into a pointless argument, stir up enough chaos that
down looks like up, a little bit of light intimidation, and cap it all off with a cheery new subject.
And she fell for it. Every time. She should have shut it down when he fished out a notebook and
pen. Should've, should've, should've. Her life was full of those.

"Alright," Donald said brightly. "Let's get started." He clicked his pen with emphasis. "So do
werewolves mark their territory? Like with pee?"

Stiles slowly turned to face Charlie. Surprise, frustration, jittery panic, sarcastic smugness—all the
typical players in his facial repertoire had been wiped away only to be replaced by resignation. "I
think I almost understand you now."

Charlie opened her mouth to reply, but was interrupted by Donald loudly clicking a pen near his
mic to get their attention. He beamed, his smile shining brighter than the sun. "You guys," he
sighed as they turned back to him, "this is gonna be so much fun."

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Monday morning rolled around like a rerun of The Twilight Zone. Nothing amiss at first glance,
but careful inspection threw into relief the school's altered state. The sun shone behind an overcast
sky, enveloping the town in a bright grey. A deputy's car sat quietly in the corner of the lot. Bits of
yellow crime scene tape stuck to the parking lot's chain link fence. A dark stain colored the asphalt
before the front doors. Ominous eighties synth score played in the background…. Reality had
shifted. But then again, maybe nothing had changed. Maybe the picture was just behind a different
lens.

Charlie's overladen messenger bag hung heavily on her shoulder, slowly destroying her posture and
employing the next generation of chiropractors. Lydia's cell phone sat at the bottom, weightier than
the combined mass of her textbooks. All she had to do was hand it over—pretend she found it in
her car that morning. Simple. Easy. Almost true. The best type of lie. One she didn't want to tell.
One she had to tell. Irony could be a fickle bitch. For as long as Charlie lived in Beacon Hills, her
primary goal had been to uncover the extraordinary. Now that she had, her most daunting task was
to emulate the ordinary. Now that she found the truth, lying was the only option.

Stalking through the parking lot, Charlie came to a stop in front of Lydia's black Beetle. She was
back in school. That was good. You had to be conscious to be at school. But as Charlie's chest
loosened with relief, the knot in her stomach tightened. Her brain buzzed with friendship math. Lying equals bad, protecting equals good, but the ideas were too subjective to assign a point value. It all added up to an impossible equation—no way to solve for 'x'. Her emotional IQ was not high enough to accommodate this. People took up so much room, she didn't know where to fit them all. Before Beacon Hills Charlie had carved out space for three of them. Now they kept appearing out of nowhere and she had to make them all fit, like a game of emotional tetris she was destined to lose.

There should be a set limit to the number of existential crises a person could experience within a single week. Charlie would estimate her average at around three, maybe four if chemistry class decided to rear its ugly, traumatizing head. She could probably take five in stride. This week...it had thrown more at her than she could count, all tangled and messy and impossible to pull apart and address separately. Nothing fit in a box anymore. The Container Store's entire catalogue couldn't sort it.

"Charlie!"

The sound of her name, pronounced with such excited desperation, jolted Charlie out of her self-pity spiral. She looked up to find Allison jogging her way, eyes alight and cheeks dotted with pink from the fall chill. So this was what blissful ignorance looked like. She skidded to a halt in front of Charlie, flashing a dimpled smile. "Oh my God," she sighed. "I'm so glad to see you. I feel like I just got out of prison. My parents took my phone after I ditched school with Scott. I was seriously considering raising carrier pigeons for a while there."

"You could always fake your own death," Charlie shrugged. "It's the perfect avoidance technique. I've gotten out of like three gym memberships that way."

"I can always count on you for a well-reasoned suggestion." Allison took a deep breath and stared upward, reveling in her newfound freedom. "I missed the sky.....Is it weird if I hug you, 'cause I feel like I just got out of prison. My parents took my phone after I ditched school with Scott. I was seriously considering raising carrier pigeons for a while there."

"Don't care." Allison lurched forward, trapping Charlie in a tight embrace. Arms pinned to her sides as they were, she had no mechanism of escape. Charlie went boneless, sagging and forcing Allison to support her weight, but the girl didn't flinch. Holy hell, she was strong. "Do your worst, Charlie," Allison tutted. "I can do this all day."

"If you miss class your parents will ground you again."

She made a noise of complaint, but let go. Instead she hooked an arm through Charlie's dragging her towards the school entry. "You're lucky I'm spending time with Scott tonight. Otherwise I'd risk it."
Just this once, Charlie allowed herself to be dragged without a hint of protest. Because Allison was soft. She was kindness and hugs and teasing smiles. Her edges were curved where Charlie's were sharp. She radiated the warmth Lydia needed to soak up. Charlie had only ever been able to provide a weak flicker. She could learn to be warmer. She could learn anything with enough dedication. But Allison had been raised by murderous psychopaths, and her softness came second nature. Between the two of them, Lydia had definitely chosen the wrong support system.

