Whatever Works

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Summary

The problem with having your soulmate's first words to you tattooed on your arm is knowing your whole life that you're fated to be with a jerk. It's enough to make Stiles want to date other people ... which is how he winds up dating his soulmate's nephew.

Notes

Loosely inspired by a post I saw once on the mechanics of "first word" soulmate AU's, my love of turning tropes on their heads, and my ongoing campaign for polyamory as a solution to love triangles everywhere.

Will eventually be explicit because Steter is my weakness.
Chapter 1

It’s not that Stiles hates the idea of soulmates. In fact, there are times when he bitterly envies the people he knows who had it so easy. Like Scott and Allison, who met when they were seventeen. Allison still proudly displays her ‘Do you need to borrow a pen’ tattoo and laughs when Scott shows off the corresponding flustered, ‘uh, what, yes, how did you know?’

He feels sorry for the people with the bland, generic tattoos. Some people get lucky. His parents, their epic romance aside, had ‘Can I have this dance’ and his mother’s reply had been, ‘Only if you don’t mind if I step on your feet!’ But he’s seen people who have things like ‘can I help you today’ or ‘it’s nice to meet you’.

Most of those people, he knows, have a collection of exciting responses they give. If a conversation goes ‘can I help you today’ and then ‘no thanks’, they’re out of luck. That was Lydia’s tattoo – ‘can I help you today’. Whenever anyone asked that, she replied with an outrageous demand. Stiles remembers Lydia laughing while she tells him about Jordan Parrish’s tattoo which reads, ‘Yes, I’m in desperate need of four hundred pounds of bananas’.

He knows that people feel even more sorry for him than they did for Lydia. Every time he looks at the profanity-laced tirade on his arm, he flinches. “Context is important,” had been his father’s somewhat lame attempt at comforting him. Stiles doesn’t doubt that, but he can’t think of any context that will make his apparent soulmate less of an asshole.

There are times – a lot of times – when he just wants to say ‘fuck it’ and start dating other people. But the problem is, nobody else is really interested. Nobody wants to date someone who isn’t their soulmate. Make friends, sure, have casual sex, maybe, but actually start a relationship? “What’s the point?” Stiles has heard, more than once.

He’s still stinging at the latest conversation he’s had along those lines – “I thought you always knew this would happen,” was what Malia had said three days previous, as she left him for her soulmate – when he shows up for his shift at the bookstore. His boss gives him a wide berth as he begins angrily shelving books.

About twenty minutes later, someone wanders into his section with the faintly confused look of someone who just knows the perfect book is there somewhere, but has no idea what it is. Stiles walks over, pastes on his best employee smile, and asks, “Can I help you find something?”

The man blinks at him. He opens his mouth to reply, but then his face twists in frustration and he groans, “Oh my God, I’m so sick of this!”

Stiles laughs despite himself. He knows the look of someone trying to recall one of their special soulmate phrases. He sees them at least once a month. A lot of people must have ‘can I help you find something’ tattooed on their bodies. “Soulmate trouble?” he asks, trying to put a note of sympathy in his voice.

The man sighs and nods. He holds out his arm to reveal the neatly printed words on his arms. “I take it you don’t have ‘I’m so sick of this’ as a tattoo, or you would have fallen over in shock.”

“Nope, sorry. Seriously, though, you look lost.”

“Oh, uh, I’m trying to pick out a birthday present for my youngest sister. She’s into fantasy and stuff,
but this all looks . . . dubious.”

Stiles looks around at the rows of ‘paranormal romances’ and tends to agree. “I can totally help you out. How old is she?”

“Twenty.”

“Hey, same as me. Okay. You said she’s into fantasy. Classic or urban?”

“Either’s fine, I think.”

“What’s her opinion on Twilight? Love, loathe, or like but only ironically?”

The man laughs. “Loathe.”

“Does she like mysteries?”

“Yeah.”

“I have just the series for you.” Stiles walks over and pulls the first two books of The Dresden Files off the shelves. “Wizard private investigator, demons, werewolves, very cool shit. Hardly a melodramatic teenager to be seen.”

“Thanks. Really. Oh, uh, I’m Derek.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Stiles.” He taps the name badge.

Derek hesitates for a moment, then takes a deep breath and appears to plunge in. “Do you want to go get a coffee when you’re off shift, maybe?”

Stiles opens his mouth to say sure, he’d love to, because Derek is kind of funny and hotter than a thousand suns, but then he remembers the look on Malia’s face as she’d broken up with him. She had been genuinely surprised that Stiles’ feelings were hurt. “I don’t think that would be a great idea.”

Derek sighs. “No, you’re probably right.”

The crestfallen look on his face jolts something in Stiles. Derek is clearly willing to go outside the system – he just asked Stiles to. Maybe it isn’t such a terrible idea after all. A grin touches his face and he says, “I didn’t say no. Are you prepared to indulge in a bad idea with me?”

Now Derek smiles, and it makes him a hundred times more beautiful. “Sounds great.”

“I get off shift at three. Meet me at the coffee shop up front? And then we can walk to the café down the street which serves something that doesn’t taste terrible.”

Derek laughs, and says, “Okay. See you then.”

By the time Stiles gets off shift, he’s half-convinced that Derek won’t be there, but he is. Stiles takes a moment to get a better look at him. Beautiful eyes, gorgeous scruff, shoulders and arms to die for. Yeah, this is a great idea. Even if it stays casual. Maybe it can stay casual in the bed at his apartment.

The coffee at the in-store café really is terrible, but there’s an independent place right down the street that serves amazing pastries in addition to the good coffee. Stiles tells him about it as they walk down the street. The weather is good, so they sit outside. “So what’s your usual go-to response when people ask if they can help you find something?” Stiles asks. “I’m curious.”
“Lately I’ve been working through the verses of the Twelve Days of Christmas,” Derek says. “I should have asked you if you could help me find five golden rings. But to be honest . . . I’m not really into the whole soulmate thing.” His gaze flickers up as if to gauge Stiles’ reaction to this outlandish statement.


Derek takes a sip of his tea. “My parents married out of soullock.”

“Oh, wow!” Stiles is genuinely surprised. He’s heard of that happening, but it’s rare. “Are they still together?”

“They died almost ten years ago, but they were still married when it happened,” Derek says, and then changes the subject. “What about you? I didn’t expect you to say yes when I asked you out.”

“Kind of a long story, but easily summed up.” Stiles rolls up his sleeve to reveal the words that have been tattooed on his arm before he knew what some of them even meant.

Derek reads it and his eyes go wide. “Whoa.”

“I know, right? Worst meet-cute ever.” Stiles dumps more sugar into his coffee monstrosity. “So I really stopped looking for whatever jackass this is years ago. And people are always like ‘oh, well, in context it’ll make sense’.”

Derek is clearly dubious. “What sort of ‘context’ could help that?”

“My thoughts exactly. I think I’ll pass on being fated to life with a complete asshole, thanks. But really, you’re the first person I’ve ever met you seems to think we have any choice in the matter at all. Even my dad, as well-meaning as he is, encourages me not to give up.”

“What about your mom?”

“She died when I was eight. You might have heard of my dad, actually – he helped found Single Soulmates.”

Derek nods in recognition. Single Soulmates is an organization that Tom Stilinski and Melissa McCall had put together, five years after Claudia died and four years after Rafael. They had wanted to get married, but it’s against the law to marry anyone who isn’t your soulmate. Even with their spouses dead, they were still technically married. “I think my mom mentioned that once or twice.”

“Yeah. I mean, if your soulmate dies, that sucks tremendously, but why the hell should you be sentenced to live the rest of your life alone because of it?” Stiles takes another drink. “So, my dad and Melissa formed this lobbying committee to get the laws changed, and now they run . . . it’s not exactly a dating site? They call it a companion service. Like, you can look for romance but a lot of people sign up to just look for friends. You know, other single soulmates who will get what they’re going through.”

“Wasn’t there some sort of scandal last year?” Derek asks.

Stiles’ eye roll is immediate and profound. “Depends on who you ask. My dad didn’t require a fucking death certificate for people to sign up, you know? So this one asshole who hadn’t actually met his soulmate yet signed up to ‘comfort the grieving woman’. Biblically, if you know what I mean. He got thrown out, obviously, but some jackass from on high came down and made them set up a bunch of new regulations about screening people. So they make sure nobody can join unless their soulmate is actually dead.”
Derek shakes his head. “I don’t get why everyone has to be all up in each other’s business about it. People were assholes to my parents literally from the day they started dating. They both had these dumb, generic tattoos. My dad’s was ‘Nice to meet you’ and my mom’s was just ‘thanks’. I don’t think either of them ever really tried to meet their soulmate. My mom told me once that she didn’t want to live her life holding her breath every time she passed the salt in the cafeteria at work. They loved each other, so . . . what was the big deal? But they got treated like pariahs.”

“How did they even get married? Was it legal?”

“Not technically. They had a ceremony, they said vows and wore rings, but they didn’t get a marriage certificate or anything like that.” Derek shrugs. “Then they had us. And it’s like . . . everyone thinks we’re cursed. Laura’s twenty-seven, I’m twenty-four, and Cora is twenty. None of the three of us have met our soulmates yet. People are saying we’re never going to.”

“But that’s crap,” Stiles says. “It’d be one thing if you didn’t have a tattoo, but you do, so you have to meet them someday.”

Derek shrugs again. “Assholes don’t have to make sense.”

Stiles laughs. “That’s true.”

They drop the soulmate subject for a little while. Derek talks about his obnoxious sisters, and Stiles tells him about Scott and Allison. They talk about movies and Stiles’ job at the bookstore. Derek works as a dance and gymnastics instructor, the idea of which does terrible things to Stiles’ libido. He opened his own studio with family money.

Stiles’ eyes go wide at this. “Oh, shit! You’re Derek Hale, arg, why didn’t I realize that?”

Derek gives a snort. “Maybe I didn’t mention it on purpose.”

“Yeah, sorry. I can dig that.”

Everyone knows the Hale family; they have more money than Warren Buffet and own roughly ninety percent of California. He had heard about a couple that had been killed in a car crash, but had never heard about them being together out of soullock. He had been pretty young when they died, so it wasn’t the sort of thing people talked about where he could hear.

“A lot of people said the accident was my parents’ punishment for living in sin,” Derek says.

“What assholes,” Stiles replies.

“Yeah. But now – ” Derek groans. “The big Hale family-reunion-slash-corporate-meeting is next week. There’s going to be over a hundred people here. All the aunts and uncles who stopped talking to my mom when she married my dad, a bunch of obnoxious cousins. They’re going to spend the entire weekend throwing shade at my parents and reminding me that I’m cursed and going to be alone forever. It’s going to be a mountain of suck.” He tosses his cup at the trash can and it’s a perfect shot.

“Can’t you just avoid them?” Stiles asks.

“Technically, sure. But if I don’t go, they’ll mention it constantly until the next one. So it’s either a few days of being shit upon from close up or an entire year of being shit upon from a distance. I usually opt for the former.”

“Sensible enough.” Stiles grins as something occurs to him. “Hey, I could go, if you want. We could
tell people that I’m your soulmate! Then they’d have to shut up, right?”

Derek frowns. “Our tattoos don’t even remotely match.”

Stiles shrugs. “I’ve done stupider things than getting ‘five golden rings’ tattooed on my arm.”

At this, Derek can’t help but laugh. “Yeah, but what happens afterwards? Are you volunteering to do this every year for the rest of our lives?”

Stiles grimaces. “I think proposing on the first date is probably a bad idea, huh?”

“Maybe a little.”

“Okay, then – let’s do it generic. Your tattoo is ‘can I help you find anything today’, right? So how about I get a tattoo of ‘just looking, thanks’. That way later we can say that it turned out we’d made a mistake and it wasn’t meant to be.”

“You’re seriously volunteering to get a tattoo of ‘just looking, thanks’ for a guy you met two hours ago.” Derek seems skeptical.

Stiles has to admit that it’s a ludicrous idea. “Uh . . . yeah, that’s pretty ridiculous now that you say it out loud like that.”

Derek looks at him, but then smiles. “Just writing it on with a fine-tip Sharpie would fool anybody who didn’t look too close.”

“You think?”

“Sure. My parents did it when my mom had clients she thought might be assholes about her sordid history.” Derek regards him pensively for a minute. “Are you sure you want to do this? You have no idea what assholes my extended family are. I mean, you barely know me, so you don’t have to make the offer, I swear.”

“Derek, there are three things I enjoy in life,” Stiles says solemnly. “Number one: inventing new grilled cheese recipes. Number two: petting dogs. Number three: being a sarcastic asshole to people whose opinions don’t matter.” He grins as Derek laughs. “Besides, no offense, but a family as rich as yours? This reunion must be off the chain. Open bar?”

“Didn’t you say you were twenty?”

“I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Derek’s grin turns into a smirk. “Oh, yeah. Great-Aunt Edna is going to love you.”

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Even knowing exactly how rich the Hale family is, Stiles can’t help but goggle at the high-end apartment building the taxi lets him out at. This is the kind of place where the marble is all imported from Italy and the concierge earns six figures to remember everyone’s name and see to their every whim.

In fact, said helpful concierge is immediately at Stiles’ elbow as soon as he enters the lobby. Despite
how out of place he looks, the man is the picture of polite respect. “Can I help you, sir?”

“Uh, yeah, I’m here to see Derek Hale?”

“Of course, sir; we’ve been expecting you.” The concierge actually escorts him into the elevator and swipes his ID card before hitting the button for one of the top floors. “Enjoy your visit, sir.”

“You too,” Stiles says automatically, and then kicks himself while the doors slide shut. The elevator is smooth and fast, so he’s still feeling embarrassed when they get to the top. It opens directly into the Hale’s apartment, which is exactly as impressive as he would have figured. The walls are floor to ceiling glass, and the floor plan is open and spacious. It doesn’t look like the sort of place where people actually live.

“Hey!” Derek says, jogging over. “Hey, come on in. Sorry about all the,” he gestures vaguely at their surroundings. “I’d be happier in a normal apartment, to be honest, but unless I want to pay my own rent, this is what I’ve got.”

“Yeah, this place is . . . intimidating,” Stiles admits.

“Sorry. It’s my uncle’s doing. You want a drink?”

“Yeah, sure. Got any coffee?”

“Yeah, follow me.” Derek leads Stiles into one of those kitchens that are generally only seen on remodeling shows. He seems not to notice how shiny it is as he walks over to a machine that probably cost more than Stiles’ car and starts to fiddle with the settings. “So I was thinking about next week,” he says, studying the machine so he doesn’t have to look at Stiles. “I don’t really want to lie to my sisters, you know?”

“Makes sense,” Stiles says. “You’re close to them?”

“Pretty close, yeah. Laura especially. See – ” Derek turns to root in the refrigerator for milk. “When my parents died, Laura had just turned eighteen. The judge was a little hesitant to let her adopt a fifteen and an eleven year old. So my Uncle Peter took official custody, but Laura did most of the actual parenting. Peter’s not a ‘parenting’ kind of guy.”

“I kind of feel that. Scott and Allison keep trying to get me to hold their baby and I’m like ‘no, thank you’.”

Derek snorts. “Peter is actually the only one of my mom’s siblings that kept talking to her after she married my dad. He didn’t believe in the whole soulmate curse. Which apparently backfired on him, because he’s thirty-two now and he still hasn’t met his either. Not that he looks, or cares, apparently.”

Stiles thinks about asking what Peter’s tattoo says, but it’s really none of his business. Instead, he looks at the photos on the shiny chrome refrigerator. They’re mostly of the two girls, but there’s one of them with Derek and another man who’s clearly older (and just as mouth-watering if Stiles is going to be honest). “This him?”

“Yeah. He works at the family business. They hate him, but he’s too good at what he does to lose.” Derek waves a hand and says, “It’s his money that pays for all this.”

“So he lives here too?”

“Yeah. He’s around here somewhere. Laura’s at work and Cora’s at school right now, though.”
“You said she goes to CalTech, right?” Stiles asks, and Derek nods. “That’s cool. It kind of sucks being stuck at community college, but hey, who can afford an actual degree, right? Uh, besides you guys. Anyway, I like being here so I can pester my dad on a regular basis. Does Laura work at your family’s company?”

“Nope. They wouldn’t hire her. The curse and all that.” Derek rolls his eyes. “She works at a nonprofit that helps out underprivileged kids. It pays a pittance. In fact, after paying for gas, I think she actually makes negative dollars. But she loves what she does.”

“That’s cool.” Stiles hops up onto the counter, swinging his legs back and forth. “So tell me about this reunion. You said it was part reunion, part business thing, right?”

“Yeah. How much do you know about my family?”

Stiles shrugs. “Just that they own basically everything in a three hundred mile radius.”

“It’s much worse than that,” Derek says with another snort. He takes two mugs out of the machine and presents Stiles with a perfect cappuccino. “Everyone knows the whole rags-to-riches story of my great-grandfather, Dominic Hale, bought steel, invested in railroads, et cetera, et cetera. Then my grandfather diversified, profited off the backs of others, and bought everything that we didn’t already own. There isn’t an industry in the western United States that we don’t have our fingers in somewhere.”

“That’s great, I guess?” Stiles says.

“Not really. They talk about responsible business practices and environmental longevity, blah, blah, but they’re just a bunch of corporate sharks. I’m glad I don’t work there.”

“What does your uncle do there?”

“He’s the head of legal. According to him, his official job is to create oceans of fine print, and his unofficial job is to make problems disappear.”

“Charming.”

“Like a rattlesnake, yep.” Derek takes a long drink of his coffee.

“So if you aren’t involved in the company, why the corporate meetings?”

Derek sighs. “That’s Peter’s doing. See, he was worried that the board was going to decide to screw over my mom’s kids, so he purchased interest in the company for each of us. Technically, each of us own seven percent of the company. Which doesn’t seem a lot, but most of my cousins only own three, and Peter only owns five himself. My grandfather was pissed when he found out, but Peter did it too fast and under the radar to stop him. So even though we’d rather not, Laura and I are expected to attend the meetings and have opinions.”

“Do you?”

“Sometimes, but usually I let Peter have them for me.”

“That seems pretty smart, all things considered.”

“You’re not wrong.” Derek laughs. He looks up as there are footsteps on the tile floor, and the aforementioned uncle walks into the room. He’s just as attractive in person as he is in the photograph, although he now sports a small goatee, and is dressed casually in a V-neck cardigan and
Jeans. “Oh, hey, speak of the devil and he appears. Peter, this is Stiles. You know, the guy I met at the bookstore?”

“Mm hm.” Peter barely looks at Stiles as he heads over to the coffee maker and immediately procures himself a cup. Stiles assumes that the smell of fresh coffee is probably what attracted him to the room.

“We were talking about the reunion next week,” Derek continues. “We thought it might get some of my esteemed relatives off my back if he went along and pretended to be my soulmate.”

This gets Peter’s attention. He looks up sharply from his coffee, his gaze traveling up and down Stiles before he turns to Derek with a sour expression. “Really? For God’s sake, Derek. When are you going to learn the lengths to which people will go to get a shot at our money?”

“It’s not like that,” Derek says, scowling.

“Oh, no, it’s never like that, is it. It wasn’t like that with Kate and it wasn’t like that with that Isaac kid – ”

“It wasn’t like that with Isaac, and just because Kate turned out to be a bitch doesn’t mean – ”

“Your faith in humanity is both adorable, and ultimately, an easily exploited personality flaw. Someday I’m going to let you get what’s coming to you, but I’m certainly not going to do it while everyone in the family is watching. Particularly not with an actual prostitute; Jennifer would have a field day.” As Derek opens his mouth, he cuts him off. “We’re done talking about this, Derek.” Then he turns to Stiles. “And as for you, you gold-digging whore, you can feel free to take the one-step shortcut to the street. Balcony’s to your left.”

Stiles’ jaw drops, and all he can manage in the moment is to blurt out, “Jesus tap-dancing Christ!”

Peter goes very still. He turns to look at Stiles with wide eyes, moving slowly, reluctantly, like he doesn’t want to admit what just happened.

Derek looks stunned as well. He looks at Stiles and says, “Isn’t that – wasn’t that your – ”

It was. Stiles has read it a million times, had it memorized before he knew what it implied. And suddenly context is important. Peter’s vulgar and cruel, but he’s defending his family. It doesn’t make what he said okay, but at least Stiles can understand where the hell it came from.

And apparently Peter has ‘Jesus tap-dancing Christ’ tattooed somewhere on him, if the look on his face is any indication. “You’ve had that tattooed on you since you were a child?” he asks, and Stiles nods mutely. “Hm. Well, I suppose an apology is in order, but I wouldn’t actually mean it, because I’m not sorry. Now get out.”

With that, he turns and walks away. Stiles blinks as he walks up the stairs, and a moment later, a door slams. “Well, that was . . . about as well as I expected meeting my soulmate would go, if we’re going to be honest.”

Derek pushes both hands through his hair. “Yeah, uh, he’s not really . . . no, he is an asshole. He’s been an asshole as long as I can remember. I don’t think ‘my condolences’ is the acceptable response after someone meets their soulmate, but, uh . . .”

Stiles starts laughing. He can’t not; it’s just so ridiculous. “I’m just glad it’s over. Now I finally know why the hell someone would say that to me. Believe me, that’s been bothering me for a literal decade, and now I have an answer, so it’s all good! You wanna get out of here?”
“Absolutely,” Derek says.

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“Hey, you, how’d your date go?” Tom Stilinski greets his son as he comes in through the front door. He hasn’t always understood Stiles’ choices relating to dates and soulmates, but he’s always tried to support them. Stiles appreciates it more than words can say.

“It was good. Uh, fun. I mean, it wasn’t really a date. We were just hanging out. We went down to Jake’s and played pool for a bit.”

“You like him?”

“Yeah, I like him. But, uh . . .” Stiles lets out a breath. He doesn’t know that he really wants his father’s advice, but he needs to talk to somebody about this, because he has no idea what to do. And talking to Scott about soulmate stuff is always doomed to failure. His outlook on the entire thing is far too optimistic for Stiles’ taste. “I, uh . . . I kind of . . .”

“Spit it out,” Tom says, waving at him.

“I met my soulmate,” Stiles blurts out.

“Oh!” Tom nearly knocks his glass over. “Okay. How, uh . . .”

He trails off, and it’s obvious that he’s trying to find a supportive way to ask ‘why was he calling you a gold-digging whore’. Stiles puts him out of his misery. “See, the guy I had a date with? Was Derek Hale. Of the ‘richer than God’ Hales. And when I was over at his place, I met his uncle, Peter. And, uh, he kind of assumed my interest in Derek wasn’t genuine.”

“I see.” Tom’s still struggling for politeness. “Seems like a bit of an overreaction, if we’re going to be honest.”

“What’s it matter?” Stiles asks, with more bitterness than he intends. “I’m fated to be with him, right? I guess I’ll just have to get used to him being an asshole.”

Tom sighs. “Look, kid. I know we’ve talked about this before. But remember, a soulmate isn’t someone who’s perfect. They’re just someone who’s a match for you. Maybe you’re Peter Hale’s soulmate because nobody else would be able to make him not be an asshole.”

“Right, because marrying someone to change them is a great idea,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes.

“That’s not what I meant. I just mean, him being your soulmate doesn’t mean you have to take his shit. You don’t have to let him talk to you that way. Someone who’s perfect for a guy like that is going to be someone with a strong backbone and a quick tongue, and God knows you’ve got both of those things.”

“Heh, I guess. But I’m not sure it matters. He didn’t seem to want to have anything to do with me.”

Now Tom frowns. “Why not?”

“Because he thinks I’m a gold-digging whore, remember?”

“You couldn’t clear that up?”

“He didn’t give me time. As soon as he realized I was his soulmate, he basically said ‘sorry-not-sorry’ and then slammed a door in my face. Derek and I went out to shoot some pool and that was
“the end of it.”

“Well, if we have any interest in being fair – ”

“The jury’s sure as fuck out on that – ”

“He was probably as surprised as you are. You can’t blame the guy for wanting a few minutes to deal with it, especially if – ” Tom’s frown deepens. “Hey, how old is he? You said he’s Derek’s uncle?”

“Yeah. He’s in his early thirties. Derek told me how old he is but I can’t remember. So yeah, I know he probably wasn’t expecting the guy he was aiming profanities at to turn out to be his soulmate, but I’m pretty sure I’m not ready to forgive him for actually specifically stating that he wasn’t sorry and then walking away.” Stiles throws his hands up in the air. “God, listen to me! Why does it even matter? The guy’s a douche. I should just keep dating his nephew and forget about him.”

Tom says nothing, but just looks at his son with arched eyebrows.

“I’m serious, Dad. I don’t care if fate thinks he’s perfect for me. I think he’s an enormous jackass, and my opinion is the important one.” Stiles stands up and steals his father’s can of Coke. “Thanks for the chat, Pops. Gonna go get started on my homework.”

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Derek greets Laura with a quick hug, says he already ate, and goes looking for Peter. He’s in his office, which is no surprise. Peter basically works eighteen hours a day, completely by choice. He has a thick folder open and he’s reading through it. He doesn’t look up as Derek comes in, so Derek goes straight to the point. “What was all that about?”

Still without looking up, Peter says, “I should think it was obvious. You’ve made poor choices in the past. Someone wants to attend our family reunion and pretend to be your soulmate? It’s an idiotic idea. Need I remind you what happened with Kate?”

“I remember it just as well as you, thanks.” It takes effort for Derek not to snarl. “But that’s not what I meant. I was referring more to the whole thing where your soulmate showed up, and you wanted nothing to do with him.”

“Why would I want anything to do with someone like that?”

Derek lifts his gaze Heavenward and prays for patience. “Peter, I asked him out. Not vice versa. He didn’t even know my last name until the second hour of our date. Say what you want about our plan, but Stiles isn’t a gold-digger.”

“Mm hm.” Peter checks off something on a list. Then he looks up and gives Derek his full attention, which is somewhat disconcerting. “Let me ask you something, nephew: what would I do with a soulmate? I don’t want one. I have absolutely no inclination to share my life or have to compromise with people. I’m exceptionally bad at both of those things. So, you’ll say, my soulmate will understand that. He’s supposed to be my perfect match. He’ll give me all the space I need. At which point, why bother even having one? No, thank you.”

Derek thinks about this for a minute. It’s true that he’s never seen Peter interested in dating anybody.
While he’s heard some people in their twenties complain bitterly about not having met their soulmate yet, Peter has never cared. There are mixers for people looking for their soulmates, going outside their comfort zone to meet someone they might not have met otherwise. People have often suggested that Peter attend, and he always nods and smiles but then never goes. “You have one whether you want one or not,” he finally points out.

“He’ll get over it.”

“So you’re totally okay with me dating him?”

“To be honest, nephew, I couldn’t care less who either of you date.”

“It’s not going to make you jealous or upset?”

Peter sighs. “Jealous about what? By all means, take the man out for romantic dinners, buy him flowers, do all that – bullshit,” he waves a hand vaguely, “that couples do. Maybe that will make him feel better about having the world’s worst soulmate. It really will not bother me.”

“If you say so.” Derek stands up to leave the room. “But I’m still bringing him with me to the reunion.”

Peter goes back to his work. “We’ll see.”

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Stiles is marginally less nervous the second time he heads up to the Hale family’s palatial apartment. The concierge greets him in the exact same manner, and the elevator is just as smooth. He’s feeling like he could get the hang of this, which is why he’s profoundly unnerved to step into the apartment and find Peter Hale staring at him like he’s a frog on a dissection table. “Oh, uh, hi. Peter, right? Is Derek around? He texted me.”

“No, I did. I need to speak with both of you about the reunion.” Preamble dispensed, Peter turns and walks into the kitchen.

Stiles follows. Derek is there, leafing through a magazine, and he blinks in surprise as Stiles comes in. “Oh, hey. I didn’t, uh, didn’t know you were coming over.”

“Apparently Peter stole your phone and texted me,” Stiles says. Derek shoots his uncle a dirty look. Peter is unfazed. “Someone has to look out for you, if you’re going to try to bring a whore to the annual company meeting.”

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“Okay, just a God damned minute,” Stiles says, before Derek can reply. “That’s twice now you’ve called me a whore, and I don’t think I’m going to let it slide this time.”

The look Peter gives him could peel paint. “I don’t apologize for being vulgar when the occasion calls for it.”

“How about you apologize for being wrong?” Stiles shoots back.

“Please. I ran a background check on you – as I run one on any potential romantic partner for anyone in the family, so don’t bristle at me, Derek. ‘Single Soulmates’ ring a bell? ‘Companion services’?”
Stiles stares at him. Then, surprising both Hales, he goes into gales of laughter. He starts laughing so hard that he has to grab one of the seats to stay on his feet. Derek frowns at him and Peter seems somewhat nonplussed. Finally, he waves a hand at them and gropes for his phone. “Hang on, hang on – ” he gasps out between bursts of snickers, while he taps his phone. A moment later, he says, “Dad? How many times have I fucking told you that ‘companion services’ makes us sound like hookers? Will you please get on the phone with Peter God Damned Hale and tell him that I’m on Single Soulmates’ payroll because I help with the website, and not because I’m a whore?”

Peter blinks at him, as Stiles holds out his phone with a sunny grin. “My dad wants to talk to you.”

“I gathered.” Peter takes the phone, and walks away with it.

“Just walk off. Sure. Okay.” Still laughing, Stiles turns to Derek. “I guess I should at least be glad he had a good reason to think I’m a whore.”

Derek is shaking his head. “It does kind of give the wrong impression.”

“I know. I’ve been telling Dad that for years. You know how everyone has that one friend who finds innuendo in anything? Well, in my family, I am that friend. And my dad is the opposite of that friend. So he always just brushed it off as me having a dirty mind.”

“I have to admit, that’s pretty funny.”

Peter comes back into the room. He’s already hung up with Stiles’ father, and hands the phone back to him. “Fine. I acknowledge that you are not, to the best of my knowledge, actually a gold-digging whore. But as to attending the reunion with my nephew, I’ve decided not to allow it.”

Derek bristles. “You don’t allow me to – ”

“Yes, I do. I allow you to live in this apartment, pay for things with the Hale money, beg off any greater responsibilities.” Peter waves this aside. “And in this case, your ruse is easily collapsed, so please don’t play stupid. You two have not thought this through. Derek, you want to tell everyone you’ve met your soulmate, in the hopes that they’ll come to the conclusion that Talia didn’t curse all her progeny by living in sin. But what is your long-term plan, nephew? You barely know this man. Are you going to stay with him forever, just to shut up a few of your cousins?”

“If the tattoo is generic – ”

“Then you can say you made a mistake, certainly – if and only if you actually meet your real soulmate. An event that could take place any time between tomorrow and eternity. Otherwise, what’s your excuse for suddenly realizing that you and Stiles aren’t meant to be? What’s your plan? Break up with your declared soulmate? Admit you made the whole thing up? No matter what you do, the only thing it will accomplish is more ridicule and mockery of my sister’s memory. And no, Derek, I will not allow that.”

“Listen, you asshole – ”

“No, he’s right,” Stiles interrupts. Derek turns to look at him, surprised. Peter looks slightly startled as well, eyebrows arching. “We didn’t think it through. The long-term options if I go to the reunion as your soulmate suck. I should go as your boyfriend.”

Derek blinks. Peter rolls his eyes. “That will only fan the flames.”

“Yes, it will,” Stiles says, but he addresses Derek, not Peter. “You know how you deal with bullies? By showing them that you don’t care about what they have to say. And what better way to do that
than to go to this reunion with a non-soulmate-boyfriend on your arm? You don’t care about the so-called curse. You don’t care that they disapproved of your mother’s lifestyle. You’re going to live by her values – not theirs.”

Peter pinches the bridge of his nose. “Well, that’s an admirable sentiment coming from someone who didn’t actually know my sister, but again, what’s your long-term plan? When you two break up, everyone will only be more convinced that Derek ruined his own life.”

“Breaking up with someone doesn’t ruin your life.” Stiles rolls his eyes. “I should know; I’ve done it three times.”

“You’re assuming it will be an amicable break-up.”

“Well, you’re assuming it’ll be a break-up at all,” Stiles retorted. “No, I’m not about to propose to Derek, but why do you have to assume the worst? You’re obviously the type who needs to make sure every I is dotted and every T is crossed, but there are some things in real life that you just can’t do that with. Sometimes you just have to let it ride.”

“You two can let it ride somewhere other than the annual company meeting.” Peter’s smile is showing teeth and his voice is getting strained. “I’m going to be busy enough trying to keep various relatives from stripping Derek and Laura of their rights on the board without dealing with extra complications.”

“Did Derek and Laura actually ask you to do that?” Stiles asks. “Or have you just made assumptions there, too?”

“Oh, forgive me for ‘assuming’ that Derek and Laura would rather not be robbed of tens of millions of dollars and wind up living on the streets, destitute.”

“Sure, if you’ll forgive me for actually trying to treat Derek like a real human being.”

“Treat him like a human being on your own time,” Peter says, and when Stiles opens his mouth, he talks over him. “I don’t know how much more clear I can be on this matter. If you come anywhere near our family reunion, I’ll tell everyone that you’re just doing it for show and that you two barely know each other.”

“Fine,” Stiles says, “and then I’ll tell them that I’m your soulmate.”

Peter opens his mouth. Then he closes it.

The room sits in tense silence for a few moments.

Then Peter looks Stiles up and down and says, “Do you have a suit?”

“Uh, yeah, I – ”

“Is it tailored or off-the-rack? God knows I can’t hope that it’s bespoke.”

Stiles isn’t exactly sure what the last option means, and now he’s squirming underneath Peter’s assessing gaze. “I, uh, I got it for my dad’s wedding – ”

“Off-the-rack, then. You’ll need one that’s tailored if you hope to not make a fool of yourself before you can even open your mouth.” Peter has his phone out and is tapping at the screen. “I’ll have a car pick you up at two o’clock tomorrow. Your address?”
Stiles gives the bookstore address, because he doesn’t want Peter Hale turning up at his house – although he’s sure that Peter has the resources to get his home address without breaking a sweat.

Peter nods and tucks the phone away. “Fine. Let the tailor make the decisions; that’s what I pay him for. Don’t worry about money. If you’re going to insist on going through with this charade, at least try not to embarrass me.”

Having recovered somewhat, Stiles gives him a jaunty salute. “Sir, yes, sir!”

Peter’s eyes narrow, and then he turns and walks away. A few minutes later, Stiles hears a door shut. He turns to look at Derek, whose jaw is slightly ajar. “Jesus Christ,” Derek says. “You two are so soulmates.”

Stiles groans. “Please don’t remind me.”

Derek shakes his head and goes into the living room. Stiles follows him and flops down on the sofa. “I guess we should probably talk about this.”

“Should we really?” Stiles is skeptical, to put it mildly. “I don’t want to be that guy who dumps someone because I happened to meet my soulmate. That’s happened to me twice, and it blows. I’m still just as interested in you today as I was when I met you.”

“Oh, and I appreciate that, but it’s also not like we have this six-month relationship that we’d be thinking about breaking up. I mean, we literally just met. And yes, I like you, and I’ve enjoyed spending time with you. But it’s also a little different for me because . . . Peter’s my uncle. And despite his laundry list of character flaws, I care about him. I want him to be happy.”

Stiles gives a snort. “Well, I can see how that would be a tall order.”

“True. To be honest, you’re really the only person I’ve ever met that I can even envision being a match for him.”

“So are you breaking up with me?” Stiles isn’t sure how he feels about that. He likes Derek, but there’s an undeniable spark between him and Peter. He can’t help it, and there’s a part of him that hates it, that doesn’t understand it. Then again, is it really that complicated? Some people have chemistry, some don’t. Is that fate? Pheromones? Chance?

“We’re not even boyfriends. We went on one date.” Derek shakes his head. “Look, there, uh . . . there’s something I should probably tell you. I mean, you know how everyone has stuff that they’re like ‘wait until the third date to bring that up’?”

“Oh geez,” Stiles says.

“Yeah. And I would wait, except, this whole thing with Peter kind of makes me think I should say it now.” Derek huffs out a breath. He’s solidly not looking anywhere near Stiles as he speaks. “Because you’d probably be better off with him.”

“Okay, let me decide whether or not I’d be better off with the guy who calls me a whore versus the guy who actually treats me like a human being, just spit it out.”

“Have you – do you know what asexuality is?”

Stiles blinks. “Uh – I think it has something to do with plants that bud, but I get the feeling that that’s not where you’re going with this.”
“I don’t like sex,” Derek says in a rush. Stiles blinks again. “I mean, I just don’t want sex. I don’t feel that way about, you know, anybody really. And please – please don’t be that guy who says I haven’t found the right partner yet –”

“No, no, that sounds like the kind of thing you’d say to a lesbian, you know, that she hasn’t found the right man yet,” Stiles says. “I think I actually have read about it a little. It’s considered a sexual orientation, right? Or maybe a lack thereof.”

Derek finally looks at him. He’s not relieved, not yet, but he’s loosening up. “Yeah. I just . . . I’m not into it, you know? I’ve had it a few times, it’s just . . . it’s . . .”

“Icky?” Stiles says, seeing that Derek is struggling for a word.

At this, a brief smile flits across his face. “Yeah. Icky.”

Stiles rubs a hand over the back of his head, thinking with some fond regret about Derek’s amazing body and silently swearing never to mention that. “Look, uh, I can’t tell you not to be who you are. If that’s you, then okay. I still like you, I still want to hang out with you and maybe go out on dates with you. I guess I can’t really say how that would affect my long-term plans for a relationship, but everything’s so messed up right now anyway, I have no idea what I would say anyway.”

