Rewriting the future

by Synesthetic

Summary

Two days before their planned bonding, alpha Derek Hale runs away with his secret beta girlfriend, leaving Stiles heartbroken. With the demands of his omega physiology forcing him to bond with someone before his first heat, Derek's uncle Peter steps in and offers a solution.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

“Peter, I need to talk to you.”

Peter Hale glanced up from where he was hanging his coat in the hall closet. He’d been gone for the past week on a business trip to San Francisco and the drive back had felt interminable. He’d been looking forward to showering and then having a decent meal, but he suspected neither of those things was going to happen, given his sister’s curt tone and grim expression. It had taken them years to reach a comfortable balance that allowed two alpha siblings to share the same roof, and he knew Talia wouldn’t make demands of him lightly.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked.

“No here. In my study. Please.”

Peter set aside his suitcase and followed Talia. Talia reserved her study for serious private discussions as it had some of the best soundproofing in the entire house. It was early afternoon and the house was virtually deserted. He could hear the faint sounds of Julia out in the backyard in her garden but it didn't sounds like anyone else was home. The fact that Talia was still insisting on speaking in the study filled him with quiet concern. Whatever was going on couldn't be good. He waited as Talia closed and locked the door, and then dropped into the chair behind her desk. She stared at him for a long moment, and Peter could smell the anger and stress rolling off of her.

“Derek’s gone.”

“Gone? What do you mean, gone?” Peter asked.

“I mean he’s run away.”

Peter's mouth opened, and then stayed there. He knew he looked ridiculous but he could not believe what he was hearing.

“Derek ran away? Your son, Derek? The one I’m pretty sure is never going to college because that would mean being away from home? That Derek? Are you sure?”

Talia slapped at a crumpled piece of paper lying on her desk.

“He left a note.”

Peter reached forward and picked up the letter. Derek’s distinctive sloppy scrawl covered about half the page. He scanned the note and then he looked up at Talia.

“Who the hell is Kate?”

Talia shook her head. “I don’t know. Laura said he’d been sneaking around with some girl, but I thought he'd just made a new friend. You know how shy Derek can be...at most I thought he might be flirting a little before being bonded. I mean, it didn’t really seem like something Derek would do, but I thought maybe he just…” Talia trailed off, groaned, and buried her face in her hands. “I had no idea he was seriously involved with some random beta girl.”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Peter said. “He’s been wanting to bond to an omega since he presented as an alpha! He was ridiculously excited when you arranged the bond six months ago.”
“I know! I thought he really liked Stiles. I know he was excited about finding a local Omega match. I mean, it was perfect.”

“What on earth could have happened in just the last six months?”

Talia shook her head. “This Kate girl happened, apparently.”

Peter re-read the note. “It sounds like he’s only going to stay away for a few weeks. I thought the bonding wasn’t until next month.”

Talia shook her head unhappily. “John Stilinski called me last week. Stiles’ hormones are rising faster than anyone expected. He’s probably going into heat sometime this week. We agreed to move the bonding to tomorrow and have the formal ceremony in a couple of months once they’d had some time to settle into the bond. I told Derek on Tuesday.” She slapped her hands down on the desk. “His reaction seemed a little off but I thought it was just nerves. How could I have misread him so badly?”

Peter shook his head. “I never would have imagined Derek had it in him to do something like this. I can see why the thought never crossed your mind. Have you told the Stilinskis yet?”

Talia looked even unhappier at Peter’s question. “No. I…” Talia’s voice faltered. “I don’t know what to do, Peter.”

Peter eyes widened, the only outward sign of his shock. Talia sometimes came to him to work through complicated issues at work, or involving the family, but he couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard his older sister sound so uncertain.

“This is going to devastate Stiles. He’s such a sweet kid.” Talia turned and stared past Peter for a moment, lost in her own thoughts. “He’s all alone with just his dad since his mom died and he rattles around in that house like a lone pea in a pod. I think he was almost as excited about becoming a part of our family as he was about bonding to Derek.”

Talia met Peter’s eyes again, and they were infinitely sad. “Everyone loves him. I was starting to think of him as one of us, as my son, not just Derek’s future bondmate. And now I have to go meet with him and his father and tell him that he can’t be a part of our family after all.”