"So Lydia's car is here," Allison murmured, her voice all sincerity and earnestness because of course it was. "Do you know how she's been doing? I've been so disconnected from everything."

"I called her house a few times this weekend, tried to stop by..." Charlie replied. "Her mom kept saying she was 'indisposed' and that 'it wasn't a good time'."

Allison sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "That's awful. Maybe we should surprise her with a card or something. Or flowers?"

Charlie shook her head definitively. "Ohhh, no. Flowers are for grovelling or expressions of romantic intent. Getting her 'feel better soon' anything would remind her that she at one point she wasn't well. And that is a sign of weakness. Lydia hates those."

"Um, that's insane."

Charlie shrugged. "That's Lydia."

Allison made a face, but inclined her head in silent agreement. "So we just...what? Ignore it? Pretend nothing happened?"

"Yup," Charlie replied, popping the 'p'. "That is exactly what we do."

The two of them pushed through the double doors just as the first warning bell rang. Students slammed their lockers shut and dragged their feet to class, chatting, laughing, complaining just like it was any other day. A few days ago, Charlie had looked just like them. Allison still did. But did she look different to them now? Could they tell?

Allison's voice sounded right next to her, making Charlie give a twitch of surprise. "Oh my God. I can't believe I'm actually relieved to be back in school. I can't wait for things to be normal again."

The irony was enough to blow out a fuse in Charlie's brain. "Same here, Allison. Same here."

As Charlie stepped into homeroom, though, it became immediately clear that normal had no intention of making a reappearance. Even the seating arrangements refused to conform. Stiles had abandoned his usual position on Allison's other side, diagonal from Scott. Instead he dropped into the seat on Charlie's other side, distancing himself from his friend. He held his body as loosely as ever, but it was sagging and sullen. Charlie approached Stiles with caution, Allison's idle chatting barely registering while she approached her desk. She took her seat slowly, almost afraid any sudden movements might spook him. They had reached an understanding, sure, but everything felt so….unsettled. And at the moment his face wasn't helping.

Charlie took her seat, extracting her textbooks with movements of undue precision. A full minute passed before she found her voice. Another one ticked by as she formulated her truly inspired greeting. "Hey."

Stiles's reply came clipped and grumpy. "Hey."

Charlie blinked at his terseness. Nothing about this presentation rang true—from his face to his
voice, nothing was familiar. Even the shittiest of Monday mornings were not exempt from his manic enthusiasm, but now a dark cloud hovered over his head, casting him in shadow. The image was disagreeable—she did not care for it. Stiles was not built to brood. After a few moments, she noticed his glower was not of the general sort, but instead had a very concrete point of focus: Scott's still-empty seat.

Charlie nodded to herself, penciling in a mental note never to piss him off. "Right." His silence continued. She felt itchy. 'Watching a documentary on beetles' level itchy. "So…," she drawled, desperately needing at least one of them to be using words, "...um...how was your weekend?"

Stiles's lips twitched downward, the angry direction. "Oh, the usual," he drawled. "Homework, TV, video games, a trip to the hospital. Stared at a bunch of x-rays, budgeted for some hospital bills. Yeah, it was a real blast." Charlie inhaled sharply at the harshness of his tone. Stiles must have heard her, because he redirected her gaze from Scott's desk. As his eyes met hers, some of the darkness lifted and he cleared his throat. "Hey….sorry."

Charlie shook her head. "Don't be."

"This weekend...I'm—I've just been….stressed. Stress has been happening to me. Like...actively. Things have been stressful in my general vicinity."  

"It's fine. Don't worry about it."

Stiles sucked in his cheeks and narrowed his eyes, worrying about it. His head bobbed and he looked down at his open textbook, but his eyes didn't move at all. He wasn't reading. Charlie studied his profile carefully. One of her awkward back-pats seemed in order, but would likely be unwelcome. She leaned in towards him, her voice tentative. "You and Scott still having problems?"

Stiles snorted bitterly. "Yup."

Charlie bit her lip and nodded in understanding. "It's, um, it's not because of me, is it?" she asked quietly. "I mean, it's not because you told me about the—the situation, right? Because if it is, I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to become another problem for you—I could talk to Scott if—"

Stiles held up a hand, cutting her off. "It's not about that. Trust me."

Charlie gave a sigh of relief. "Good," she breathed, turning to face the chalkboard. She stole a couple of sidelong glances at him, unsure of how to proceed. "So….do you wanna talk about it?"

Stiles wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "Not really."

"Okay, then."