Now the relief is plain on Derek’s face. “Thanks. For not immediately jumping down my throat and telling me that something’s wrong with me.”

Stiles shrugs. “I figure you probably know what you’re talking about better than the guy who thought of budding plants.”

“Yeah, well, there’s always that one guy who tells me I should try ‘horney goat weed’ and see if that helps.”

“That is not a thing.”

Derek is laughing now. “It totally is. Some goatherd in China noticed his goats getting really frisky after they ate this weed and started selling it as an aphrodisiac.”

“This just in: people aren’t goats.”

“Yeah, and somehow, nobody ever thought to give it a better name.” Derek shakes his head. “Anyway, uh . . . I do really like you. And I’m glad that you aren’t already writing me off. I’d say ‘so many people do that’ except you’re really only the third person I’ve told about this. Since most people don’t want to date anyone who isn’t their soulmate anyway. So maybe we should just put things on hold. You know, you can have a chance to get to know my uncle, see what happens. And if it ends in disaster between you and Peter, we’ll try a second date and go from there. Until then, let’s just be friends.”

“That sounds very mature and reasonable.” Stiles chews on his lower lip. “I don’t like it.”

Derek laughs. “You can still be my boyfriend at the reunion.”

“Well, okay. And your uncle is still a dick.”

“That’s true. But this is bad even for him. There’s something about meeting you that’s . . . unsettled him, I want to say. I think he figured he was immune to the whole soulmate thing, and it’s bothering him to find out that he’s not. Plus he’s always on edge before the annual meeting. He’s used to being the only backstaber around.”
“I’m charmed yet again,” Stiles says, and shakes his head. “But okay.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Everyone in canon is now related to each other because that's way easier than inventing a bunch of OCs.

Also, Harris is now a first name because have Adrian and Aiden in the same scene was way too confusing, plus, everyone thinks of him as Harris anyway. =D

Last things last: I am forever in love with Peter Hale, fashion consultant.

The trip to the tailor is interesting. The car that picks Stiles up is an actual limo, and he feels ridiculously self-conscious, trying to open the door before the driver can open it for him. The tailor is in an old brick building in the classy part of downtown, and he’s the sort of flamboyantly gay stereotype that Stiles hadn’t thought really existed outside Hollywood. Still, he’s professional and sets Stiles at ease. Peter’s called ahead, he says, so he has a number of choices ready for Stiles to try on. He talks about how Peter had told him which cut and fabric would suit Stiles best, and how Peter, as always, “knows his stuff”. It’s a fascinating tidbit which Stiles wouldn’t have expected of the man.

He has to admit that it’s amazing, the difference a tailored suit makes. He looks good. He turns around in the mirror a couple times, admiring what the suit does to his butt and his shoulders. The tailor laughs at him and says he’ll finish the alterations and it’ll be delivered to the Hales’ apartment.

Besides fashion advice, Peter has left a thick packet of papers and several magazines at the tailor for him. They’re full of articles about the Hale corporation, the structure, the people, the projects. Peter’s left a note on top of the stack that says, “Since I can’t trust you to keep quiet, I don’t want you to look like an uneducated yokel. Here are your study guides.”

Stiles shakes his head but does as he’s told. The Hale corporation actually is pretty interesting, once of the most powerful tech companies in the world. The company that Jordan Hale had diversified, his children had solidified to their strengths. They still have their fingers in plenty of non-tech pies, but the tech world is where they dominate.

The day before the meetings start, Stiles stops by the apartment to pick up his suit and, he presumes, take a written exam on his materials. But although Peter has summoned him by text, he isn’t there. Derek is, and Laura, who greets him with a friendly smile and a handshake. “So where’s the written exam I’m supposed to take?” Stiles asks, showing Derek the stack of ‘study guides’, and Derek laughs.

“I probably should show you who’s going to be there,” he admits, and waves for Stiles to follow him up to the loft where his bedroom is. He takes out a tablet computer and futzes around on it for a few minutes before he pulls up a website. “Okay, so, there are two types of people you’re going to have to deal with at the meeting. Important people, who will take interest in anyone I’m dating as it could affect the company. And my asshole cousins, who will take interest because it will give them opportunity to be assholes.”
“Got it.” Stiles pretends to take notes. “Asshole . . . cousins . . . will be assholes.”

Derek cuffs him over the top of the head, and then shoves him in front of the laptop to look at the pictures. “Okay, this is Deucalion. He’s the CEO. He’s my . . . second cousin once removed? I don’t even know. My mom’s mother’s cousin’s son.”

“Former roommate.”

Derek rolls his eyes and doesn’t dignify that with a response. “It doesn’t really matter how they’re related to me. I mean, it’s so distant that it’s barely worth calling relations. My grandfather was one of six siblings, and my grandmother one of three. They all had kids, and about two thirds of those kids had kids, and something like ninety percent of them work for Hale Corp in some manner. The only ones where the manner of relation is important are my closest cousins, and I’ll get to that in a bit.”

“Got it. Deucalion, CEO, Grand High Muckety-Muck. What’s his deal?”

“He’s smart, ruthless, and power hungry. He’s done well by the company, mostly at other peoples’ expense. He’s the guy who forced my mother out of her position at the company when she married my dad, although to be fair to him, the board was going to do that anyway.” Derek swipes to the next picture. “That’s his wife, Marin. She works as a consultant for some department, I don’t remember which. She’s okay.” Another swipe to a dark-skinned woman. “Kali Steele. CFO.”

“Okay, I know she’s not related to you, no offense,” Stiles says.

“She is by marriage.” Amused, Derek swipes again, to a brunette woman. “Jennifer Blake. Another cousin’s cousin. She’s the head of PR and marketing, and Kali’s wife. They actually met through the company, Kali started at the bottom and worked her way up. She eats spreadsheets and spits out profits.”

“Cool. I’d love that talent.”

The next picture is of an older Asian woman. “Satomi Ito. One of the few high muckety-mucks who’s actually not related to the Hale family in any way. She was one of my grandmother’s friends, and got her position through sheer talent. She’s head of R&D. Her husband died almost ten years ago. She’s also one of the few people who isn’t going to make a sarcastic comment about you. She was actually pretty good friends with my mom, who thought of her as more of an aunt than a lot of our actual family members.”

“Hey, someone who isn’t a jerk, good to know.”

Derek snorts, amused. He goes through a few more pictures of people in various positions of authority. “Moving on to the asshole cousins. You kind of have to understand the Hale family tree for this.”

“Ooh, ooh, I know this one. Third cousin, once removed.”

Derek smacks him over the head again. “So in theory, the oldest kid in the family is the most important, right? A relic of ye olden monarchy days. Dominic Hale was the oldest of his siblings, Jordan was the oldest of his, so Jordan’s oldest kid, Harris, is considered the most important of his kids. He started in R&D, but these days he basically just leeches off the company and occasionally tries to get a project funded. Then there was my mom, and then Peter. So, my mom’s considered a pariah, and Peter is only barely better.”

“I see where this is going,” Stiles says. “Harris has kids, and they’re obnoxious.”
“Yep. Three of ‘em. Twin sons, Ethan and Aiden, and then a younger brother, Theo. Peter jokingly refers to the line of inheritance as ‘the golden line’. They can do no wrong and even though there are other people in the company who are far higher ranking – the ones I just showed you – Harris and his kids still strut around acting like they own the place.”

“They sound like swell guys.”

“It gets worse.”

“Of course it does!”

“Ethan and Aiden are twenty-one, and neither of them have met their soulmate yet. So even though they’re late bloomers, so to speak, that doesn’t stop them from making constant jokes about the curse and the fact that Laura and I don’t have soulmates yet. Et cetera.”

“Super.”

“I’m not done yet,” Derek says, grinning despite himself.

“God, this is so much fun. I’m going to have so much fun. You’re prepared for that, right?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m counting on it. There are two other cousins you should know about. Braeden, she’s Marin and Deucalion’s daughter and she’s about my age. She’s actually not so bad, a bit of a rebel, works for HR as a head hunter.”

“That sounds illegal.”

“It means she scouts talent and steals it from other companies. Anyway, she’s totally mercenary, and absolutely capable of pretending to be your friend and then dumping you the second she thinks it’ll benefit her.”

“So, avoid.”

“We go out for drinks sometimes, but if Marin tells her to spy on us, she will.”

“Noted.”

“Then there’s Matt.” Derek huffs out a sigh. “How can I describe this little prick?”

“Sounds like you just did.”

“Matt’s not technically related to us. His dad owned a big tech conglomerate. We bought them out, and part of his price was that Matt got a place on the board, even though he was only eighteen at the time. He’s your basic trust fund fuckboy who manages to screw up every job he’s given, tank half a dozen projects, and remain untouchable.”

“How’s his soulmate status?”

“He actually met her just before the last annual meeting, and proceeded to throw it in my face the entire time. She’s a psycho bitch.”

“So my dad was right. Soulmates really are perfect for each other.”

Derek gives another snort. “Pretty much, yeah.” He puts the tablet aside. “That’s about everyone. I mean, there will be two hundred other people there, but those are the ones who will actually talk to me and have opinions.”
“Okay.” Stiles chews on his lower lip for a minute. “Hey, can I ask a question that’s really insensitive?”

“Can I stop you?”

“Sure. Say ‘no, Stiles, keep it to yourself’.”

Derek shrugs. “Shoot.”

“Peter keeps making a big deal out of me ‘embarrassing’ him. And I’d just chalk it up to Peter being a jerk, but I feel like there’s something else that happened that I should probably know about . . .?” Stiles lets his voice trail off as he sees Derek’s shoulders tighten. “I did warn you it was insensitive.”

“Yeah. But you’re right.” Derek huffs out a breath. “Two years ago, I dated this woman named Kate. She was . . . smart, and charming, and just really . . . energetic. We got pretty tight.”

“But she turned out to be after your money?” Stiles asks, remembering Peter mentioning her at their first meeting.

“Not technically. Do you know much about Argent Industries?”

Stiles pats the stack of magazines and says, “I surely do. Your biggest competitors, right?”

Derek gives another snort. “Yeah. Well, it turned out that Kate was Kate Argent, and she was trying to ferret out company secrets.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. I mean, in terms of actual damage, it wasn’t that bad. I’m not involved much in the day-to-day running of the company, so all I could tell her was bits and pieces I’d picked up from talking to Peter and reading the occasional company bulletin. It was enough that they managed to ace us out on a project we had ongoing, and make us trash another one – it was an app, there were privacy concerns, we were addressing the privacy concerns, but they got us so much bad press that Duke decided to just shelve the whole project.” Derek’s shoulders have tightened again. “If it had happened in any other way, it wouldn’t have been as big a deal. Corporate espionage happens. Nobody likes being a victim to it, but it does. Kate could have gotten just as much information – likely more, in fact – by creating a fake identity and getting hired as a low-level tech.”

“But she dated you, and everybody hates the concept of dating outside your soulmate, so . . .” Stiles nods in understanding. “So people shit all over you for it.”

“Basically, yeah. And there was also really poor timing. See, this happened just after Peter got us three kids the stake in the company. Which actually makes sense. To an outsider, like the Argents, it looked like something might be going on, some sort of inner power struggle, like Laura and I were planning a corporate takeover. That’s why they targeted me. But to the people inside, it looked like I was conspiring to get into a position of power and then dealing with the Argents.”

“Oh, geez.”

“Yeah. I mean, I got cleared pretty quickly, because of course as soon as Kate was found out, she dumped me and ran off. But the rumors at the time were pretty ugly. Of course, Peter facilitated the stock transfer, and Peter’s never gotten along with the rest of the family. He’s known for being underhanded and conniving, so, a lot of people thought he had orchestrated the whole thing.”

“So you show up to the meeting with a boyfriend and it’s going to be like the same thing all over
“Which, admittedly, I wasn’t thinking of when we made the plan. I just thought it would be . . . fun. You know. To have someone there with me.” Derek’s cheeks flush faintly pink. “I like the idea of going anywhere with you.”

This is the kind of discussion that they absolutely should not be having, so Stiles hastens to change the subject. “Well, I’ll tell everyone that I promise to leave all my corporate espionage for after the meetings. Think that’ll help?”

Derek gives another snort of laughter. “Yeah, that’ll put everyone’s mind at ease. Good idea.”

“I’m just chock full of good ideas,” Stiles says.

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The schedule for the reunion goes as follows: there’s a huge dinner and party on the first night, and then two days of corporate meetings and presentations. Although only family is allowed at the reunion itself, shareholders from all over the country are welcome at the presentations. The board meeting is at two PM on the last day, and lasts three hours. Then there’s another formal dinner while everyone celebrates how successful they are, and everyone goes home.

“So you don’t actually have to go to any of the meetings,” Derek says, leafing through the presentation schedule. “I mean, I’m supposed to, but I’d understand if you didn’t want to.”

Stiles looks down the list. “Are you kidding? Some of this shit looks really interesting.” There’s a presentation on a new software they’re developing to help disabled people communicate. One on renewable energy sources. Allergen-free peanuts. 3-D printers and prosthetics. Self-driving cars.

“Say that once you’ve been staring at statistics tables for an hour,” Derek says, but he’s smiling a little. “The eggheads get up and talk about the projects they’re working on and how well things are going. Then at the board meeting, they decide which projects they’ll pursue in the coming year and who gets how much of the budget.”

“Don’t you mean ‘we’?” Stiles asks. “You have a vote, don’t you?”

“Yes. Though it doesn’t always matter. Because it’s not just about which projects are the coolest or which will help the most people. A lot of the time it’s about a return on the investment.” Derek sees Stiles’ somewhat sour look. “That’s business, Stiles. Making money is a higher priority than helping other people.”

“I don’t think I’d be very good at business.”

Derek snorts. “Me neither. That’s usually why I just let Peter tell me which projects to vote for. Sometimes I’ll vote for one just because I like it, but he knows what he’s doing a lot more than I do. Anyway, we can go to the presentations if you want. Sometimes they can be interesting, sometimes they’re boring, it really depends on who’s presenting.”

“Cool,” Stiles says.

But first they have to survive the reunion dinner. Stiles gets dressed in his snazzy new suit and shiny again.”
shoes, and Derek picks him up. The dinner is held at the Beacon Hills Plaza Hotel, the nicest joint in a two hundred mile radius, and Stiles feels outclassed from the moment he walks in the door. Derek’s hand is on the small of his back, guiding him through the crowd of elegantly dressed attendees. Laura rode with them, in a burgundy evening dress, and she seems just as ill-at-ease as Stiles is. She spots a table with refreshments and hastens over to get them a drink.

“Derek!” a shrill, female voice says, and Derek’s shoulders slump a little in a gesture that couldn’t mean ‘so it begins’ any more clearly. “How are you, my darling?”

“Aunt Edna,” Derek says, as she kisses the air around his cheeks. Stiles takes a minute to study the woman and decide he doesn’t like her. She’s probably in her seventies, and wearing a black sequined dress, a lot of sparkly jewelry, and far too much perfume. He tries not to wrinkle his nose as she and Derek exchange pleasantries.

“And who might this be?” Edna asks, looking at Stiles in undisguised interest.

“This is Stiles.” Derek wraps an arm around Stiles’ waist as he offers his hand for Edna to shake. She does, and then gives a fake, dramatic gasp. “You didn’t tell us you had met your soulmate!”

“I haven’t,” Derek says. “Stiles is just my boyfriend.”

“Oh.” Edna drops Stiles’ hand and gives a sniff. “Well, I suppose you have to keep yourself occupied somehow.”

That’s the kindest thing that anyone has to say about Stiles for the next hour. Nobody calls him a whore, but it’s clear that some of them are thinking about it. Derek’s uncle, Harris, laughs in his face and tells him to stop wasting his time. Several people obliquely bring up Talia and the curse, saying things like “I suppose we can’t expect anything better from you”.

“But what will you do when you meet your real soulmate?” a simpering woman asks, looking like she’s ready to cry out of grief for Derek’s life.

“Invite him to join in, I hope!” Stiles says, elbowing Derek in the ribs and garnering a scandalized gasp from their audience. Derek gives a snort of laughter despite himself.

“Oh, look, they’re going to start serving!” somebody says hastily, and everyone departs for their assigned seats.

Unsurprisingly, Stiles is at the table with Derek and the rest of his immediate family. He’s definitely not looking forward to sitting across from Peter for the evening, but his soulmate barely looks at him. Laura hasn’t brought a date, so they’re seated at a table of eight with four others: Harris and his three sons.

The twins immediately want to hear all about Derek’s dating adventures. “So what’s the deal with you two?” Aiden asks.

“We’re dating,” Derek says.

“Yeah, but why? I mean, what’s the point?”

“I like having someone to spend time with who isn’t related to me,” Derek replies, as the waiters come around with salads that look more elegant than delicious. Stiles catches Peter looking down at the food with an expression of withering disgust.
“I guess that since you’re never going to meet your soulmate, I can see that,” Ethan says. “But what’s in it for you, Stiles?”

“Cha-ching, am I right?” Theo asks, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together and laughing.

Aiden elbows his brother and says something in an undertone about the size of Derek’s penis.

“I’ve met my soulmate,” Stiles says calmly. Peter’s eyes narrow, and everyone else just looks genuinely shocked. “He’s a shithead. I don’t like him. So I date other people.”

“And he just lets you?” Aiden blurts out.

“It’s not up to him. It’s my life. If he hadn’t been such a jackass when we met, I might want to have a relationship with him, but he was, so I don’t. Derek’s company is far preferable, trust me.”

“You can’t just – not like your soulmate,” Theo says, an expression of confusion creasing his face.

“I can. And if you’d met him, you wouldn’t like him either, trust me.” Stiles is enjoying this, but to be honest, Peter doesn’t really seem fazed. He’s gone back to eating his salad with a bland expression on his face. “I like dating Derek. He’s got lots of good qualities and he’s fun to hang out with.”

“The money can’t hurt, though,” Harris says, his voice a little sharp. “That suit didn’t come off the rack.”

“No, it didn’t,” Stiles replies evenly, “but Derek didn’t pay for it.”

Peter’s fork clinks against his plate. Stiles sees him roll his eyes, but he still doesn’t comment. It’s true, after all. The Hale money paid for the suit, but not Derek. And since Peter was the one who insisted on Stiles having it, he can hardly argue that it wasn’t money well spent.

“Eh, if Derek wants to be a sugardaddy, let him,” Ethan says, snickering into one hand. “We all gotta have a hobby.”

“Maybe Derek should pick one that doesn’t involve costing the company millions of dollars,” Harris says.

Derek scowls, and Stiles has a witty retort on the tip of his tongue, but it’s Peter who answers, speaking for the first time. “That’s rich coming from you, Harris. When was the last time Satomi let you be in charge of a project, 2009? I seem to recall Duke saying something about how it actually cost the company less to pay you your exorbitant salary to do nothing, rather than have you do work.”

Harris flushes red. “Well, I wouldn’t expect you to understand a position that involves actually making people like you.”

Peter rolls his eyes so hard that he probably detaches a retina. “Yes, I couldn’t possibly be expected to learn your two hard and fast rules: ‘let them win at golf’ and ‘order the same drink they do and act like it’s what you always drink’.”

“The fact that you say that just proves that you don’t understand the complexities,” Harris says with a sneer.

Stiles elbows Derek, makes air quotes under the table, and murmurs, “Complexities.” Derek nearly chokes on a piece of carrot.
“What do you do for a living?” Theo overhears Stiles’ remark and can’t wait to jump back into the fray.

“I’m still in school,” Stiles says. “I work at a bookstore to help pay for it; that’s how Derek and I met.”

“Liberal arts, I’m sure,” Harris sneers at him.

Stiles doesn’t flinch. “I’m double majoring in criminology and psychology.” He sees Peter raise an eyebrow in what might be genuine interest. “My father was the sheriff of the town I grew up in, and I’ve always wanted to work in law enforcement. I love mysteries and detective work.”

“Maybe you can start by solving the mystery of why Derek would bring you to the reunion,” Theo says, laughing.

“Sure, simple,” Stiles says. “Derek knows I won’t hesitate to tell you to fuck off.”

In the ensuing shocked silence, Peter snorts into his water glass. Derek is pressing a hand over his mouth in an effort not to laugh.

“Are you done with your salad, sir?” the server asks, and doesn’t understand why Theo jumps. She collects the plates while Theo looks at his father as if to say ‘is he allowed to say that to me?’ Harris is too busy glowering at Peter to notice. Peter is too busy ordering himself a drink to care.

Once the plates are gone and the server has left, Stiles goes on the offensive. He smiles at the obnoxious Theo and says, “So what do you do for the company?”

“Oh, uh,” Theo stammers and blinks, “I don’t work there, I mean, not yet – ”

“Oh, really?” Stiles says. “From the way you were talking, I figured you had to be someone really important.”

Theo scowls. “You’re looking at the future CEO, so yeah, keep that in mind.”

Peter quietly snorts into his wine.

“Who do you think is going to be CEO when Duke retires?” Ethan asks Peter.

“Certainly nobody sitting at this table,” Peter says, laughing.

“Not even you?” Aiden asks.

“Good Lord, no,” Peter says. “I have absolutely zero desire to be CEO. Do you even know what the CEO’s job entails? It’s not ‘drink cocktails and tell people what to do’. It’s ‘be the person responsible for fixing everybody’s problems, and be the one who everybody blames when things go wrong’. No, thank you. You’re welcome to it, Theo . . . although you understand I’d have to vote against you for the company’s welfare.”

“Maybe by then you won’t have a vote anymore,” Harris says.

Peter shrugs. “The sun could go supernova tomorrow. Must we waste our time on the least likely possibilities?”

Stiles expects Harris to have some snide retort, but instead the man just smirks, like he knows something that Peter doesn’t. If that’s the case, it certainly doesn’t seem to worry Peter. He’s looking over at the servers, who are bringing around the main course.
Thankfully, it’s better than the salad. Steak and mushrooms and amazing garlicky mashed potatoes. Stiles is in Heaven. The steak is filet mignon that he can practically cut with his fork, and he closes his eyes in bliss.

“They probably don’t have food like this on your side of the tracks, huh,” Aiden says, sneering at him.

“Mmf,” Stiles says, because he’s too busy eating to bother getting offended.

“You said you work at a bookstore to pay for your tuition, right?” Harris says. “There probably isn’t much leftover after that. I guess they don’t pay cops what they used to.”

That necessitates a reply, so Stiles forces himself not to take another bite. “My father was injured in the line of duty about eight years ago and had to take an early retirement. He lives off his pension and workman’s comp. So no, there isn’t a lot leftover after that. Hey, here’s a thought: maybe once you’ve been involved in a high-speed car chase to save a kidnapped child and been partially paralyzed and had to retire, you can offer an opinion on my finances.”

Peter looks interested in this. “That wouldn’t happen to have been the Kira Yukimura case, would it have?”

“Yeah, actually.”

“I read about it at the time. I did see that several policemen had been injured. Given what I know about the Yukimuras, I’m surprised they didn’t offer to help your father out.”

“They paid all his hospital bills and for his PT and everything,” Stiles says, marveling at the fact that he’s having a civil conversation with Peter. “But he couldn’t really depend on their generosity for the rest of his life, you know? Or at least he didn’t want to.” He forces a smile and says, “We get by just fine.”

“Can’t be that fine, given that you’re here,” Theo says.

Stiles looks at Derek and says, “God, he really won’t let this go, will he. I think there’s a psychological term for this. Projection?”


Theo scowls. “It’s none of his business.”

Derek looks at Stiles and says, “It’s ‘why don’t you let me call you a cab’. So apparently whenever Theo gets around to meeting his soulmate, he’s going to be too drunk to drive. I’m sure it’s gonna go real well.”

“What’s yours say?” Theo asks Stiles, in a belligerent tone.

Stiles sure as hell isn’t going to mention the gold-digging whore comment, as the ensuing discussion would surely get out of control. He uses Scott’s instead. “Nothing interesting. ‘Can I borrow a pen’.”

Theo’s clearly disappointed at this lack of further ammunition, and goes into a sulk. Stiles goes back to eating contentedly. When they’ve eaten, a band strikes up some music, and people start dancing. Stiles nudges Derek and says, “Want to dance?” and Derek says sure, although he looks as if he’d rather not.

“Don’t be so stiff,” Stiles says, as he pulls Derek onto the dance floor. “You teach dancing, for
“God’s sake. I’m the one who doesn’t know what I’m doing.”

At this, Derek smiles. “Okay, I’ll teach you. This is a waltz, so . . .” He shows Stiles where to put his hands and how to move his feet. Stiles gets into it after a while, trying not to step on Derek’s toes and laughing whenever he does. The next song is some easy jazz which basically just involves moving back and forth. “You know, I think Peter’s starting to warm up to you.”

“You think?”

“Yeah. I’ve caught him smiling a couple times when you’ve been running rings around Theo.”

“Maybe he’ll man up and admit that this was a great idea.”

Derek snorts. “That’s less likely. But I think maybe he’s coming around to the idea that you two do have some things in common, after all.”

“He’s had some good zingers himself,” Stiles says. “This has actually been a lot of fun so far.”

Derek nods and smiles. “I’m glad you came.”

The song ends and there’s some brief applause. A glass clinks and everyone looks over at where Deucalion is standing at the table at the front of the room. “Thank you all for coming,” he says. “It looks like it’s going to be another great year for us. I do hope that you’ve enjoyed yourselves and that I’ll see all of you at the presentations tomorrow. If you have any questions, please feel free to notify my assistant.”

Stiles pokes Derek in the ribs. “When do I get an assistant?”

“When you get an actual job,” Derek says with a snort, as the music starts again.

“Might I cut in?” a voice asks, and both of them look at Peter, surprised. But Derek relinquishes Stiles to his uncle without argument.

“I don’t actually know how to dance,” Stiles tells him.

“Neither do I. I have better ways to spend my time.” Fortunately, the song is slow, and there isn’t a lot of actual dancing to be done. Stiles is starting to wonder if Peter actually intends to apologize to him, but instead Peter says, “I presume you intend to come to the presentations tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Stiles says.

“I’ll be busy. I won’t have time to baby-sit you.”

“At what point this evening have I indicated a need for a baby-sitter?”

Peter doesn’t reply to the question. “Dress is business casual. An off-the-rack suit is fine, as long as it basically fits you, or just a shirt and tie. Be sure to turn off your phone during the presentations.”

“Dude. I am not five years old. I understand business presentation etiquette.”

“Don’t try to convince Derek of which projects to vote for. He’ll get hopelessly confused.”

Stiles pulls away from Peter. “Yeah, we’re done here,” he says, and walks away to find Derek at the bar. “Can I get a martini? Extra dry, extra olives.”

“Sure,” the bartender says, mixing the drink.
“That went well, I take it,” Derek says, arching his eyebrows at Stiles.

“Well, your uncle’s a dick, it’s not a surprise.” Stiles accepts his drink. “How long do we have to stay at this thing?”

“Dessert will be in half an hour. We can leave after that. But I thought you were having fun?” Derek reaches out, grabs his hand, gives it a squeeze. “Don’t let my uncle ruin this for you, okay? He’s just a prick. Let’s go find Theo and see if he knows anything about tomorrow’s presentations. He won’t have even read the agenda and we can make him feel like a moron.”

Stiles’ lips twitch in a smile. “Okay, yeah. Let’s do that.”

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Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Things I know practically nothing about: 1) How corporations work, 2) Advanced technology, 3) literally anything that might happen in a board room. So I'm just going to apologize in advance for the probably-many inaccuracies in this fic. =D

After the presentations are over, Derek asks Stiles if he wants to go over to the apartment for a little while to have some food and maybe play some video games. Stiles agrees, which makes Derek smile. He had half-expected Stiles would refuse; they had spent a lot of time together, after all. They pick up some Chinese food and eat on the sofa out of the take-out containers like heathens.

“So which of the projects do you like best?” Stiles asks, shoveling lo mein into his mouth.

“I like all of them, really,” Derek says. “You know, I might not approve of every decision the board makes, but the company does good work.”

Stiles nods and starts talking about the 3-D printers and some of the pictures he’s seen on the internet, and they’re still chatting about it when the door opens and Peter comes in. He’s not deterred by Stiles’ presence, and walks over to examine the food. “Mongolian beef?”

“Help yourself,” Derek says, and Peter picks up one of the containers before he kicks off his shoes and slumps into a chair. “We were just talking about the presentations. Which ones are you going to vote for?”

“Mm, well, Reyes’ translation app for the disabled is a lock,” Peter says. “The prosthetics, too. Boyd’s solar farm is interesting, but I doubt it’s realistic. Too much initial expense.”

“We have to invest in renewable energy,” Stiles says.

“Well, no, actually, we don’t,” Peter says. “You have to put yourself in the corporate mindset. Everyone in this room will be dead by the time the oil runs out and the planet has become uninhabitable, so what does it matter to us?”


“I’m not saying that’s my opinion. But it’s the corporate opinion. The goal is to make money, now. Which means that projects with a high initial expense are going to get shot down.”

Since Stiles is scowling, Derek intervenes. “What about the allergen-free nuts? I thought that was really cool.”

“It is, but it’s not the right time for it.” Peter is shaking his hands. “With all the bad press recently about GMOs and people trying to eat like cavemen, nobody is going to want to spend millions of dollars producing allergen-free peanuts that every mommy blogger in the country is going to have hysterics about. And no, Stiles, I don’t think GMOs are a bad thing and you can stop looking at me like I kicked your puppy. Again, I’m just talking about safe investments from a corporate
“What about the self-driving cars?” Derek asks.

“We’re twenty years away from it. Nobody wants to admit that, but it’s true. High-speed rail, though. That’s a good investment right now, especially on the east coast, where everything is tightly packed. People detest flying and are looking for alternatives. Japan and Europe have had it for ages and we really ought to catch up. And,” he adds with a glance at Stiles, “it’s environmentally conscious.”

“So you get to look environmentally conscious without actually being environmentally conscious,” Stiles says.

Peter rolls his eyes. “No, we get to be environmentally conscious in a way that won’t make our shareholders revolt.”

Derek clears his throat. “What about the smart gun? No chance, right?”

“Lord, no. It’s a shame because it’s a brilliant idea, but the gun lobby would never allow it. They’ve torpedoed similar projects in the past and they certainly wouldn’t have any reason not to do it again now.” Peter eats another mouthful before looking at Stiles and saying, “No witty remarks about that?”

Stiles growls at him. “My dad’s a cop. I know about gun technology and the gun lobby. Now give me back my food, we didn’t order that for you.”

Peter relinquishes the take-out box as Stiles snatches it out of his hands, then points to a different one. “Egg rolls?”

“Go away, Peter,” Derek says. Peter laughs, takes an egg roll anyway, and leaves the room.

Stiles makes a noise somewhere between a hissing snake and a teakettle about to boil. “I’m going to kill him.”

Derek is trying not to laugh. “He’s really enjoying himself. It’s actually kind of fun to see him like this. I think he’s enjoying needling you because you actually challenge him, when most people don’t.”

“Yeah, that’s swell.” Stiles is disgruntled. “Just tell me that you’re not going to vote against renewable energy just because he thinks it would cost the company too much money.”

There’s a pause while Derek gets through a mouthful of lo mein. “He’s probably right in that it won’t get past the board. But I would like to support it. I think I’ll vote for the allergen-free peanuts, too. Nobody should have to live in a world without peanut butter fudge.”

“He might be right about that one,” Stiles says. “There’s a really strong anti-science sentiment nowadays.”


Stiles laughs. “That’s more like it.”

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The problem with the board meeting is that so much of it goes over Derek’s head. He doesn’t know that much about business, especially not on such a large scale. There are charts and graphs and serious discussions about things like trend-spotting and corporate tax rates and buy-outs. He tries to look interested, but he has a feeling that he fails a lot of the time. So he isn’t particularly looking forward to it, although, as Peter reminds him frequently, it’s only one day of the year.

At least he has Laura for company. She likes it even less than he does. Cora can’t sit on the board until she’s twenty-one, and she’s already trying to find a way out of it. That would be just fine with the rest of the board members, who don’t like having any of Talia’s children there. Two is bad enough.

But Derek isn’t going to let them see him uncomfortable. So he smiles at Matt Daehler in his ridiculous tailored suit that he still wears a puka shell necklace with. He exchanges pleasantries with Kali Steele, all sharp angles and sharper teeth, and Jennifer Blake, whose girl-next-door beauty and sweet smile give the lie to the cutthroat businesswoman underneath. He even manages a polite greeting for Deucalion, the man who forced Talia out of the company because he thought the scandal of her marrying out of soullock would be bad for business.

Then he sits there and drinks coffee and nods intelligently while people talk. There’s a lot of people fussing because their profits have declined for the second year in a row. Different people offer a lot of different theories on why it’s happening. They’re still in the black – quite comfortably so – but many people seem upset that they’re only making enormous amounts of money rather than obscene amounts of money.

Even Derek, with his lack of business acumen, can tell that they’re going to be very conservative with their projects and their budgets. He doesn’t change his votes, but he’s not surprised when the solar farm gets voted down by a large margin. The high speed rail project does, too, which annoys both Peter and Satomi. Allergen-free nuts and smart guns both get the axe. What’s left is a variety of smaller projects that will be less expensive to produce, allowing for a greater markup but still remaining affordable for the average citizen.

Peter looks somewhat pensive as they leave the building. They’ve got about an hour before dinner, which will barely be enough time to get back to the apartment and change into nicer clothes. Peter has a car waiting for them, and they drive in silence for the first few minutes. All of them are glad that the weekend is nearly over.

“So what do you think is causing the slump everyone is freaking out about?” Laura asks.

Peter shrugs. “Any of a dozen things, or all of a dozen things. Finicky consumers, changing material prices, a crash-and-burn project here and there, rising competition.”

“From the Argents?” Laura flicks her gaze towards Derek.

“They’ve aced us out a couple of times in the last year, which probably has very little to do with what happened with Kate.” Peter reaches into the limousine’s mini-fridge and gets a bottle of water. “And I think they’re responsible for a chain of bad reviews that went viral, but we couldn’t prove anything. But that’s business. The board will always have their panties in a wad about something.”

“But if we don’t invest in the right projects, we won’t turn it around,” Derek says.

Peter waves this aside. “The projects the board picked are fine. They’ll generate lots of revenue. We’ll have a nice, safe year, everyone will calm down, and then next year we can tackle some riskier things. Duke will steer them around to it. I might abhor him as a person, but he knows not to let the company get into a rut.”
Derek makes a face. “At least nobody said anything to me about Stiles.”

“Most of them probably think he was only in it for the free shrimp,” Peter says. “I presume you won’t be seeing him again after this?”

“That’s a hell of a presumption,” Derek says, frowning. “Stiles is still my boyfriend, remember?”

“I was trying to forget.”

“You said you wouldn’t get jealous.”

“I’m not jealous. I am, quite frankly, baffled by why you would waste your time. But, as your cousins said, everybody has to have a hobby. So enjoy yourself, and keep him away from me.”

“Man, you really hate having a soulmate,” Laura says, shaking her head. “I don’t get it, Uncle Peter. He seems like a nice guy. It’s not like he tried to move in the instant he found out that he was your soulmate. Why don’t you give him a chance?”

“And force Derek to break up with him? I would never.”

“Yes, you would.” Derek rolls his eyes. “You would steal my boyfriend in a heartbeat if you actually wanted him. So don’t try to use me as an excuse not to have a soulmate. Which I will again remind you that you have, whether you like it or not.”

Peter sighs. “You need to let this go. Both of you. I don’t expect you to understand, and frankly, I don’t have to explain myself to anybody.”

Now it’s Laura who sighs. “You know we just want you to be happy, right?”

“That’s nice, Laura. Makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. In that case, why don’t you respect my wishes and shut up about it.”

Laura lifts her hands in surrender. “Whatever you say.”

Derek shakes his head as they pull up to the curb beside their apartment building, and the doorman hastens over to let them out. Stiles had found that weird the first couple of times they had come back after a date, but Derek is used to it. He gives the doorman a polite nod and smile before they head in and upstairs. Peter disappears into his own rooms to change without another word.

There’s just enough time for Derek to take a quick shower, which he feels like he needs to refresh himself and wake himself back up after the long meeting. Then he gets dressed. His phone chimes just as he’s doing up his tie, and he sees that it’s a message from Stiles. ‘I’m here, should I come up or are you coming down?’

‘We’ll be down in a few minutes,’ Derek texts back. He goes out and finds Laura, already in her dress but putting on a pair of sneakers.

“Oh, good, you’re out of the shower.” She sounds frazzled. “Bill just texted me, Marco got arrested and I’m the only one who can afford to bail him out. Everyone at the dinner will just have to do without me. It’s not like they care.” She leans up and kisses him on the cheek. “Have fun.”

“Tell Peter I’m waiting downstairs,” he says, and she nods. He takes the elevator down and finds Stiles wearing the other suit Peter had bought for him, a gray three-piece with a green tie. He sees Derek come out of the elevator and smiles, which makes Derek’s heart do a little flutter that he thinks is completely unnecessary. He’s spent the entire weekend with Stiles; he should not be this excited to
see him. “Hey, nice suit.”

“You too,” Stiles says, and leans in for a kiss on the cheek. “How was the meeting?”

“Ugh, boring as always. The solar farm got shot down, sorry. But it wasn’t Peter’s fault, it was by a pretty big margin.”