Talia paused and looked down at Derek’s letter, where Peter had set it back on her desk. “He’s going to be so hurt, and humiliated, and he doesn’t deserve any of it.”

“We could try to find Derek…” Peter offered.

“And do what, Peter? Force him to bond against his will? What if he rejects Stiles in person? That would only make this whole situation worse.” Talia grimaced. “Derek’s eighteen. He’s technically an adult. It’s not like we can force him to come home if he doesn’t want to.”

Peter was quiet for a long thoughtful moment, and then shook his head. He met Talia’s quizzical look.

“If Stiles doesn’t have a backup plan, he’ll have to go through a government match.”

Talia groaned. “He’ll hate that.”

Peter snorted. “What newly presented Omega wouldn’t? Showing up at a government office and picking a bondmate out of a catalog? There’s a reason why registered alphas outnumber registered omegas sixty to one.”
“I don’t think Stiles has even bothered to register. He and his father agreed to the match with Derek almost as soon as he presented as an Omega.”

Peter shook his head. “His father made him register. I remember Stiles complaining about it to Laura at one of the dinners. He said his father had gotten a hold of a bunch of government brochures for betas with omega children and he was making Stiles go through all the checklists.” Peter smirked. “Apparently one of the suggested steps was a domestic arts class, to prepare the newly mated Omega for running a household.”

“Oh, I bet Stiles just loved that.”

“I believe he was asked to leave the class after his oven mysteriously caught fire.”

They both laughed softly for moment before Talia’s face grew sober again.

“I need you to come with me. I…Peter.”

Peter stared at his sister and fought down an urge to growl. Talia never used that tone on him unless she wanted something that she knew Peter wasn’t going to want to give her.

“Talia.”

“You’re an unmated alpha.”

Peter startled upright in his chair. He stared at his sister who was looking at him hopefully.

“Peter. You’re only thirty-four. You’re still young enough to take a mate.”

“Stiles is sixteen!”

“Marcus was sixteen when I bonded to him.”

“You were twenty, not thirty-four! I’m old enough to be his father!”

“You’re also old enough to be his alpha.”

Peter went silent for moment, and then gave a harsh laugh.

“Even if I agreed to this, he’ll never accept me. He’s about to find out my nephew just rejected him in the cruelest possible way, just days before he was meant to bond with him. He has been jilted at the bonding bed like some kind of terrible omega romance novel and you want me to show up and offer myself, as what, Talia, some kind of consolation prize? Oops, I know you thought you were getting bonded to one Hale but he wandered off somewhere so here’s another one instead? I’m pretty sure he’s going to notice.”

“No Talia, he’s going to hate us all for this and I don’t blame him.”

Talia sighed. “Peter, I know you’re attracted to him.”

Peter fell silent. He didn’t drop his eyes but he shifted his gaze to the painting on the wall behind his sister.

“If it had been anyone but Derek I would have encouraged you to court him.” That made Peter look back at Talia, and it was Talia’s turn to shift her gaze, not quite able to meet Peter’s. “I really did
think that Stiles and Derek were perfect for each other. I wanted them to have what I had with Marcus and I really think they would have ended up as true mates.”

Talia’s voice broke. “I don’t think Derek has any idea of what he’s done and he’s going to be paying the price for it for the rest of his life.” She looked up and she was crying. Peter stared. His tough, bossy alpha sister was crying. “I don’t want Stiles to have to suffer for Derek’s mistake. You’d be a good fit for him, and a good alpha to him, and he could stay part of our family. Please, Peter, at least ask him. I know he might say no but it’s possible he might say yes.”

Talia turned away and wiped her eyes. Peter waited until she’d blown her nose and turned back to him.

“You know he’s probably going to spit in my face.”

Talia's face brightened at that. Coming from Peter, that was practically a ringing agreement.

“You’re charming Peter. No one can ever say no to you.”

Peter snorted. “Great. I suspect Stiles is going to prove himself the exception.”
“What? Are you kidding me?”

“I know John, and I’m sorry. I don’t know what Derek was thinking. This just isn’t like him.”