That should have been that. Avoiding heavy conversations was a staple of the Charlie Oswin behavioral manual. But Stiles was still sad and her skin still itched. "Um, if you decide that you do wanna talk about it, I'm, you know, here and stuff. Like if you want to do some unnecessary yelling, you can do it in my direction and I promise not to get mad."

Stiles's lips twitched again, but this time they went upwards. The happy direction. "That's a generous offer. You sure you're up for it?"

"Absolutely," she declared. "I might punch you in the face, but I won't be mad."

"Um, you really need to work on your sales pitch," Stiles laughed, gesturing in the general direction of her face. "And FYI, face-punching negates pretty much all of the generosity in the
"Hey, I'm not Mother Theresa," Charlie shot back, folding her arms across her chest. "And that's just how it works. Punches follow yelling. It's instinctive. There's no ill will or whatever. Just playground rules."

Stiles wheezed. "Playground rules?"

"Yeah, playground rules. If someone gets in your face, you gotta punch them. Otherwise all the other kids think you're weak and turn on you. Punching maintains the status quo."

Stiles gaped at her, shaking his head in disbelief. "Playground rules—those are prison rules! Did you grow up in the Thunderdome?" Charlie smiled enigmatically, and Stiles gave of a derisive scoff. "Sometimes you terrify me."


The roll of his eyes was at odds with the flicker of mirth behind them. Good. Laughing Stiles was the best of the Stileses. His thumb still tapped nervously against the edge of his desk, but his resemblance to the cast of the Addams family had lessened somewhat. "How's your dad doing?"

she asked, eyeing him carefully.

The tapping of Stiles's thumb abruptly stopped. "The scans said he didn't bruise his spine. He should be fine, but the doctors said to take it easy—rest a lot."

Charlie raised her eyebrows skeptically. "And how's that working out?"

"Not too well. He keeps going over his files. Every time I try to get him to lay down, he keeps yelling about how our house isn't a nursing home. He's being a gigantic pain in the ass, to be honest."

"Yeah, well he's a cop," Charlie replied. "Asking a cop to take it easy is like asking a fish to tap dance. And your dad is a good cop. Honestly, I'd be a bit disappointed if he just laid down with zero protest."

Stiles groaned, his head falling forward and slamming into his desk. "Can you stop being all wise and understanding and stuff and just let me complain? Is that too much to ask?"

"Oh, were you having difficulty complaining? I couldn't tell. You know, because of the complaining you were and are still currently engaged in."

Stiles wrenched his head up from the desk. "You know what—"

His indignation was cut short as a familiar silhouette darkened the doorway. The mildness with which Scott carried himself was always endearing, but now it had the added bonus of being hilariously paradoxical. The meekest person she knew, an apex predator. As he approached, he fixed Stiles in the crosshairs of those apologetic puppy dog eyes of his. Stiles's eyes, on the other hand, were a pair of windows with the curtains drawn shut. Complete refusal to engage. Defeated, Scott took his regular seat and slumped forwards, chin resting on his desk. Even Allison's brilliant smile of greeting was not sufficient to improve his posture.

Suspicious. Scott didn't wear his heart on his sleeve, he wore it on his face. And his face had no reaction whatsoever to hers. No nervousness, no skittishness, no nothing. She held his fate in her hands like a fragile little robin's egg, and he apparently had no solid opinion on this. For someone
with his propensity towards awkwardness, the complete absence of it could only mean one thing. He didn't know that she knew. That little shit hadn't told him. Her face hardened as she looked at Stiles. He must have felt her eyes on him—he visibly twitched—but for some reason he decided not to return the look. Suspicious-ier.

English class dragged more than anticipated. And they were reading Dante's Inferno, so Charlie could pinpoint the exact circle of hell she was currently enduring. Complicated and boring, anxious and angry, predictable but completely nonsensical. And that was just Mr. Hobson's lecture. Throughout the class, Charlie's eye jumped back and forth between Stiles and Scott, trying to piece together the source of the rift. Stiles must have been paying attention. He stiffened under her scrutiny every time.

When the second period bell did ring, Stiles scrambled out of his seat as quickly as possible and sprinted for the door. Scott stared solemnly at his wake, not bothering to follow. Charlie, on the other hand, jumped up, using her elbows to paddle through the tide of students until she caught up. She called out after him. "Hey, Stiles."

Stiles stopped in his tracks and turned around. His face, unsure whether to appear guilty or oblivious, painted a Picasso-esque combination of the two. "Hey, Charlie!" he exclaimed brightly. "What are you—"

"We need to talk."

Charlie wrenched open the nearby door to the music room, grabbed hold of his arm, and shoved him inside. "What are you doing?" he protested. "We're going to be late for class! This is not normal behavior!"