“I guess he was right about the corporate mindset,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes.

“Yeah. Profits were down this year so everyone’s playing it safe.” Derek gives a shrug. “But it’s not all bad. A lot of what got approved was medical stuff, which is nice. Oh, I have to show you this – Daehler wore a puka shell necklace with his suit.”

“He did not,” Stiles says, as Derek takes out his phone to show him the picture he had managed to surreptitiously take. “Oh my God. He is the worst.”

Both of them are still snickering over that when Peter comes downstairs. “Ready to go?” he asks, and keeps walking past them without waiting for a confirmation. Derek rolls his eyes, but starts after him. He snags Stiles’ hand on the way, and sees Stiles’ cheeks turn faintly pink, which is strangely gratifying.

Peter notices, too, because as soon as they’re in the car, he says, “Well, aren’t you two cute.”

“Yes, we are,” Stiles says, smirking at him. “We’re adorable, and don’t you forget it.”

Derek gives a snort as Peter rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t let go of Stiles’ hand. He likes it. It’s a nice hand, and he’d like to keep it. Peter, of course, can’t resist making another comment. “So, have you enjoyed your little foray into the world of the rich and powerful, Stiles?”

“Oh, yeah, it’s been a blast,” Stiles says. “I’ve learned a lot. The steak was great. What’s on the menu for tonight? Will I get to try caviar? I’ve always sort of wanted to try it, but then I remember that it’s fish eggs and I get kind of grossed out.”

“Probably,” Derek says. “I can’t stand the texture. Anyway, I think they’re serving prime rib tonight.”

“Hell yes,” Stiles says happily, and Derek snorts again.

“What with your environmental concerns, I’m surprised you aren’t a vegetarian,” Peter says, in a tone that’s obviously meant as an insult.

“I will fully admit that being a vegetarian is very environmentally conscious, and I applaud the people that can do it,” Stiles replies, “but unfortunately for the environment, meat is delicious.”

“So you’ll bend in your principles as long as it benefits you,” Peter says. “Hm. Good to know.”

“Why don’t you bend and kiss my ass?” Stiles shoots back.

“I get the feeling Derek might object,” Peter replies. “Actually, we were talking about that earlier, about whether or not you intended to continue this charade once the banquet tonight was over.”

“And as I told you earlier, it isn’t a charade,” Derek says. “Remember, the part where he’s my boyfriend? I mean, we talked about him pretending to be my soulmate, but that’s not actually what we did, so at no point was any of this a charade. Oh, except for the part where you’re pretending he’s not your soulmate. So if you want to talk about who’s winning at charades, I’m pretty sure it’s
“Well, as long as I’m winning,” Peter says.

Derek’s eyeroll is epic and involuntary. He turns back towards Stiles and says, “Actually, I wanted to ask you what days you have off next week. I thought we could go down to the botanical gardens if the weather is good . . . maybe have a picnic?”


“I teach classes in the morning, but any time after one o’clock would be good.”

“Okay. I’ll make my grandmother’s famous potato salad.”

“It’s a date.” Derek lifts Stiles’ hand to his mouth and kisses his knuckles, and Stiles flushes pink again.


Fortunately for everyone’s sanity, they arrive at the banquet hall. Peter is out of the car and in the hotel before any of them can say anything, and Derek just shakes his head. They go inside and run almost directly into his great-aunt, who looks at Stiles and asks, “What is he still doing here?” before strutting angrily away without giving him a chance to reply.

“Let’s get a drink,” Derek says.

“And some caviar,” Stiles says. Peter has disappeared into the crowd, so they don’t have to worry about him. Stiles is fascinated by the little pearl spoons that they serve with the caviar, to prevent the taste from being tainted by metal. “These are so fancy,” he says repeatedly, while Derek tries not to laugh.

They’ve abandoned the caviar for trays of canapés when Deucalion walks over. “Derek, I haven’t had a chance to meet your . . . friend.”

Derek keeps the pleasant smile pasted on his face. “This is Stiles, my boyfriend.” He gives the word a slight emphasis, just enough to be heard without being a challenge. “Stiles, this is Deucalion.”

“Nice to meet you,” Stiles says, keeping himself polite and shaking Deucalion’s hand.

“How did you find the presentations, Stiles?” Deucalion asks.

“I thought they were really interesting. It was too bad that the solar farm didn’t get past the board.”

“Oh, that is regrettable. The board was being very conservative this year. Still, knowing Mr. Boyd, he’ll continue to work on it in his own time, perhaps find a way to decrease the initial cost so we can look at it again next year.” Deucalion smiles at Stiles. “It’s a little unusual for someone like you to show so much interest in our proceedings.”

“I promise I’m not a corporate spy,” Stiles deadpans.

Deucalion laughs heartily. “No, I didn’t think you were. They tend to be more subtle.” To Derek, he says, “I do apologize for the way you were treated over that Argent fiasco. It really wasn’t your fault, and the damage was minimal, all things considered.”

“That’s . . . thanks,” Derek says, frowning. “I have to admit I’m surprised to hear you say that, after what happened between you and Talia.”
“There’s probably a lot about what happened back then that you don’t know,” Deucalion says. “And this isn’t really the time or the place. Suffice to say, Talia was going to be forced out of the company one way or another; I found that orchestrating it civilly was the best way to go about it. In any case, I’m pleased to see that you’re showing more interest in the company, Derek.”

“That was mostly Stiles’ doing,” Derek says. “I don’t really care.”

“Well, that’s too bad. I was going to say, we don’t have much need for a gymnastics instructor, but I’m sure we could find a place for you here, if you wanted.”

Derek arches an eyebrow. “You’re not worried about my mother’s curse?”

“Superstition has no place in a board room.”

“Says the man who booted my mother out of the company.”

“Your mother made some . . . questionable choices.”

Derek threads his fingers through Stiles’ and says, “I’m literally standing in front of you with my boyfriend, so I don’t see how my choices are going to bring the company any less scandal. Unless you’re one of the people who thinks that Stiles is only here for the free shrimp.”

Deucalion shrugs. “As I said, there’s a lot about Talia’s departure that you don’t know. In any case, think it over. I’ll be seeing you, I’m sure.” He picks up one of the canapés and walks away.

“The hell was that all about?” Stiles asks.

“I don’t know,” Derek says, and scans the room until he sees Peter. “Let’s go ask somebody who might.”

Peter is talking to a cousin that he seems glad to be rid of. “What is it, nephew?”

“Deucalion just offered me a job and told me that superstition has no place in the board room,” Derek says, and Peter’s eyebrows go up. “He also said there was a lot about Talia leaving the company which I didn’t know.”

“Interesting,” Peter says.

“And?” Derek says. “You’re going to explain it, right?”

“I’m not sure why Duke would offer you a job. He must be trying to butter you up for something. Which is interesting in and of itself. As for Talia, I can’t be one hundred percent certain what he means. I wasn’t actually involved, you know; Talia was much older than I was and so I was barely in my teens when she married your father and left the company. Talia often said that leaving was her best option, so somebody had obviously concocted some plan to give her no choice, but I don’t know what it was.”

Derek gives an explosive sigh. “God, I hate this, this fucking pit of vipers.”

“Well, you’re almost done with us,” Peter says.

Stiles tugs on Derek’s sleeve and says, “Let’s go figure out where they seated us and switch our name plates so we’re sitting with tolerable people instead.”

Derek can’t help but smile at that. “Good idea. We can find Erica’s table, she’ll be over the moon about her first project getting approved.”
“Are you just going to abandon me with Harris, then?” Peter asks, in a long-suffering tone.

“Yup!” Stiles says with a bright grin, and tows Derek away.

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Stiles doesn’t know exactly what’s going to happen now that the corporate weekend is over. He suspects he’ll just get back to his normal life, hang out with Derek, and pretend that Peter doesn’t exist. He’s surprised when he’s at work and his coworker tells him that there’s a call for him, and he picks up with a cautious hello.

“Stiles? This is Jennifer Blake. We met briefly last weekend, do you remember?”

“Oh, uh yeah,” Stiles says, flummoxed. He met Jennifer for a total of two minutes, if that.

“I’m so sorry to call you at work, but I didn’t have your personal number. I’m afraid I did a bit of snooping to find out where you work. Listen, I would love to have a chance to chat with you. Business.”

Stiles can’t possibly imagine what business she would have with him, but his curiosity is piqued, so he’s not about to say no. “My shift is until six, but I guess I could meet you afterwards.”

“Great. I’ll send a car to pick you up.” She exchanges pleasantries with him and hangs up. Stiles is left boggling at these people who just send cars willy nilly, and goes back to work. He thinks about texting Derek to ask what’s up, but decides he’ll wait and see what Jennifer wants first. If Derek had known this was going to happen, he would have warned Stiles, so he can’t know anything that would be useful.

The car that picks Stiles up is, thankfully, not a limo, although it is extremely plush. They drive a couple blocks to a popular sushi bar, where Jennifer is waiting for him.

“So, I’ll be frank with you,” she says, as soon as they’re seated. “I want to talk to you about Derek.”

“Well, I might or might not be willing to do that, but let’s see what you’ve got.”

At this, Jennifer smiles. “Let me back up. Several of us – on the board, you see – have worried about Peter’s influence over his niece and nephew. I presume Derek has told you that Peter bought them their positions on the board and interest in the company.”

“He mentioned it, yeah.”

“Since then, Laura and Derek have voted with Peter about ninety-five percent of the time.” Jennifer sips her tea. “Peter is building himself a cozy little voting block, and it’s concerning. The company is still privately owned – between the board members, we own sixty-seven percent of the stock. The rest is public, and most shareholders only own 0.01 or 0.05 percent. Still a lot of money when you’re talking about a company worth billions of dollars, but spread out amongst many, many people.”

“Okay,” Stiles says, feeling wary.

“Since Talia’s children between them own twenty-one percent, plus Peter’s five percent, they own an entire quarter of the company. Which would be fine, were it not for the fact that neither Laura nor
Derek have ever shown any interest in the proceedings, and allow Peter to dictate their actions.”

“Still, twenty-six percent isn’t a monopoly,” Stiles says. “There’s more than enough leftover to thwart any plans he might have of a corporate takeover or whatever.”

“True. It’s not a monopoly. But it is a very, very important swing vote.”

“Okay. So what?”

“So, we’re trying to break it up.”

“Why start with Derek and not Laura?” Stiles asks curiously.

“Because something unusual happened at the board meeting last weekend,” Jennifer says. “Derek voted differently from Peter three separate times. He voted twice for projects Peter voted against, and once against one that Peter voted for. And taken in conjunction with his long-term voting record, it seems to us like Derek might be pulling away from Peter on his own. Which probably has something to do with you, as the only new factor in the equation.”

Stiles shrugs a little. “Sure, Derek and I talked about the projects. We didn’t agree on all of them, and we sure as hell didn’t agree with Peter on all of them. But I think you’re exaggerating if you think I magically made him immune to Peter’s influence.”

“Do you? Like I said, he’s voted with Peter ninety-five percent of the time over the past four years. That’s one or two disagreements a year. Now there’s three in one weekend? Something has changed.”

Stiles thinks about it for a minute. The waiter comes over and takes their order. “Okay. I’ll grant that. I did actively encourage him to vote for the solar farm even though Peter said it was too expensive. Maybe he just finally felt like his vote mattered. But I still don’t see why you care. In the grand scheme of things, these votes were not important. We’re not talking about selling the company or giving that obnoxious Theo kid his own department or moving an entire branch overseas. We’re talking about projects, fun tech stuff that actually caught his interest.”

“But there will be votes like those in the future.”

“Yeah, and on those votes he’ll continue to let Peter tell him what to do, because he knows that he’s not familiar enough with the business to have an informed opinion.”

Jennifer purses her lips. “That’s why we need to get Derek away from Peter, now, while he’s finally starting to show independence. We need to convince him that he’s not on Peter’s side.”

Stiles sits back, mouth slightly open for a moment, then says, “Wow.”

Jennifer frowns. “Wow, what?”

“I’m just surprised at how little you understand the dynamic here. I mean, you’ve been watching it for years, I literally just met these guys a few weeks ago. But you’re completely clueless.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.” Jennifer tries to smile, and the expression is brittle, forced.

“Peter is the only guy in your entire corporate hegemony that’s ever treated Derek like he gives a shit. You’re his family, and you’ve been total assholes to him. You didn’t approve of choices his mother made, so you treat him like a pariah. Peter, meanwhile, has taken care of him. As lousy a father as he would have made, he’s supported Derek financially and given him the freedom and the
trust to make his own decisions about his own life. And you think telling Derek ‘but we don’t like that Peter has a block of swing votes!’ is going to make a God damned bit of difference to him? Hell, you’d practically guarantee to up that ninety-five percent to a hundred, just out of spite.”

After a moment, Jennifer sighs. “You might be right. Understand, choices that were made about Talia were made before I was ever in a position of power.”

“That doesn’t matter. Things happened years ago that you weren’t responsible for, sure, but things have continued to happen up until as recently as two days ago that you were. Derek has no reason to be loyal to you. You’re lucky he hasn’t just sold his shares to Peter and washed his hands of all of you. And I’m pretty sure that the only reason he hasn’t done that is because Peter bought him those shares, so obviously Peter wants him to have them.”

“Well, what do you suggest we do, then?”

Stiles opens his mouth to ‘suggest’ that they go back in time and not treat Derek like shit. Then something occurs to him. “Something big is coming up, isn’t it. Something that you discovered or figured out at the meetings, and you’re trying to line up your ducks for it. You know how Peter’s going to swing, you know it’s going to be tight, so you’re trying to get people on your side now, before he has a chance to convince them of something else.”

Jennifer’s smile tightens. “You’re sharp. I see why Derek likes you.” She looks up as the server comes with their food. Once he’s gone, she says, “You understand that I can’t give you any details.”

“Wouldn’t want ‘em,” Stiles says. “I’m pretty sure that the further away I am from your corporate bullshit, the happier I am.”

“But it’s very important that I at least get a chance to present our side of the issue to Derek. So he can make, as you put it, an informed decision.”

Stiles shrugs. “Tell him that, not me. It’s not like Peter keeps him under lock and key. Call him on the phone, tell him you want to talk to him. Maybe apologize for some past wrongs. Or maybe don’t, since then he’ll know that you’re buttering him up. Your call.” He sees the look on Jennifer’s face and says, “Look, that’s all I’ve got for you. Treat him like a human being capable of making his own decisions, and there’s just a chance that he’ll act like one.”

“But you won’t talk to him.”

“And say what? Jennifer wants you to vote her way on an important vote that she won’t tell me anything about, and she won’t give you a call to tell you that herself? That’d go over real well.”

“I meant, talk to him about Peter.” Jennifer dips her sushi in the soy sauce. “It was pretty obvious that you aren’t Peter’s biggest fan.”

“Sure, he’s a prick,” Stiles says. “But you’re acting like Derek doesn’t know that. He’s well aware that his uncle is an arrogant, sarcastic, mean-spirited jerk. He just doesn’t care, because Peter is still his uncle, and because Peter has still treated him well. So what am I supposed to say? ‘Hey, Derek, did you know your uncle is a jerk?’ to which the answer would be ‘no kidding’.”

“How about ‘Derek, your uncle had ulterior motives for buying you that stock, because it gives him extra votes on the board’.”

Stiles starts to tell her that that won’t work, because Derek really already knows that too, and it’s not like Peter had insisted on having Derek’s votes before giving him the stock. But he changes his mind. Jennifer Blake is the sort of person who’s clearly intent on getting what she wants. It might not
be a bad idea to keep her thinking that he could be on her side. “I guess I could mention it to him. Nobody likes feeling like they’re being used.”

“That’s all I ask,” Jennifer says. “Because this vote that’s coming up in a few months . . . it’s going to change the company. Derek and his siblings are going to be at risk.”

“Mm hm.” Stiles thinks about what Harris had said at the reunion, about how Peter might not be on the board forever. He devotes himself to eating his sushi while he ponders this.

Jennifer asks about his studies, and they talk a little while about college and his job at the bookstore and his father. Stiles is careful not to tell her too much, because he doesn’t want this lady thinking that she’s his friend. But by the time dinner is over, he’s come to a decision, which is that he has to tell Derek and Peter about this conversation. He would have told Derek anyway, but he thinks that Peter should know. Peter will have a better idea of what this universe-changing decision will be.

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Stiles doesn’t put it past Jennifer to have him followed, so when dinner is over, he goes home. He has homework to do, anyway, and he has a feeling that it’ll be easier to catch Peter at home over the weekend. He can’t go see him at work – Jennifer will almost certainly hear about it if he does.

So he texts Derek on Saturday morning, saying he needs to talk to them, to which Derek replies, ‘oh geez’. But Peter is there, he says, so Stiles stops to pick up some donuts before heading over. Derek greets him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek and says that Peter is in the kitchen, and that there’s fresh coffee.

This is Peter outside his natural habitat, it seems. Derek hadn’t warned him, so instead of his perfectly pressed suit, he’s wearing a V-neck shirt and flannel pajama pants. The look he gives Stiles when he comes in is spectacular. Stiles grins at him in response. “Not a morning person?”

“I can be when the occasion calls for it.”

Stiles holds out the donuts. “Peace offering.”

It looks like Peter might argue, but then he sees the pink box and realizes that they aren’t some cheap chain donuts. These are the real thing, from the best baker in town. Stiles sets the box down and Peter immediately goes for the double chocolate. “Hedonist,” Stiles says.

“Is there a reason you’re here?” Peter asks him.

“You guys have a better coffee maker than I do,” Stiles says, and proceeds to use it while Peter glowers at him. Once he’s gotten his latte made, he sits down and says, “Seriously, though. I wanted you to know that Jennifer Blake called on me a couple days ago, took me out for a fancy dinner, and said a lot of very serious things about your company and how much she doesn’t like your little block of swing votes.”

“Interesting,” Peter murmurs, sipping his coffee.

Derek is frowning. “Why did she talk to you?”

“She seems to think that I have some sort of influence on you.” Stiles rolls his eyes. “Like you don’t know how to vote unless someone tells you. She doesn’t like the fact that you almost always vote with Peter, and since I talked you into voting for the solar farm, apparently I’m some sort of wizard.”

Peter looks at Derek and says, “I told you not to vote for the solar farm.”

“Really? That’s what you’re taking away from this?” Stiles gives him a look.

“I’m not concerned about what Jennifer Blake is doing.” Peter picks up a second donut. “If she
thinks she can get Derek interested in the company by batting her eyelashes and saying pretty please, that’s her own business. What did she offer you?”

“Nothing, yet. She did ask some questions about college and work and how hard it must be managing it all on my dad’s pension.”

“So she intends to bribe you.”

“That’d be my guess, yep.” Stiles picks up a donut of his own. “You feel like telling us what’s going on?”

Peter sighs, and directs his commentary towards Derek. “You were at the board meeting, so you know that profits are in a slump. Jennifer wants to oust Deucalion and take up his position as CEO. But she doesn’t have the votes to do it – yet.”

“I take it that you’re not one of those votes?” Derek asks.

“No. For two reasons. Primarily, because Jennifer wouldn’t make a good CEO, for reasons that I think you would both agree with me. She’s too short-sighted. She doesn’t like to invest in projects that won’t have an immediate return. And she doesn’t like to take risks. Hale Corp would do very well under Jennifer . . . for a while. But long-term projects are important, too. And if you don’t want to take my word for it, I’d be happy to show you her voting record for the past several board meetings.”

“What’s the second reason?” Derek asks.

“Well, she hates me. She’d fire me.”

“I thought you said you were ‘too good at your job’ to lose,” Derek says, eyes narrowing.

“Oh, I am, but that wouldn’t matter to Jennifer.”

“Why would she target Derek?” Stiles asks. “If he knows that you’ll get fired, that’s a compelling reason he would have not to vote her way. There must be easier people she could go for.”

“Well, I don’t doubt she’s going for them, too.” Peter considers for a minute. “On a vote like this, there will be two crucial swing votes. One is Matt Daehler, who I swear to God flips coins on his way into the meetings sometimes. Deucalion brokered the deal to get him onto the board, so he’d lean that way, but he could be persuaded otherwise if Jennifer promises him his own department, which he’s wanted for a while but nobody else has been stupid enough to give him. The second will be Satomi. She detests Deucalion because of the way he treated Talia, but she’s also smart enough to know that he makes a better CEO and she shouldn’t let her feelings get in the way of that. Getting both of them to vote with her will be difficult. But, if Jennifer could get Derek to swing her way, she could lose one of them and still come out on top. And of course, it’s very possible that through Derek, she could get to Laura.”

Derek nods slowly. “So what should we do?”

“We convince her that you’re going to vote with her,” Stiles says.

Peter’s eyebrows go up. “Yes, that’s exactly what we do.”

Derek looks between the two of them and rolls his eyes. “And how do we do that?”

“Well, first of all, you and I will need to get into an argument about how I only got you those shares
so I could have a sure vote, how I’ve been using and manipulating you, et cetera.”

“Haven’t you?” Derek asks dryly.

“That depends on how you look at it. I didn’t tell you ‘you can only have these shares if you agree to vote the way I tell you’. Of course, I did know when I bought them that you had no interest in the day-to-day running of the company. So it’s less me manipulating you, as me understanding the sort of person you are and banking on a predictable outcome.”

“Sure, Uncle Peter.” Derek rolls his eyes. “So we get in a fight, and Jennifer swoops in to make her promises about how much better things will be after you’re gone.”

“And before she does that, she’s going to want to know what she needs to say, what she needs to offer you, and that’s where Stiles comes in.”

Derek frowns a little and looks at Stiles. “Are you comfortable with this? I don’t want you to do anything that you don’t want to. Including and especially getting involved in corporate espionage.”

“No, I don’t mind,” Stiles says. “I think it might be fun.”

“It does beg a question, though.” Peter takes another drink of his coffee and studies Stiles intensely for a few moments. “Why? What are you going to gain by helping us?”

“Peter, come on,” Derek says. “Stiles is allowed to help just because he’s my friend. You are aware that helping out their friends is a thing that people do, right?”

“This goes a bit beyond help,” Peter says. “First you wanted to attend our reunion and all our corporate meetings, now you’re volunteering to pretend to spy on Derek for Jennifer and help us stop her in her attempts at a corporate takeover. That’s not exactly helping a buddy move a sofa.”

Stiles shrugs. “Part of it is that I want to help Derek, which unfortunately seems to mean helping you. And part of it is that I don’t like people like Jennifer. She knows she can’t win Derek over honestly because she’s been a super bitch to him. But instead of apologizing and trying to make amends, like I told her she should, she wants to bribe me so I’ll help her manipulate him. I could just take a seat and let her dig her own grave, but to be one hundred percent honest, I’m a petty, spiteful person who does petty, spiteful things, and the idea of giving her a dose of karma appeals to me.”

“Mm. Now that is something I can understand,” Peter says. “Okay, then. We’ll play it like that.”

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Stiles lets Jennifer sweat for a few days before he gives her a call and says he wants to ask her a few more questions before he talks to Derek. He says they’ll probably want privacy for the conversation. Rather than have him come to the office, she picks him up and says they can just talk in the car.

It’s a little surreal, this clandestine business meeting, but it works for Stiles’ purposes. Peter was the one who had said that Stiles needs to make Jennifer work for this, and Stiles agrees. If he just gives her everything she wants with no strings attached, she’ll know that he’s not really doing it for her benefit. Stiles was the one who had said that if he was going to make Jennifer bribe him, he might as well ask for what he actually wants. Peter had given him the side-eye at that, clearly suspecting again that Stiles’ motivations weren’t genuine, but he acquiesces because it does make sense.
“So, I thought about everything you said,” Stiles tells her, “and I decided against saying anything to Derek, at least for the moment. Because I don’t really have any reason to. I mean, I don’t know what the ‘big decision’ coming up is. You say that Derek and Laura will be at risk. But why should I believe you?”

“I don’t have any reason to lie,” Jennifer says.

“Of course you do. You probably have a dozen reasons to lie. I just don’t know what any of them are yet. Whatever this decision is, it’s probably something that’s either going to benefit you or fuck you over. You pretty much definitely have reasons to lie. So maybe I should go tell Peter about what you want me to say to Derek. Or Deucalion. Did you know he actually offered Derek a job at the banquet?”

Jennifer’s mouth thins. “Of course he did.”

“He wants Derek’s vote, too. But at least he’s trying to give Derek something in return, unlike you.”

“So you want me to give Derek a job?”

“No, Derek doesn’t want a job with you guys anyway. I’m just saying, at least Deucalion is trying to butter Derek up directly. You’re behind in this little race to wherever, so you’d better start thinking strategically. If you won’t approach Derek about this – and it’s clear that you won’t for whatever reason – and you want to use me as a middle man, you should know that I don’t come cheap.”

“So you want a bribe?”

“Hell, no.” Stiles is grinning. “This is straight-up blackmail, sister. Give me what I want, or I’ll tell Peter and Deucalion about what you asked me to do.”

“Actually, this could work for me,” Jennifer says. “I could hire you and put you in a place where you could keep an eye on some of the other swing votes for me, maybe get an idea about which way they’re going to go. How much do you make at the bookstore? Just minimum wage?”

“Please, I’ve been there for years. Eleven bucks an hour.”

“I can double that. Plus full benefits.”

Stiles shakes his head. “I’ll take it, but it’s not good enough. I want one of your scholarships.”

Jennifer looks somewhat surprised. “I don’t decide who gets those.”

“Find a way. Right now I’m doing nine credit semesters at community college because they don’t even offer half the things I need. If I’m going to get the sort of job I want, I need to go to a good school which has classes on criminology, forensics, et cetera. But I’ll never be able to afford it on my own. If you can’t wrangle me one of the scholarships, I’ll take signed paperwork saying Hale Corp will pay all my tuition costs.”

Jennifer thinks it over. “Okay. Done.”

“Super. Once I have that, I’ll talk to Derek about Peter the Terrible.”

“Try to be subtle.” Jennifer looks like she has a headache.

“Sister, I just blackmailed you into an education worth at least a hundred grand. I think you can probably trust me to know what I’m doing. But on that note, it might help to know what this earth-
shaking decision is going to be.”

“Why?” Jennifer is clearly suspicious.

“Because turning him against Peter won’t be that hard, but I still need to know who he’s voting for and against, if not the specifics. Like, all the anger at Peter in the world won’t make him promote Theo to an important position. You obviously want him to like you, and I can work with that, but who do you want him against?”

Jennifer’s lips thin. “I’m not sure that I trust you enough to tell you that.”

Stiles sighs. “Okay. Fine. It’s Deucalion, right?”

Now she looks really annoyed. “What makes you think that?”

“Well, a big decision would involve big people. Kali’s your soulmate, so it wouldn’t be against her. And there’s not a lot of people in the top tier. It probably isn’t Satomi Ito, who’s much happier in her lab than in the board room. Which really only leaves Deucalion, and that would explain why you’re unhappy that he offered Derek a job.”

Jennifer sighs. “Yes, then. Deucalion. But turning Derek against him will be easy, and I don’t need your help to do it. I just need you to get Derek to listen to me, not Peter.”

“Fair enough. He does hate the guy. When do I start my new job?”

“I’ll have the paperwork for you by Monday.”

“Great. Don’t call me this weekend. Derek and I have a date.”

Jennifer rolls her eyes. “Whatever you say.”

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Derek has always enjoyed cooking, especially for other people. He likes making birthday dinners for Cora and Laura, even enjoys cooking the food that Peter likes, if he’s had a rough day or he’s annoyed about something. He had loved cooking for Kate, who had always raved about his food and enjoyed his offerings in a manner that bordered on sexual.

For a while, he had worried that his subsequent breakup with Kate was going to ruin it for him. He’s pleased to find that it hasn’t. He mixes waffle batter and breads chicken and puts it in their little deep fryer while Stiles sits on the counter and kicks his legs back and forth. They’ve got a ton of expensive kitchen gadgets, so he might as well use them.

“That smells amazing,” Stiles says, leaning off the counter and nearly falling over in an effort to see what Derek is making.

Derek smiles over at him. “The trick is that you have to make the waffles savory instead of sweet. That’s why you add the spices and the chopped bacon. They go with the chicken better that way.”

“Nice. You can improve anything by adding bacon. I mean, not that I’m a master chef. My diet consists of a lot of ramen. But I’m in college, so it’s kind of expected.”
Derek snorts and shakes his head. “Well, that explains a lot about how you’ve reacted to life with the Hales thus far.”

“True dat,” Stiles says comfortably. “Peter was all wrong about me. I’m not a gold-digging whore. I’m a filet-mignon-digging-whore.”

“Waffle-digging,” Derek agrees.

Stiles laughs and kicks his legs back and forth. “Hey, so, I’m supposed to start my new job on Monday, and I’m supposed to talk to you about why Peter is a terrible person. So I guess the first thing to figure out is what your genuine reaction would be. So, did you know that your Uncle Peter only got you those shares in the company so he could have extra votes in the board?”

“Wow, subtle,” Derek says. “You know you wouldn’t actually approach it that way.”

“True. Okay. Probably I would start by complaining about Peter. You know, he doesn’t like me. He doesn’t like you dating. Constantly brings up your poor judgment in the past, Kate Argent, et cetera.”

“The sad thing is, that’s all pretty accurate.” Derek finishes mixing the waffle batter and puts it in the waffle maker. “So, I agree with your initial premise that Peter is a jerk.”

“Then I would probably present the whole ‘shares and votes’ thing like it’s obvious. Just more evidence of his jackassery. You know, he’s the kind of guy who uses people.”

“I, of course, am shocked at this assertion.”

“I challenge your shock. Have you never thought about this?”

“Well, no. He’s my uncle. How could you suggest such a thing?”

“Don’t you always vote how he recommends?”

“Yes, but – and this is a genuine sticking point – he never told me I had to do that. He never said ‘I’ll only give you these shares if you do what I say’.”

“And to my innocent mind, that actually makes things worse. At least then he would have been up front about it. He’s manipulative. He’s using you.”

Derek frowns and starts taking the chicken out of the deep fryer. “I’m getting a little uncomfortable at how I’m starting to agree with you, and you aren’t even trying.”

Stiles shrugs. “Okay, back to real life instead of our little fantasy scenario. Does that actually bother you? Because yeah, Peter did manipulate you. But, I think he was genuinely also trying to help you. Giving you the shares wasn’t just for his benefit. It also gives you a hand in the company, and a very generous source of income, a safety net if you ever wanted to sell those shares, et cetera. All in return for a few votes every year that, let’s be perfectly honest, there’s a good chance you would agree with him on anyway.”

Derek has to stop and think it over for a few minutes. Stiles is right about Peter in a lot of ways. He seems to understand Peter in a way that Derek never really has – which does make sense, given their innate similarities. He’s argued with Peter on votes a few times, and although Peter has always explained his rationale behind their disagreement – usually with a dollop of cutting sarcasm – he’s never told Derek he can’t vote his conscience.

Peter is, among other things, a product of his environment. As the youngest of his five siblings in a
huge extended family, he’s constantly had to fight for a place at the table. He’s had to prove himself ten times harder than anyone else. Like Talia – and Derek himself – he’s been put down, marginalized, and insulted for things that he couldn’t help or had never asked for. He had responded to all of that by excelling at what he did, making himself indispensable, and spitting in the eye of anyone who dared question his superiority. And he had used whatever resources were available to do that. Derek was one of them.

But even though he had used Derek, he had also helped him – and his sisters. He could have tried to get them more involved in the company. In all reality, he could have manipulated into them into a lot more than a few votes. But he had never argued with them finding their own paths, even when he personally didn’t see the merit to them. He might make a snarky comment about their choices, but in that regard, he treated them no differently than anyone else.

“No,” Derek finally says. “I don’t really care. Peter is who he is. He’s my uncle and I care about him. So, you know. He does what he does.”

“Okay.” Stiles is distracted when he sees the shish kabobs that Derek is pulling out of the deep fryer. “Oh my God, I need to put those in my face.”

Derek jokingly slaps his hand away. “Let them cool, dumbass. So back to Jennifer. I’m shocked and hurt, et cetera. But how are you going to convince me that she’s the solution to my shock and my hurt?”

“I don’t, at least, not yet. We have to give it some time. Would you confront Peter?”

“Yeah. And he’d blow me off.”

“Which would only piss you off more.” Stiles nods a little. “Later, I’d drop the idea for you to vote against Peter on the next big thing, just to piss him off. And then even later, we’d find out what that thing is and we’d work on the Deucalion angle. But we’re not there yet, and I wouldn’t move too fast, lest you figure out what I was up to. So that’s all for now.”

“Okay.” Derek opens the waffle maker and lifts the waffle out onto another plate. “All right. Let me just get some sour cream . . .”

“Bleh, keep it to yourself,” Stiles says, but he’s practically craning forward as Derek puts the chicken and waffles on a plate. Derek holds out a shish kabob to him and he takes a piece of chicken off the end with his mouth. “Oh my God,” he says, mouth still full. “That is fantastic.”

Derek flushes a little pink. “Thanks. It’s not that hard, actually.”

“Still a hundred times better than anything I could make.” Stiles accepts the shish kabob and takes another piece of chicken and a piece of pepper off of it. “If this is the way you cook for someone who isn’t technically your boyfriend, I can’t wait to see what comes next.”

At this, Derek rubs a hand over the back of his head. “Yeah, that whole ‘put things on hold’ idea didn’t work too well, did it.”

“Not really. I mean, it didn’t help that we followed that up by pretending to be boyfriends for the next week. I sort of forgot that we weren’t.”

“Me too,” Derek admits.

“I think that’s okay.” Stiles grins at him as he cuts into his waffle with the side of his fork. “I mean, we put things on hold so I could have a chance to get to know Peter. Now I’ve spent several days
with both of you, and trust me, I am so much happier with you. Obviously we want to be dating, so let’s just say we are.”

“And you’re . . . okay with that?” Derek hesitates, braced for rejection. “With me being the way I am?”

Stiles is pensive for a few moments, although it doesn’t him from filling his face. “I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to do,” he finally says, “but I have to admit that I don’t really want a life of celibacy, either. Do you mind if I have sex with other people?”

“I’m not sure. I want to say no, but . . .”

“Think of it like this,” Stiles says. “You said you hate horror movies, right?” he asks, and Derek nods. “Well, I love them. Not slasher fics, but the creepy, suspenseful ones – I love that stuff. And I don’t want to never watch one again, so I’ll just watch them with other friends. Sex is like a horror movie, which is a terrible metaphor now that I’m saying it out loud. It’s just a fun activity that I’ll do with my friends sometimes.”

Derek nods thoughtfully. “I can definitely try to think about it that way.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not some sort of Casanova,” Stiles adds. “I haven’t gotten laid in like, six months. So it’s not like I’d be out there screwing everyone I came across. And it’s not like they’ll want to get serious with me, because they’ll still be waiting for their soulmates. Anyway, the point is, I don’t think sex is necessary to a romantic relationship, and vice versa. If you’re okay with that, so am I.”

“Just . . . this is a weird request, but will you tell me what you’re doing? I think it’ll help. That I’ll be able to see that you don’t act any differently towards me even if you’re having sex with someone else.”

“Sure. I can do that.” Stiles takes a bite of the waffle and moans. “Oh my God. I can definitely do that. Do you like kissing? Because I really want to kiss you right now.”

“I’m not a big fan of kissing on the lips, but . . .”

“Got it.” Stiles leans forward and presses a kiss right against the corner of Derek’s mouth. He pulls away with a grin. “How was that?”

“Good,” Derek says, and smiles back. “That was good.”

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Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little on the short side. Sorry, it's been a busy week. On the upside, it has nearly-naked Peter in it, so ... that makes up for a lot. XD

More things I know nothing about: what interns do

Things I actually do know a fair bit about: smart gun technology! Which is actually very cool.

Satomi Ito greets Stiles on his first day in her department with more than a little puzzlement. She met Stiles at the reunion, so she knows that he’s Derek’s boyfriend. Given Derek’s lack of interest in the company, Stiles’ job there is sudden and strange. But she doesn’t push for details. He’s an intern, a glorified gopher. He spends the morning learning how the computer system works and the afternoon running errands.

“Jennifer has you assigned to Daehler,” Satomi says the next morning, with a trace of distaste in her voice. “He won’t have enough work to keep you busy for an hour, but will almost certainly abuse the privilege of having an intern, which he hasn’t had before now. Don’t let him give you any shit.”

Stiles laughs at that sentiment coming from the reserved older woman. Two hours later, he’s regretting it deeply, because Matt is making him caddy. Standing out on a golf course, looking at clubs he doesn’t understand, while Matt yuks it up with his trust fund buddies, is akin to the ninth circle of hell. Then Matt makes him pick up his dry cleaning, and as if that wasn’t insulting enough, makes Stiles try to get a girl’s number after she tells Matt to buzz off.

He comes in the third morning and says to Satomi, “Look, you can fire me if you want, but I’m not working for that little prick.”

Satomi snorts. “I’ll tell you what, Stiles – I’ll tell Matt that until he has actual Hale Corporation business he can give you, I’m going to keep you busy. But if he comes with an actual task for you, you’ll have to do it.”

“Just as long as I don’t have to hit on girls for him again,” Stiles says.

“I think that can probably be arranged,” Satomi says. “You have Excel on your résumé. Do you actually know how to use it, or are you one of those people who thinks they can wing it and fool me?”

“I know how to use about sixty percent of its functions. Just don’t get too fancy on me.”

“Data entry it is, then.”