John Stilinski’s face was getting redder by the minute, and Talia watched nervously as his hand hovered over his gun. She hadn’t given much thought to the fact that the sheriff was still dressed in his uniform when she’d sat him down to give him the bad news. She’d been meeting with John for the past six months as they had prepared to join their families and she felt like she’d come to know him pretty well. Even for a beta, John was remarkably even-tempered and it wasn’t until this very moment, watching him react to the news of Derek’s flight, that she realized that she’d never before seen him truly angry.

“How could he do this? We had an agreement! There were months – months! – where that little shithead could have said something, anything so we could have made other plans!” John was almost spitting in his anger but he deliberately kept his voice low. While he didn’t have the enhanced senses of an alpha or omega, he’d been living with an omega son long enough to have lost the habit of shouting, even when he was angry.

Talia didn’t try to defend Derek. She loved her son, but she knew there was no possible excuse for his behavior. She clamped her lips shut against offering another apology, knowing it would only make things worse. Peter sat silently by her side, his body posture relaxed as if he were sitting on the sofa at home, and not three feet away from a furiously angry father wearing a gun. She felt a pang of envy at his composure and tried to force down her instinctive alpha urge to stand up and meet John’s aggression with her own.

“What is Stiles supposed to do now? He’s almost in heat! He’s already taken leave from school!” John stopped and ran his hands through his hair. “He’s been nesting for the past couple of days.”

John’s face fell. “Oh God, this is going to destroy him.”

John fell back into his chair, his anger suddenly swamped under a surge of grief. He stared at Talia, then at Peter. “How could he do this to Stiles? He must have seen how much this meant to him. Every time he talked about this bond, about Derek, he was so happy. I can’t remember the last time I saw him so purely happy about anything. And now...he doesn’t deserve this.”

“I agree, John,” Talia said, leaning forward. “I completely agree. I’m so mad at Derek right now I can’t even think about it without feeling like I’m losing my mind. Right now I want to think about Stiles and what we can do to fix this.”

“Fix this?” Just like that, John was up on his feet again and livid, so angry he was almost stuttering. “This isn’t a god-damned flat tire. This is my kid’s life! His entire life, which your fucking son just ruined! He’s expecting to get bonded in two days and his fucking bondmate just abandoned him. What the hell is he supposed to do?”

"John."

John’s head snapped towards Peter.

“I want to court Stiles,” Peter said quietly.

“I know I’m older than Derek but I like and respect your son, and I would do my best to see that he
has a good life,” Peter said. Only his years of courtroom experience kept his voice level as John Stilinski’s face slowly grew redder and redder as he spoke. The beta was practically panting through clenched teeth, his hands fist at his sides, and the harsh scent of his rage was boiling off of him like steam. Peter could practically see the ugly calculations going on behind John Stilinski’s eyes and spoke fast to cut them off.

“I would never have interfered in Derek and Stiles’ bond, and this isn’t part of any kind of twisted plan to force your son into an unwanted bond, I swear. I just found out about Derek this morning. I just wanted to make this less terrible for Stiles somehow.”

“And you think bonding to Derek’s uncle is somehow going to make this better for Stiles? How exactly do you think that’s going to make anything better?” John spat.

“Because we want him to know that he has options,” Peter said. “Derek left him but we haven’t. We still want him as part of our family.”

Peter paused for moment and cocked his head to the side. “Sheriff Stilinski, I hear Stiles’ jeep coming down the street,” Peter said quietly, then started speaking in an urgent, hushed voice. “I don’t have time to explain this entirely but from a purely practical standpoint Stiles is on a deadline. He needs an alpha before he goes into heat or else he’s not going to have any choice in the matter. He’ll wind up sedated into a coma and you’ll end up having to arrange a bond for him or else some government agent will.”

“Oh God.” John muttered. His face had drained of its color and now he just looked nauseated, and overwhelmed.

“Please let me at least make an offer to Stiles. I know he’ll most likely say no but I want him to at least have that choice.”

The sound of keys in the door stopped whatever reply John may have made.

“Hey Daddio, Are you home?”

John stiffened at Stiles’ cheerful voice. There was a thump and a rustle and then Stiles came into the room, holding a huge Styrofoam cup.

“Talia! Peter! Hi! I thought I heard you guys in here. Did Derek come with you? Oh, man, I would have brought smoothies for everyone if I’d known you were coming over.”