Charlie locked the door and pulled down the blinds on the window that looked into the hallway. "Do you really want to start qualifying normal behavior? Do you think that would be useful for someone in your situation?"

"Uh...probably not, but—"

"What's going on with you and Scott?"

Stiles sighed and shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his hoodie. "I'm not really talking to Scott right now."

Charlie scoffed. "Yeah, no shit. And speaking of things not happening right now, why isn't Scott spiralling out about the fact that I know about his...condition?"

"Because he doesn't know that you know."

"Yeah—I gathered that. And why doesn't he know?"

"I don't know, Charlie," Stiles shrugged. "Maybe because telling him would kind of defeat the purpose of the whole 'not talking to him' thing."

"Don't you think he deserves to know I'm in on the whole 'werewolf business' now?" she asked incredulously. "I mean, it's his secret. Shouldn't be aware who else has it?"

"Right now I really don't care what Scott deserves," was Stiles's grumbling reply. "And if you're so bent out of shape about it, why don't you go and tell him yourself?"

Charlie poked him in the shoulder, hard enough to break the mask of bitterness with a little old
fashioned annoyance. "And how would that work out, hm?" she demanded. "What? I just walk up to him all like..." She shoved her hands in her pockets and hunched her shoulders, adopting a non-threatening posture. "Hi-de-ho, Scotty boy!" she chirped, venom mingling with the artificial sweetness of her voice. "How are you doing on this fine morn? I'm some random girl you barely know, but—"

"You're not some random girl."

"BUT," Charlie insisted, "I know all of your deepest, darkest, and most personal secrets! How did I find out, you ask? Well your bestest bud in the whole wide world told me! Okay, then! Bye!" She dropped the act and glowered at Stiles. "In what world would that end well for anybody involved—especially you? In that reality, you get to be the asshole. Anyways, we're going to need him to find out who the alpha is."

"Hey, I don't see why we can't research that on our own," Stiles grumbled. "It's not like Scott was getting anywhere to begin with."

Hearing Stiles use the word 'we' made Charlie want to laugh or cringe. "Oh, no," she declared, shaking her head. "You don't get to do that. You don't get to turn me into the other woman."

Stiles's face shifted from dour to bewildered. "Um....what?"

"You're friend-cheating on Scott with me," she said gesturing between the two of them.

"Did you suffer from some acute head trauma over the weekend? Because I think you might be suffering from a concussion."

"You're coming to me with all your werewolf stuff because you're refusing to talk about it with Scott! I'm your temporary replacement Scott. I don't know how I feel about that—I am not the B-team."

Stiles blew out a long breath and shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous, Charlie, there is no B-team. And you're not a replacement Scott."

Charlie planted her hands on her hips, squaring her shoulders in his direction. "Really. So you're saying that, under normal circumstances, you wouldn't have sent that rambling email of Derek Hale conspiracy theories to Scott instead of me?"

"It wasn't rambling!"

"I'm totally your replacement Scott," Charlie barreled on. "And he doesn't know I'm in on the secret?! I feel like a dirty homewrecker. You're making me be the voice of reason here! This has gotten out of hand!"

"Hey, the only person who wrecked anything was Scott!"

Charlie hadn't even realized they started yelling until her chest heaved from the effort. Stiles stood as standoffish as she had ever seen him, arms crossed across his chest, expression closed, steeled eyes, a 'Do Not Enter' sign stamped on his forehead. She took a small step forwards, fixing him under her gaze. "This can't just be about Scott missing some calls. What's going on?"

Stiles frowned, a sharp breath pushing through his nose. "He's...he's not taking any of this seriously enough. While he's off making out with his girlfriend, people are getting hurt. He's got all these new abilities and stuff—he can help people. Instead he's just ignoring them."
"People like your dad," Charlie filled in. Stiles didn't reply, but his nonverbal cues numbered in the dozens. Rocking back on his heels, lips pinched in a thin line, eyes willing to look anywhere but at her, she could go on. Damnit, she was the voice of reason. "Stiles, Scott is a high school sophomore. He's not Superman. You can't expect him to save everybody, even if everybody includes your dad."

"I can expect him to try, though!" Stiles shot back. "I can expect him to care enough not to go and disappear for an afternoon while the shit is hitting the fan! I can expect him not to abandon me with his problems that I can't do anything about, and to bother showing up when I'm in the middle of mine! I'm always there for his! Do you remember who helped me this weekend? 'Cause it wasn't Scott. It was the self-proclaimed 'random girl who barely knows us'. You got my dad to the hospital. You deleted Lydia's video. You're the one who realized I couldn't do it by myself. Scott couldn't be freaking bothered."