Working for the Hales actually doesn’t turn out to be too bad. Satomi is a pretty good boss. There’s a lot of work, because apparently two of her previous interns had just gotten snaked out by Argent Industries, so for a while he’s running around putting out fires. But generally speaking, it’s work he
doesn’t mind. He’s glad that he’s working for R&D rather than Jennifer herself, because he imagines PR and marketing to be incredibly boring.

Other than Satomi, he doesn’t see any of the others who had been at the reunion. They all have their own important things to do. Daehler goes away in a sulk after Satomi tells him that she won’t let him keep Stiles unless he has real work to do. Satomi makes a dry comment about what will happen if Daehler ever actually gets to head up a project, but those are the only office politics that Stiles is privy to.

Other than that it’s data entry, running errands, writing memos, tallying accounts. It’s fun to see all the projects that are being worked on. There are the ones he heard about at the meetings, of course, but a variety of others that are long-term, and some that are still in development and will be presented the following year. Satomi is bitterly angry about the smart gun getting the veto, although she admits that she knew it would happen.

“I understand the second amendment,” she mentions to Stiles, “and I’m not for the legal restriction of gun purchases. But I just don’t understand why the NRA is against a gun that can recognize its owner! That way, a stolen gun couldn’t be misused. An intruder wouldn’t be able to wrestle away a homeowner’s gun and shoot him with it. A child wouldn’t be able to accidentally shoot their sibling. What on earth could any reasonable human being possibly have against that!”

“Do they actually work?” Stiles asks, curious.

“Of course they work. Europe has had them for quite some time. There are varying methods. The one I was developing had an RFID tag and wouldn’t fire unless the shooter had the corresponding bracelet.” Satomi shakes her head. “But of course, anyone who tries to manufacture or sell them immediately gets all the backlash and the boycott. Some people simply do not make sense.”

“I definitely agree with that,” Stiles says.

“And we’re one of the few companies large enough to actually take the hit, but the board is running scared, because of course they are.” Satomi shakes her head. “That’s enough of that for one day. Will you take these reports up to legal? I need Hale’s signature on them before the end of the day.”

“Sure.” Stiles hasn’t seen Peter since their breakfast discussion of this plan, although they’ve texted a few times. He hopes that he isn’t there and that he can just leave the reports with Peter’s secretary. She’s sitting at her desk, looking frazzled. “Hey, uh, R&D sent these up, they need a signature on –”

“I’ll take them,” she says, grabbing them and stacking them on her desk.

“– them by the end of the day.”

The woman gives an incredulous laugh. “Well, that’s not going to happen, not with all the meetings Mr. Hale has today. He’ll have them back to you by Friday.”

“Uh . . . okay,” Stiles says, because he doesn’t feel confident enough to push the issue. He heads back down to R&D and delivers this news to Satomi. She swells up like an enraged hen and immediately orders him to go back upstairs and put the reports directly into Peter’s hands because he’s waiting for them, he’s already e-mailed her and told her that he can have them done by the end of the day. Stiles sighs and heads back to the elevator.

The secretary isn’t pleased to see him return, and even threatens to call security on him. Stiles does his best to convince her that Satomi and Peter have already spoken about these particular documents and that Peter has agreed to read through them, but she doesn’t budge. “Look, can I just talk to him?”
He’s in a meeting, he’s extremely busy –

“Yeah, okay,” Stiles says, and gives up. He picks up the papers, then walks past her while she squawks indignantly, and goes into Peter’s office. It’s massive, floor to ceiling glass on the opposite wall with a huge desk, plush carpeting, and walls of filing cabinets and bookshelves. Peter is, amusingly, lying on his stomach on the floor, surrounded by piles of papers and books. He looks up when Stiles comes in, and his eyebrows go up. The secretary trots in behind him, still shouting.

“Gina, it’s all right,” Peter says. “What do you want, Stiles?”

“I wanted your secretary to give you these papers that Satomi needs back by the end of the day,” Stiles says, tearing his eyes away from Peter’s ass, “without telling me that it would take until Friday.” Then he gives in to his curiosity. “Do you always work lying on the floor?”

“Always? No. When the mood strikes me? Yes.” Peter sits up. “Gina, I told you that Satomi’s assistant would be bringing these up.”

Gina cringes. “I know, but Ms. Steele told me that I shouldn’t give you anything else to do until you had finished that financial analysis she gave you –”

“You’re my assistant, not Ms. Steele’s,” Peter waves her off. “We’ll talk about this later. Stiles, give me the papers. Gina, shut the door behind you.”

Gina nods and immediately retreats. Peter gets off the floor and leafs through the stack of papers. “It might not be by five, but I’ll get my signature on them before I leave. I told Satomi that already, she shouldn’t have a problem with it. How are things going down there?”

“Fine.” Stiles isn’t sure if Peter’s asking about the job or the con, but the answer is the same either way.

“How are things with Derek?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Well, because this scheme only works while you and Derek are an item, so monitoring the condition of your relationship seems prudent.”

“Wow,” Stiles says. “Wowwww. Derek and I are fine, it is precisely zero percent of your business, and you can ask your nephew next time you want to know because I won’t be answering any more questions on the subject.”

“Don’t take it personally. It’s just business.”

“And therein lies the problem. Bye, Peter.” Stiles turns and walks out before he can say something he’ll regret.

~ ~ ~ ~

“So,” Jennifer says, pouring milk into her tea and stirring it elegantly, “how are you finding the job?”

“I like it, actually, as long as Satomi keeps me away from Daehler and his cronies.” Stiles takes a drink of his coffee and licks foam off his lips. He tries not to moan. He has a feeling he’s going to
end up going to the coffee shop here even after he doesn’t work here anymore. “Seriously, can we get rid of that guy? He’s a jackass.”

“Unfortunately, no. The terms of the buy-out of Daehler’s business were very cut and dry.”

“Do you need his vote? Because I’ve got about a hundred ways you can get it, most of them relating to how desperate he is to get laid and what a creeper he is when it comes to ladies.”

Jennifer doesn’t bite. “I’ll take it under advisement. But for the moment, we need to focus on Derek. Have you spoken with him?”

“Yes. And he’s super unhappy. He tried to brush it off, you know, because Peter didn’t insist on having his votes before he gave him the stock. I convinced him that that was worse, that Peter had manipulated him rather than just outright asking him for something. I told him not to confront Peter about it, so of course he did.”

“Let me guess. Peter brushed him off?”

“As he does.” Stiles takes another drink and wonders how many of these he could drink in a day before his heart exploded. “So Derek’s pissed about that, but he’s not doing anything about it. Which is fine, since you told me not to push him. I figured I’d let it wait a while before floating the idea of voting against Peter on the next big thing just to piss him off.”

Jennifer nods. “In the meantime, we need to arrange me as an ally.”

“Yes, I was thinking about that. You just calling Derek on the phone and saying hi would be weird, so I thought we should arrange for you two to meet coincidentally. Derek knows I’ve got the job here, so I thought next week I would ‘forget’ to bring my lunch and call him to ask if he wanted to meet me down here and eat in the cafeteria. If the food is as good as the coffee, that’d be better than any restaurant in a five mile radius.”

“It is,” Jennifer says, amused. “That’s a good idea. Let me know the time and then I can bump into you in the cafeteria.”

“Done and done.” Stiles checks his watch. “I’d better go before Satomi starts wondering where I am.”

“She likes you, doesn’t she? You’re her favorite type of intern.”

“What, one with a brain?” Stiles rolls his eyes. “You need her vote, too?”

“Hopefully not, but it won’t hurt to have you in position in case I need an extra push. Stay on her good side.”

“Stay on my boss’ good side. Check.” Stiles salutes with his coffee and heads back downstairs.

~ ~ ~ ~

Stiles heads over to the Hale’s apartment after work so he can run this plan by Derek. They end up watching TV and then talking about increasingly stupid shit until it’s long past midnight. Stiles is yawning prodigiously, and although he thinks he could make it home, the buses have stopped
running. Of course, that doesn’t matter to the Hales. There’s always someone on duty at the concierge desk, and they could get him a taxi or a car service. But Stiles still feels awkward about that, so when Derek says, “Do you want to just stay the night?” he jumps on it.

Derek loans him a pair of pajama pants and a T-shirt that’s cartoonishly large on him. Stiles flops down on the bed next to Derek and is suddenly, uncomfortably, aware of their proximity. Derek’s face is only a few inches away from his. The room is dim and quiet. Stiles sees Derek’s throat work like he’s just realized how charged the atmosphere is.

“Hey,” Stiles whispers, “are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Probably not . . .?” Derek says, with a hint of nervousness in his voice.

“Pillow fight!” Stiles grabs the pillow behind him and whumps Derek right in the face with it. Derek whoops with laughter and starts wrestling for it. Five minutes later, he proclaims himself the victor – accurately – and they both flop back down on the bed. “G’night,” Stiles says, yawning again. He closes his eyes and falls right to sleep.

Of course, as understanding as his conscious mind is, he can’t do much about his subconscious. He wakes up from a very vivid dream with an extremely excited dick, and has to untangle himself from the blankets and Derek’s warm, heavy limbs, and crawl out of bed. He’s not sure how Derek would feel about Stiles jerking off to thoughts of him, and doesn’t want to do it without asking him about it first. So he gives his sleeping boyfriend with his adorable bed hair a wistful look, and ventures to the kitchen so he can get a cold drink and calm the hell down.

It’s early yet, and the sun is just coming up. The glass wall of the apartment faces east, so it gives a glorious view of the sun rising over the city. Stiles gets an equally glorious view of Peter Hale, wearing nothing but boxer briefs, standing in front of the windows in what looks like a yoga pose. Stiles realizes he’s doing katas, the slow martial arts movements that somehow seem perfectly in tune with Peter’s personality. He can’t help but stare. Peter’s gorgeous all the time, but this view of him is something else. Completely un-self-conscious, muscles taut and controlled, eyes closed, hair slightly out of order -

“Can I help you with something?” Peter asks, breaking through Stiles’ reverie.

Stiles clears his throat and feels the blush creep up his throat and into his cheeks. “Yeah, uh, sorry. I didn’t realize anybody would be up.”

Peter doesn’t stop his slow movements. “I didn’t either.” He opens his eyes. “You stayed the night?”

“Yes.” Stiles hears an edge of challenge seep into his voice. “So?”

Peter stops moving for a brief moment. Then he drops his hands to his sides and comes out of the rigid pose. “If you pressure my nephew into anything he’s not comfortable with, you really will be making that one-step shortcut to the street.”

Stiles flushes again, but Peter’s concern is understandable. He doubts most people are as accepting of Derek’s asexuality as he’s been, and can’t help but think that Kate Argent in particular must have pushed the envelope. Peter clearly knows about his nephew’s preferences, so Stiles doesn’t dance around the issue. “We were up late, so he asked me if I wanted to spend the night. We shared a bed. That’s all. No sex. I would never push him into anything he didn’t want to do.”

There’s a long moment of silence while Peter studies him, clearly gauging his sincerity. Then he says, “Good,” and resumes his katas.
“So . . .” Stiles can’t resist continuing to talk to him, since Peter would clearly rather not have a conversation, and after the way Peter has treated him, it’s fun to needle him. Plus, the view is nice. “You really care about Derek a lot, don’t you.”

“He is my nephew. You did receive that memo, yes?”

“Yeah, but dude, I’ve got two uncles. I haven’t even seen either of them for the better part of five years. Occasionally one of them remembers to send me a birthday card. So, you care about your nephew, okay, but you’re really super defensive of him.”

Peter sighs. “Is there a point to this?”

“Just satisfying my curiosity. I’m kind of wondering how you wound up with custody of them, to be honest. You can’t have been that much older than Laura. What were you - twenty-four when Talia and Aaron died?”

“Twenty-three.” Peter changes to another position that gives a stunning display of his ass. Stiles nearly chokes before he can manage to speak again.

“So they’ve got – or at least they had – older uncles, plus Talia’s parents, or Aaron’s. I guess nobody else wanted them because of the whole soulmate curse, huh?”

“That’s partly it. Certainly my father wouldn’t have taken them for that reason.” Peter seems to come to the conclusion that they’re going to have this conversation whether he’d like to or not, and drops his pose again. “But Talia and I were always close, mostly because we were a study in opposites. She was the oldest, the most pressured to be perfect. I was the youngest, overlooked and unappreciated. We rebelled against our father in our own ways – her by refusing to do what he wanted, and me by excelling at it. We bonded over it to a certain extent. Talia was one of the few people on earth whose opinion I actually gave a damn about.” Peter reaches for his glass of water and takes a long drink. “I knew that Talia would have wanted me to take custody of her children, certainly given the other options, so I did.”

“Other options?”

“Other family members who would have told them that Talia and Aaron were mentally ill, that their existence was an abomination, et cetera. People who would have dishonored my sister’s memory.”

“Oh, right.” Stiles thinks about that, thinks about what had happened at his and Peter’s second meeting. “Look, uh, sorry that I sort of used Talia as a way to get Derek to bring me to the reunion. I was trying to help him, you know. I didn’t know how strongly you felt about it.”

Peter shrugs. “You used what you had to get the outcome you wanted. That’s what people do. Although I have to admit, I disliked feeling like a game piece instead of a player.”

“Bet that doesn’t happen to you very often,” Stiles says, grinning.

“No. No, it does not.” Peter gives Stiles one of those looks, the kind that makes him feel like he’s under a microscope. He’s suddenly, keenly aware of every inch of himself, of Peter’s near-nudity, of the almost electric charge that seems to run between them. His erection is coming back, and he hopes that Peter doesn’t notice.

Then Peter’s phone rings, abruptly breaking the moment. He turns away to answer it, and Stiles flees for the relative safety and comfort of Derek’s room.
Chapter 7

The plan goes off without a hitch, as plans generally do when all the details are shared ahead of time. Just in case Jennifer has spies, Stiles actually does call Derek on Tuesday morning to moan about how he was in such a rush that he left the house without his wallet and has nothing to do for lunch. Derek meets him at the cafeteria at twelve thirty and is honestly baffled by all the options.

“I had no idea our cafeteria was this big,” he admits, as Stiles drags him into the ‘world food’ line, because it’s Taco Tuesday.

“And it’s good, too,” Stiles says.

“I wonder why.”

The woman in front of them turns around and says, “Productivity! Having a good cafeteria makes the workers feel like they’re treated well, like the company cares about them, and it keeps them from leaving the building for lunch and taking a longer time. Hey, Derek. Long time no see.”

“Hi, Braeden.” Derek smiles at her. “I guess your mom set all this up?”

“Yeah, she knows how to keep the talent.” Braeden gives them both a knowing look and says, “You must be Stiles.”

“Indeed I am.” Stiles shakes her hand.

“Everyone’s buzzing about you being here,” Braeden says, as the line inches closer to the tacos.

“You know, first of all the whole ‘boyfriend’ thing, which nobody here gets, and then because Derek’s never shown much interest in the company. They’re trying to bring you into the fold, huh? Maybe they suddenly realized how much Harris’ kids suck.”

Derek snorts. “Quite possibly. And it’s not like they’re ever going to get any from Peter.”

“Also true. Actually, the idea of Peter reproducing is a little terrifying, to be honest.” Braeden shrugs.

“Since Mom knows that she didn’t hire you, and I didn’t, then it must have been Jennifer, which is a little weird. Especially since she put you directly under Satomi, who usually hates having interns because they get underneath her feet.”

“But what does it all mean, dear?” Stiles asks.

“Oh, I have some ideas, but I haven’t narrowed it down. I’ll figure it out,” Braeden says, laughing as she turns to the servers to give her orders.

Once they’ve gotten their food and are sitting down, Stiles says, “I wonder how much she knows.”

“Probably everything,” Derek says. “Or close. Deucalion clearly knows that there’s a movement against him, thus him cozying up to me. Which means Marin and Braeden know. Jennifer and Peter are the most likely instigators of such a movement – Jennifer because she doesn’t like Deucalion, and Peter because he’s the underhanded sort – so you being suddenly hired does raise a lot of questions.”

“Wouldn’t Jennifer have known that?”

“Oh, sure.” Derek bites into a taco and is again surprised at how good it is. “But she’s playing the
odds. If Deucalion already knew, it’s not like she’s tipping him off. It’ll let him know that she’s going for my vote, and maybe Laura’s, but he probably already knew that, too. So it’s not really a big deal.”

“Noted.” Stiles nudges Derek’s foot underneath the table with his own. “You look nervous.”

“I am nervous,” Derek admits. “This type of skullduggery isn’t exactly in my wheelhouse. You’ve done such a good job at fooling Jennifer, I’m afraid that I’m going to say the wrong thing and completely screw it up.”

“Nah.” Stiles takes a large bite of his taco and forces himself to chew and swallow before answering. “Just because Peter and I are more devious than you, that doesn’t make you any less intelligent. You just don’t think the same way, that’s all. And there won’t be any skullduggery today. Jennifer just wants to pop in, be nice to you for five minutes, and get thanked in front of you for the job she got me. We’re probably not going to talk about Peter or about company politics at all.”

“I hope you’re right,” Derek says.

“Heads up,” Stiles adds, as he sees Jennifer come into the cafeteria. She gets in line for a sandwich, making Stiles shudder, because only someone truly inhuman wouldn’t partake in Taco Tuesday.

When she sees them at their table, she smiles and heads towards them. Stiles gives her a little wave, and Derek glances over his shoulder. He doesn’t smile, because there’s no reason for him to, yet, but he gives Jennifer a polite nod as she walks over. “Hello, Stiles, Derek. How are you settling in to R&D, Stiles?”

“I actually really like it,” Stiles says. “Mrs. Ito is amazing to work with, she has so many good ideas. I wanted to thank you again for getting me the job.”

“Well, we are a family business,” Jennifer says.

“Not everyone sees Stiles as family,” Derek says. Peter had told him to start off a little belligerent, but then cool down, which seemed like a decent strategy. Besides, he’s better at belligerence than most other attitudes.

“Well, I’m not everyone,” Jennifer says. “I figure that you’re the best equipped to make that decision, not me. You’d always be welcome here, you know.”

Derek shrugs. “It’s not my thing.”

“Stiles told me that you’re interested in yoga and gymnastics?”

“I’m not ‘interested’ in them. It’s my career. I own a studio.”

Jennifer sees that she took a wrong step, and says, “I’m sorry. That was poorly phrased on my part. What I meant was, we’re always on the lookout for new projects. Maybe there’s something yoga related that you could do. We’d be happy to make you the head of whatever project you wanted to work on.”

“Really,” Derek says. “Happy. This from the people who only let us have company stock when Peter bought it for us under the radar. I’m really feeling your joy.”

Jennifer sighs. “I am sorry about that, Derek. But you have to understand, that was the old generation. Jordan Hale and his associates. Those of us who are expanding the company now, we’re more flexible on that sort of thing.”
“Well, I really don’t see how yoga would be of any benefit to Hale Corp,” Derek says, “but I’ll take it under advisement.”

“Don’t forget, we’re not just a tech company,” Jennifer says. “We could get more involved in other areas, and yoga is very linked to health. We could acquire a company that specialized in that sort of thing. You could be put in charge of it.”

Derek’s acting skills are really put to the test here, because he wants to call her out on what a terrible idea that is. Buying a chain of yoga studios just to bribe him for a single vote, putting him in charge of them when he has very little business management training, is a laughably terrible idea. But of course, that doesn’t matter to her. He remembers what Peter had said about Jennifer being shortsighted. This is the kind of decision he was talking about.

But, they want Jennifer to think that he can be bought, that he appreciates her offer. So he does his best to look interested, and says, “Well, I don’t know that I have the sort of experience necessary for that sort of thing, but it might be interesting to try. I’ll think about it.”

“That’s the ticket.” Jennifer smiles, and then her phone chimes. “Oh, excuse me. It was nice talking to you both,” she adds, and hurries away.

Stiles finishes eating his taco and waits until she’s left the cafeteria. “Wow, subtle.”

Derek snorts so hard that he nearly inhales a piece of tomato. “She’s not as good at this as she thinks she is.”

“Nope. You, on the other hand, were awesome. Just enough interest not to seem like you knew it was coming.” Stiles leans across the table and gives him a kiss on the cheek. “Also, thanks for lunch.”

Derek laughs. “You’re welcome. Hey, what are we doing Friday? You want to go out?”

“We could go out. Or we could make popcorn and marathon Daredevil. Your choice.”

“I’m always up for a Marvel marathon. Let’s do it.”

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Derek’s response to ‘is it okay if I think about you while I jerk off’ was a shrug and ‘sure, it’s not like I’m actually involved’. Blessing thus dispensed, Stiles is really annoyed that he keeps thinking about Peter instead. He’ll start with Derek – Derek’s amazing shoulders and hands and perfect stubble – but it’s Peter that creeps in. Peter’s ass. Peter’s smirk. Peter doing those perfectly controlled katas. It makes Stiles think about how perfect and controlled he would be in bed – or what Stiles would have to do to make him lose control.

Since mentioning that to anyone would be a terrible idea, Stiles keeps quiet about it. He works hard, goes on dates with Derek, texts with his father and Scott, and barely sees or speaks to Peter at all. He’s around the apartment sometimes, but almost always holed up in his office. “What does he even do in there?” Stiles asks once, and Derek just shrugs.

Things at work are fine. Satomi has taken a liking to him, his intellect and unquenchable curiosity. Stiles is always full of questions about science and technology, and she actually takes the time to
He reports back to Jennifer that Derek is seriously considering the whole ‘buy a chain of yoga studios’ thing, and that Derek is barely speaking to his uncle. Both of these things make Jennifer happy. She wants Stiles to find a way to casually mention that Peter is against this yoga acquisition. Stiles wisely doesn’t say that anybody would be, and agrees that he’ll find a way to drop that in Derek’s lap.

Much to his dismay, he does find himself working with Matt a few times, for semi-legitimate reasons. Matt does technically work in R&D, though he considers himself an ‘idea man’. It’s his job, he tells Stiles importantly, to think up things for the ‘lab rats’ to invent. To this end, he’s teamed up with Theo, because of course he has. They sit around and order Stiles to take notes on their ridiculous plans. They probably wouldn’t be thrilled to see the notes he takes. Sometimes he attempts to contribute, particularly when their ideas border on illegal, but they always just laugh him off. Theo thinks it’s hilarious that Stiles now has a job as a pencil pusher. Stiles reminds him that Satomi Ito started off in R&D as a pencil pusher, and now she’s the head of the entire department. Theo tells him to watch out or he’ll end up scrubbing toilets. His threats are laughably incompetent.

Stiles manages to dig a little deeper and find out that Jennifer is the one responsible for the Matt-Theo dream team. Theo talks often about how awesome Jennifer is and how she’s got the right ideas about the future of the company. It’s obvious that Jennifer has recruited Theo to help her get Matt’s vote. It’s not a bad strategy. Harris is obviously on Jennifer’s side, if only because he wants to get rid of Peter. Theo’s not as smart as he thinks he is, but he’s not an idiot, either, and he’s sure as hell smarter than Matt. It’ll be easy for him to convince Matt that Jennifer is going to give him his own project.

When Peter finally graces them with his presence over dinner, Stiles updates him on what’s been happening. He listens with a frown and then says, “We’re going to need you to get closer to Matt.”

“Yeah, that ain’t gonna happen,” Stiles says with a snort.

Peter’s eyes narrow. “I’m the one in charge of this operation -”

“This operation? What operation?” Stiles retorts. “I’m the operation. Without me, you don’t have an operation. And you sure as hell aren’t in charge of me.”

“Well, I certainly don’t plan on letting you be in charge of yourself,” Peter says. “This is my family, my career that’s at risk. I’m not leaving it in your hands to do whatever you like with it.”

Stiles is quiet for a long minute. Derek, sensing the impending explosion, takes the sharp objects off the table and heads into the kitchen. Finally, Stiles looks up and says, “Do you want to tell me what I did to make you not trust me? You do realize that I could have fucked you right over, to get back at you for the way you treated me, and I actively decided not to?”

Peter’s lips thin and he starts to reply, but Stiles talks over him. “I didn’t have to tell you what Jennifer said to me. I didn’t have to help you. I did it for Derek. And keep that in the front of your mind, Peter, keep it right here -” He reaches out and jabs Peter in the forehead. Peter’s mouth compresses even more. “Because helping you and helping Derek aren’t necessarily the same thing.

“I could have blackmailed Jennifer just by threatening to tell you about her plans and still gotten that sweet scholarship. I could have actually turned Derek against you – and don’t make that face at me because you know I’m right. You might not like me, that’s fine, but you had damned well better respect me. You’re manipulative and you use people, and I absolutely could have convinced Derek that you don’t give a damn about him.
“But I did it this way. I went for full disclosure. I told you about what Jennifer was up to, and I agreed to help you, but I’m not your fucking slave. I’m not going to try to get close to Matt and discourage him from being friends with Theo because that will blow my cover. And you need me to keep my cover. I can’t influence Matt for you, but that was never the plan, remember? The plan is just to keep tabs on them. Jennifer’s not trying to get Satomi’s vote because she thinks she’s going to get Derek’s, so even if she gets Matt, she still loses. But if she thinks I’m trying to get too close to Matt, trying to influence him in your favor, she will fire my ass, write Derek’s vote off as a loss, and try to get Satomi’s instead. So no, Peter, I will not be getting closer to Matt, and no, Peter, I will not be taking orders from you, and if you have a problem with that, the balcony is to your fucking left.”

There’s a long silence while they stare each other down. Then Peter says, “All right. You have a point. Getting closer to Matt would be a big risk to take.”

Stiles nods. “And?”

“And what?”

Stiles doesn’t flinch. “And?”

“I don’t do apologies.”

“And I don’t fuck people for money. Now that we’ve both stated what should be completely obvious, what’s your point?”

Peter makes that thin-lipped face again. “I acknowledge that you’re doing this to benefit my nephew, and that you could have fucked me over, and that I would have completely deserved it had you decided to do so.”

Stiles considers. “Okay. Good enough.” He stands up and grabs his plate to take to the kitchen. “But if you talk to me like that again, we’re done. And I wouldn’t bet on you having Derek’s vote if that happens, Peter. I really wouldn’t bet on it at all.”

~ ~ ~

Derek stews and snarls until long after Stiles has left for the evening, skulking around until he finally loses his temper. He finds Peter in the living room, reading a magazine, and says, “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“You’ll have to be more specific, or else I won’t know where to start,” Peter says, not looking up.

“Let’s think. How about what happened a couple hours ago when you were a complete and total asshole to my boyfriend?”

Peter shrugs. “What about it?”

“Why are you being such a jerk to him?” Derek asks. Peter continues to flip through his magazine and doesn’t respond. “And why do I feel like this has something to do with a certain tattoo on your arm?”

“Yes, nephew, you’ve seen through me,” Peter says. “I’m cruel to him because he broke my heart. Excellent insight. Go away.”
“Why do you hate your soulmate?”

Peter rolls his eyes. “I don’t hate my soulmate.”

“Really? Because that’s not what I’m seeing. With a few exceptions, you’ve treated him like something you scraped off the bottom of your shoe.” Derek sees that Peter is about to make a snarky comment about Stiles’ worth as a human being, and forestalls him. “Which is weird, because normally you love people like Stiles. Remember Laura’s college roommate? Sarcastic, impatient, majoring in political science? You practically invited her to move in. Stiles is a lot like her. He’s funny, he’s smart, he’s sarcastic and kind of cynical, he loves to break rules and get his way. He’s like - ”

“Like my soulmate?” Peter snaps. “Yes, he’s perfect for me. I understand. The universe can stop rubbing it in.”

Derek takes a step back and then eyes Peter warily. “So . . . you’re mad at Stiles . . . because you like him.”

“That’s a gross oversimplification,” Peter says.

“That’s not a ‘no’.”

Peter huffs out a sigh and returns to his magazine. “I would very much like it if Stiles would depart from my life, never to be seen again. The quickest path to that eventuality is to encourage him to do so.”

“Yeah . . . that’s not gonna happen.” Derek sits down on the sofa. “Look, I like Stiles. A lot. You know, I know it’s only been a couple months, but this . . . this is going to be something long-term with him. I don’t know if we’ll be together forever, if we’ll get married or whatever, even if it’s not legal. But he’s not going anywhere, Peter, and you’re going to have to get used to that.”

“You can date him to your heart’s content, as long as he stays away from me.”

Derek thinks about that for a long minute. “Peter, it’s not his fault that he’s your soulmate. And taking it out on him is a really bitchy, unfair thing to do.”

“Well, it should come as no surprise to you that life isn’t fair.”

“I’m just trying to apply some common sense,” Derek says. “You’re the kind of guy who fights against the current. You’ll swim upstream just to prove to everyone that you could. But you don’t need to prove yourself to me, Peter. Or to Stiles. And sometimes even if it isn’t the fair thing to do, the smarter thing to do is just to go with the flow.”
Peter’s quiet for a long minute. Then he picks up the magazine again. “Go away, nephew.”

Derek takes that as a win.

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After some discussion – most of it even civil – Stiles and Peter decide that Derek should reject Jennifer’s offer. “We can’t make it too easy for her,” Peter says, and Stiles agrees. He’s also curious to see what Jennifer’s next move is.

Somewhat predictably, Jennifer’s next move is to get annoyed. “How could he refuse that? I’m basically offering him his dream on a silver platter!” She paces around her office and then demands, “What did he say exactly?”

“Just that he didn’t think he had the kind of business skill he would need to run a national company,” Stiles says with a shrug. “He asked me what I thought and I agreed with him.”

“What? Why!”

“Because he’s right. And he knows he’s right, so if I told him he’s wrong, he’s going to wonder why I would lie to him.”

Jennifer grits her teeth and says, “Fine. But there has to be something else he wants.”

“I’m working on it. Besides, just offering it to him got his attention. He’s mentioned several times that he really appreciates the offer, and he’s glad that someone in the company is willing to work with him.”

“Good.” Jennifer waves him off without another word. Stiles rolls his eyes and goes about his business.

It’s not until the next evening, while he’s watching Derek chopping vegetables for homemade pizza, that he says, “What do you actually want out of the company, anyway?”

Derek blinks over at him. “What?”

“Well, I asked for a scholarship because I figured that if I was going to get something out of this, it might as well be something I actually wanted. You obviously don’t want to run a national chain of yoga studios, which was a really stupid idea on her part anyway, but if you could actually get something out of this, what would it be?”

“I don’t know. I can’t think of any job at the company that I’d actually want to do.”

“You’re thinking too small.” Stiles reaches out and steals an olive, and Derek growls at him. “Don’t forget, Hale Corp is international. They’ve got a zillion locations and subsidiaries. It doesn’t have to be ‘get a job in the basement making transistor radios’.”
“I guess not.” Derek thinks it over for a few long minutes while he arranges pepperoni, mushrooms, and olives on the pizza. “Would you laugh if what I really wanted wasn’t for me?”

“No, that seems like you. Shoot.”

“Just . . . my sisters. Cora especially. You know, she loves food as much as I do. We got that from my dad. And she’s in college now, like you, and she’s been studying plants and biology and food science. She would love to have a job at Hale Corp, work on ending world hunger or saving the bees or whatever. And Laura, I mean, she loves what she does, but she could do so much more with Hale Corp’s support. If they could let her run a charity wing. Great press, minimal expense to the company, because damn can Laura stretch a dollar.”

Stiles nods thoughtfully. “Well, Jennifer would especially be able to work with that second one, since it’s all PR. I’ll mention it to her.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think it’s what Jennifer’s going to want to hear.” Derek checks the temperature on oven and then leans against the counter for a minute. “Jennifer’s inherently selfish, and she’s expecting me to be inherently selfish. So she’s going to think it’s weird if I don’t want anything for myself.”

“That’s probably true. But we’ll start with Laura and the charity wing. Even if you’re expected to be selfish, I think it’s still okay to want to get your sister a job. Anyway, just think about it. The sky’s the limit. Probably. Presuming that it’s something you can still have even after we pull the rug out from underneath Jennifer and piss her off.”

Derek snorts. “Good point. Maybe I’ll just make something up.”

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It’s about ten o’clock in the morning, and Stiles is elbow deep in smart gun research, when the phone on his desk rings. “R&D, this is Stiles.”

“This is Peter Hale. I need to speak to Satomi if she’s available.”

“Sure.” Stiles doesn’t bother being professional. He puts Peter on hold and goes into Satomi’s office. She’s not there, so he heads into the lab. She’s working on something that looks like a human-sized upright storage container. “Whoa, are you guys working on cryogenics?”

“I’m working on cryogenics.” Satomi smiles slightly. “It’s been a pet project of mine for years. All purely theoretical, still. But the science is sound. People have survived being in deep freeze, though never for more than a day, I don’t think.” She steps away from the unit and says, “Did you need something?”

“Oh, uh, Peter Hale is on the phone for you.”

“All right.” Satomi heads back into her office. Stiles goes back to his own desk, although with Satomi’s door open, he can hear the conversation. “Hello, Peter, what do you need? . . . oh? Yes, he’s doing fine, why? . . . I suppose so . . . oh Lord, what did you do this time? Never mind, I don’t want to know. . . . Yes, of course. I’ll send him up, but you’d best return him in the same condition you get him in . . . well, yes, since you ask. All right. Mm hm.”
Satomi hangs up and heads out to Stiles’ desk. “Well, Peter scared off his secretary again. He goes through one every few months. He asked if he could borrow you for a few days while he finds a new one. Apparently you impressed him with your willingness to walk right into his office despite being told not to.”

“Sounds like Peter,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes. But inwardly, he’s wondering what Peter’s up to. “I’ll keep working on that research if I have a minute.”

“You won’t,” Satomi says.

Stiles sighs and heads up in the elevator. He finds the same secretary’s desk buried underneath a pile of papers. “Ohhhhh-kay,” he says, and knocks on the door. Peter calls for him to come in, so he does. “What did you do to Gina?”

“I fired her. She had no sense of priorities.”

Stiles has to agree with that, so he doesn’t argue. “And they don’t have a secretarial pool that they can just send you someone from? You have to pull me out of R&D?”

“Under normal circumstances, they would pull someone to send me, but, well.” Peter huffs out a sigh that seems genuine. “Apparently, there isn’t anybody currently available except people who have already worked for me and now refuse to return.”

“Wow.” Stiles takes a minute to process that. “Wowwwwwww.”

“It’s a demanding job, and I don’t need people who can’t handle it. I do most of them the courtesy of sending them back to the secretarial pool to find more appropriate positions, rather than firing them, and this is the thanks I get in return.” Peter shrugs. “You seem to think quite highly of your own intelligence, so I figured I’d see how you could hold up.”

“Sure.” Stiles shakes his head and directs his attention to the stacks of paperwork. He has a suspicion that there are ulterior motives going on, but he can’t talk about them where other people might hear.

One thing becomes clear almost immediately: he’s not going to get a chance any time soon. Peter wasn’t kidding when he said the job was demanding. Stiles’ ability to multi-task is put to the test so hard that he pops an extra Adderall. Peter’s calendar is completely full of meetings and phone calls, plus eighteen legal documents to read through and approve, and he still somehow manages to dictate enough memos that Stiles is there until six PM with his face in a computer screen. He’s exhausted by the end of the day.

“You’re still here,” Peter says, somewhat surprised.

“Yes, and I just finished up.” Stiles rubs both hands through his hair. “Not looking forward to the bus ride home.”

Peter regards him silently for a minute before he says, “Call someone to take you home. There are three car companies in the Rolodex. Tell them to bill it to my office.”

“No, are you sure?” Stiles asks, and Peter nods. “You want to share the car?”

“No, I’ll be here for another hour at least.” Peter turns and goes back into his office. Stiles gives up on ever understanding him, makes the call, and drags himself down to the curb.

He sacks out on the sofa with mac and cheese and a DVR full of Storage Wars, and finally staggers off to bed. His phone wakes him at what must be a truly obscene hour, since his alarm hasn’t even
gone off yet. “Mmmphello.”

“Stiles? This is Jennifer Blake.” Her voice is sharp with anxiety, but Stiles can’t quite bring himself to care, probably because he’s still three quarters unconscious. “I heard that you were working in Peter Hale’s office yesterday.”

“Oh, yeah.” Stiles rubs a hand over his face and manages to open one eye long enough to see that it’s just past six AM. “Sorry, I should’ve called you, but he ran me ragged.”

“What are you doing working for Peter Hale?”

“I couldn’t exactly say no, could I?” Stiles says. “He called Satomi herself and asked to borrow me until they could find a new secretary for him.”

“So he knows what we’re up to. What did he say to you?”

“Nothing,” Stiles says. “He just piled work on top of me.”

“If he tries to bribe you, I’ll double whatever his offer is,” Jennifer says, “but I’m more worried that he’ll tell Derek the truth.”

“He can’t,” Stiles says, yawning despite himself. “Because I made the first move. I convinced Derek that Peter is a manipulator. If he tries to tell Derek that I’m a manipulator, it just makes him look even worse. And since Peter has been outspokenly against Derek dating me since minute one, if he says anything like that, it’ll look like he’s just trying to break us up like the bitter, mateless jackass that he is. And he knows it.”

“I hope you’re right,” Jennifer says, and hangs up on him.

Stiles flops back against his pillow and takes a minute to thoroughly hate Jennifer Blake, and the rest of the Hales for good measure. He tries to go back to sleep, but ends up tossing and turning, and finally gets up at seven AM in a terrible mood. Derek swears by yoga first thing in the morning, and Peter does his katas – after seeing his job up close, Stiles can definitely understand why – so Stiles looks up some yoga videos on YouTube and tries some of those. It does mellow him out some, although he’s still feeling grumpy as he leaves for work.