Stiles’ smile faltered a little as no one responded. He looked quizzically at his dad, then at where Talia and Peter were sitting as if frozen on the sofa.

“Dad? Is something wrong? Is someone hurt?” Stiles took a step back and clutched the cup in front of him with both hands. “Did something happen to Derek?”

Talia and Peter both stood.

“Stiles.” Talia started, “Derek hasn’t been hurt but there’s something serious I need to talk to you about.”

Stiles took another half step back. “Right now? Can’t it wait until after the bonding?”

“Stiles.” John’s voice was low, gentle and Stiles’ eyes flicked between Talia and Peter and his father. “No.” Stiles shook his head and kept shaking it. “I don’t want to talk. I’m really busy right now. I
haven’t gotten everything I need for my heat and I still have a lot of laundry to do and the doctor told me he wants me to pack on another couple pounds this week if I can.” He lifted the cup and waved it at them. “Look! Three thousand calories worth of fruit and yogurt and protein powdery goodness. I need to get down at least two of these bad boys today so I really don’t have time to stop and chat.”

John circled around and tried to wrap one of his arms around Stiles’ shoulder but he ducked and shrugged off his father’s touch, then retreated until his back hit the wall, still shaking his head. His grip on the cup tightened until the side of the cup buckled under his grip. His gaze darted between everyone as they slowly moved towards him, and an ugly flush started crawling up his neck. “I really can’t right now. I can’t do this. Please. Please, please not right now. I can’t. Don’t do this. Please.”


Stiles’ arms flew up to wrap around his chest.

Stiles stared at Talia, who had walked around the sofa to stand in front of Stiles. “Where’s Derek? Can I just talk to him, just for a minute?”

“Stiles…” Talia’s voice was thick, and she had to clear her throat before she could finish. “He’s not coming. He …he left a note. He said he’s not coming.”

Stiles entire body jolted, and he stared at Talia.

“He’s not coming? At all?” His voice was tiny, and so hurt that John’s hand snapped without conscious thought towards his gun. Nothing that made his son sound like that deserved to live.

Talia shook her head. “No sweetheart, I’m sorry.”

A whimper forced itself out of Stiles throat and his hands flew up and pressed against his mouth. His eyes clenched shut for a long minute before he drew himself upright and let his hands drop down to his sides. He pressed his lips into a grimace that looked nothing at all like a smile.

“Ok. Thanks for coming and letting me know in person, Mrs. Hale.”

Talia bit her lip. It had taken Stiles months to feel comfortable enough to call her by her given name. His sudden retreat into formality stung like a sudden slap. She opened her mouth but shut it again when Stiles shook his head at her with a desperate look on his face. He turned to his father.

“I’m just going to go my room.” He started towards the stairs when Peter spoke.

“Wait, Stiles. May I talk to you for a moment privately?”

Stiles didn’t turn back but he stopped walking.

“Right now?” he asked in an unsteady voice.

“Please. It’s important.”

“It’s up to you Stiles,” John said. “If you want them to leave, they’ll go.” His voice was fierce. It was obvious that he’d be happy to send the Hales packing by whatever means necessary.

“Please, Stiles,” Peter pleaded, “Just for a moment.”

Stiles hesitated but then jerked his head towards the stairs and kept walking.

Peter followed Stiles to his room. Stiles went straight to his bed and sat with his back against the headboard. He pulled his knees against his chest and wrapped his arms around them. He laid his chin
down against his arms and looked expectantly at Peter. He looked small, and impossibly young.

Peter hovered for a moment in the doorway, and then walked over to the desk, leaving the door wide open. Peter took in the signs of a nesting omega approaching their heat – the fresh smell of laundry, the neatly made bed heaped with soft cushions, the handful of fresh flowers Stiles had stuffed into a jar on his desk, and promised himself silently that the next time he saw his nephew he was going to punch him right in the face.

He dragged the desk chair over to the bed and sat down near Stiles.