Stiles groaned loudly and stomped across the room, collapsing in one of the chairs somewhere in the tuba section. Elbows on his knees, head in his hands, the tension in him snapped. He went slack, but strain clicked with his jaw and clenched and unclenched with his fists—movements of unfulfilled action. Charlie worried her lip. She had yet to fully realize the sense of futility imposed upon Stiles through all of this. He was logistics and backup. Both important roles to play, to be sure, but they were never at the forefront of a fight. They didn't decide the winner. Whenever Scott wasn't around, Stiles probably felt a tiny bit useless. An impossible-to-confront enemy. She could relate.

Moving over to the chairs, Charlie took the seat next to Stiles. She reached over and clapped a hand on his shoulder, making his head snap up, his eyes finding hers. Smiling gently, she gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You're right," she said, nodding to him. "Scott probably needs to take this stuff more seriously. But you can't blame him for your dad. He's a cop. It's literally his job to put himself in harm's way. And you can't keep doing this radio silence thing—it's not sustainable and it helps nobody."

Stiles wrinkled his nose at her. "Would you stop doing that?"

"Doing what?"

You know…." He waggled his fingers in her face. "Stop ruining all my anger with your….reasonableness and logic. I don't care for it. You're supposed to be on my side."

Charlie elbowed him in the ribs. "I am on your side. Sometimes being on someone's side means telling them when they're being a moron."

She regarded Stiles evenly, hoping for some form of response. Maybe a shift in his expression to something warmer, more familiar. The second bell rang, reminding them of where they were—where they were supposed to be. School felt so distant right now. Stiles stood up and grabbed his bag from the floor, marching towards the door. He wrenched it open, poised to step through, but paused for a moment. "I'll talk to you later, Charlie."

He ducked through, leaving her alone.

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At a certain point, too many things could happen in a single day. If that point has been reached, a person should be allowed the eject from their life, go home, wrap themself in a blanket, and eat a crapload of ice cream. It was only fair. But the world wasn't fair. The world was a freaking dystopian Disney World ride that could shift beneath your feet and send you toppling into a parallel
dimension where nothing made sense and a chorus of puppets soundtracked your crisis. Stiles and Scott were fighting. Lydia's phone still sat at the bottom of her messenger bag. Mr. Harris insisted on continuing to exist. Too freaking much for one day. She was taking an out. Charlie had 99 problems, and she was going to hide from all of them. Today, lunch would be taken in the library.

The lunch bell rang and Charlie jumped to her feet, darting door. Stiles called her name behind her, but she pushed forwards into the hallway regardless. She was about to turn to the library, but a small, manicured, and surprisingly strong hand wrapped around her arm. Charlie turned to find Lydia staring at her, eyebrows raised expectantly. "Excuse me, what do you think you're doing?"

Charlie's resolve to find solitude crumbled beneath her like a bridge in an Indiana Jones movie. Lydia upright, Lydia talking, Lydia sassing her. Damnit. More itchy feelings. These people had gotten under her skin. As Charlie's lips fought off a smile, Lydia took a step back, eyeing her suspiciously. "What is this?" she said, waving a finger in Charlie's face. "What's happening here—what is this look?"

Charlie swallowed. It was a new rhythm she'd have to become accustomed to, heart beating like a drum and cymbals crashing in her head. Her body reacting to innocuous sentences, screaming 'this situation is not normal!', while her face stays smooth and serene. Relief could be as loud as anxiety, joy as loud as panic, and all of them screamed in her ears at once. "Nothing. I'm just really glad to see you."

Two-thirds of an emotion flitted across Lydia's face. She shook her head, brushing the almost-feeling aside along with a clump of curls over her shoulder. Enough sincerity for one day. "Well, clearly our time apart has done you no favors." She withdrew one step further and looked Charlie up and down, taking in her floral skull print shirt, overall skater skirt, and tattered blue Converse. "Your shoes are practically falling off your feet. It took what? Three days for you to forget everything I taught you?"

"That implies I was ever paying attention to begin with."

Lydia rolled her eyes and linked her arm through Charlie's, dragging her towards the cafeteria. "Anyways, it's been a few days since we've all seen each other," Lydia said, each syllable heavy with determination. "We are going to have a girls' lunch. No boys or distractions. Just you, me, and Allison. Talking about boys and distractions."

"Sounds unmissable."

With all her purpose of movement, Lydia was distracted. Her head kept swivelling—either she was looking for someone or trying make sure everyone got her 'good angle'. Probably both. Charlie took the opportunity to reach into her messenger bag and pull out the cell phone. "Hey, by the way," she said, rooting around amongst the textbooks, "I found this in my car this morning. I think it got wedged under the passenger seat."

"Ugh, thank God."