Peter, of course, does not improve his mood. Stiles has barely settled down with a cup of the glorious coffee when Peter arrives for the morning. He looks as immaculate as ever, and he snaps out, “Stiles, with me.” Stiles scrambles to grab a pad of paper and a pencil as he follows him. “I need the paperwork for the Honeywell lawsuit on my desk by nine. I also need the last quarterly report for Syntechs; call Reynolds and have her send it up. Winstead was supposed to have that report on the Salerno precedent to me yesterday and I still don’t have it, so once you’ve done those two things, go sit on him until it’s done.” He heads into his office, then pokes his head back out, “Oh, and I’m having a lunch meeting with Santorini’s staff, so order from Rosati’s. Enough for eight.” With that, he’s gone, and the door is firmly shut behind him.

Just like that, Stiles is buried in work again. As soon as he finishes those tasks, Peter has five more for him to do. He spends most of the day on his feet, wondering when he gets to go back to R&D. At four o’clock, Peter comes out of his office, carrying a stack of books. “Can you work late today?”

“Uh, define ‘late’,“ Stiles says.

“Eightish, probably.”

“Do I get overtime?”
“You’re lucky you get paid at all, you know, most interns – ” Peter sees the look on Stiles’ face.
“Yes, you’ll get paid overtime.”

“Then sure.”

“Good.” Peter hands him the stack of books. “Take these over to Feldman’s office and tell him I said
that if he doesn’t actually absorb the material in them before he writes his next brief, he’s fired.”

“Super. Love this job.” Stiles shakes his head and goes looking for the hapless Feldman.

Things don’t exactly come to a grinding halt at five or even five thirty at the legal division of Hale
Corp, but it does get quieter. Stiles is halfway through eating all the leftovers from lunch while he
runs down credentials of varying lawyers when Jennifer Blake shows up. Since Peter is almost
definitely within earshot, he greets her with a polite, “Hello, Mrs. Blake. Are you here to see Mr.
Hale?”

“Yes, I am,” she says, and marches past him.

“Go right on ahead,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes and turning back to his pizza.

Jennifer doesn’t bother to shut the door behind herself, so Stiles hears her say, “I know what you’re
doing,” loud and clear.

“What am I doing?” Peter replies, and Stiles can practically
see that look of complete dismissal on his
face.

“You’re trying to drive Stiles out of the company by abusing him the way you do all your assistants,”
Jennifer says. “How do you think Derek is going to like that?”

“I really couldn’t care less what Derek thinks about how I treat my employees.”

“You might want to start,” Jennifer says, with sweet venom in her voice.

“Oh? Do you know something I don’t know?”

“I probably know a lot of things you don’t know.”

Peter snorts. “That seems unlikely. Let’s cut through the bullshit, shall we? You’re using Stiles to get
closer to Derek. Feel free. As if offering a man with absolutely no business experience a position
running a company isn’t going to end in complete disaster. You just do what you want, Jennifer, and
as usual, I’ll be behind you cleaning up the mess.”

“Not for much longer,” Jennifer snaps. She leaves Peter’s office and says to Stiles, “I want you back
in R&D tomorrow.”

“Oh my God!” Stiles throws his hands skyward. “At this rate, you’ll all be lucky if I show up
tomorrow at all. I didn’t sign up to baby-sit.”

Jennifer gives him a scornful look and then walks away, her heels clacking on the tile floor. Stiles
waits until he hears the elevator before he goes into Peter’s office. Unlike Jennifer, he has the sense
to close it behind him. “What the hell!”

Peter looks exasperated. “I’m trying to work, for God’s sake – ”

“Did you bring me up here to piss Jennifer off?”
“Well, yes, since you ask. Although I did actually need a new assistant. I couldn’t tolerate Gina toadying up to Finance anymore. I wanted to send a message to Jennifer that I saw what she was doing.”

“Are you sure that was smart?”

Peter sighs. “Yes, because if I hadn’t pretended to catch on, Jennifer would have known I wasn’t surprised and that I was probably involved. So, yes, it was necessary for me to do that, and no, I’m not sorry I didn’t clear it with you first, because you’re not, as you said, my baby-sitter.”

“And what the hell am I supposed to do tomorrow? Whose department do I work in?”

“Mine, until I send you back to Satomi or Satomi calls you back. Jennifer can’t interfere with that.”

“So, this is a great position for me to be in.” Stiles paces around the office for a minute before he turns and squares off with Peter. “She’s going to be pissed at me.”

“You can handle it.”

“Oh, now you have faith in me to handle this?” Stiles loses his temper and gets in Peter’s face. “You arrogant piece of shit! I’m not one of your faint of heart little secretaries that you can walk all over. I’m not some company lawyer who quakes in fear when I hear your name. You cannot do things behind my back and then tell me that you did it that way because you respect me. That is the most concentrated heap of bullshit! You don’t fucking respect me at all! And do you want to know what, Peter? You know how you kept asking me why I was doing this? Yeah, it was to help Derek, because I like Derek. And yeah, it was because Jennifer pissed me off. But it was also because I can’t fucking stand the way you look at me! Ever since we met, you treat me like some God damned second class citizen just because I have the terrible fucking luck to be your soulmate! I thought maybe, just maybe, I could use this as a way to show you that I’m smarter than you think I am. I thought maybe you would respect me if I could play your game. But I’m not smart, apparently. I’m a fucking idiot, because I should have known better to think that you would ever think of me as anything but – ”

He gets that far before Peter shoves him up against the wall and kisses him.

Stiles makes a startled noise against Peter’s mouth, and it takes him a few seconds to catch up, but then he’s all in without even thinking about it. Peter’s got his hands on the sides of Stiles’ face and is kissing him like the sky is falling, and Stiles curls his hands in Peter’s hair and gives it everything he’s got. A few moments later, Peter is tugging Stiles’ shirt out of his pants, sliding his hands up Stiles’ bare stomach, his thumbs tracing along Stiles’ ribs. Stiles pulls away and gasps for breath. That’s no deterrent to Peter, who leans in to suck a line of kisses down Stiles’ throat. Stiles slides his hands down Peter’s jacket and grabs Peter’s ass, yanking Peter against him, and –

There’s a knock on the door.

Peter is across the room so quickly that it’s practically superhuman. Stiles hastily turns so he can shove his shirt back into his pants, just as the door opens. It’s one of the other secretaries, with one of the reports Peter had been demanding earlier in the day. Peter takes it and thanks him. Then, without a word, he points to the door.

Stiles leaves Peter’s office without having to be told twice.

He isn’t sure what the exact protocol is after having a thirty-second makeout session with someone who is a) his boss, b) his boyfriend’s uncle, and c) threw him out afterwards. He’s pretty sure that
he’s still supposed to be working, although he supposes Peter wouldn’t be surprised if he flat out ran away. He figures he’s safe enough to hole up in the bathroom and make a quick phone call.

Derek picks up on the third ring. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Hey, uh, something super weird just happened?” The words fall out of Stiles’ mouth in a rush. “Peter just kissed me, like, kissed me a lot. We probably would have made it around second if someone hadn’t interrupted us.”

“Huh.” Derek seems to take a minute to think this over. “My uncle is so weird.”

Stiles gives a snort of laughter, already feeling better about the situation. “He so is! We were having an argument, like, I was literally shouting in his face!”

“Well, that probably explains it,” Derek says. “He won’t admit it out loud but he thinks it’s super hot that you stand up to him. Nobody else does.”

“Great. Awesome.” Stiles clears his throat. “Look, I know we had our agreement, but is it just me thinking that somehow it would be super weird if it was Peter that I had sex with?”

“It would be weird, but I don’t necessarily think it would be bad. I mean, yeah, he’s my uncle, but . . .”

“That’s not why, though.” Stiles takes a breath. “He’s your uncle, but he’s also my soulmate. I mean, the whole thing about me having casual sex is that it’s okay because other people won’t want to get serious. Because, you know, they’ll be looking for their own soulmate. But that won’t be the case with Peter. I don’t want to have sex with him and then suddenly, like, I’ll be his boyfriend.”

Derek’s quiet for a minute. “I guess maybe I’m okay with it because I just don’t see that happening. I mean, it’s pretty clear that Peter’s attracted to you, but I’m ninety-nine percent sure that he doesn’t want to date you. I don’t think Peter wants to date anyone.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“I mean, it’s up to you, obviously. Just, for me, it wouldn’t bother me if it was Peter that you had sex with. Actually, it’s weird, but I might prefer that to someone I didn’t know? Just because I feel like I know Peter wouldn’t steal you from me.”

“Well . . . whatever floats your boat, I guess.” Stiles shakes his head. “I gotta go. I’m still supposed to be working for him. I think.”

“Okay. Good luck with the jackass.”

“Heh, thanks.” Stiles hangs up and heads back to his desk. He’s got work to do, and he plans to get it done whether Peter likes it or not.

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Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the lack of Derek in this chapter. Stiles and Peter had, uh, some stuff they needed to work out. XD

On that note, this chapter is NSFW. =D

It’s about seven thirty, and Stiles is just finishing up with his work, when Peter comes out of his office. He’s carrying his briefcase and looks only mildly surprised to see that Stiles is still there. “I’ve called my driver to pick us up. The rest of that can wait until tomorrow.”

“Great,” Stiles says. He’s not even going to tackle the issue of whether or not he’s still going to be Peter’s assistant in the morning. He just shoves the pile of work aside and stands up. “Wait, is this you offering me a ride home?”

“Yes. And you’re coming with me. We need to talk.”

“Super.” Stiles sighs and mentally rehearses some cutting comebacks, since Peter is obviously going to spend the next ten minutes trying to rake him over the coals. He’s not stupid enough to think that Peter actually plans to apologize. So he follows Peter down to the street, where his car is indeed waiting. But even after they’ve gotten into the limousine, Peter doesn’t say anything. In fact, he’s studying something on his phone. Stiles fidgets as the driver gets behind the wheel and pulls out of the parking lot. A minute later, they’re gliding down the street and he blurts out, “Are you taking me somewhere to kill me?”

Peter looks like he feels a migraine coming on. “Yes. I’m taking you somewhere to kill you, in my own limousine, with my own driver, after passing five security cameras on the way out of the office with you. Are you deficient?”

“Yeah, maybe,” Stiles says.

“If I were going to have you killed, it would be while I was in a meeting with forty people who could provide my alibi.”

“I’m really happy that you’ve thought about this so much.”

“It’s just basic common sense. And a lot of disposable income.”

“Thanks for that.” Stiles fidgets more as they head into a different part of town, more industrial and less classy. “No, but seriously, where are we going? What’s happening? You’re obviously pissed at me, and you want to get me somewhere alone so you can threaten me, or extort me, though for what I don’t know — ”

“Stiles,” Peter says, rubbing his eyebrow with two fingers, “would you like to call your father and tell him where you are and who you’re with?”
“I don’t even know where we are – ”

“That can’t be blamed on me.”

“Yeah, well, I’m texting him. Right now,” Stiles add, and begins to dictate what he’s typing loudly.

“Hey Dad. Just want you to know, Peter Hale is being real shady. We are going somewhere in his limo and he won’t tell me where. He promises he isn’t going to murder me . . .”

“I’m sure he’ll be very comforted by that.” Peter glances up as the limousine takes another turn.

They’re driving into a parking garage.

Stiles tucks his phone away and looks around as the car rolls to a stop in an empty corner and then turns off. He’s about to say something, but then he hears the driver get out. Unlike usual, he doesn’t immediately open the back door for them to get out. Stiles listens, and thinks he faintly hears footsteps, although it’s hard to tell through the car’s insulation. “Okaaaaaaay, this is weird – ”

Before he can finish his sentence, Peter has crossed the distance between him and is kissing him so hard that he sees stars. He instantly feels like an idiot for not seeing where Peter had been going with this, and a little surprised that Peter still wants to kiss him after all the talk about murder. All of this comes in a strangled ‘mmmmph’ before he’s got his hands up the back of Peter’s jacket and he’s grabbing for the fabric of his shirt.

“You are so infuriating,” Peter growls, tugging the jacket off and throwing it towards the other end of the limo. He settles onto the seat and yanks Stiles on top of him. Stiles manages to get his legs in order so he can straddle Peter while Peter pulls him in for another kiss. This one is a little different, a little less frantic, as they both settle into it. It goes on for what feels like an eternity, with slight pauses to catch their breath, Peter rubbing his thumb over Stiles’ cheekbone and lower lip, Stiles tangling his hands in Peter’s hair.

Then Peter pulls away, and the next thing Stiles knows, he’s been pushed back against the seat across from them. Peter is leaning over him, undoing the line of buttons on his shirt. Stiles is determined to stay on equal footing, so he starts trying to do the same, but Peter’s tie keeps getting in the way. “Get this off, why can’t I just – ”

“Because it’s a trinity knot – ” Peter yanks off his tie.

“What the fuck is a – ” Stiles promptly forgets what he was saying as Peter slides to his knees in the space between the two seats and starts undoing Stiles’ belt. “Fuck, so, this is happening – ”

“For once in your life, shut up,” Peter tells him, tossing Stiles’ belt aside and going to work on his pants. Stiles’ semi hard-on cheerfully graduates to the hardest he’s ever been as Peter pulls his pants down a few inches, just enough to give himself room to work. It’s difficult to believe that this is actually happening, that he’s sitting in a limousine and Peter Hale is between his legs and clearly about to start sucking his dick.

“Oh, shit,” Stiles says, his head falling backwards against the window with a thunk as he feels Peter’s breath on his cock. “Ohhhhh my God, okay. I can’t – ”

“Like this,” Peter says, pushing one of Stiles’ legs to the side so he can get his foot on the seat across from them. His matter-of-fact tone makes it seem like he’s done this before, and he certainly wastes no time going down on Stiles. Stiles grabs at one of the handles on the ceiling, trying not to arch right out of his seat. Peter’s hands on his hips firmly press him back down.

“Fuck, okay, yes,” Stiles pants. He tries to focus on the feel of Peter’s fingers digging into his hips,
rather than Peter’s mouth on his cock, or this is going to be over embarrassingly fast. He lifts his other leg up to brace himself against the seat. “Okay, you just . . .” He manages to stop gripping the seat and twine his fingers through Peter’s hair again. Then he makes the mistake of looking down just as Peter looks up, as if surprised to feel Stiles’ hand. Stiles catches a glimpse of Peter’s face—focused, intent, just a faint flush over his cheeks and pupils dilated—and moans, letting his own head fall back against the window again. “Oh, God. You’re the worst.”

Peter just hums in response, and Stiles feels that noise spread from the root of his dick down to the curl of his toes. It’s too much. The drag of Peter’s tongue, the feel of Peter’s hair in his fingers, the warm glass against the back of his head. He gives a choked little whine, arching off the seat again. Peter presses him back more firmly, keeping him pinned to the seat while he comes.

He’s breathing hard as he goes limp against the seat. Peter is undeterred, kissing his way up Stiles’ stomach and chest, biting his collarbone through his shirt, sucking what’s sure to be an impressive hickey on his neck. Stiles is only just managing to pull himself together, feet sliding off the opposite seat, when Peter somehow maneuvers himself to get his pants and underwear off.

“Hell yes,” Stiles says, unable to help himself. Peter rolls his eyes, but Stiles is distracted because Peter’s dick is right there and he wants to be all over that. Admittedly, it does wipe the condescending look off Peter’s face when Stiles grabs it. He gives a muted little groan as Stiles strokes him gently. Stiles grins and leans in to bite at the joint of Peter’s shoulder.

Peter pushes him back and away. “No marks.”

“You left one on me.”

“You’re an intern. I’m the head of legal. No marks.”

Stiles makes a face at him but doesn’t continue to argue. “So you’re gonna fuck me, right? Because I really need that to happen. Like, now. Now would be good. I’m just not quite sure of the logistics. I’ve never had sex in a limo before. I feel like you probably have.”

Peter is rolling his eyes and fishing in his discarded pants. He comes out with two condoms and tosses one to Stiles. “I don’t want you coming all over the seats.”

“Sexy,” Stiles says, nodding. “You’re not supposed to put one on until you’re hard, you know.”

Peter leans in and nips at Stiles’ ear. “So get hard.”

“Fffffffuck, okay, mission halfway accomplished,” Stiles says, and just rips open the condom package and slides it on. It’s not like he’s worried about it coming off during sex; he’s not going to be on top. “So how are we going to –”

“Like this.” Peter just grabs him around the waist and manhandles him so he’s on his knees, leaning up against the seat at the front of the limousine that has its back to the front of the car.

“Ooooh, lengthwise instead of crosswise, I get it.” Stiles says, bracing himself on his elbows as Peter strips his pants and boxers all the way off. Peter’s gotten lube from the same place as the condoms, apparently, because the next thing Stiles knows, one of Peter’s fingers is pressing into him and he’s definitely graduated to all-the-way hard. He lets his forehead rest against the seat and tries not to moan too loudly. It’s difficult. For someone who’s never shown any interest in finding a soulmate or a boyfriend, Peter knows what he’s doing. It takes three fingers and two minutes to reduce Stiles to a loose-limbed, desperate mess practically begging Peter to fuck him.

Peter must be equally desperate, however, because the force of his first thrust drives Stiles up onto
the seat. He has to brace himself hard, pressing his forearms against the window that separates them from the driver. “Fu – fuck, Peter,” he gasps out, trying to remember how to speak English. “Ease up a little, fuck.”

He isn’t sure Peter heard him at first, but then Peter does pull back and lets Stiles resituate himself, backing up a little so he can bend into a more comfortable position. “Okay, okay, I’m good, go,” Stiles says, and Peter does. Stiles finds a good position and rides it out, letting Peter take what he wants. Since he’s able to brace himself, Peter’s hands are free, sliding up underneath the shirt that Stiles is still wearing to trace patterns on his stomach and chest. He can feel his orgasm starting to build in the pit of his stomach, and curls his fingers against back of the seat. He lingers on the edge for what feels like an eternity, and he wants so badly to jerk himself off, but he can’t move either of his arms if he doesn’t want Peter to put him through the partition.

“Peter,” he pants, licking his chapped lips. “Peter. I wanna come. Make me come.”

Peter bites down on his shoulder, and the hand that had been idly rubbing at Stiles’ nipples comes down and starts to jerk him off hard and fast. A little too hard and fast, to be honest, and Stiles is dizzy with it almost instantly. Then he feels Peter tense against his back and it’s too much all over again, and he comes so hard that he sees stars.

Both of them wind up collapsed in a messy, sweaty heap. Stiles doesn’t know where his pants wound up. He doesn’t even care.

About five minutes pass before Peter manages to recover enough to get to his phone. He taps on the screen for a brief moment. Stiles doesn’t bother to ask what he’s doing because he’s pretty sure he knows. That’s confirmed a minute later when the driver’s door opens and shuts. The car smoothly pulls out of the parking garage and back onto the street.

“Better get dressed,” Peter says, and smacks Stiles’ ass. Stiles gives a cry of mock outrage, but manages to locate and crawl back into his clothes. Peter isn’t bothering. He’s sprawled out on one of the seats. Stiles thinks about pointing that out, but then figures that if Peter wants to put his naked ass all over the leather seats, he’s probably gained the right. It is, after all, his car.

It takes about fifteen minutes to reach Stiles’ apartment building. The silence would be awkward if not for the fact that Stiles keeps nodding off. He’s awash in post-sex contentment and weariness, and has no desire to have a discussion about it. Someday, tomorrow possibly, he’ll figure out what the hell just happened.

The limousine pulls up outside his building, and the driver opens the door for him. If he notices Peter still half-naked, it clearly doesn’t surprise or bother him. Stiles gets out of the car, thanks him for the ride, and staggers up to his apartment to pass out on his bed.

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When Stiles’ alarm goes off the next morning, he groans and contemplates calling in sick. He’s a little sore, although Peter had been pretty careful, all things considered, but mostly he just feels good. He wants to stay in bed and luxuriate in the feeling of being well-fucked. But that clearly isn’t going to happen, because God only knows what Peter will do if he thinks that Stiles is avoiding him.

So he rolls out of bed, takes a quick shower, and gets dressed. It occurs to him halfway through his
bowl of cereal that he needs to call Derek. He feels a sneaking edge of guilt about it. Derek had given him permission to have sex with other people, but he also wants to be kept in the loop, and Stiles hadn’t thought to call him the night before.

But, Stiles reasons, Derek hadn’t said that Stiles needed to tell him everything the instant it happened. The next morning is probably fine. He reminds himself that he needs to respect Derek’s decisions, and that means respecting what Derek is okay with just as much as it means respecting what Derek isn’t okay with.

He checks his watch and decides that he has time to call. Derek will be up, because the yoga studio opens at seven AM on most days anyway, but he could be in class or working out. So Stiles texts first, saying, ‘call me if you have a sec’.

When five minutes have passed and he hasn’t gotten a call, he finishes his cereal and leaves for work. He gets his coffee on the way and heads into the building. Everything is going smoothly until one of the people who steps onto the elevator with him is Peter Hale. Stiles flushes pink despite himself and looks away. He’s not great at ‘morning after’ talk, and it’s going to be even more awkward since Peter is technically, albeit temporarily, his boss. Also, just looking at Peter makes his mouth water and his dick hard. The fact that Peter steps to the back of the elevator as more people get on just makes it worse.

“Excuse me,” Peter says, the picture of corporate politeness, as he shuffles in towards Stiles to make more room. Stiles feels Peter’s hip press against his, and he knows that Peter is doing it on purpose. It’s nothing that someone else will notice, but Stiles is suddenly one hundred percent certain that he’s not going to make it to ten AM without jumping this man in his office.

When they get off the elevator, Peter gives a little jerk of his chin to indicate that Stiles should follow him. Stiles does, and Peter walks past his office, glances around, and then heads into the unisex bathroom at the end of the hallway. Stiles grins and follows. Apparently, Peter has come to similar conclusions about their ability to keep it in their pants.

They’re all over each other the moment the door is locked behind them. Peter has Stiles pressed up against the wall and they’re kissing hot and heavy. Stiles tries to yank Peter’s jacket off. Peter growls at him and takes a step back so he can remove it more carefully and set it aside. “That jacket cost more than your car.”

“I don’t have a car,” Stiles says, and drops to his knees so he can start mouthing at the bulge in Peter’s pants. Peter hisses between his teeth. “You know what I noticed?” Stiles asks, sliding his hands up the backs of Peter’s thighs so he can grab Peter’s ass. “I got to come twice last night, but you only came once. So I owe you one.”

“That seems like a petty thing to keep track of.”

Stiles pauses in where he’s pulling the zipper of Peter’s pants down with his teeth. “So you don’t want me to suck your dick?”

“I didn’t say that.” Peter manages to get his belt off. Stiles wastes no time tugging Peter’s pants and underwear down, but he doesn’t rush after that. He wants to memorize this experience, the noises Peter makes, the way his breath comes fast and his hand slaps against the wall as he obviously tries to avoid grabbing Stiles by the hair. “I have – a meeting at nine. Just – nngk! – just so you know.”

Stiles laughs and withdraws long enough to say, “Who the hell cares?” before he goes back to what he was doing. Peter growls at him again, and Stiles decides to stop messing around. Making Peter come is gratifyingly easy when he puts his mind to it, and he files away a few tricks that make him
Peter gets his pants back on and then pushes Stiles against the opposite wall. He leans in, nuzzling at the crook of Stiles’ shoulder and neck. Stiles takes in a shaky breath and instinctively grinds his hips against Peter’s, trying to get some friction going.

“Ah, ah.” Peter backs away a step. “You don’t get to come. Then you’d be ahead of me again. You’ll have to wait until later.”

“Son of a bitch,” Stiles says, closing his eyes and tilting his head back as Peter presses soft kisses into the side of his neck. “I think – you’re supposed to negotiate kinks like this ahead of time.”

“Probably.” Peter’s mouth moves along Stiles’ throat and up to his ear, and one hand gently cups the bulge in Stiles’ pants, applying just enough pressure to be maddening. “But you’re the one who brought up the idea of keeping score.” He gives Stiles a gentle squeeze. “If you get ahead of me again, I can’t be held accountable for what I’d have to do to keep up.”

“I – oh, oh fuck,” Stiles says, his hands gripping hard at Peter’s upper arms as his entire body goes tense and trembles. He lets out a shaky breath and then says, “Um. Too late.”

Peter pulls back. “Did you just – ”

“Yup.” Stiles is laughing despite himself. “You’re too sexy for your own good. Or mine. I’m not sure.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “I suppose you’ll have to make it up to me later.” He steps away and then gives Stiles a somewhat critical look. “You can borrow some of my pants. I keep clothes here in case I stay the night at the office. Although people will certainly realize that my pants are not your pants, given the differences in what we wear.”

“I’ll tell people I spilled coffee on my own,” Stiles says.

Peter nods. “Wait here,” he says, and eases out of the bathroom.

“No problem,” Stiles says to the ceiling, waiting for the feeling to come back to his legs. Peter returns a minute later with a pair of underwear and pants. “So do you stay the night often?”

“Not often. And despite what you may think, usually not because I’m working late. It happens more often when I need to work early the next day, because of time zone differences. Hale Corp does international business, so sometimes I have meetings with people in Australia or Japan or Europe. If I’m going to be here at four AM for a meeting, I just sleep here.”

Stiles nods as he does up the pants. “So . . . there’s a bed in your office?”

Peter’s eyes glint. “Keep it in your pants until after my meeting, Stilinski,” he says, and leaves without another word.

Stiles manages to gather his wits and head to his desk. He’s immediately slammed with work, and is taken off guard when his phone rings about ten minutes later. He sees that it’s Derek and grabs it anyway. “Hey, sorry I didn’t call sooner,” Derek greets him. “I was teaching a class. What’s up?”

“Uh, just some stuff, now that I’m at work I’m super busy,” Stiles says. He doesn’t want to drop ‘I had sex with your uncle’ in Derek’s lap and then have to hang up. “You want to do dinner?”

“Sure. Come over to the apartment after work? I’ll pick up some steaks.”
“Okay, great. See you then.” Stiles hangs up and gets back to work. Peter has meetings all morning, and when the last one leaves, Peter buzzes him over the intercom and asks him to come into the office. When Stiles comes inside, Peter points through a door that’s next to one of the bookshelves. Stiles looks into the other room. “Is that a bed?”

“It’s a futon.” Peter is taking his tie off. “I have one at home, too. They’re better for your back.”

“Are they better for other things, too?” Stiles asks.

“Let’s find out,” Peter says.

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Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Here we go, a nice long chapter to make up for the previous short ones. Full of Peter meta. =D Also NSFW. Let’s be fair, this whole fic from here on out will be NSFW. XD

Stiles is exhausted by the end of the day, and at four o’clock, Peter lets him go. “You can go back to R&D tomorrow, you don’t need to check in with me. I get more done when you aren’t here to distract me.”

That’s probably a fair assessment, so Stiles stops in to tell Satomi he’s free of Peter and that he’ll be back on task tomorrow. Peter obviously plans to work late, so Stiles stops to pick up some dessert at a local bakery before heading over to the Hale’s apartment. He feels strangely nervous as he heads up. What if Derek’s angry at him? If he’s upset? He said that it was okay for Stiles to have sex, but that doesn’t mean he might not regret it once Stiles has done it. A lot. And as amazing as the sex with Peter has been, it’s not worth losing Derek over.

“Oh God that smells so good,” he moans, as soon as he comes in. “I didn’t have time for lunch. One of the girls in legal brought me a salad. A salad.”

Derek snorts, amused, and walks over to press a kiss into Stiles’ temple. “Busy day?”

“Your uncle is the devil.” Stiles tugs at the hem of his shirt and braces himself. “Okay, so, I have to tell you something, and you might be upset, but I hope you’re not upset, and also please don’t judge me, but I kind of sort of had sex with Peter. Uh. Four times. In . . . the past twenty-four hours.”

Derek takes a drink of his soda and presses his lips together. For a minute, Stiles thinks he’s upset, but then he sees Derek’s shoulders are shaking. “Wow. You two really needed to get that out of your system, didn’t you.”

“Oh my God, we so did,” Stiles groans. “Like, yesterday night, after we got in that big argument, I literally thought he was taking me out to dispose of me Mafia-style, only we wound up having sex in his limo. Which was really hot. Uh, should I not tell you that sort of thing? I’m kind of feeling out the boundaries right now. Would you rather not know?”

“I’m not sure, to be honest? But let’s go with the horror movie metaphor. I don’t want gory details, but I’d like to hear, you know, how it was. I think knowing you’re having a good time will help me feel like I’m not, you know, depriving you of anything.” Derek gets another soda out of the refrigerator and hands it to Stiles. “So it was hot?”

“So hot,” Stiles agrees. “And then, uh, we kind of had sex three more times today before he sent me home early because I was distracting him from getting his work done.”

“You distracted Peter from work? Holy shit.”

“I know, right? And I wasn’t even doing anything! Just, like, my existence on the same floor as him was the problem. I was just minding my own business, typing memos, when he’s suddenly like –”
Stiles makes the noise of his intercom buzzing. “‘Stiles, can you come in here for a second?’ and then the next thing I know we’re having sex on his desk. I was completely innocent.”

“I bet,” Derek says, nearly choking on his efforts not to laugh.

“I’m glad you’re laughing,” Stiles confesses. “I was nervous about telling you. I mean, you said it was all right, but I wasn’t sure if it was all right all right. Does that make sense?”

“Logically no, but emotionally yes.” Derek shrugs a little. “I was a little worried myself that I’d be less okay with it than I thought I would be. But it’s okay. I’m glad you had a good time.”

“Thanks.” Stiles walks over and hooks an arm around Derek’s shoulders, pulling him into an embrace. “Because as hot as it was, I want to make it clear that it was absolutely, in no way, worth losing you over.”

Derek’s cheeks turn a faint pink. “You’re just saying that because I’m making you dinner.”

“I’m saying it because you’re the best boyfriend in the world.” Stiles pokes him in the ribs, then lets go. “Which actually sort of makes me wonder, does Peter now think I’m cheating on you? I mean, he knows you’re asexual, but he doesn’t know about our agreement, so did he just jump his nephew’s boyfriend’s bones and is like . . . is he totally okay with that?”

“I’m not sure, but if you want my best guess, Peter’s probably well aware of our agreement,” Derek says, giving a little shrug. “After the debacle with Kate . . . doing things with Kate that I would have rather not done, to be honest . . . I said that the next time I had a boyfriend or girlfriend, I was going to just let them have sex with other people. Plus, Peter’s a filthy eavesdropper, and he’s probably listened in on enough of our conversations to know that we had agreed on the same thing.”

“Sounds like him.” Stiles sighs and takes a long drink of his soda. “I just wish I knew what to do now.”

“How so?”

“It’s just weird, that’s all. Like, okay, I know he’s not into the whole soulmate thing, and God knows I thought that if I ever met my soulmate, we would do something other than argue and fuck, but like . . .” Stiles chews on his lower lip, thinking. “I guess I just want to have some sort of interaction with him that isn’t a screaming match or sex.”

“If you’re asking what my uncle’s deal is, trust me, I’m just as clueless as you.” Derek turns back to the oven and takes out a tray of roasted potatoes. “Well, okay, I guess I’m not. The thing is, Peter can’t think his way out of this one, and it’s frustrating him. He likes you, and he’s clearly attracted to you, but he doesn’t want to be.”

“Yeah, but why not? I’d be insulted if it weren’t for the fact that I’m pretty sure this is Peter being fucking weird.”

Derek doesn’t look up as he scoops the potatoes into a bowl and tosses them with olive oil. “Peter doesn’t know what to do with a soulmate. That’s what he said to me the day he met you. That he doesn’t want to have to share his life or compromise with someone.”

“Okay, but I’ve got you for that,” Stiles says, nudging Derek with his elbow.

“I think Peter just needs some time to adjust to the fact that his soulmate actually understands that,” Derek says. “You know what you should do, is drag him out to eat somewhere. He’s such a foodie. Not like the people who make kale and quinoa smoothies or whatever. He likes food. He loves to try
new places, especially ethnic places. It’s not about money. He loathes the gourmet places where they
serve you two slivers of steak and a stalk of asparagus and try to tell you it’s a meal. I remember,”
Derek says, and starts to laugh, “at my great-aunt’s retirement celebration, they had that sort of food.
Peter went to a place two blocks away and came back with a bag of cheeseburgers and fries and
brought them right into the banquet hall for us.”

“Nice,” Stiles says, smirking. “Okay, food, I can do food. He must read, right? There’s a wall of
books here and they don’t all look like yours.”

“Yeah, he reads a ton. He thinks a lot of highly acclaimed literature is crap, and will complain about
it at length if people get pretentious. He plays racquetball and squash. And he plays golf, but he hates
it. It’s just a thing you kind of have to do, if you’re going to do business with middle-aged white
dudes.”

“No golf, check. Not a problem.”

“That’s about it, really,” Derek says. “If he’s not eating or reading, he’s working.”

“He’s into fashion, though, isn’t he?” Stiles asks. When Derek just shrugs, he says, “The tailor told
me about stuff that Peter had suggested. Different styles and fabric types. I had never even heard of
most of them, but the tailor seemed to think that Peter knew what he was talking about, so he must
have some interest in it.”

“I’ll take your word on it. He never talks about it.”

“What a weirdo,” Stiles says. “Are you okay with that? With me, I don’t know, trying to be friends
with him?”

“Yeah,” Derek says. “I mean . . . it’s weird, but the stuff I want out of a relationship is kind of the
polar opposite of what Peter would want out of a relationship. Like, I want to cuddle and talk until
midnight and go star-gazing and . . . Peter will never do any of that stuff with anyone. So if you’re
happy with the things we do, Peter is literally no threat to us.”

“Okay.” Stiles chews on his lower lip. “It’s kinda weird, isn’t it? Like a weird coincidence. You and
Peter wanting opposite things.”

Derek shrugs. “Yeah, I guess. And you being okay with it that way is probably why you’re his
soulmate.”

“Right, but why am I his and not yours?”

Derek stops to think about that for a minute. “I guess because . . . at the risk of sounding like I’m
tooting my own horn, there’s probably only one person in the entire world who could put up with
Peter, and that’s you. There’s probably at least one more person out there somewhere who can put
up with me.”

Stiles laughs. “That makes sense. I mean, you being a wonderful person and all, the only real
qualifier is that your soulmate is probably also asexual. And there are probably a lot more asexual
people out there than there are people who would be willing to spend time with your uncle.” He
takes another drink of his soda and steals a piece of potato. “Wonder what your soulmate is gonna
think of all this.”

“Probably that we’re weird as hell.”

“Can’t argue that,” Stiles says with a snort. “Okay. I will take Peter to dinner tomorrow and see if it’s
“I’m glad you’re back,” Satomi greets Stiles the next morning. “I need your help with some financial information. The quarterly reports are in and they don’t match some of the prelim sales reports I’ve gotten, and I need to find out where the discrepancy is. Call Morimoto at Sharp, Lindsay at Intuit, Abel at Lulu – tell them I need all the sales data, week by week.”

“Yes, ma’m,” Stiles says, and gets on the phone. He’s somewhat amused, in retrospect, with people’s inability to work with Peter. He’s not a terrible boss – Stiles has had terrible bosses – but the position itself is very demanding. Peter’s impatient streak only shows up with his employees if they refuse to admit that they’re getting backed up or behind. He knows that because he’s seen two paralegals admit to Peter that they haven’t had a chance to start a second task because they were still working on the first. Peter’s response to that had merely been to assign more people to those tasks, to get them done. But the moment someone skimped on the quality so they could keep up, that was when he would get annoyed.

A normal secretary might blanch at the idea of doing audits on the sales data of eight different projects from three different companies, but after four days with Peter Hale, it sounds easy. Stiles has all the data within an hour and starts setting up his spreadsheets.

It takes him until about three o’clock before he has everything entered, and then he spins in his chair to call out to Satomi. “No discrepancies. I checked everything twice.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Satomi says. “I talked to Lindsay just two weeks ago and he said that the app was doing great. Now it’s barely breaking even.”

“Maybe he just exaggerated,” Stiles suggests.

“He knows better.” Satomi shakes her head. “Call Kali Steele’s office and tell her that I need a meeting with her as soon as possible. It might not be for a week or two – she’s always busy. That’s fine.”

“No problem,” Stiles says, and does as he’s told. But he files that away to discuss with Peter later. The company has been in a slump, and Jennifer is using that as an opportunity to oust Deucalion from his position. Is it possible that the slump is manufactured? It seems like that would be a lot of work, but if anybody could manage it, it would be the CFO.

As for Peter, Stiles is already formulating his plan. He looks up all the ethnic restaurants nearby Hale HQ to see what sort of variety there is. It’s pretty impressive. The days of choosing between Americanized Chinese and Mexican food are long past. There’s Greek, Korean, Turkish, Ethiopian, all within five miles of Peter’s office.

Peter’s in meetings that don’t get out until seven o’clock, and Stiles knows that he has to be starving. He pounces on him as soon as he walks out of his office, with a faint air of irritation. “Hey, you wanna grab dinner?”
Peter looks at him and sighs, but is apparently hungry enough that he doesn’t immediately fob Stiles off. “What did you have in mind?”

“I mostly know places over by the bookstore. There’s a pretty good diner, nice Chinese place, et cetera. Oh, you might not like it, but there’s a super Moroccan restaurant that opened last year, fucking amazing lamb tagine.”