Lydia snatched the phone from Charlie's hand at a speed that could break the sound barrier. The moment it was in the redhead's grasp, Charlie became a vestigial appendage, clunky and unnecessary. Lydia released Charlie's arm, waving her off as she scrolled through her missed notifications. "Allison's in the lunch line. Go get us some food and I'll find us a spot. Meet you in five."

"What was that you said about 'no distractions'?"
Lydia looked up from her phone long enough for one disdainful glare. "I said we were having a 'girls' lunch'. Are we eating lunch in this moment? No? Okay, then."

Lydia spun on her heel, marching in the opposite direction as Charlie's eyes followed. "Hey!" she shouted at Lydia's retreating figure. "Hey, why am I buying you food?"

Lydia's wave morphed to a prominent display of her middle finger. It was a move Charlie could respect, so she relented, instead trudging to meet Allison in the lunch line. The brunette didn't see her approach, as her head was tipped down towards an aged book. She was being jostled down the line, too engrossed to pay any mind to her surroundings. Charlie peeked over her shoulder to find a series of elaborate, menacing prints. "What are you reading?"

Allison jumped and turned, the wide eyes of surprise crinkling at the corners when she saw Charlie. "Oh, hey, Charlie," she said, shaking off her alarm. "You startled me."

Charlie slapped her tray down next to Allison's, ignoring the stink eye of the few people behind them in line. "What has you reading on a lunch break? I'm pretty sure this is our designated dilettante hour."

"Half hour," Allison corrected. The lunch line moved and the pair of them slid their trays closer to the various colors of gloop. "And it's just research. You know, for the family origins report for history? My aunt Kate filled me in a bit about our genealogy—ancestors and stuff. Apparently there's this French legend—I've been reading up on it a lot."

The shiver down Charlie's spine was battled into stillness and her mouth formed a silent 'o'. As much as she loved being proved right, her foresight in this case offered no comfort, not even a cold one. Kate did want Allison in on their secret. She'd begun to drop breadcrumbs, and at the end of the trail she might well gobble the girl up. Drums, cymbals, crash, bang. Her head hurt. "That's really cool," Charlie forced out with a hasty nod. "I'm pretty sure my ancestors were boring cattle farmers. Old French legends? That's a way better hook than dear old Bessie. I'm just gonna repurpose a paper I wrote on the Coast Guard last year."

Allison blinked. "Wait, you reuse papers?"

"Well, yeah. There's gotta be at least one perk to school-hopping."

"Look at you, using your powers for evil."

"I think it's more of a moral grey area than being straight-up evil."

Allison let out a light snort, but her expression quickly shifted. A line formed between her eyebrows and they knitted together in a frown. Charlie followed her eye line only to be confronted by the cafeteria door swinging shut. They stumbled a few more paces down the line before Allison spoke. "Hey, can I ask you a kind of weird question?"

"That's how I prefer my questions," Charlie said, plopping two plates of salad on her tray. "What's up?"

Allison bit her lip and bounced nervously on the balls of her feet. "Does Scott seem like he's acting kind of weird to you?"

"You're gonna have to be a bit more specific, Allison. Scott always seems like he's acting kind of weird. I'd go so far as to say he is weird."

Allison glanced down the lunch line and leaned forwards, tipping her head towards Charlie. "No, I
mean especially weird. I was walking down the hallway this morning and I could swear I saw him running away from me. And then this morning in English class he just sort of...ignored me? Everything has been going really well. He snuck in this weekend—"

"Allison, you little minx!" Charlie whispered, smacking her arm.

Allison flushed pink from the collar of her shirt to the roots of her hair. Sheepish fingers tucked a curl of hair behind her ear before continuing. "It—it was nice. And everything was going fine until Kate walked in on us. He hid in the closet for a while and then left. I mean, everything was fine until he left. What changed?"

"Can't really help you there," Charlie shrugged. "My emotional IQ is in the negatives. Maybe he just really had to pee and was booking it for the bathroom. You know, it's never too soon to concern yourself with prostate health."

Allison furrowed her eyebrows, considering the thought. "And in English?"

"Maybe he was just worried about getting into trouble in class. I ran into his mom the night of parent-teacher conferences and...well, she wasn't exactly thrilled with him. Maybe she put him under some sort of parental academic probation."

The explanations, probable or not, did nothing thing bolster Allison's confidence. "I can't believe he got into so much trouble for me. I feel so guilty."

Today was proving to be a day of awkward back pats. "Oh, I'm sure it's fine," Charlie mumbled, offering Allison her one brand of comfort, 'I'm sure he thinks it's totally worth it. Now, come on. Lydia's saving us a seat. We're having something called a 'girls' lunch'."

What precisely constituted a 'girls' lunch', Charlie wasn't certain. But given the expression of distaste on Lydia's face after the three of them settled in their seats, what was currently happening did not qualify. The enthusiasm on her face faded almost immediately as Allison opened her French history book on the table. Charlie made idle conversation—primarily defending exactly why she still owned this particular pair of shoes—but Lydia's eyes continually strayed to Allison. Eventually she dropped her fork to her tray with a passive aggressive clang.

Flipping her hair over her shoulder, Lydia placed her elbows on the table and folded her hands together, primly resting her chin on them. "Um, Allison," she said sweetly, "what are you doing?"

Allison's eyes flicked up from her book. "Reading."

Lydia's nose wrinkled with dissatisfaction. "Yeah….I can see that you're reading. What I don't understand is why you're reading here and now. I expect this kind of stuff from Charlie, but not you. No offense, Charlie."

"Um, offense taken. How dare you imply that I'm well-read. Don't embarrass me in public like this, Lydia."

"Being well-read isn't embarrassing," Lydia replied snappishly. "Being a crazy shut-in nerd with no social life, on the other hand, is." She squinted over at Allison's book. "What are you reading, anyway?"


Lydia pursed her lips and nodded. "Okay, follow up question. Why are you reading that?"
"The family origins history paper. It's really interesting." She hunched over the book and drew her leg up to her chest, resting her heel on the edge of the chair. Literally on the edge of her seat. Allison had a talent for being adorable. "Okay, listen to this," she continued. "They've got this entire story about La Bête du Gévaudan."

"The what of who?" Lydia demanded, waving her fork around like an orchestra conductor.

"The Beast of Gevaudin," Allison elaborated. "Listen. A quadruped wolf-like monster prowling the Auvergne in south Dordogne in France during the years 1764 to 1767...La bête killed over a hundred people, becoming so infamous that the king Louis XV sent one of his best hunters to try and kill it."

As she spoke, Allison's voice adopted a sinister tone, all low whispers and creepy smirks, one campfire and ominous flashlight away from being a ghost story. Charlie's stomach folded in on itself, twisting with a twinge of fear. Not because Allison's performance was exceptionally harrowing, but because the scene being painted bore an eerie resemblance to present day Beacon Hills. Kate was ushering the next generation forwards. That could go very badly for Stiles and Scott.

"Boring," Lydia interjected, destroying all sense of gravitas.

"To you maybe." Charlie waved a beckoning hand, urging Allison to continue. "Keep going."

Allison leaned forwards, fixing them both with a serious stare. "Even the church eventually declared the monster a messenger of Satan."

Lydia pressed her lips together poutily. "Mmph. Still boring."

"Cryptozoologists believe that it may have been a subspecies of hoofed predator, possibly a masonicate—"

"Slipping into a coma bored."

"—while others believe that it was a powerful sorcerer that could shape-shift," Allison whispered dramatically, "into a man-eating monster."

"Any of this have anything to do with your family?" Lydia asked, arching a perfectly shaped eyebrow.

"This," Allison continued. "It is believed that la bête was finally trapped and killed by a renowned hunter who claimed his wife and four children were the first to fall prey to the creature. His name was Argent."

Charlie, whose insides were rapidly turning into one of the varieties of mush they served for lunch, let out a low whistle. "Damn. You hail from a long line of badasses, Allison. Remind me not to pick a fight with you."

Lydia, meanwhile, maintained her air of intense disinterest with little to no effort whatsoever. Though 'intense disinterest' did rank among her basic personality traits. "Your ancestors killed a big wolf," she deadpanned. "So what?"

Allison eagerly flipped to another page. "Not just a big wolf. Take a look at this picture." She turned the book around and held it up for both her and Lydia to observe. "What does that look like to you?"
Charlie's mushy insides straight-up liquefied. The charcoal image depicted a huge, wolf-like beast, shrouded in both mist and mystery. But that was to be expected based on all previous narration. The panic-inducing tour de force manifested in the piercing red eyes that stared through that mist and out from the page. Charlie glanced over at Lydia. Her eyes seemed to widen, fixated on the photo. But the moment passed as soon as it came. She quirked her head to the side, glossed lips pulling into a superior smile.

"It looks like a big wolf," the redhead said snarkily, enunciating each syllable. "And now that we're done with show and tell, how about we go over our double date plans for tonight."

Wide-eyed wonder turned to narrow-eyed suspicion. "What double date?" Allison demanded.


Allison opened her mouth, looked to Charlie, and then closed it again. Too good-natured to protest given the weekend's events, she put her book to the side and listened intently to Lydia's really rather highly involved plans. Lydia scooted her chair closer to Allison, discussing what sounded to be a series of costume changes, and left Charlie to her salad and her thoughts. Until, naturally, she felt something collide with her shoulder.