“Moroccan?” Peter is clearly interested. “I’m game.”

Stiles waits until Peter isn’t looking to fist pump. He’s going to force Peter to be civil to his face for an hour whether he likes it or not. Peter’s regular driver isn’t there, so they take a different car. Stiles actually has been to the restaurant before, although not frequently because it’s a little outside his price range. But hey, Peter can afford it. They order enough food for five people. Stiles tries to ask him about the legal meetings, and his conversational attempts are rebuffed. He figures that Peter is probably hangry, and changes the subject. He’s not about to approach the subject of possible financial shenanigans until Peter is in the mood to listen, so he talks about the smart gun research Satomi has him doing instead.

Peter doesn’t have much of a response until he’s halfway through his goat stew, and Stiles is telling a story from work about how he and his coworkers hid all the Twilight books to see if they could get people to buy Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings instead (with variable success). “I suppose you must read a lot, since you worked at a bookstore. What is your opinion on James Joyce?”

Stiles shrugs. Even without Derek’s warning, he still would have been honest. “That there’s probably some merit to his work but I’m sure as hell not wading through the bullshit that is Finnegans Wake to try to find it.”

Peter gives a snort. “That’s a fair way of putting it. All right. What was the last book you read?”

“Black House. I’ve been on a Stephen King run.”

“Mm. Stephen King is quite hit or miss for me. I do enjoy his true horror tales, but he occasionally becomes far too impressed with himself.”

“And he also occasionally writes The Tommyknockers while high on cocaine,” Stiles says with a snort. “I feel you, though. I’m the same way with Michael Crichton. People feel like he can do no wrong, you know? And he’s written some damned good stuff, like Andromeda Strain, but then some of his stuff is just pulp crap.”

“I have to admit, I was quite disappointed when he died because it meant Next was his last novel, and an unreadable piece of trash when compared to some of his earlier work. It was basically a treatise on how frightening GMOs are.”

“Yeah, well, taking science and making it scary was pretty much his shtick,” Stiles says. “Okay, your turn. John Grisham.”


“And A Time to Kill.”

“Preachy, trite, and inconsistent. Your turn. Dan Brown.”

“Leave me here if you want, but I fucking loved The Da Vinci Code. It was awful. I couldn’t put it down.”
“I was actually somewhat surprised at how terrible Angels and Demons wasn’t. Everything else he’s written should be ceremonially burned.”

Stiles grins. They keep talking about books until most of the food is gone. The staff ‘politely’ suggest that they leave after they get in an argument about Anne Rice that leads to raised voices. Peter pays the tab; Stiles is relieved to see that he’s a good tipper. They wind up making out in the restaurant’s bathroom until the driver gets back to pick them up. “My place is only two blocks away,” Stiles says, trying to keep his voice even. It’s difficult, since Peter’s hand is still down his pants.

“Give him the address,” Peter says, and Stiles does a mental fist-pump.

He’s only had his own place to live for about three months, and he’s desperately glad of it now. Bringing guys or girls home underneath his father’s ‘I’m pretending not to see this’ gaze was never fun. But he had gotten an apartment at the beginning of his junior year of college, because he had several afternoon classes and the drive home during rush hour could take over forty-five minutes.

So he had gotten a tiny two-room apartment just off campus, where there was a ton of cheap housing for students. He’s not exactly thrilled with the concept of Peter seeing it, since it’s kind of a dump, but there’s running water and the lights all work and he doesn’t even think he has a cricket problem anymore.

Peter doesn’t really seem in the mood to care about the décor. Stiles has barely gotten the door closed and the bolt done before Peter has him pushed up against a wall and is stripping off his clothes without ceremony. Stiles is naked so fast that it’s truly impressive, and then Peter pulls his own shirt over his head while Stiles works on his pants.

They stumble into the bedroom and Stiles winds up on his back on the bed, panting for breath as Peter kisses a line down his abdomen. He fumbles wildly at the night stand drawer, can’t get it, and just gasps out, “Condoms.”

“Mm.” Peter bites at Stiles’ hipbones, his thumbs digging in just underneath his ribs. Stiles tries not to whimper as he hooks a knee over Peter’s shoulder. Somehow Peter does manage to get the condoms and the lube, tilting Stiles’ hips up and sliding into him before Stiles can catch up with what’s happening.

They’re so worked up from making out in the restaurant, in the car, and in the stairwell, that it only takes a minute before they’re finished. Stiles takes a minute to catch his breath, then leans in to give Peter a kiss. Surprisingly, Peter responds. They kiss for several long minutes, slow and languid. The frantic edge has finally worn off, letting them slow down and explore.

Peter’s rolled onto his back, and Stiles takes the opportunity to take charge for once, nuzzling at the other man’s shoulder, tracing patterns along his chest and abdomen. His thumb flicks over a nipple, and he gets a satisfying grunt. “You like that?” he asks, leaning down to fix his mouth on it. He looks up at Peter while he does so, watches Peter’s head fall back, mouth slightly open as he gasps for breath. “Yeah, you do,” Stiles says, laughing, bringing his hand up so he can rub at Peter’s other nipple. Peter just groans in reply. He’s getting hard again, gripping at handfuls of the sheets. Stiles pulls back a little and just watches, running soft fingertips along Peter’s collarbone while he pants for breath. “Wow, you’re really sensitive there. That’s kind of awesome.”

“Nnng,” is all Peter can manage as Stiles’ flicks his tongue over his nipple again. The cords in his neck are standing out as he fights for control. Stiles just continues to tease him until Peter pants out, “Stiles – stop. Please. Stiles.”

Stiles pulls back at that, aware that he’s hard now, too, and suddenly feeling so empty that he aches.
He looks down at Peter’s cock and needs it like yesterday. Peter is still trying to catch his breath. “Hey, I’m gonna ride you, okay?” Stiles says, and waits for Peter to nod before he grabs a condom to get it on him. He makes a few embarrassing noises as he sinks down onto Peter, tossing his head back and adjusting himself. “Okay. Wow, okay, fuck.”

“Do you – ever stop talking?” Peter asks.

“Pretty much no,” Stiles admits, rocking gently. Peter hisses between his teeth. “Okay, yeah, that’s – oh –” He leans forward a little, hyperfocusing now, barely aware of anything else in the world. He only dimly feels Peter’s hands on his hips, steadying him as he grinds down. Hell, he only dimly remembers that Peter is there, he’s so focused on getting off. It’s the most amazing feeling he’s ever had, and he grips down hard on Peter’s shoulder, shaking apart as he comes.

A few minutes later, he surfaces to find his face resting on Peter’s chest. He can still feel Peter inside him, still hard, but Peter is quiet and motionless, not wanting to disturb him. “Mmkay,” Stiles murmurs. “That was awesome.” He opens one eye and sees Peter’s nipple right next to his face, and he just can’t resist flicking his tongue over it.

“Oh, you son of a bitch – ” Peter flips them over, a tangle of limbs and enthusiasm, arranging Stiles on his back on the bed, and fucks into him hard. Stiles grunts a little, but he’s way past the point of feeling any pain. He twines his hand in Peter’s hair and lets Peter do whatever he wants. He’s earned it. Peter buries his face in the crook of Stiles’ neck to muffle the noise he’s making.

For a long time afterwards, they’re just lying there, exhausted and heavy-limbed and completely satisfied. Stiles rolls onto his side so he can kiss Peter just underneath his ear. “You c’n stay if you wan’,” he murmurs, and gets a noise of sleepy assent from Peter before he passes out.

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The alarm on Peter’s phone goes off at seven, and he’s out of bed before Stiles can moan and pull the blankets over his face. A few minutes later, he hears the shower turn on, and a minute after that, he’s fallen back to sleep.

He wakes back up when he hears Peter talking to someone on the phone. “ – and give it to my driver. Yes, I appreciate it.” There’s a pause, and then he’s clearly talking to someone else. “I need to be picked up by eight. Stop by the apartment first and see the concierge; he’s going to get some things I need. All right, good.”

By the time he’s off the phone, Stiles is sitting up and rubbing a hand over his face. “G’morning.”

Peter doesn’t waste time on pleasantries. “The car is going to be here at eight, and then I’ll need a few minutes to get ready. You can go back to sleep if you’d like.”

“Nah, I’m up now. Where are you rushing off to? It’s Saturday.”

“I have a meeting. We didn’t finish that settlement we were working on yesterday.”

“Bleh,” Stiles says, summing up his feelings about having to work on a Saturday morning. “You want some breakfast?”

“Is there anything to eat here?”
“There’s always eggs and tater tots.”

“I’ll pass.”

“Suit yourself.” Stiles climbs out of bed and heads into the bathroom. He showers and gets dressed before heading out into the apartment. Peter might not be interested in his food, but he’s started the coffee maker, and Stiles helps himself to a cup before he digs into the refrigerator. Peter’s opinion be damned, he needs sustenance. There’s leftover pizza.

The car shows up at five to eight, and the driver is carrying a garment bag that he hands over. Peter thanks him and disappears into Stiles’ bedroom to get dressed. The driver goes back down to keep the car warm.

Peter comes out of the bedroom dressed in a suit that makes Stiles’ mouth water. He’s wondering if they have time for a quickie, but Peter clearly isn’t in the mood. He’s doing up his tie as he says, “I know what you’re doing, but last night doesn’t change anything.”

“Uh – what?” Stiles asks.

Peter doesn’t look at him. “This is never going to be more than exactly what it is right now. So don’t get your hopes up, and if you do, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He picks up his jacket and says, “I’ll see you later,” before leaving the apartment.

Stiles stands there with his jaw slightly ajar. He’s honestly more confused than hurt. He’s not sure which one of them is mixing signals. Does that mean that Peter never wants to go out to dinner with him again? Does Peter think that Stiles is now firmly convinced that they’re in love? Or is Peter just being an asshole because that’s what he does best?

“I don’t understand this jerk!” he declares to his ceiling.

His immediate impulse is to go to Derek – but he doesn’t want to spend all their time together trying to figure out what’s going on with Peter. He wants his time with Derek to be about Derek, not about this asshole who unfortunately happens to be his soulmate. After a long period of pacing his apartment and swearing at nobody, he decides to go visit Scott. Usually he doesn’t talk to Scott about soulmate stuff, because he’s always sickeningly optimistic. But at this point, he feels like he could use some optimism.

He shows up at Scott and Allison’s place with donuts to apologize for the early hour. They’re already up, because of course they are. Scott is in the process of leashing up their three dogs, so Stiles joins him for the walk. He’s kept Scott up to date by text, so it only takes a few minutes to describe what’s transpired since they last talked.

Scott listens with a faint frown on his face. When Stiles is finished talking, he says, “Honestly? I think Peter’s trying not to be a jerk. I mean, he’s failing, but I think that was his intent.”

“By telling me we’re never going to be more than fuckbuddies?”

Scott shrugs. “I don’t know, man. Maybe that’s just not the kind of guy he is. I mean, okay, you’ve had it rough with the whole ‘my destined soulmate is a jackass’ tattoo. But you also have to look at it from his point of view. Here’s a guy who has absolutely zero interest in romance. Who isn’t good at any of the things a romantic partner would want. He’s known his whole life that eventually his soulmate is going to come jogging into his life and, and expect things from him. Things that he has no interest or maybe even ability to give. And to a guy as smart as Peter, that must be frustrating as hell. So he was all geared up to tell his soulmate to go to hell, but then it turned out to be you. And
you’re trying to tell him that you’re okay without him giving you that shit, but he isn’t listening, or at least he isn’t believing you. What he said to you today – it’s like he’s already preparing himself for disappointing you.”

Stiles thinks about that for a long minute, thinks about what Derek has told him about Peter, how he’s all weirded out by the whole soulmate thing. Thinking about how Peter always had to prove himself. It does make sense that Peter would hate the idea of not being good enough at something. Peter seems torn between his own innate personality, which doesn’t want any sort of relationship, and hating the idea of failing at something that comes to everyone else so easily. “I thought we were supposed to be perfect for each other.”

“That doesn’t mean you don’t have to work to figure out how you fit together,” Scott points out. “I mean, being a soulmate doesn’t mean everything automatically comes easy. Me and Allison hit it off from day one, I was in love with her from the minute we met, but we still had to deal with how much her mother hates me and that shit.”

“Fair.” Stiles shoves his hands into his pockets. “I just don’t know what to do. I like Derek, like, a lot. The, uh, the L word is getting pretty close, I think. But Peter’s my soulmate, and we’re supposed to be together.”

“Yeah, but you two get to decide what together means. In college, I met this guy named Jackson, right? And his soulmate was his best friend, Danny. They’d known they were soulmates since they were eight years old. But here’s the thing – Jackson’s straight. Danny’s gay, but Jackson’s not. I asked how it worked, and Jackson just shrugged and said they were best friends, they made all their decisions together, they were the most important thing to each other – but both of them get sex somewhere else, and it works for them. You get to decide what works for you.”

“Do you think it’s even remotely possible that I could date Derek and have sex with Peter without both of them hating my guts?” Stiles asks. “I mean, Jesus, that makes me sound greedy.”

“It’s not, though,” Scott says. “You want both sex and romance. So what? Most people do. And most people tend to get both of those things from the same person. But there’s no law saying you have to.”

“There is a law,” Stiles argues. “There is an actual law that says I can’t marry Derek, because he’s not my soulmate.”

Scott sighs. “True. But, uh, it’s a stupid law? Does that help?”

Stiles can’t help but give a snort of laughter. “Strangely, yes.”

“I don’t think you have to explain your relationships to anyone. It’s nobody’s business, as long as the three of you are okay with it. So, you know, use your words. Talk to Peter. Tell Peter you’re okay not being romantic, as long as he doesn’t mind you dating Derek. And to be honest, his reaction will probably tell you everything you need to know.”

After a moment to think that over, Stiles nods. “Yeah, I guess that’s not a terrible idea.”

“Thanks for the enthusiastic support,” Scott says, and Stiles punches him in the arm.

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The first thing that Stiles figures he needs to do is show Peter that he *is* okay with the way things are. That means acting like everything is normal. He spends Sunday at the Hale’s apartment with Derek, but Peter is nowhere to be seen. That’s fine. He goes to work on Monday morning and waits until around lunch time before he heads up to Legal. Peter has a new secretary, so Stiles smiles at her and tells her that he has some things for Peter from R&D.

Peter looks somewhat wary as soon as Stiles enters, but Stiles forestalls him with, “Hey, I got a free half hour and I’m super horny, how about a quickie?”

The suspicion slides off Peter’s face. He checks his watch and says, “I’ve got seven minutes.”

“Ooh, challenge accepted,” Stiles says, leaning in for a kiss.

It takes them four and a half, which Stiles says is great because now he has an extra couple minutes to regain feeling in his legs. Peter just rolls his eyes in reply.

While Stiles is getting dressed, he says, “I have to talk to you about some business stuff. Weird financial stuff that Satomi noticed. When will you be done today?”

“Hopefully by five thirty, although I have another engagement at six.”

“Okay, we can talk in the car. Privacy will be better anyway.”

“Fine,” Peter says, already getting back to work.

“Cool.” Stiles rakes a hand back through his hair and says, “I’ll see you then,” before trotting out of the office. He spends most of the afternoon organizing the data he has, since he know Peter will be more inclined to listen if he can make his points quickly and clearly.

He gets to the car a few minutes before Peter does, and chats with the driver, who really seems like a nice guy. Stiles is starving, and the driver says that Peter probably will be too, but since he doesn’t have a lot of time, he’ll probably opt for the drive-through.

He’s one hundred percent correct. Peter arrives at the car and says to the driver, “Let’s swing by In and Out,” and then gets into the back. Stiles follows him. “What’s going on down in R&D?”

“Satomi is worried that prelim sales reports aren’t matching quarterlies,” Stiles says, and Peter frowns. “Apparently there are a few projects that she was told were selling very well, but now that the reports are actually in for her to review, they’re barely breaking even. I thought it might have something to do with the slump the company is in. Jennifer wouldn’t have a chance of ousting Duke if the company were doing well, right?”

“It would be much, much more difficult, yes,” Peter says, frowning. “Kali reviews all the reports before they go out to the other department heads. In theory, she could tuck that money away into trusts or even siphon it off completely, without anybody noticing.”

“But I don’t know that we can prove it,” Stiles says, “because all the sales reports match. I called and got them directly from the companies that Satomi was concerned about.”
“Mm. But those could have been manipulated, too. I’ll have to make a few calls.” Peter glances up as they pull into the drive through. “Do you want anything?”

“Already gave Sam my order,” Stiles says.

Peter snorts. His phone rings, and he glances down at it. “Lord, what now,” he mutters, rolling his eyes. “It’s Jennifer. Stay quiet,” he adds, and then puts it on speaker, which surprises Stiles. “Peter Hale.”

“Mr. Hale.” Jennifer’s voice is poisonously sweet. “I wanted to talk to you about opening up a charity wing for Hale Enterprises.”

“Mm. Sounds like a good idea, presuming that we could afford it at the moment. Profits are in a slump, you know. Did you run it by Kali?”

“Of course,” Jennifer says. “It'll go to the board at next month’s meeting. I was thinking about having Laura run it. She’s already very involved in charity work, isn’t she? I wanted to know if you thought she would be interested.”

“Certainly, although her charity work thus far has been very focused. She might need to widen her gaze. But I’ll let you talk to her about that.”

“You don’t want to talk to her about it yourself?” Jennifer asks. “I mean, she is your niece. I don’t want you to think that I’m trying to win her affections away from you.”

Peter sighs. He looks up as the partition slides open and the driver hands through several bags of food. “Jennifer. My dinner is here, and I have a meeting in less than half an hour, so I’m going to make this as short and sweet as possible. I know what you’re doing, and I don’t care. You want to win over my niece and nephew so they’ll vote for you as CEO, fine. It’s not like Deucalion is my best friend. Take the company from him. I couldn’t care less. Fire me. I’ll have a new job within an hour. I can think of a dozen companies who would hire me the minute I stepped through their doors, probably with a better salary. I started work for Hale Corp to prove my worth to my father, who you might recall being dead for the past four years. So, really, Jennifer, play your games, win your votes, give Laura a charity foundation, but for God’s sake stop wasting my time with it, because I really don’t care.” He hangs up and tosses the phone aside in favor of his fries. Stiles is laughing. “Too much?”

“Just enough,” Stiles says. “Would you really go work for someone else?”

“I’d work for Gerard Argent if he paid me enough,” Peter says. “It’s not like I have any real reason to be loyal to Hale Corp. My family is an enormous bag of dicks.”

“God, that is so true,” Stiles says. His phone rings. He looks at it and see that it’s Jennifer. “I quit.”

“Answer it, this ought to be good,” Peter says, his mouth already full.

Stiles picks up and puts it on speaker. “Hey, Mrs. Blake, what’s shaking?”

“You can tell Derek that I have the approval for Laura’s charity foundation,” Jennifer says. “She should call my office to set up a meeting so we can go over the details.”

“Oh, cool. He’ll be really happy to hear that. Anything else?”

“Peter’s going to make some sort of move,” Jennifer says. “I want you to stick by Derek as close as you can for the next few days. Call in sick to Satomi. I’ll make sure you don’t get in trouble.”
“What sort of move, any idea?”

“I’m not sure. It might not even be in Derek’s direction. I think it’s going to have more to do with the rest of the board. But I want to play it safe. I want to get Derek as far away from him as possible. We need to start turning him against Deucalion.”

“He already hates Deucalion, since Deucalion tossed his mother out of the company.”

“Good. Don’t let him forget it.” With that, Jennifer hangs up.

Stiles looks at his phone. “Well, it definitely wasn’t too much, since she apparently didn’t believe a word you said about not caring.”

“No, but she did believe me about getting a different job, and that’s why she’s worried.” Peter is halfway through his burger. “She knows that there are board members who would be very concerned about the possibility of me working for one of their competitors. If they know she’s going to fire me, if she gets voted in as CEO, it could change their votes.”

“Makes sense.” Stiles starts in on his burger. “Guess we don’t have any time for some fun, huh,” he says wistfully, as the limo pulls up outside his apartment building.

“No right now, more’s the pity.”

“Want me to send you some pics?” Stiles asks, winking as he gets his things together.

“I have a meeting,” Peter reminds him.

“That’s not a no.”

“Get out of my car, Stiles,” Peter says, and Stiles laughs and obeys. He waits until five after six, so Peter’s sure to be in his meeting, before he starts sending pictures.

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“I feel like Jennifer hasn’t really thought this through,” Derek says over Skype. “I mean, okay, you can tell Satomi you’re sick so you can keep an eye on me and make sure Peter doesn’t, I don’t know, brainwash me. But what are you going to tell me? I know you have a job. I’m not supposed to know about all the shenanigans, so . . .”

“Well, leaving aside what Jennifer intended, since she probably didn’t think about it, I figured I would just tell you that I’m sick, too.” Stiles gives a loud, dramatic, fake cough. “I’m so sick, Derek. Come pamper me. Bring me chicken soup.”

Derek laughs. “I will bring you chicken soup, if you want.”

“As much as I would definitely enjoy being pampered by you, I was actually wondering, uh.” Stiles clears his throat and looks nervous. “Did you want to go over to my dad’s place tomorrow and hang out? My brother Scott and his wife are going to be there, so I thought, you know. I’ve met your family, and mine are actually not assholes as a general rule.”

“I’d love to,” Derek says, hoping that his face isn’t as pink as it feels. “Should I bring anything?”
“Dad said he’s gonna grill, but I thought maybe you could bring dessert? Because there’s no faster way to my father’s heart than through something he definitely shouldn’t be eating.”

“Okay, sure,” Derek says, laughing again. “That sounds good. Do you want me to pick you up?”

“Yeah, I usually take the bus, since it’s too far to bike, so if you could, that’d be super. Two o’clock?”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you then.” Derek signs off skype and heads into the kitchen to think about what he should make for dessert. He’s got several good dessert recipes in his repertoire, but he wants to make sure he brings something really amazing. It’s basically impossible to go wrong with crème brûlée, and he has everything he’ll need. He can start them now, chill them overnight, and do the topping in the morning before he heads over to pick Stiles up.

He’s just pouring the mixture into the ramekins when Peter comes in. “Smells good. What are you making?”

“Dessert for dinner with Stiles’ family tomorrow,” Derek says.

Peter takes off his tie and considers for a minute. “He has told you – ”

“That you two are having sex? Yeah, he told me. It’s fine.”

Some of the tension eases out of Peter’s shoulders. He leans into the refrigerator and pulls out a beer. “Good.”

Derek considers for a minute while Peter goes for the bottle opener. “You want to talk about it?”

The expression on Peter’s face is a mixture of incredulity and genuine, if confused, affection. “Would I like to talk about . . . the fact that I’m having sex . . . with your boyfriend.”

“Yeah.”

“No. I’m good, thanks.”

“Suit yourself. You’ve seemed pretty happy over the last week though. You know. You must’ve really needed to get laid.”

“So it would seem.” Peter pops the top off his beer. “I’ll be in my office,” he says, and heads out of the kitchen without another word. Derek shakes his head and goes back to what he’s doing.

He’s up early the next day, and nervous although he doesn’t want to admit it. He finishes the dessert, showers and even shaves before trying to figure out what to wear. He chews on his lower lip as he stares into his drawers full of T-shirts, jeans, and yoga pants. Laura isn’t home, but he remembers what Stiles had said about Peter being interested in fashion. He supposes it’s worth a try, so he knocks on Peter’s office door. “Can I borrow something to wear?”

“None of my clothes will fit you,” Peter says, without looking up from his laptop.

Derek sighs. He knows that Peter’s right, but he was hoping that asking that way would be more subtle than saying ‘Stiles says you like fashion, come tell me how to dress myself’. “I know, but I don’t have anything to wear.”

At this, Peter does look up. “When do you need to leave to pick Stiles up?”

Derek checks his watch. “Uh, in forty-five minutes.”
“Then there isn’t really much I can do about that, is there.” Peter goes back to his work.

“That’s such bullshit, you know that if you called the concierge and told him you wanted a specific suit in a specific size in here in thirty minutes, he would have it here with three minutes to spare.”

“I suppose so, but do you actually need a suit? Is this a formal dinner?”

“Uh, no, he said his dad was going to just grill some steaks – ”

Peter looks like he feels he has a migraine coming on, and he rubs the bridge of his nose with one hand. “Go put on that dark green Henley and some blue jeans. That’s more than formal enough for a cookout with the in-laws. Now go away, I’m working.”

Derek shakes his head, but he does as he’s told. Less than an hour later, he’s outside Stiles’ apartment. Much to his relief, Stiles is also dressed casually, in a T-shirt and jeans and one of his ubiquitous plaids. He also seems a bit nervous, and he launches right into a speech as soon as they’ve pulled back onto the road. “Okay, so, I know that you were there when I was talking about my dad during the reunion but I don’t know if you really remembered what I was talking about, so just, don’t be weird about the fact that he’s in a wheelchair and don’t try to help him with things unless he asks, he fucking hates it when people think he can’t do things – ”

“Stiles, it’s fine,” Derek says. Strangely, Stiles’ anxiety makes him feel a little bit more confident. He can do this. “I know how to treat disabled people. I’m sure your father is perfectly capable of handling himself.”

Stiles huffs out a breath and then nods. “I’m not worried about you? Because you’re brilliant and amazing? But my dad can get super touchy about it, so . . . he’ll probably be standing up when you come in because he hates the awkward handshake angle and just . . . hopefully after that he’ll sit down and not be a stubborn jackass about it.”

“I take it that he isn’t completely paralyzed?”

“Yeah. He had what’s called an incomplete spinal injury. He’s got some sensation and movement in his legs, but his muscle grade is low and he has some problems with coordination. So he can stand for a minute or two at a time, but he can’t really walk.” Stiles waves this aside and continues, “The house is all fitted to be handicapped accessible, and he lives pretty much independently – I mean, he’s married, but Melissa works full-time, so she’s not always around to help him out. So he can do pretty much anything, but to hear him tell it, something like seventy percent of the people he meets see his wheelchair and immediately assume he’s completely helpless.”

“I can see how that would rankle,” Derek says.

“Especially because he was a cop, you know? So he was always out there. And, I mean, it happened in the line of duty and everything, but . . . anyway, that’s how he met Melissa. She was one of the nurses who took care of him. They fell in love, and Scott and I are best bros, so it’s all good. So what’d you bring for dessert?”

“Crème brûlée,” Derek says.

“Awesome, you are seriously the best,” Stiles says. “Oh, also FYI – Dad and Scott both know all about you and Peter. I mean, they know that Peter’s my soulmate but you’re my boyfriend. And, uh, Scott knows about all the sex I’ve been having with Peter. I haven’t told my dad about that. For obvious reasons. But you don’t need to pretend Peter doesn’t exist or anything.”

“Okay, cool.”
As Stiles had predicted, Tom Stilinski is standing in the kitchen when he and Derek arrive. Derek shakes his hand, Stiles gives him a hug, and Tom leans on the counter for a minute before settling down into his wheelchair. Stiles is already talking a mile a minute about how Derek brought dessert and how he got corn on the cob and he’s already starving. Scott and Allison show up only a few minutes later with an infant and their three dogs, and things become chaotic. Derek sits back and is happy to just watch Stiles interact, watch this healthy, happy family. Stiles is practically glowing, and he’s telling his father and Scott about what he’s been doing at Hale Corp.

They wind up sitting out on the back porch, shucking the corn and enjoying the sun. Tom says that Melissa will be home in about an hour, after her shift is over, so they’ll wait to eat. Most of the food won’t take long. Scott and Allison brought a salad, so all they need to do is cook the steaks and the corn.

Stiles is telling them all about the projects that Hale Corp is working on, like the smart gun and Satomi’s cryogenics chamber. “Isn’t that kind of science fiction?” his father asks dubiously.

“Well, yes and no,” Scott says. “I mean, he’s not wrong in that people have survived being frozen. Paramedics have a saying, ‘you’re not dead until you’re warm and dead’. People who are underwater in near freezing temperatures can survive for a lot longer than people underwater in warmer water.”

“Chilling technology is actually used to treat a number of problems, too,” Stiles says. “They call it therapeutic hypothermia. They use it to prevent brain damage in heart attack victims.”

“Yeah, but that only lowers body temperature by like five degrees,” Allison says. “That’s a lot different from completely freezing people.”

“True,” Stiles says. “Nobody really knows if it would work. Even Satomi admits that. She’s been working to get clearance to actually test it on some terminal cancer patients who have volunteered, but of course that’s a nightmare from a legal standpoint. She showed me how it worked, though. We were talking about what would happen if the world turned into a dystopian hellscpe and you woke up inside your cryo chamber and no one was there to let you out, and – what, I had a nightmare, don’t look at me like that.”

“Wow, Stiles,” Scott says, shaking his head. “Just wow.”

“Hey, she added an emergency release on the inside and I bet whatever millionaire who wants to freeze himself until the Jetsons is a reality will be very into that.”

“Because there are going to be so many competing options.” Derek rolls his eyes.

“Just because there’s no competition is no excuse not to have the best product,” Stiles says, “according to Satomi.”

“That sounds like her.”

Tom shakes his head. “Well, I’m glad you’re having a good time with your new job, but how are you going to handle it once school starts again?”

“Oh, I won’t. That’s one of the beautiful parts about it. They’re paying me enough that I won’t have to work during the school year as long as I don’t go flinging my savings at everything. Which is good, since I’m going to have a much heavier workload. I wanna catch up so I can still graduate in four years, even though I did a couple semesters with only nine credits.”

“Maybe you should make it four and a half,” Tom says. “We don’t want you to burn out.”
“We’ll see,” Stiles says cheerfully.

“And you are actually saving your money, right? You’re not letting this newfound wealth go to your head, right?”

“Dad, I am shocked that you would make such an assertion – ”

“You spent your entire first paycheck on video games.”

“That was three years ago. I’m much more responsible now.”

“Uh huh.” Tom doesn’t sound impressed. “Derek, don’t go letting him making you pay for everything when his money runs out. It’ll be a good lesson for him.”

Derek huffs out a quiet laugh. “Noted.”

“Derek’s not my sugar daddy,” Stiles says, rolling his eyes.

“I mean it,” Tom says, pointing at his son. “You be good to him.”

“This shovel talk seems very backwards,” Stiles protests.

“That’s because I know you,” Tom says, laughing, and Stiles laughs, too. “Derek, you seem to be a respectable, honest sort of guy. Don’t let Stiles drag you down to his level.”

Derek’s cheeks are turning pink. “Uh, yes, sir.”

“Daaaaaaaad, stop embarrassing him,” Stiles says, also blushing.

“Okay, okay. Now come on, freeloader, help me get the grill lit.”

“Sir, yes sir!” Stiles says, but he grins at Derek as he gets out of his seat, and Derek smiles back. Melissa arrives not long after, while the steaks are on the grill, and she meets Derek with a smile. They eat outside, and Tom asks Derek about his studio. Derek talks about the benefits of dance and yoga, and gets so enthusiastic that he feels a little embarrassed afterwards. Stiles squeezes his wrist, thumb absently rubbing over the back of Derek’s hand, when he falls awkwardly silent.

Scott is talking about the animals and the clinic, and of course Melissa always has funny patient stories to tell, and they sit around for a long time after the food is gone. Then Derek brings out dessert, and it’s an instant smash hit. Stiles practically moans as he’s eating it. So does Allison, for that matter.

“Screw yoga, you should be a chef,” Scott says.

Derek shakes his head. “I’ve thought about it! But actually being a chef is a very high-stress position, and I just . . . don’t really enjoy that sort of thing. I love to cook for small groups, to learn new recipes and experiment, but I would never want to be an actual chef.”

“That makes sense,” Stiles says. He elbows Derek and says, “And this way we get to keep you all to ourselves. I’m definitely not arguing with that.”

“Yeah, we should have you cook next time,” Scott says, laughing.

Derek flushes faintly pink. “I’d be happy to. I mean, if you actually wanted me to.”

“We absolutely want you to,” Allison says.
“Oh my God! You should totally make those wings, you know, the ones you did last week that had all the different sauces?” Stiles bounces on his seat. “You should do those and we can all get together and watch the game next week. I know you’re not the biggest sports fan but the World Cup is on and soccer is actually like an interesting sport and if you make those wings I will totally reward you with a back rub and a foot rub and just, like, every kind of rub you want.”

Derek is laughing despite himself. “Okay, you’ve got yourself a deal,” he says, and Stiles beams.

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Stiles has just gotten out of the shower when he hears his phone chirp. He glances at it to see a message from Peter that says, ‘what are you doing?’ and grins. Peter isn’t quite uncouth enough to suggest his intentions, but Stiles knows a booty call when he gets one. He texts back with, ‘just got out of the shower’.

Almost immediately, the reply comes: ‘Pic?’

Stiles takes a picture of his extremely foggy bathroom mirror, in which his naked silhouette can be kind of seen, and sends that.

Peter responds with, ‘tease’.

‘You want better resolution, come over and see for yourself,’ Stiles texts back, still grinning.

‘Don’t bother getting dressed,’ Peter replies.

Stiles flops onto his bed and texts, ‘ok, but if you’re not here in 20, I’ll start without you’.

‘Don’t you dare,’ Peter says, and Stiles laughs to himself. He knows that the drive from Peter’s apartment will take about fifteen minutes, so he plays a few rounds of Angry Birds before unlocking his apartment door and flopping down on his bed on his stomach.

Peter shows up just after the fifteen minute mark, and slowly undresses while Stiles watches over his shoulder. Then he gets on the bed with him, kissing his way down Stiles’ back. Stiles presses his face into the pillow and holds back a moan as Peter’s fingers trail down the cleft of his ass. He has to take a deep breath to steady himself. He’s determined to hold out, because he knows how good this is going to be and he wants it to last as long as possible.

It does. It feels like a small eternity that Peter is back there, teasing Stiles with his fingers and his tongue. Every nerve in Stiles’ body is on fire and he’s practically begging Peter to fuck him by the time that he does, deep and slow and amazing. He rides it out, clutching at his pillow and gasping out pleas to various deities.

They lay in silence for a while afterwards, and then the bed creaks as Peter gets up. Stiles yawns and rolls onto his back. He sees Peter reaching for his pants. “You wanna stay and hang out?”

“Why?” Peter asks.

“Because hanging out is something people do? We could put in a movie.”

Peter shakes his head. “I have to go.”
“Where?” Stiles can’t help but ask, stung by Peter’s tone. “Come on, it’s seven thirty on a Sunday, don’t try to tell me that you’re going back to work because I know that’s a lie.”

“It’s none of your business where. Somewhere other than here.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Okay, Captain Buzzkill.”

“I’m not going to apologize for it, either.”

“I really wasn’t asking you to.” Stiles yawns again. “See you tomorrow. Come see me in R&D, we can find a closet to have sex in.”

“Sounds lovely,” Peter says, and leaves without another word.

Stiles can’t help but roll his eyes again. He leans over and grabs his cell phone off his desk and calls Derek. “Hi, hi, hi,” he says, when Derek picks up, and Derek gives a quiet snort of laughter. “What are you doing?”

“Laundry,” Derek says.

“Exciting! You want to come do mine?”

“Pass.”

Stiles laughs again. “That’s fair. So, I have three reasons for calling. Number one: I was bored, and wanted to hear your dulcet tones. Number two: Scott texted me earlier asking if I could babysit on Tuesday night because they’re having dinner with Allison’s grandfather, and for some reason the baby is terrified of Allison’s grandfather, probably because he’s the devil. And Melissa can’t because she’s working. I, of course, am happy to babysit my little niece, by which I mean terrified, and would like to invite you to join me so if she gets past me, you can grab her before she sticks her tongue in an electrical socket.”

“That sounds like a very rewarding endeavor,” Derek agrees solemnly. “Sure, I’m game. What’s three?”

“Ugh, Peter. I want to give you a head’s-up that sometime in the next day or two, I’m cornering him to give him The Talk.”

“I think my uncle knows where babies come from by now.”

Stiles snorts. “Not that talk. I need to talk to him about, you know, us. Basically about him not being an enormous asshole to me in the name of getting me to leave him alone, which I’d like to add is very obnoxious of him after he booty-called me.”

“Is booty call a verb now?”

“Sure, obviously,” Stiles says. “Anyway, I need to sit down with him and make him use his words and get him to acknowledge that we can be fuckbuddies without it being the end of the world.”

“Sounds like something that could go either very well or very badly,” Derek says.

“No shit, right? But I’m going to keep him in there and kick his ass until he’s agreed with me.”

“I’ll make the popcorn.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, everyone! I got, um, distracted. Definitely not by the Malec fandom. Absolutely not. It was work stuff. Yep.

Derek feels pretty confident going into baby-sitting duty. He’s dealt with more young kids than Stiles has, because the moms who take yoga often bring them. His studio offers two-hour daycare, which has made it a very popular destination. Derek sometimes stops in to say hi to the kids, and of course sometimes the moms like to show them off.

Scott and Allison’s daughter, Ellie, is sweet and cheerful. She just turned a year old, Stiles tells him, as he dangles a plastic toy in front of her face. “Scott and Allison met when they were in high school, right? So they basically got married the day after graduation.”

“You said Scott wants to be a veterinarian?” Derek asks, glancing around at the dogs. There are three of them, all hard-luck cases that Scott and gotten from shelters. He thinks one of them is a Beagle, but the other two are just mutts with no identifiable breed.

“Uh huh. So he’s still in school, while Allison stays home with the baby. That’s part of why Allison’s mom hates Scott; she feels like Allison ‘gave up her dreams’ to be with him.”

Derek frowns. “Did she?”

“No, because ‘her dreams’ were actually ‘her mother’s dreams’ and Allison didn’t have a lot of interest in them. See, she was a gymnast. And you probably know better than most people how physically demanding that is,” Stiles adds, and Derek nods. “Allison’s mom started her on it when she was like . . . three. And she was good, too, not quite Olympic level good, but she’d done pretty well in a lot of national competitions. But she was burning out. She was seventeen when she met Scott, and I guess most gymnasts peak somewhere in that late teen window? So she was literally at the top of her game, and she just up and quit. Pissed her mother right the hell off.” Stiles tosses the toy and Ellie grabs it, chewing on it happily. One of the dogs comes over to see what the fuss is about, and licks her face while she squeals and giggles.

“I don’t blame her,” Derek says. “I only teach a couple gymnastics classes, and it’s brutal. I mean, it’s a fun sport if you’re in it casually, but at the competition level? Some of those kids wreck their bodies for life. And it’s all in the name of winning.”

“Yeah. But Allison’s mom couldn’t see that it was what Allison wanted, so she blamed it all on Scott.”

“They’re soulmates, though, aren’t they? So shouldn’t she just accept that Scott is what the universe wanted for her?”

Stiles sighs. “Oh, yeah. Allison tried to pull that card, saying that Scott was who she was supposed to be with, and her mom said something along the lines of, ‘then I guess you aren’t the woman I
“I thought you were’.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. I don’t think they’ve really spoken since.” Stiles shrugs. “Her whole family is like that. They’re all fucking nuts. The only one she’s on good terms with is her dad. I only met him once, but how he can possibly be her mom’s soulmate, I have no freakin’ clue.”

“Didn’t you say she was out with her grandfather tonight?” Derek asks, picking Ellie up before she can crawl too far away and settling her down with a bunch of stackable cups.

“Yeah. It’s his birthday. She takes him out to dinner once a year, on his birthday, because she feels like that’s what a granddaughter should do.”

“Too bad she can’t just tell her entire family to fuck off the way I did,” Derek says, laughing. “Of course, they started it.”

“True!” Stiles hops off the sofa. “You hungry? Scott said we could raid the fridge, and I’ve got to get the munchkin here her dinner.”

“I could eat.” Derek says. He picks up Ellie, who giggles and tries to grab his nose. “God, you weren’t kidding when you said that she’s an easy baby. Most babies freak out if someone they don’t know very well picks them up.”

“It’s Scott’s genes. He’s the friendliest person in the entire world.” Stiles’ top half is already in the refrigerator. “Okay, mashed carrots, mashed bananas, mashed . . . I don’t even know what this is, yikes. Want to get her in her high chair?”

“Sure.” Derek tucks her in the seat and ties her bib on. “I’ll get us some food if you want to feed her.”

“Okay.” Stiles takes the jars and plops down next to the baby. “Just wait ‘til you can eat steak, kid. You’ll never go back.”

Derek snorts. He’s about to open the refrigerator and find some food for himself when a picture on the front catches his eye. He stops and stares. “Stiles, what . . . what did you say Allison’s last name was?”

“Huh? It’s McCall, why?”

“No, I mean, what was it before she married Scott?”

“Oh, geez, I don’t know. Uh, it started with A.” Stiles rubs a hand over the back of his head. “Arnett, maybe? Armstrong? Archer?”

Derek is distracted from his realization and turns to give Stiles an amused look. “You don’t know your sister-in-law’s maiden name?”

“Dude! Why would I know that? Scott introduced her to me by her full name once, like, three years ago. It’s not like I’ve really hung out with her family and had to call them Mr. and Mrs. Arnett or whatever.”

“They weren’t at the wedding?”

“No! See aforementioned commentary about how her mother was pissed at her for marrying Scott?
Allison didn’t want to make a big deal out of it, so she and Scott got married at City Hall, and the only one from her family there was her dad. His name is Chris but if I heard his last name, I don’t remember it. Ugh, stop hounding me on this. What does it matter what her last name was?”

Derek takes the photograph off the refrigerator and holds it out to Stiles. “Because it’s Argent.”

Stiles blinks. He takes the photograph and studies it. “No shit, really?”

“Yeah. That’s Kate. Remember, Kate Argent? Dated me, stole company secrets?”

“Holy shit.” Stiles sits there for so long that Ellie starts to fuss, demanding the next spoonful of carrots. “Oh, shit, sorry darlin’.” He starts spooning baby food into her mouth again. “Wow, I honestly had no idea. Allison told me once that she was on pretty good terms with her dad’s sister, but she moved out to like, Ontario or something, a couple years ago.”

“Yeah, I know.” Derek puts the photograph back on the refrigerator. “What age do babies start talking? You’re going to teach her terrible language.”

“Oh God, I know. Scott’s always on me not to swear around her.” Stiles laughs and rubs a hand over the back of his head and looks over at Derek. “Are we . . . okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine.” Derek shrugs and goes back to finding them something to eat. “I know that nobody chooses their family, trust me. And I’m pretty sure that if you’d actually been trying to fool me, you would have come up with a better cover story than ‘I don’t know my sister-in-law’s maiden name’. Like, you know, not inviting me over to her apartment in the first place.”

“True. A real spy definitely would not have done that.”

“I wonder why Allison didn’t mention it, though.” Derek pulls out a bag of chips and one of shredded cheese.

“Well, to be fair, Allison doesn’t know anything about what happened with Kate. So her family runs a company that’s a rival to your company. But, uh, she might have figured that I had told you. Because, you know.”

“She probably thinks you remember her maiden name?” Derek asks dryly.

“Um. Yeah, that.”

Derek shakes his head, amused despite himself. “Jalapenos?”

“Ooh, yes please.”

Stiles finishes feeding Ellie while Derek makes the nachos, and they let her crawl around for a while so they can eat. Then Stiles takes her upstairs to give her a bath and get her settled into bed. Derek goes with him so he can read her a story.

“You’re very cute with kids, you know,” Stiles tells him, as they settle on the sofa together to watch TV.

Derek flushes pink. “I don’t normally deal with babies, but I do teach a couple classes of younger kids.”

Stiles pokes him in the chest. “Don’t be modest. You’re adorable.”

“Whatever,” Derek grumbles. “You’re not too bad with them yourself.”
“Oh, I’m fine with Ellie because she’s cute and easy. Never put me in a room with a bunch of screaming toddlers, though. I’d probably start playing kickball.”

“Lord.” Derek snorts with laughter, burying his face in Stiles’ shoulder. “You’re terrible.”

“Pretty much, yeah! Oh, hey, Star Trek reruns. Super.” He looks up at Derek and says, “It just occurred to me that I’ve neglected to ask you a very important question. I should really know the answer to this if we’re going to keep dating.”

Derek arches his eyebrows.

“Original Star Trek or TNG?”

Without hesitation, Derek says, “Original for series, but Picard for best captain.”

Stiles pretends to swoon. “How can one man be so perfect?”

“Are you talking about me or Picard?”


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It’s easy to avoid Peter for a couple days while Stiles thinks about how to handle the conversation that’s almost certainly going to turn into a mess. Peter rarely seeks out his company, so as long as Stiles avoids places where he’s likely to be, they don’t bump into each other. He also wants to make sure that when he does corner Peter about this, it’s not when he’s busy at work. Fortunately, he has Derek on his side, so Derek texts him once Peter’s gotten home and Stiles can pounce.

Of course, that doesn’t mean he’s not still working. Stiles finds him in his home office, examining a document on his computer. He doesn’t look up when Stiles comes in, but Stiles doesn’t let that deter him. He pulls a chair over and says, “We need to talk.”

“Oh, Lord, here we go,” Peter says, eyes rolling. “I’m not – ”

“Peter,” Stiles interrupts forcefully, “shut up.”

Peter arches his eyebrows.

“Listen to me, you jackass. For once, acknowledge the fact that you aren’t the only intelligent person in the room. Stop presuming that you know exactly what I’m going to say and that I’m going to start weeping at your feet because you don’t like me. For God’s sake, let me talk.”

After a moment, Peter pushes back from his computer, turns so he’s facing Stiles, and gestures with one hand. “Talk.”

“I know that you don’t want to date me,” Stiles says. “I fucking get that, okay? You don’t want to be my boyfriend. So will you please stop being an enormous asshole to me in an attempt to get that message across? Believe me, it’s been received. You’re coming through loud and clear. And I don’t know how to make you believe me, but I’m okay with that. With you not wanting to date me, that is. You being a jerk, I could do without.”
“If I’m awake, odds are good I’m being a jerk,” Peter points out, but he looks surprisingly serious.

“Okay, true. But you know what I mean. I don’t mind you being snarky and vulgar, I don’t mind you being you. But when you start actively pushing me away and basically telling me that you don’t want anything to do with me, that’s where I draw the line. If you don’t want to hang out and watch a movie, fine, just fucking say that. Don’t ask why I would invite you, like you can’t fathom why anyone would want to spend time with me.” Stiles takes a deep breath, seeing the frown on Peter’s face. “Look, I know that it’s probably sucked, being the way you are and having everyone on your back. ‘When are you going to meet your soulmate, Peter? Aren’t you going to look for him? Aren’t you so lonely without him? Don’t you feel incomplete?’” Stiles has taken on a slightly whiny, nasal tone, and Peter smiles despite himself. “You’ve been waiting for me to come tap-dancing into your life since you could read, and the more people told you about what a soulmate was, the more you convinced yourself that I was going to hate you. That I was going to be disappointed in you.”

It’s clear that Scott was right, because Peter’s lips thin into a grimace when Stiles says that word. He opens his mouth to protest, but Stiles doesn’t let him.

“It’s okay,” he says, gentling his tone a little. “I like you just the way you are. I’m totally okay being fuckbuddies. You know, have dinner sometimes, insult each other’s taste in books, mess with your corporate brethren together, have enormous amounts of fantastic sex. I’m okay with that, Peter, so for the love of God, please stop trying to convince yourself that I’m not.”

It’s a long moment before Peter nods. “It’s not exactly the sort of thing most people would be okay with.”

Stiles shrugs. “Okay. I’m not most people. And God knows that you’ve spent your entire life dealing with assholes. I’m not even going to say that I’m not an asshole, because I kind of am. But, there’s something else we should talk about, which is Derek.”

“What about him?”

“I like him. You know? He’s a really great guy, and he makes me feel special in a way that you don’t, never will, and don’t even want to. I’ve only known him a couple of months but I can see this being something long-term with him. I want it to be something long-term with him. I want to do all those things with him that we’ll never do together. Take long walks on the beach, buy flowers on our anniversary, cuddle on the sofa and talk about our future.”

“But you don’t want to sleep with him.”

“Oh, well, if we’re going to be one hundred percent honest, I would hit that like a double cheeseburger,” Stiles says, and Peter snorts. “But Derek’s not into that. So if we’re going to get into the whole ‘soulmates are perfect for each other’ thing, I can’t help but think it’s not a coincidence that you want sex but not romance, and your nephew wants romance but not sex, and I want both but am totally happy getting it from separate places.”

“It’s not that like having your cake and eating it too?” Peter asks, eyebrows arching.

“You know, I’ve never understood that phrase. How can you eat cake you don’t have?”

“Admittedly, it’s badly phrased. The point is, once you’ve eaten the cake, it’s gone, so you no longer have it.”

“Oh, got it,” Stiles says. “But anyway, no. It’s more like, I get the flour and sugar from you, but the eggs and milk from Derek, and combine it to make cake myself.”
“This metaphor is making me hungry.”

“Me too.” Stiles snickers. “But do you see my point? It’s not like I want both things from both places so I’m getting twice as much as the average guy. I just want the normal two things.”

“I suppose so.”

“So if you don’t care if I cuddle with him and go on long walks on the beach, and if he doesn’t care that we have sex – which he doesn’t, we’ve discussed it in detail – then everyone lives happily ever after.”

“And what of Derek’s soulmate? Eventually he’ll run into them.”

Stiles shrugs. “I don’t know, but I guess we sort of have to figure it’ll work out. I mean, if we can make it work with the three of us, I don’t see any reason we won’t be able to make it work with four of us. Maybe whoever they are will be asexual, too. Maybe they’ll just want to cuddle and be friends. Who knows? But I don’t see any reason not to try to be happy while we wait for something that could take years to happen.”

“Fair enough.” Peter’s hand taps absently at Stiles’ knee, and after a moment, he gives a decisive nod. “All right. I’ve decided to acknowledge that I’m not the only intelligent person in the room.”

Stiles bursts into laughter. “Wow, you finally decided that, huh? I’m flattered. Really. What’s my prize?”

“Well . . .” Peter’s hand rubs at Stiles’ knee. “I’m sure we can come up with something.”

“Yeah?” Stiles grins at him. “You’re sure you’re not too busy? That document you were looking at could be critical, you know.”

“It isn’t,” Peter says, leaning in to press a kiss against Stiles’ neck, just underneath his ear.

Stiles enjoys it, more than enjoys it, but then pushes Peter away. “Hang on a sec. I don’t know if it’s okay with Derek if we have sex here while he’s also here, you know, in the apartment? I don’t want to make him uncomfortable.”

Peter sighs. “I suppose I could call the car – ”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I just want to ask him.” Stiles has his phone out and is busily texting.

Peter blinks. “You don’t want to make him uncomfortable, but you’re willing to just ask him for permission to have sex?”

“Yep. Welcome to the land of adult communication, Peter. If I want to know if something’s okay, I’m going to ask. If he says he’s okay with it, we get to boink, right here, right now. If not, you can call the car. Either way, we respect his decision.” Stiles sends the text and then looks up at Peter. “How is it that you’re the least mature out of the three of us?”

“At least I don’t use the word ‘boink’.”


“You know, perhaps that document is pressing, now that I think about it – ”

Stiles’ phone chimes. He looks down at it and then laughs. “So Derek says as long as we don’t invite him to join in, he doesn’t care if we have sex in the apartment while he’s here.”
“Does he mind if we . . . boink?”

Stiles looks at Peter. He looks at his phone. “Would you like me to ask him?”

“No, I want you to get over here so I can suck your dick.”

Stiles laughs. “Yeah?” He settles on Peter’s lap, leaning in for a kiss. “I’m sure as hell not going to argue with that.”

Peter returns the kiss with interest, curling one hand in the back of Stiles’ shirt and the other around the back of his neck, his fingers digging in. He stands up abruptly, getting Stiles on his feet and then pushing him against the wall.

“Whoa, a little impatient there,” Stiles says, laughing again as he stumbles backwards. “I didn’t leave you on your own for that long.”

“I’ve had a long day,” Peter says, punctuating each word with a nip to Stiles’ neck or shoulders. Stiles looks up at the ceiling and tries to control his breathing as Peter pulls his shirt off. “And you did not help.”

“Sorry.” Stiles squeezes the word out. “Just figured it was an ordinary work day.” It takes effort to keep his voice steady as Peter undoes his belt and tugs his jeans and boxers down a few inches.

“What happened?”

“I was looking into those financial discrepancies.” Peter nuzzles the line of hair leading down, and Stiles grips his shoulders hard to compensate for suddenly weak knees. “Had to get vendor reports from all over the place.”

“Oh, yeah, talk finances to me, Peter.” Stiles moans despite himself.

Peter snorts and bites down on his hips, one hand slowly stroking Stiles. Much too slowly, in Stiles’ opinion. “Well, it might interest you to know that Satomi was right.”

“It might interest me if you would get around to sucking my cock the way you said you were going to.”

“Who’s the impatient one here?” Peter asks, but conversation is suspended as he gets to work.

Turnabout is fair play, so once Stiles is finished and he’s kissing his way down Peter’s chest, he stops to ask, “So, Satomi was right?”

Peter doesn’t react beyond an arched eyebrow. “Yes. I had to get reports directly from the vendors, but nngk!” His head tilts back as Stiles bites down on one of his nipples. “You’re the devil. You do know that, right?”

Stiles laughs. “Yeah, I know it. You were saying?”

Seeing that Stiles isn’t going to make himself useful, Peter undoes his belt and pants himself, saying, “It’s been going on for a while. Small amounts at first, but getting bigger as Jennifer’s gotten bolder. Kali’s squirreling it away somewhere, but I haven’t been able to figure out where yet.”

“You will,” Stiles says, before he goes down on him.

Peter’s eyes close and he tangles a hand in Stiles’ hair. “Of course I will.”
“Stiles, come take a look at this,” Satomi calls out from her lab, and Stiles gladly ditches the paperwork he’s been busy with and goes to see what she wants. She’s holding a handgun, a compact little Beretta that has a strange looking grip. “It’s the new model.”

“How does it work?” Stiles asks, taking it from her hands and looking at the grip. It’s a little heavier than a normal gun. “Is it an RFID chip again?”

“No, I’ve been working on something else. The problem with the RFID tag is that it could be stolen along with the gun. So it would prevent accidents, if a child got hold of a gun, but it wouldn’t prevent a gun from being misused if whoever stole it could also steal the RFID tag. Now, most smart guns work off fingerprints or palm prints, but anyone who’s used an iPhone can tell you how finicky that is. So I’m trying it with voice recognition.”

“Cool,” Stiles says. Satomi waves for him to follow her into the soundproof room she’s been using to test the guns.

“Here, try to shoot,” she says, handing him the gun. He takes it, aims at the target, and pulls the trigger. Nothing happens. She takes the gun back and says in a clear tone, “Unlock.” Then she hands Stiles a pair of the insulated headphones for him to put on. Once they both have them on, she points the gun at the target and fires.

“Nice,” Stiles says, taking the headphones off.

“Lock down,” Satomi says to the gun, and then to Stiles, “It’ll automatically lock after five minutes of not being fired, so if the owner forgets to give the verbal command, it’ll still be safe.”

“It’s very cool,” Stiles says, “but I kind of wonder about the practicality. How sensitive is the voice recognition?”

“Very sensitive. Wouldn’t be much good otherwise.”

“Right, but here’s the thing – let’s say that there’s a prowler in your house. You want to whisper ‘unlock’ to your gun, but it doesn’t recognize your voice because a whisper is fundamentally different from your regular speaking voice. Or a scream, too.”

Satomi nods thoughtfully. “Well, it’s programmed to allow multiple owners, so we could just say to give it multiple voice prints, to make sure it would recognize your voice if you were under duress.”

“That would be a good idea. I was – ” Stiles is interrupted as Satomi’s cell phone rings. She motions for him to wait for a second as she pulls it out.
“Must you call my cell phone?” she greets the person on the other end. “I’ve told you, if I don’t pick up at my desk, it’s because I’m in the lab and don’t – yes, I’m sure it’s urgent. It always is with you.” She listens in silence for a long minute. Stiles pretends he’s not trying to overhear. Finally, she says, “I see. Yes, go ahead and send the specs down and I’ll take a look. All right.” When she gets off the phone, she sighs. “Deucalion’s assistant is going to be bringing down some documents for me to look at. Apparently one of our subsidiaries claims that one of our products is experiencing an error that we never encountered in testing, and wants to pull their support. And of course since we could lose money, it has to be done right this instant.”

“Of course,” Stiles says, somewhat amused. He hesitates, then adds, “You don’t seem to like Deucalion very much.”

Satomi turns and arches her eyebrows at him. “That’s really none of your business, young man.”

“Yeah, I know.” Stiles carefully places the headphones back on their stand. “I guess I was just curious about it. I mean, about something that Derek had said. I thought the reason you might not like Deucalion would have something to do with it.”

Satomi looks at him for a long minute, then sighs and gestures. “Just ask what you want to ask, then.”

“Well, Derek said that Deucalion was the one who forced his mother out of the company,” Stiles says, and sees Satomi frown again. “But then at the reunion, Deucalion made this cryptic comment about how there was a lot about that which Derek didn’t know. I thought, since you were friends with Talia, and you were around back then . . .”

“I can see why you would ask.” Satomi sighs. “But I don’t know that having the answers will make Derek very happy.”

Stiles thinks about that for a minute. “Maybe not. But I think that he deserves to know.”

“Oh, probably. But it’s going to cast some people in a very unappealing light.” Satomi shakes her head. “No, Stiles, I don’t particularly like Deucalion, but it’s a simple matter of personality conflict. It has nothing to do with what happened back then. Yes, Deucalion is the one who engineered Talia’s removal from Hale Corp. But it was bound to happen anyway, and Deucalion actually made the situation a lot less terrible than it could have been. He was the head of legal back then – where Peter is now. Jordan, Talia’s father, was the CEO. And he was dead set on removing Talia from the company; he was profoundly against her marriage to Aaron, and when she started having children with him, he became even more determined.”


“Don’t underestimate the power of bigotry.” Satomi gives another sigh. “He had tried several times to force her to resign before anyone in the media or the competition found out about her ‘unnaturalness’, as he put it. When she refused to budge, he fabricated evidence that she had been embezzling. He was going to have her fired, arrested, and quite likely put in jail. Deucalion convinced Jordan to give him ‘one more chance’ to convince Talia. He warned her of what Jordan intended so she could quit, and he arranged for her to receive a severance package and set up a trust for each of the children with company stock in it.”

Stiles blinks. “Wait, wait. Are you saying that the stock that Derek thinks Peter bought for them was actually arranged by Deucalion?” If that’s true, he’s going to kick Peter in the balls; he doesn’t care how amazing the sex is.
“No. It’s more complicated than that. Deucalion took the credit for Talia’s resignation, because it
gained him a lot of allies on the board, that he was able to engineer that without causing a scandal.
Jordan wasn’t thrilled with it, but he knew it was the better solution, and to be fair, Deucalion
couldn’t have done it without Jordan’s help, as it was. Most of the board were unaware of the
severance package or the stock.”

“So what happened to the stock?”

“The children were still quite young, so it was officially owned by Talia, in a trust that was
designated for them when they came of age. But then Talia and Aaron were killed. She left it to them
in her will. Jordan challenged the will in court.”

“He did not.”

Satomi nods. “He persuaded a judge that since Talia’s children were born out of soullock, they
couldn’t be ‘natural inheritors’, and that Talia was clearly mentally ill and incompetent to have had
them in the first place. I’m sure money changed hands. The children were allowed to inherit Talia’s
personal wealth and material possessions, but the stock came back to the company.”

“Oh my God.” Stiles rakes both his hands through his hair. “And they don’t know anything about
this?”

“No. They were still children, except Laura, who had only just turned eighteen. Nobody thought it
was right to tell them.”

Stiles paces around for a minute while he thinks about this. “How much does Peter know?”

“Ah, Peter.” Satomi shakes her head, and her tone is almost fond. “He knew very little about
Deucalion and Talia’s deal. He was young then himself. But by the time Talia died, he was working
in legal, although he was still fairly low in the ranks. He knows all about Jordan’s vendetta against
his grandchildren.”

“So he got the stock back for them.”

At this, Satomi smiles. “Three times what they would have had if Jordan had just let it be, plus a
position on the board for each of them. It’s his crowning achievement, I think.”

Stiles laughs at that. “I bet his dad was pissed.”

“Absolutely, but Peter didn’t care. You worked for Peter for a few days. So you know he’s an
arrogant, selfish, impatient prick. But he’s the youngest of his siblings and his father perpetually
ignored him and measured him against his brothers. Talia told me once that Peter never even wanted
to go into law, but was determined to succeed because his father told him that he’d be terrible at it.”

“I have trouble picturing him doing anything else,” Stiles admits. “What did he want to do?”

“Oh, Peter’s an artist,” Satomi says, and laughs at the stunned look on Stiles’ face. “He’s always
liked to draw. The year before college, he was actually planning to go into fashion design. Of course,
his father reacted to that with all the subtlety of a loose nuke. Peter went into law instead.”

“Oh my God,” Stiles says, barely able to contain his glee at this information.

“So Peter became a world class lawyer and immediately put it to use getting back at his father for
what he did to Talia. And that’s the sad story of the Hale family.”
“Then Jordan died a few years ago, right? I think I read about that.”

Satomi nods. “A boating accident, along with his two other sons. That’s how Deucalion became the CEO so unexpectedly – they were next in line, since Peter was too young and Harris is, er, unqualified. To put it mildly. Of course, they were probably murdered,” she adds, so casually that Stiles nearly swallows his pencil eraser. “You didn’t know that? It’s fairly agreed upon that Gerard Argent was behind it somehow. We just never had enough evidence to prove it, and basically any time someone talked about it, he sued us for slander. So we had to drop it in the long run.”

“Jesus. Does Derek know that?”

“Probably. But I doubt he cares very much. Understand, Talia’s children never even met their maternal grandparents. To him, Jordan is just the man who disowned Talia.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Stiles rubs a hand over the back of his head and finally settles back into his chair. He thinks all of this over and then decides to take a risk. “I just don’t see why Deucalion would decide to suddenly start dropping cryptic hints about his involvement in any of this.”

Satomi looks up sharply, and for a minute Stiles thinks he’s given himself away. But then she says, “That’s an excellent question, really. Probably some sort of political move. Deucalion is very politically savvy.” She shakes her head. “But I wouldn’t be the person to ask. I stay as far away from the boardroom as possible.”

“If I wanted to know – well, if Derek wanted to know – who is the person to ask?”

“Well, Peter, of course.” Satomi gives a snort of laughter. “Although there’s only about a fifty-fifty chance he would tell him anything. But still, if I wanted to know what sort of devious goings-on were happening in the boardroom, Peter is where I would start.”

“Okay. Thanks. And thanks for telling me all of this.”

“You’re welcome. Now, I should go look at the report Deucalion is emailing me before he has a coronary. The money men are always in such a hurry.”

Stiles laughs. “Good luck with that.”

~ ~ ~ ~

While Stiles is hard at work for Satomi, Derek is stuck having lunch with Jennifer. This annoys him on general principle. The board meeting is only about two weeks away now. He’s gotten sick of waiting for her to make her move, and after discussion with Peter and Stiles, called her up and asked if he could meet with her. She’s insisted on it being over lunch at a quaint French café, and she greets him with air kisses to each cheek.

“How’s Laura doing?” Jennifer asks immediately, as they peruse their menus.

“Fine. She’s really excited and I think she’s already got a thousand ideas.”

“That’s great,” Jennifer says. “So what did you want to talk about? Have you changed your mind about my offer?”
“No,” Derek says. “Actually, I have a question for you.”

“Oh, go ahead.” Jennifer gives him a warm smile. “You can ask me anything.”

“Okay. What do you want?”

Jennifer’s smile fades a little, and she blinks. “I don’t follow.”

“I’m a little bit sick of everyone treating me like I’m some sort of idiot,” Derek tells her. “I’m not an idiot, okay? I might not be involved in the business but that doesn’t mean I’m stupid. It’s obvious that you want something from me. Giving my boyfriend a job, trying to buy a national business for me to run, giving my sister a charity operation. It’s really obvious that you want something from me, and I wish you’d just come out and tell me what it is.”

“I haven’t given you anything that you aren’t completely entitled to,” Jennifer says earnestly. “You know that, right? Laura’s going to do a great job. Stiles is a wonderful employee. It’s not just that – ”

“Obviously you’re not giving me things that would ruin the company,” Derek says, and waves a hand. “My own chain of yoga studios aside. But you are still trying to butter me up. So just – talk to me like I’m a fucking adult with a brain, would you? Treat me like you respect me. I’m not a child.”

Jennifer sighs. “I just wanted to show you what the company could do for you, if Deucalion weren’t the one in charge.”

“Great. Consider it showed. But you’re going to have to tell me what you want at some point, if you want a prayer of getting it.”

“There’s going to be a very important vote at the next board meeting,” Jennifer says. “I’m calling for a vote of no confidence in Deucalion, and I need your vote. That’s a big deal, and I know that you – ”

“Okay,” Derek says.

Jennifer looks wary. “Okay?”

“Sure, fine, okay,” Derek says. “Deucalion is an ass. I assume you’re going to take over. That’s fine by me.” He shakes his head at her. “You could have just asked me. It’s not like I have any reason to be loyal to Deucalion.”

“Well, you didn’t really have any reason to be loyal to me, either,” Jennifer says.

“That’s true, but at least you didn’t throw my mother out of the company on her ass,” Derek says, and shrugs. “Do you have the votes to do it?”

“With yours, I do. You do understand that your uncle won’t like it?”

“Yeah, I get that.” Derek fiddles with the straw in his drink, then looks up and looks Jennifer in the eye. “Are you going to fire him?”

Jennifer’s jaw tightens a little. “It’s a possibility. He might not give me any choice, you know.”

“I guess that’s true. Peter being the sort of person he is. He’d probably go straight to the Argents like the mercenary dick that he is.”

“We’ll have to cross that bridge when we get there,” Jennifer says. She looks up as the waiter approaches, smiles and orders her food. Derek orders as well, not looking forward to the inevitable
awkward silences that are going to follow now that they’ve gotten the business portion of the meeting out of the way. “Thank you. For trusting me.”

Derek shakes his head a little. “Next time you want something, just ask me. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jennifer says. “We’re going to do a lot of great things, working together.”

“Yeah, like finding me a new apartment,” Derek says, rolling his eyes. “Peter’s going to be impossible to live with after this.”

“We’ll find a place for you,” Jennifer says. “Don’t worry.”

She asks how his studio is doing, and he manages to waste enough time talking about that to get them until the food has arrived. Then they talk about food, and that keeps the awkward silences to a minimum. Jennifer has to rush away after the meal, to get back to work, and Derek shakes his head and hails a taxi to get him back to the apartment. He’s never been a fan of the plush cars that Peter uses.

Stiles has texted him with ‘how did it go?’ so Derek calls him up to see where he’s at and gets Stiles’ voicemail. Derek knows that Satomi keeps him hard at work, so he just texts back to say that it went fine, and does Stiles want to come over after work? Stiles texts back about half an hour later to say that of course he does, and tells Derek not to cook.

When Stiles shows up around six, he’s carrying a paper bag full of foil-covered dishes. “What’s all this?” Derek asks, laughing.

“Spoils of war!” Stiles declares. “Seriously, this drug rep came in for a meeting with Satomi today and brought lunch. Satomi was super pissed off because she had specifically told the woman not to bring lunch. See, drug reps spend lots of money on lunches and products to bribe people to prescribe their products, and it inflates the price of drugs and – anyway, Satomi will have meetings with these people, if they want to talk about getting Hale Corp involved in the manufacturing process, but she refuses to have lunches. So she refused to have the meeting at all. Buumuuut the food was already bought and paid for, so there was no point in wasting it.”

“Nice. Mexican?”

“Yeah, and it’s really good.” Stiles starts unloading. “How’d Jennifer take it?”

“Pretty well. I think she was a little suspicious and surprised, but after I told her to treat me like an adult, she might have even realized what an idiot she had been.”

“Sounds unlikely.”

Derek snorts. “Yeah, probably. But she knows I hate Deucalion, so it all works out.”

“Yeah, about that. Satomi told me an interesting story today.” Stiles is busy making himself a burrito as he speaks. “I found out what Deucalion meant at the reunion. Apparently, although he did coerce your mom to resign, he did that to prevent your grandfather from forging evidence she was embezzling, and getting her arrested and thrown in prison.”

Derek nearly drops his tortilla. “Jesus Christ. Really?”

“Yep. It’s not like Satomi has reason to lie about it. Your grandfather, as you probably know, was hardcore against your mom’s marriage and was determined to get her out of Hale Corp at any cost. I guess he decided the scandal of one of his kids embezzling was better than the scandal of one of
them marrying out of soullock. Which seems really ridiculous to me, but hey, people are bigots and bigots are stupid.”

“Wow.” Derek mulls that over for a minute. “So Deucalion warned her?”

“Yeah, and he arranged for her to have a pretty generous severance package if she left voluntarily. Which included stock for you guys, by the way, but when she died, Jordan contested her will and took it back.”

“God, what a dick.” Derek shakes his head and goes back to making his food. “Mom never talked about him, like, ever. I mean, if I hadn’t known my dad’s parents, I don’t think I would have realized that grandparents were a thing that existed.” He frowns suddenly. “So when Peter got that stock for us . . .”

“Yup. He did it as a deliberate ‘fuck you’ to his father, particularly the part where he got you guys seven percent, because Talia’s severance package only gave you a third of that.”

“Wow.” Derek’s laughing. “Peter might be a jerk, but sometimes, he’s an awesome jerk.”

“True dat,” Stiles says, and he’s laughing, too. “You’re not upset? I mean, when Satomi told you about what your grandfather did . . .”

“He was an asshole. I’ve always known that. You don’t know a lot about . . . not just what he did to my mom, but the way he treated Peter. Peter doesn’t get his weird complexes from nowhere. As far as I can tell, Jordan spent his entire life telling Peter he would never be good enough.” Derek folds up his burrito. “When we got word he’d been killed, it really fucked Peter up.”

“I would’ve expected him to go throw a party, if he hated the guy that much,” Stiles says, frowning.

“You would have thought so, but Peter was upset that Jordan died before he could become Head of Legal, which is where he was aiming. He wanted to show his father what he could do, and he never got the chance.”

Stiles sighs. “God. Parents can really fuck people up.”

“Yeah. Anyway, it took time, but he got over it. He succeeds for himself now, which I think is good for him.” Derek takes a bite into his burrito. “Damn. This is really good.”

“I know, right? That’s enough about business. Let’s stuff ourselves silly and play Mario Kart.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Stiles corners Peter in his office at the apartment the next day. He’s too full of excitement to wait. “So I heard that you almost went into fashion design.”

Much to his surprise, Peter slaps shut the ledger that he’s been working on and launches straight into a tirade. “You know, I had to put up with enough mockery about that when I was fifteen, I don’t need you to –”

“Whoa, whoa, hang on!” Stiles holds his hands up in surrender. “There wasn’t going to be mocking,
I swear. I was just going to ask if you wanted to take me shopping.”

Peter looks at him suspiciously. “Shopping.”

“I knew you had to be at least a little into fashion; the tailor told me that you’d made some recommendations. So when Satomi told me you had almost gone into it as a career, I thought, this explains why Peter’s eyebrow always twitches when he sees me in my so-called business suit. Nobody else seems to know about it, so I thought you might actually enjoy having somebody to talk about it with. And somebody to dress.”

For a long minute, it looks like Peter is fighting against his better judgment. Then he says, “Cargo pants, Stiles? With a suit jacket? Really?”

Stiles gives in to a wide grin. “And?”

“Your ties are never the right length. You don’t match your belt and your shoes. And virtually nothing you ever wear actually fits you. I don’t know how you can stand to go out in public.”

“So . . . you want to take me shopping?”

Peter gives in. “For God’s sake, yes. I’ll call the car.”

Stiles is laughing as Peter practically drags him out of the apartment and down the stairs. To his surprise, they don’t wind up back at the tailor. Peter says he goes there frequently, but it’s really more for special occasions and formal outfits. What Stiles needs, he says, is business casual. For that, they can go to any department store with a decent selection.

Peter hands him the first outfit and Stiles says, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why these clothes? I want to know. Why these colors, why these fabrics? I don’t know fuckall about fashion and ADD compels me to learn things. So tell me why.”

Peter gives him a somewhat suspicious eyeballing, but then he does start to explain the whys and wherefores of fashion, about the different patterns and how they fit and accentuate the human body. He gets into it more as they try different things, and several times Stiles catches Peter stopping himself, like he’s afraid he’s getting too excited and Stiles is going to start poking fun at him. Whenever Peter does that, Stiles tries to ask a semi-intelligent question to show that he’s paying attention.

By the time they leave, he has an entire new wardrobe, and he’s exhausted from all the trying things on. But he looks good and he knows it. Peter’s attention to detail is incredible. He doubts he’ll look anywhere near as good when he dresses himself in the exact same outfits.

“So is this why you always pushed Derek and his sisters to do what they really love to do?” he asks, as the car takes them back to the apartment. “Because you couldn’t do what you wanted to do?”

“It’s part of it, yes.” Peter shrugs. “And partly logic. People will be the most successful at what they’re passionate about. Just because Derek’s passion for dance and yoga makes no sense to me doesn’t mean that it doesn’t make sense to him. And not many people are in a position like his, where they have the available wealth to pursue their dreams. It seems foolish not to, given the circumstances.”

“Very logical.” Stiles is smirking despite himself. “Nobody will ever guess how squishy you are on
“I beg your pardon. I am not squishy.”

“You’re totally cotton candy.”

“I will make you walk home.”

Stiles is still laughing, but manages to muffle it. “Couldn’t you go after it now, though? I mean, you have plenty of money. It’s not like you have to stick around being Head of Legal. Your dad being dead and all.”

“What makes you think I don’t?” Peter asks, arching his eyebrows at Stiles.


“You don’t honestly think I spend six hours in my home office most days doing legal work, do you? For God’s sake, no. Even I’m not that much of a workaholic.”

“So you’re designing stuff? What do you do with it?”

Peter gives him a look for a minute, then sighs. “Several years ago, Hale Corp bought out a company that designs and manufactures clothing. I brokered the deal. They were allowed to remain largely independent, and part of the agreement was that they would manufacture my designs. Pending the approval of their staff, of course. I’m open to critique.”

Stiles’ jaw hangs open for a minute. Then he whoops with laughter. “You mean, you maneuvered a billion dollar corporation into buying out some tiny clothing distributor so you could see your designs put into production? That is awesome. I want to see them, come on.”