Charlie brushed at the point of collision, not thinking much of it. Until it happened again. And again. Until a grape landed in the middle of her salad. Frowning to herself, she glanced down to see a few other grapes rolling around on the floor. Another one hit her ear, joining its comrades beneath the table. Following its trajectory, her eyes found Stiles a few tables over, hand waving frantically and a full tray of grapes at his disposal. Charlie waved back, then turning back to Allison and Lydia, still deep in conversation.

"I'm, uh, I'm going to go," she said, jerking her thumb in Stiles's direction. Allison gave a quick smile of acknowledgement while Lydia mustered up a tired wave. "Uh, okay then."

Abandoning her meal, she grabbed her bag and made a beeline for Stiles, who seemed to be establishing a bunker behind a French textbook. "What's all this about?" she demanded, gesturing in his direction.

"I'm going incognito," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth. "Scott's avoiding Allison because Derek told him to, so we're both staying under the radar."

"Um….what?"

"Ugh, I know, right?" Stiles groaned. "Turns out you were right about the whole 'not talking to Scott' thing being a bad idea, because the dude can be a bona fide moron. Three days—" he held up three fingers "—three days without me and the idiot's going to Derek for help. I mean, seriously? Derek? Ugh, he's hopeless."

"So you guys are talking again?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't kissed and made up yet."

"No," Stiles mumbled bitterly. "But we've still got to help him before he goes and makes a deal with the freaking devil."

Charlie squinted carefully. "We?"
"Yes, we. I haven't told him about you yet, but I'm gonna. Because you know—" he lifted his fingers up in air quotes "—it's 'the right thing to do' and blah, blah, blah. But in the meantime we've gotta think of a way to keep him from shifting involuntarily. If we don't the dumbass is going to go back to Derek and, like, start a freaking book club or something."

Charlie fished out her own textbook, setting it up as a barrier between her and the rest of the cafeteria. "Okay. So is involuntarily shifting a big issue for him?"

"In that he has a tendency to go bat crap crazy and start trying to kill people—me, specifically—yeah, it's a bit of an issue. Less murderiness would be a net positive. Man, it would be really freaking awesome if he stopped trying to kill me."

Charlie jerked her head to the side noncommitally. "Eh, speak for yourself."

Stiles bristled, his spine straightening. "Okay, one, I am. And two, you're like the second meanest person I know."

"Okay," Charlie barrelled on, ignoring his grumbling annoyance. "So how do we stop Scott from shifting? What makes him shift in the first place?"

Stiles glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, still hesitant, still not used to sharing. His head may have made up its mind about her, but his instincts needed a little more time to adjust. "Scott keeps saying it has to do with his heart rate," Stiles sighed. "Like it's worse if he's playing lacrosse, or he's getting anxious, or if he's making out with Allison…"

"Whoa, now. Are we sure this whole 'premature shifting' thing isn't a highly involved euphemism?"

Stiles made a face at her from behind a set of verb conjugation problems. "Gross. Also, I wish. It's a way bigger issue than sexy times with his girlfriend. He's chased me around the locker room like four times. I had to blast him with a fire extinguisher."

Charlie let out a low, sympathetic hiss. "Right," she nodded. "So shifting is connected to his heart rate….Have you tested the parameters of that at all? Like at what point does heart rate become an issue?"

Stiles's eyes lit up, a small smirk twisting the corners of his lips. "Not sure…..but I think I've got an idea." He snapped his French textbook shut and shoved it in his backpack, jumping up from the table.

"That's great," Charlie deadpanned. "You gonna share that idea with the class?"

"Gotta make sure it works first," he grinned. Stiles scrambled to get all of his things assembled and made a move for the door. Before taking off, he afforded Charlie one last grin.

"Welcome to the A-Team, Oswin."

Chapter End Notes

Comments/reviews are appreciated!

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Charlie is cleaning up for Stiles's arrival, all nervous and stuff. I just kind of like this calm, waltz-like song set against her frantically trying to clean the kitchen.

--- Casanova - Adam Green & Binki Shapiro

Charlie arrives at school. The song would sort of start playing over Donald's super-smug face in the last frame of his scene and then cut to Charlie arriving, looking at Lydia's car and all that.

--- Youth - Cultfever

Charlie tracks Stiles down in the hall and shoves him into the music room. This would be an instrumental song, don't really pay attention to the lyrics. It was used in an episode of Suits, but whatever.

--- Addicted To You - Scorpio Loon

Meeting Allison in the lunch line.

--- Chop - Vundabar

End chapter...Welcome to the A-Team.

--- Addicted To You - Scorpio Loon (reprise, I just like the idea of both Charlie and Stiles getting a moment with the same song, that cheeky whistle at the beginning, etc. Again, no lyrics would come into play…)

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