“Well . . .” Peter’s reticence lasts all of about two seconds before he takes out his phone and pulls up a folder. “These are the actual catalog photos. I only have the sketches and design software on my laptop, obviously.” He starts swiping through the gallery so Stiles can look at the clothes. “This is probably my favorite. I made it for Talia, a long time ago. She wanted a dress with pockets.”

“Pretty much every woman I’ve ever met would kiss you just for saying those words,” Stiles agrees.

“Yes, my dresses-with-pockets line has sold very well,” Peter says.

“You have a dresses-with-pockets line!” Stiles can’t stop laughing. “That’s amazing. I bet Laura and Cora would love that.”

“They each have one, actually. Gifts from me. And they do like them.”

“But they don’t know you designed them.” Stiles sits back and studies Peter thoughtfully. “Why haven’t you told them about it? Derek didn’t have any idea you were even interested in this kind of thing, let alone that you’d bought an entire company to live your dream.”

“I’d like to say ‘it’s complicated’, but it really isn’t.” Peter shrugs. “I spent years being mocked for my chosen profession being beneath me, being silly, being pointless. So I stopped talking about it. I’ve thought once or twice about telling Laura or Derek about it, but the longer you keep a secret, the harder it becomes to talk about it. You have to deal with all the ‘why didn’t you ever tell us’ bullshit. Frankly, I just didn’t care enough to mention it.”

“Well, I think you should tell them, because then you could design clothes for them, like you did for
Talia,” Stiles says.

“Mm. Perhaps.” Peter looks up as the car pulls up to the hotel, and the chauffer gets out to get their door. “Are you going to come up, or should I have him take you home?”

“Oh, I’m totally coming upstairs. I want to put on that three-piece suit again and have you take it off me.”

Peter gives a snort. “Can’t argue with that. Come on, then.”

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When Derek gets home from his late classes at the studio, he’s surprised to see an extra pair of shoes just inside. He thinks they’re Stiles’ dress shoes, although he’s not sure since he usually wears his sneakers when he comes over. Then he sees a jacket tossed over a chair. That’s definitely Peter’s. A little further into the apartment, there’s a tie and a shirt on the floor. Derek starts laughing as he puts together what’s happening.

A moment later, there’s a loud thump from the bathroom and then he hears Stiles give a whoop of laughter. Surprisingly, Peter is laughing, too. It stops Derek in his tracks, because he can’t actually think of the last time he heard Peter laugh. He just isn’t that sort of person most of the time.

“Oh my God!” Stiles proclaims loudly, and there’s another thump. “Oh my God, Peter, oh fuck, fuck –”

Cheeks flushing pink, Derek retreats to the living room, which is far enough away that once he turns on the television, he can’t hear the noises coming from Peter’s bedroom. He finds X-Files reruns on and lies down on the sofa.

About half an hour later, Stiles comes staggering out of the bedroom, wearing Peter’s bathrobe, inside out. He sees Derek on the sofa and his face lights up. “Hiiiiii, wanna cuddle? I wanna cuddle but Peter doesn’t wanna cuddle but that’s okay because I’d rather cuddle with you anyway,” he says, and sprawls out all over Derek. He tucks his head right into the crook of Derek’s neck, pressing his cheek against Derek’s chest, and gives a contented sigh. “You’re the best cuddler. Don’t move. I live here now.”

Derek snorts. “Noted,” he says, reaching up to rub his hand down Stiles’ spine. Stiles makes a happy mumbling noise and nestles closer. “Good day?”

“Yeah. I mean. Work stuff. Sex stuff.” Stiles yawns. “I’m so lucky. I have the best snuggly boyfriend and the hottest fuckbuddy and life is super. I still feel greedy sometimes because even though I’m not getting more than your average person, I’m getting it from two awesome people. Especially you. Mostly you. Actually, Peter’s just kind of mediocre in a lot of ways. I’m still lucky though.”

Derek laughs again. “We’re lucky, too, you know. To have found you. Someone who’s happy with what we can give you, instead of unhappy about what we can’t.”

“You give me all the things,” Stiles says, and yawns again. “It’s awesome. I love you.”

“I – oh,” Derek says, a little stunned despite himself. Stiles doesn’t seem to have noticed. Derek feels
a smile come to his face despite himself. “I love you, too.”

“Was that weird?” Stiles seems to wake up a little. “Shit, that was weird, wasn’t it. I’m sorry. Well, I’m not sorry, because it’s true and I want you to know that, but —”

“It wasn’t weird.” Derek rubs his thumb over the back of Stiles’ neck. “It’s just that nobody’s ever said that to me before, so it took me off guard a little.”

“That’s ridiculous. Everybody should love you.” Stiles sounds grumpy. “But I definitely do. One hundred percent truthiness.”

“That’s not a word.”

“Sure it is. Ask Stephen Colbert.” Stiles wiggles around a little and gives a contented sigh. “Ooh, I’m gonna spoil you so bad. I’m gonna buy you chocolate covered strawberries and I’m gonna give you backrubs and you will melt. Melt, I’m telling you.”

Derek feels his cheeks flush faintly pink. “Yeah, well, I’m gonna bake you a heart-shaped cake and take you stargazing and hold your hand all the time.”

“I’m totally gonna scatter rose petals all over your floor.”

“I’m going to bring you breakfast in bed.”

“You two are sickening.” Peter remarks as he walks through the room, clad in nothing but his underwear, heading for the kitchen.

“And proud of it,” Stiles shouts after him. “Hmm, hey, so. Board meeting is in two days. We’re gonna totally kick ass. Jennifer’s gonna be sorry she wouldn’t just apologize to you like a human being.”

“Yeah, but it occurs to me, won’t she still be head of PR?” Derek is frowning. “She’ll still be in the company. She could cause a lot of trouble.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.” Peter comes back through, holding a bottle of beer. “When I get done with her, she won’t know what hit her.”

“Charming.” Derek says, rolling his eyes. Peter just salutes him with the bottle and keeps walking.
Chapter 14

Stiles isn’t technically working the day of the board meeting, because it’s a Saturday. But he’s there, because he’s too excited to stay home. He’s working down in the lab, which is empty and deserted. Derek has promised to put him on speaker phone so he won’t miss the fun. He’s barely able to contain himself as he paces around the lab. Only thirty minutes to go. Twenty . . . fifteen . . .

He looks up as Theo strolls into the lab, dressed casually and looking as smug as ever. “Hey, nice piece,” he says, picking up the smart gun off the table where Satomi was last fiddling with the voice chip. He holds it up in one hand, eyes narrowed as he sights along the wall and then lets it rest on Stiles. “Bang!” Theo laughs. “Two for flinching.”

Stiles doesn’t bother pointing out that he didn’t flinch, because the gun can’t fire, or that Theo’s an idiot. He just says, “Was there something you wanted?”

“Not me. The boss lady.” Theo tucks the gun in the back of his pants like he’s some sort of practiced criminal, and looks over as Jennifer walks in.

“Hey, Jennifer,” Stiles says, although he’s feeling wary. He doesn’t like Jennifer approaching him right now. She has no reason to. They had talked both the previous night and that morning, as he assured her that everything should go her way. “Problem?”

“No exactly.” Jennifer gives him that warm, insincere smile. “Just trying to head off any problems before they start. Harris tells me that both Peter and Derek have arrived for the board meeting.”

“One would expect that right around now,” Stiles says.

“Well, you’re going to be my insurance. Because I don’t trust you, Stiles. I don’t trust any of you, and I’ve never planned to.” Jennifer pulls a pistol out of her purse. Unlike the one Theo has been playing with, Stiles is willing to bet that this one is extremely functional. “I just need a place to stash you while the meeting goes on. If Derek doesn’t vote as he’s been instructed, the consequences could be . . . messy.”

Stiles opens his mouth. Looks at the gun, and closes it. He forces himself to swallow. “Jennifer, you don’t need to do this. He’s going to vote for you, I promise.”

“You can’t promise that, Stiles. It’s not exactly that I don’t trust you, but whenever Peter’s involved, a little backup is advisable. He could have gotten Derek to change his mind in the past ten minutes. And if so, I’m going to change it back.”

Stiles looks at the gun again and then glances around the room, his mind racing. “Okay, but, but you don’t have to stash me somewhere. Just leave me here, I won’t do anything weird, I promise.” He glances around again, lets his eyes linger here and there, licks his lips nervously. “Please don’t put me in a closet or something, I fucking hate small spaces, just – ”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Jennifer looks where he’s been looking, over at Satomi’s cryogenics chamber. “What an excellent idea, Stiles. Is that thing airtight?”

“W-What? Well, yeah, it would have to be, but – ”

“Good. Get in.”
“Jennifer, no, come on, this isn’t— you don’t have to do this—”

“I’m not going to repeat myself, Stiles.” Jennifer gestures with the gun. Reluctantly, Stiles climbs into the chamber and lies down. “Give me your phone.”

“Aww, come on,” Stiles whines, but hands it over. She tosses it to Theo, who catches it with a shit-eating grin. Then Jennifer uses her own phone to take a picture of him in the chamber.

“This should be motivation enough for Derek,” she says. “Theo, I want you to stay in here. Make sure nobody comes in and finds him and lets him out. Here, take my gun.”

“Got my own,” Theo says, smirking as he shows her his prize.

“Good.” Jennifer closes the lid over Stiles. He hears it latch, hears the hissing which means it’s being sealed off. He probably has a couple hours of oxygen. He doesn’t know exactly what the rate of consumption is. But he has no intention of staying sealed away that long.

“Yeah, you go show that picture to Derek,” Stiles mutters as he looks up at the ceiling of the chamber and then checks his watch to see how long it is before the meeting starts. “That ought to be a laugh riot. When you’re done with that, show it to Peter. This is gonna be fun.”

~ ~ ~

Peter barely looks up as Derek comes through the board room door. Until they drop the other shoe, he’s supposed to be pretending that he and Derek aren’t speaking to each other. It’s silly, but playing the game amuses him. So he’s not really paying attention, running through the numbers in his head one more time, as Jennifer walks over and greets Derek. She’s got that smug smile on her face again, and looks altogether too pleased with herself. Peter rolls his eyes despite himself, as she takes out her phone to show Derek something.

Instantly, Peter realizes that something is wrong. Derek’s back and shoulders go straight, rigid, and he automatically looks over at his uncle like he needs help. Peter frowns and decides that they’re close enough to go time that he doesn’t care if they blow their cover. It’s very doubtful that Jennifer can get an extra vote in the three minutes before the board meeting is scheduled to begin. So he walks over to Derek and says, “Something wrong, nephew?”

“She has—” Derek starts, his voice tight and anxious.

“Stiles,” Jennifer says, holding out her phone so Peter can see the picture on the screen. He looks down to see Stiles lying flat on his back in some sort of enclosed area. He looks more annoyed than anything else. A second picture shows the lid of the container closed over him. “Hm. I wonder how much oxygen is in there? It’s designed to be airtight.”

Peter looks at the phone as she tucks it away, his mind untangling all the possibilities. “I’m just curious, but did you actually think we were working against you, or was this just a bit of extra insurance?”

“It was insurance because I don’t trust you, Peter. I knew there was a possibility that you were working with Stiles, and gee, look at this! I was right.” Jennifer tucks her phone into the pocket of her blazer and turns to Derek. “I hope I have your vote, Derek. I really do. Because you’ll never find Stiles before he runs out of oxygen without my help. And I’d hate it if anything happened to him.”
With that, she turns and walks away, heading for where Kali is standing by the head of the room. Peter sees the look of panic on Derek’s face, and reaches out to squeeze his wrist. “So short-sighted,” he murmurs, mostly to himself. “Your position as CEO won’t help you very much if you get charged with murder.”

“Peter!” Derek hisses. “Never mind whether or not she’ll be arrested tomorrow. What are we going to do today?”

Peter sighs, but then he remembers that Derek, for all his intelligence, is nowhere near as devious as he and Stiles are. “Derek. I would never let anything happen to Stiles. Do you believe that?”

Some of the tension eases out of Derek’s shoulders. “Yeah.”

“Then let me handle this. Stiles is going to be fine, but we need to buy a little bit of time. I need to ask Satomi a quick question, so excuse me for one moment.” Peter steps away from Derek, glancing over at Jennifer and Kali. Jennifer smirks at him. “Satomi, lovely to see you as always,” he greets her, and she rolls her eyes at him. “Can I ask you what might seem like a rather odd question?”

“From you, I would expect no less,” Satomi says.

“Your cryogenics chamber. Stiles mentioned to me that you had put an emergency release on the inside, is that true?”

Satomi’s eyebrows go up. “That is an odd question, Peter. But yes, that’s correct.”

“Mm. Thank you.” Peter exits the room to make a quick phone call, then walks back over to Derek and takes his seat.

Jennifer calls the meeting to order as soon as the last board member is in, and says, “Well, we all know why we’re here, so let’s cut to the chase. I’ve called for a vote of no-confidence in Deucalion Hale. Mismanagement over the past two years has led to a drastic reduction in profits, and our shareholders are unhappy. It’s time that we put the company in better hands.”

“Oh, I have no objection to the fact that at least two of the people in this room have absolutely got to go,” Peter says, glancing at his phone, “but I think we should talk about which two.”

“Everyone here has been thoroughly briefed on the situation,” Harris says impatiently. “There’s no need for further discussion.”

“The most capable we have,” Jennifer says.

Peter gives a quiet snort, and then says, “I’d like to open the floor for discussion.”

Jennifer gives him a startled look. It’s clear that she wasn’t expecting that. With a theoretical clock on Stiles’ life, stalling is the last thing she would have predicted Peter would do. But she recovers well. “I don’t see how that’s necessary. We all saw the profit reports. We all know who’s been in charge. It’s time for a change in leadership.”

“Oh, I have no objection to the fact that at least two of the people in this room have absolutely got to go,” Peter says, glancing at his phone, “but I think we should talk about which two.”

“It’s a decision of some gravity, is it not?” Peter says. “There are many people here who don’t have all the facts. I’d like to shed some light on subject.”
Stiles studies his watch until it’s two minutes into the meeting and he can be absolutely sure that Jennifer, with her actual firearm, is out of the room. Then he hits the emergency release. There’s a sharp hissing noise and the lid pops free. It’s heavy, and it takes him a lot of effort to shove it open, but he manages.

The lab is empty. He looks around for his phone and doesn’t see it, so he heads out to the reception area. Theo is sitting on Stiles’ desk, legs swinging back and forth as he plays on his own phone. Stiles clears his throat and Theo fumbles it, grabbing at the gun. “The hell? How did you get out?”

“God, spend more time in R&D, you guys are pathetic,” Stiles says. “Where’s my phone?”

“Like I’m going to give it to you!” Theo points the gun directly at Stiles’ face. “Get the fuck back in the lab!”

“Or what, you’ll shoot me?” Stiles can’t hide the tone of disdain, and doesn’t make any effort to. “News flash, jackass. Remember that smart gun project your company has been working on? You’re holding the prototype. You can’t shoot me with that thing.”

“Nice try!” Theo sneers at him. “I already checked to make sure it’s loaded.”

“For fuck’s sake, you really are as stupid as you act.” Stiles holds his hands out to his sides. “Okay, shoot me then. Go ahead. Go.”

Theo’s sneer fades into a scowl, and his hand tightens on the trigger. “Get back in the lab and I won’t have to.”

“I’m not going anywhere, and you can’t make me. Not with that thing, not unless you club me over the head with it.”

Theo pulls the trigger. There’s the expected click. He looks down at the gun, an expression of dismay creeping across his face.

“Give me that,” Stiles says, marching across the room and grabbing it from him. “Where’s my phone?”

“I’m not giving you your God damned phone!”

“Another bulletin for you, Theo: one of us knows how to use this thing. It clearly isn’t you. Who does that leave?”

Theo looks around, uncertainly, like someone might step out of the shadows and save him. Nobody does. Stiles waves the gun at him, wanting to get the point across without Theo asking pesky questions like how Stiles is going to unlock it. He can’t know that only Satomi can, but if he stops to think, he might realize that Stiles probably can’t.

So Stiles grabs Theo by the front of the shirt, yanks him close, and presses the barrel of the gun into his neck. “Did I tell you that my father is a cop? So I happen to know that if you threaten me with a gun, and I get it away from you and then shoot and kill you, it’s considered self-defense and no charges would be pressed? Give me my phone, jackass. Are you willing to die for Jennifer’s stupid ambitions?”
“Jesus, fine, here!” Theo opens the desk drawer and practically throws it at him.

Stiles manages to grab it before it hits the ground. “Thanks.” He tosses the gun onto the desk and then unlocks the phone. “Now smile for the camera,” he says, tugging Theo into the frame. “I’ve got a very important message to send.”

~ ~ ~ ~

Jennifer’s smile tightens as Peter continues to speak. She looks at Derek and says deliberately, “I don’t really think we want to waste time on that, do we?”

Derek gives Peter an uneasy glance, but then says, “I think my uncle is right. It’s a complicated situation, and I really haven’t decided what my vote should be.”

“Well, that’s fascinating to hear, Derek,” Jennifer says, “but certainly, why don’t we have a brief overview of the evidence that – ”

Peter’s phone quietly chimes. He looks down at the screen and sees the message there. It’s a photo of Stiles, flashing the V-sign for victory, next to an extremely disgruntled looking Theo. Below it are the words: I’m good. Take her to church. A smile curves on Peter’s face despite his best efforts. He quietly forwards the text to Derek, though he’s sure that Stiles will text him as well, and then looks up as Jennifer finishes talking. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t listening. What were you saying?”

Jennifer flushes dark red, and several of the board members titter quietly. “I was talking about the profit loss we’ve sustained under Deucalion.”

“Yes, let’s talk about that,” Peter says. “You can tell the board all about the money that you and Kali have embezzled, thus causing our profit margin to drop.”


“Oh, all right, ‘embezzled’ is a bit too strong a word,” Peter says, “since the money hasn’t actually left the company coffers. You’ve just been hiding it and forging sales reports. Let’s rewind to about a few weeks ago, when I first noticed that sales reports weren’t matching preliminary reports. Since all the sales reports go through Finance before they’re distributed to the rest of us, I decided that they couldn’t be trusted. So I’ve spent the last two weeks gathering sales reports directly from the vendors, rather than distributors or manufacturers, and let me tell you that if my assistants never have to spend six hours trying to find intelligent life at Best Buy again, it will be too soon.”

There’s another spate of snickering. Jennifer is just looking stunned.

“Once I had those reports and confirmed that there was, indeed, a discrepancy between what was being sold and what we were told was being sold, I went looking for the money. Which, as I’m sure you remember, has been dumped into a number of Reserve Accounts.”

Laura clears her throat. “Meaning?”

“Let me explain for those of you who don’t work in Legal or Finance,” Peter says. “When a company gets sued for ten million dollars, they transfer ten million dollars into what’s called a reserve account. The money still belongs to us, but it is now classified as a liability, not an asset.”

“Over the past three years, Kali has transferred hundreds of millions of dollars to these Reserve Accounts. I can only assume Jennifer didn’t actually steal the money point blank because she wanted it as a cushion in case her tenure as CEO led to less than desirable results, as is basically inevitable.”

“But the money is still there,” one of the board members presses.

“Yes. The money is still in Hale Corp hands,” Peter says, and several of them let out sighs of relief. “We’ve actually done quite well for ourselves over the past two years – especially the year before last, as it happens.”

“You – you can’t – ” Jennifer sputters.

“If you’re going to say I can’t prove this, you’d better not even think about it,” Peter says. “Of course I can prove it. I can prove every word of it. I have spreadsheets. I have a small army of assistants who have helped me compile the data and half a dozen banks who were holding the money. Which, by the way, has all been transferred back to where it’s supposed to be. Would you like me to demonstrate? One of my interns is very good with Power Point; I’m sure she could put together a lovely presentation.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” Deucalion says, his voice quietly amused.

Jennifer looks at Derek and shouts, “How can you let him do this?”

Derek snorts. “I don’t let my uncle do anything.”

“The reason, in case any of you are curious, that Jennifer is so shocked that I dared bring all this up, is because she threatened the life of Derek’s boyfriend if either of us were to vote against her or persuade anyone else to vote against her,” Peter says, and a murmured gasp goes throughout the room. “Locking Stiles away in an airtight space, putting a clock on his life, and telling us we only had until his oxygen ran out to rescue him. By the way, Jennifer, you really ought to spend more time in R&D. Satomi added an emergency release to her cryo chamber, and it seems you didn’t know that.”

Jennifer goes white and stammers weakly.

“Oh, and by the way, I’ve already called the police, so, now that we’ve finished up here, they’re waiting to arrest you for fraud, assault, et cetera. Kali will only get arrested for the fraud. Oh, and Harris, you should know that Theo is being arrested, since he helped Jennifer abduct Stiles. I’m afraid that the Hale legal department will not be representing him.” Peter smirks around the room.

“Anything else?”

Harris sputters. “You can’t – ”

“Should we talk about replacing Jennifer and Kali?” one of the board members asked.

Deucalion clears his throat. “I would suggest that we table that decision until such time as we’ve had ample time to review Peter’s findings. Jennifer and Kali will be on leave until then.”

“Seconded,” Satomi says, and a quick vote approves the measure.

“But you . . .” Jennifer looks a little helpless as Derek opens the door and the police come in. “How did you . . .”
“Well, Jennifer, let me tell you,” Peter says. “You really shouldn’t have tried to involve Stiles. You’re going to have to get up a lot earlier in the morning to outsmart my soulmate.”

There’s more shocked silence, and then Satomi leans back in her chair and bursts into laughter. “Oh, Lord, suddenly so many things make sense.”

“I agree,” Deucalion says, shaking his head. As the police take Jennifer and Kali out of the room, the board members start to talk amongst themselves. “It isn’t what I expected from you, Peter. I figured you would let Jennifer take over, so you could swoop in and save the company later. She never could have gotten the board’s approval to fire you, not with you threatening to take your talent to Argent Industries. Give her a year to run things into the ground, then take the CEO position away from her. It seemed like your style.”

Peter sighs. “Nobody believes me when I say I don’t want to be CEO.”

“You don’t?” Satomi asks dryly.

“No, of course not. I want to be CFO. A position which just opened up, I believe.” Peter smiles at them. “It’s the CFO that has all the real power, you know.”

“God help us all,” Derek says, rolling his eyes. He looks up as Stiles comes into the room, and his face brightens. He goes over to Stiles and pulls him into a tight hug. “Hey, you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Stiles assures him, pressing his face into Derek’s shoulder. “Not gonna lie, it got a bit scary, but fortunately for me, Jennifer is an idiot and Theo’s twice as stupid.”

“It was some luck that they picked my cryo chamber to lock you into, though,” Satomi says.

Stiles laughs. “Luck had nothing to do with it. I was in the lab and they obviously had to stash me somewhere, so I just telegraphed that I was afraid of small spaces and she ate it right out of my hand.”

Satomi shakes her head. “You’re too clever by half, young man. Now, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I have work to do. Peter, always a pleasure.”

Deucalion gets up and extends his arm to Marin, and she takes it. “Have that Power Point presentation on my desk by nine AM Monday, if you could.”

“Naturally,” Peter says. A minute later, the room is empty except for the three of them.

Stiles pokes Peter in the chest, though he still hasn’t left the comfort of Derek’s embrace. “You seem very proud of yourself.”

“He was pretty awesome,” Derek admits. “He took Jennifer down all the pegs.”

“I recorded it for you,” Peter says. “I know that sort of thing gets you all hot and bothered.”

Stiles’ eyes light up. “Hell yes! Let’s go listen to it and have sex on your desk.”

“How could I refuse an offer like that?”

Derek’s arms tighten involuntarily around Stiles. “Not yet, okay? I just . . . stay with me for a little while. Peter can wait.”

Stiles looks at him, then nods. “Okay.” He leans into Derek’s embrace, pressing his cheek against Derek’s shoulder. “I’ll stay with you as long as you want. How about we go back to the apartment
and watch a movie, okay?”

“Yeah. That sounds good.” Derek looks at Peter. “You want to come with?”

“Do you promise you won’t watch an obnoxious romantic comedy?”

“Deal,” Derek and Stiles say in unison.

“Then yes. Let me just grab a few things from my office and we can head home.”

~ ~ ~ ~
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I thought for a long time about whether or not I wanted to include Derek's soulmate in this. Eventually I decided against it because it would just be so convenient for him to meet them just as the action wrapped up. If enough people interested are I might write a little tag, but I actually like it a lot this way, too. ^_^

Thanks for reading, everybody! <3

The story is big news in the paper the next day. “Good thing it's Sunday, or the stock would have dropped fifty points,” Derek says.

“Infant, please,” Peter replies. “Why do you think I made sure to have the board meeting on a Saturday?”

Derek snorts and shakes his head. “I give up. You thought of everything.”

“Naturally.”

The stock does dip Monday morning, but it’s not too bad, because by then they’re in damage control mode. Peter and Deucalion are prepared for it and have released a number of statements about how the damage to the company was minimal and the perpetrators have already been caught and will be replaced shortly. Peter has distributed his proof to the other board members with great gusto.

He’s acting CFO, and nobody is questioning whether or not the appointment is going to become official. Legal is in good hands, he says, having left his duties split amongst three people until he ‘has time’ to choose which one of them will be his replacement. He’s openly admitted to Stiles that it’s a test, and he wants to see how each of them handle it. “That’s a shitty thing to do,” Stiles says.

“Only if they don’t know it’s what I’m doing, and they all do,” Peter says. “Call it a probation period. And it’s not like the other two get fired afterwards. They’ll keep their current, important, well-salaried positions. I’m not a monster.”

In the meantime, Peter is being treated like a hero, which amuses the hell out of him. He’s been very modest about it, making sure that everybody knows it was Satomi who originally noticed the discrepancies, and that it was Stiles who helped him get a lot of the information.

“You being all fair about this is giving me the heebs,” Derek says.

Peter snorts. “People like a humble hero. I’m just giving them reason to like me. By the end of the month, they’ll be willing to give me anything I want.”

“What exactly are you trying to get out of them?”

“Besides the position of CFO, which I’ve basically got in the bag? Well, we have to replace our director of PR, as well, and I’d like to make sure that’s somebody competent. Plus I need to keep them on my good side while we get Laura’s charity foundation set up.”
“Oh, are we still doing that?” Derek asks. “I mean, it was Jennifer who promised it.”

“Yes, but it was an excellent idea on your part. Both for your sister and for the company. Some good press will be just what we need right now, and opening a charity foundation assures our investors that despite recent problems in the chain of command, the company is flourishing just as well as ever.” Peter reaches over and steals a piece of bacon from Derek’s cutting board. “Secondly, if I’m going to get any leverage out of this deal, I’m going to use it against Harris. I can’t prove he knew what Jennifer and Kali were doing, but he was definitely on their side, and nobody on the board trusts him right now. I probably can’t get rid of him, but I can make him toe the line for a while, which will be immensely satisfying.”

Derek snorts. “I have to admit, that’ll be fun to see. What about Daehler?”

“Daehler’s position on the board is non-negotiable, unfortunately. We have to live with him. On the upside, he’s an idiot. So there’s that.” Peter shrugs. “Then, of course, there’s the situation with Stiles.”

“What situation is that?” Derek asks. “You mean his job?”

“No, I mean the fact that he’s my soulmate, but your boyfriend.”

Derek shrugs. “I thought we had that pretty well hashed out, to be honest.”

“We do. But now the board knows that I’ve met my soulmate. Which means there are certain things that they are going to expect to happen now. Things like marriage.”

“Oh.” Derek starts slicing into the top of the loaf of bread he’s using. “How are we handling that?”

“I haven’t decided, to be honest. Several people have mentioned that they’d like to get to know Stiles better, that they’ll assume he’ll have a place on the board, et cetera. Which is fine. That’s how Marin got her position on the board before she became Head of HR. It isn’t as if they’re being insistent, it’s just that . . .”

“They expect things.” Derek nods quietly. He doesn’t look up as he starts filling the crevices in the bread with shredded cheese. “Why not just tell them the truth? That you and Stiles are friends but not a couple?”

“I haven’t worked up to it yet. They’ll all have a hundred stupid questions about it.”

“Then for now, just say that Stiles is still in school, so you haven’t really talked about it.”

Peter glances over at his nephew. “Yes, that’s probably a good idea. Stiles certainly doesn’t have any interest in working at Hale Corp. Which reminds me. I was talking to Cora the other day. She’s going to be back from Uganda next week. She was talking about carotene-enriched bananas to prevent vitamin A deficiency?” He steals another piece of bacon, and Derek smacks the back of his hand with a spatula. “I think I’m going to have Satomi give her her own lab.”

“Pretty sure that Cora’s going to need to get her PhD before having her own lab is gonna help,” Derek mentions.

“Yes, I suppose so. Still. Nothing wrong with planning for the future.”

Derek nods as he sprinkles green onions over the bread. “You know, uh . . . I don’t think I ever really thanked you for what you did for us. Getting us the stock, the positions on the board. In fact, I’m pretty sure I bitched about it a lot because I hated the meetings so much. And I know you didn’t
do it only for us, that you had your own reasons, but . . . thanks. You’ve always looked out for us.”

“It’s what Talia would have wanted,” Peter says.

“It’s what you wanted. So just say ‘you’re welcome’ like a normal human being.”

“You’re welcome, nephew.”

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One doesn’t just open a million dollar charity foundation without fanfare, Peter tells Stiles, after the new PR director has been appointed and they’re at work arranging things. Laura responds to the idea of the opening gala with about as much enthusiasm as an ant would have to a magnifying glass on a sunny day. “Do I have to?” she asks, and Peter assures her that yes, yes she does indeed have to. It won’t be as bad as she thinks, he says. Mostly they just have to let a bunch of rich people mill around and talk about how impressed with how generous they are.

“If it’s a gala, you’re going to need something to wear,” Stiles says, and he and Derek take her shopping. Laura likes fashion about as much as Derek does. Like her brother, her drawers are filled with T-shirts and jeans. Stiles thinks about everything Peter has told him about fashion and picks out a pink taffeta horror. Laura is oblivious to how awful it is, paying for it without a qualm.

“Let’s see what you got,” Peter says when they get home, unable to squelch his curiosity. Laura pulls the dress out of the bag and holds it up against herself. Peter’s eyes go wide with horror. “No,” he says.

“No?” Laura says blinking.

Peter reaches for the dress, fingers curling like he’s trying to stop himself. “You can’t wear that. It’s hideous. Literally everything about it is hideous.”

“Geez, why do you even care?” Laura asks, rolling her eyes.

“I care far more than you can comprehend, I will design you a dress, you are not to wear that, I cannot be seen in public with you in that,” Peter says, the words leaving his mouth in a rush.

Laura and Derek both blink at him. “You’ll design me a dress?” Laura’s tone is skeptical. “What are you even talking about?”

Peter’s jaw twitches. “I’ve designed half of your wardrobe, for God’s sake. That green dress you wear to literally every special occasion? I designed that when I was twelve. The pants that you call ‘stealth comfort’ because they look fancy but feel like pajamas? I designed those, too. The blouse that you own in six different colors because you liked it so much? Mine. I will design you a dress, and you will look fantastic, and it will not be pink and you!” Peter breaks off halfway through his sentence and turns on Stiles. “Don’t think that I don’t see what you did! You deliberately put Laura in the worst dress possible because you knew I would hate it!”

“Guilty,” Stiles says, grinning. “You taught me enough about fashion that it was easy.”

“You shouldn’t use your powers for evil.”
“You’ll have to punish me,” Stiles says, biting his lower lip to keep from laughing.

“I’m going to, believe me, but right now I have things that are far more important that I need to be doing. Laura, come with me, I need to get your current measurements – ” Peter takes Laura by the elbow and practically drags her into his office.

Derek blinks after them. “What just happened?”

“Your uncle is a weirdo,” Stiles says, “and he has a clothing design business under the table because he’s a fashionista, but never told either of you about it because lots of people made fun of him when he was a teenager. And somehow this was too complicated for him to explain, despite the fact that I literally just did it in two sentences.”

Derek considers that. “Somehow that all makes perfect sense. Cool. Did you actually dress Laura in the worst outfit you could find?”

“Oh, yeah, absolutely. Pink taffeta? Jesus, even before I met Peter I knew better.” Stiles gives a shudder that’s only partially feigned. “I never would have actually let her wear it, though. If Peter hadn’t taken the bait, I was going to break down and confess that it was a prank and tell her I chickened out. But I was about ninety percent sure that Peter would jump off the balcony before letting Laura wear that to an actual corporate function.”

“Pretty safe bet, apparently,” Derek says, laughing. He twines his fingers through Stiles’. “Well, looks like they’re going to be busy for a while. Want to go down to the park? Feed the ducks, maybe?”

“Only if I get to sit in your lap.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.”

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“Okay, so, let me get this straight,” Ethan says, frowning between the three of them. Peter rolls his eyes, but that doesn’t deter Ethan. “You two are boyfriends,” he says, gesturing between Derek and Stiles, “but Stiles is Peter’s soulmate.”

“That is correct,” Derek says. He’s allowing the conversation because Ethan had started it by apologizing for how crazy his immediate family was. He seems to be genuinely interested, so Derek doesn’t see the harm in answering the questions.

“But how does that work?” Ethan asks.

Peter sighs. “I’m going to go get a drink,” he says, and departs without another word.

Stiles rolls his eyes. “Actually that’s a pretty good example. I mean, can you picture Peter wanting a boyfriend? Buying flowers, remembering anniversaries, negotiating whose turn it is to do the dishes?”

Ethan frowns after Peter. “No. Granted.”

“So there you have it.”
“But aren’t you jealous?” Ethan looks at Derek. “Isn’t he jealous?”

“I’m really not,” Derek says. He sees Ethan’s perplexed expression. “Look, you don’t have to understand it. You’re not involved. Just file it under ‘whatever works’, okay?”

Ethan lifts his hands in surrender and wanders away to get himself a drink. Stiles leans in to plant a kiss on the corner of Derek’s mouth. “At least he wasn’t a jerk about it?” he says, and Derek rolls his eyes. “You wanna go see how Laura’s doing?”

“Yeah, good idea.” Derek stands up and extends a hand to Stiles, who takes it. Laura has been talking to different donors for most of the evening, and she looks exhausted. She had already had to give a speech about how much good they’re going to do for the community. She’s got a dozen plans already in motion to improve life for the homeless, with medical care and mental health assistance, job programs, afterschool programs for underprivileged teens to keep them away from drugs and crime.

She looks fantastic, of course. Peter has made her a burgundy off-the-shoulder gown with an elegant skirt. She’s been complimented on it numerous times, and has been gleefully telling everyone that Peter designed it. This, of course, has led to a number of people badgering Peter all night. He’s clearly annoyed at most of them, but three or four women have begged him to design things for them, and he’s secretly flattered even if he won’t admit it.

“Oh my God,” Laura groans, as Derek rescues her from a particularly persistent businessman. “What an asshole. If he’d said the word ‘bootstraps’ one more time I was going to punch him in the mouth.”

“Now that’d be a good way to get donors,” Stiles says, and Derek snorts. “Drink?”

“Absolutely.” Laura marches towards the bar.

The bartender looks up as they approach. “What can I get you?”

“I need at least three whiskey sours if I’m going to survive until this is over,” Laura says, and the bartender surprises all of them by dropping the bottle he’s holding.

“Oh my God!” he stammers. “That was – you’re my – ” He gestures at his arm emphatically, holding it out so they can see Laura’s words about whiskey sours written there. “Oh my God, I’ve been working as a bartender five years waiting to meet you – and you’re Laura Hale! I – I’m Josh, hi, it’s nice to meet you – ”

Laura is flushed bright pink. “Hi, wow, okay, I was not expecting this to happen right now. Or possibly ever if we’re going to be honest.”

“I, uh, I’m not sure – ”

Derek smoothly takes over as they blush and stammer at each other. “Josh, why don’t you call and have someone come take over your post for you, okay? The other bartenders can keep everyone served until your replacement gets here. Then you and Laura can sit down and get to know each other.”

“Right. Good idea.” Josh steps away from the bar and gets on his phone. A few minutes later, he and Laura have settled at a table in the corner. Derek has waved Peter over, and Peter is telling everyone about how the bartender turned out to be Laura’s soulmate, so how about they all leave her alone for a little while.

“It’s so wonderful!” Derek’s great-aunt gushes as one of the other bartenders pours her a glass of
wine. “First Peter, now Laura! I guess Talia’s curse is finally broken!”

“My mother was not cursed,” Derek says firmly.

“Well, I’m sure you don’t – ”

“Take your glass of wine and leave him alone, you old bat,” Stiles says, and Edna gasps and protests as Derek breaks down into laughter.

“I never!” she says, huffing away.

“Man, I love your family,” Stiles says, beaming. “Have I mentioned lately how much I love your family? Countless hours of fun.”

“You’re incorrigible,” Derek tells him.

“And that’s why you keep me around.”

Derek shakes his head, but he’s laughing. They find a table in the corner, and Peter joins them as they sit down. “I guess soulmates are going around,” he says.

“Hopefully mine won’t turn up any time soon,” Derek says.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Stiles says. “I’m actually kind of excited to meet them. I mean, if they’re perfect for you, they’ve got to be pretty awesome, whoever they are. We can handle it.”

“Don’t involve me in this ‘we’,” Peter says, sipping his whiskey.

“I am gonna involve you,” Stiles says. “I’m going to make you be polite and civil to them.”

“Sounds abhorrent.”

Stiles smirks at him before leaning over to kiss Derek on the cheek. “Just wait. It’s gonna be awesome. You’ll see.”

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