“Stiles, I know this wasn’t what you had planned and I’m sorry. I know that your first heat is already scary and stressful without something …” Stiles looked up and the words suddenly turned to ashes in his mouth. His mouth opened, then closed, as he suddenly struggled with what to say. Peter never ran out of words. They were his art and his weapon, but looking at Stiles’s brilliant amber eyes shimmering with unshed tears he found himself at a loss. He wished there was some combination of words that would make what Derek had done okay, but he knew there wasn’t. He groped for something to say and suddenly fell back on something he didn’t often have much use for: honesty.

“Derek’s a fucking idiot. I don’t know why he’s not here but I never in a million years imagined he was capable of something so cruel and stupid. Do you…is there anyone else you were considering?”

Stiles shook his head. His eyes dropped again and he buried his face in his folded arms. The smell of tears got stronger and the sound of Stiles's harsh breathing got more ragged.

Peter stared at his huddled form and took a deep breath. “Did you know I was matched to an Omega a few years ago?”

Stiles looked up, his attention caught, and shook his head.

“I enrolled in the government match as most unmated Alphas do.” Peter gave a brief lopsided smile. “They sell it to alphas like a lottery – you can’t win if you don’t play. Given the relative number of omegas to alphas when you sign up as an alpha, they spend half their time encouraging you to be hopeful and the other half trying to teach you ways to accept that you’ll probably never find an omega mate. There are even a couple mandatory classes on why mating with a beta is a good compromise.”

“Well, I’d been enrolled for a couple of years and then I got the call – I was on the short list for a government match. A female Omega.”

Stiles watched him, absorbed in his words, tears momentarily forgotten.

“I dressed to impress and caught the next flight to Nevada where this Omega was living. It was some small town down south so the local office was this little hole in the wall between a post office and a karate studio. I got there at the same time as one of the other alpha candidates and two of the office staff hustled us off into private rooms like we were about to start a dominance fight right there in the lobby. When I got into a private room, the guy tells me that this Omega had short-listed just three alphas and I was one of them. I was so excited thinking, this is it, and maybe this is my mate.” Peter made a face. “I thought I was going to have a heart attack waiting to meet her.”

“What happened?” Stiles asked quietly.

“I met her.” Peter said wryly. “She was pretty, sixteen, like you are, so close to her heat she smelled like…” Peter inhaled, searching his memory, eyes half closed, and then shuddered a little. “Well. Then we talked a little and I realized that she was dumb as a box of rocks.” Peter closed his eyes for a moment. “I asked her what the last book she’d read was and she said US magazine.”
Stiles gave a hiccupping burble of a noise that might have been laughter on any other day.

"The interviews lasted all day. She spent maybe twenty minutes in my room. I knew that probably wasn't a good sign but I stayed. Even knowing that we had nothing in common except our compatible biology. I just kept thinking, what if this is it? What if this is my only chance? When the administrator came in with a guard to tell me that she'd chosen someone else I realized that all I really felt was relieved. I thanked him and left that office and ran home as fast as the airplane could carry me."

“I kind of gave up on the idea of an omega mate after that. I realized that the odds were stacked against me and I also realized that I was just going to be getting older and Omegas were going to be getting younger and that the chance of finding one I fit with was going to get more and more remote. So I worked and dated betas and when Talia announced that she’d made a match for Derek with a cute local Omega I didn’t think much of it. Maybe I was a little jealous of Derek for having it so easy, but otherwise it didn’t mean very much to me. Then, I met you."

Peter paused here, and gave Stiles a warm smile.

“I know we haven’t really gotten to know one another on your visits. After that first dinner when your dad brought you over and we all were introduced, I made sure that I was busy when you were scheduled to come over.”

Stiles flinched a little and dropped his eyes again. His shoulders shrugged inward as if preparing for a blow.

“Do you know why I started to avoid you when you visited our house?”

Stiles shook his head but didn’t look up.

“Because you were perfect. Smart. Funny. Gorgeous. Everything I’d ever wanted for myself and accepted I would never have.”

“Really?” Stiles looked up again, his wet eyes wide.

“Really. I thought if I didn’t see you until you were mated with Derek I could accept it. Then you’d be Derek’s mate and bonded to him and out of my reach forever. I thought then I could accept you as a part of my family and let go of this...feeling that you invoked in me.”

Peter laughed a little, and then ran his hand through his hair. “I felt like my dream had come true but somehow for Derek, not for me.”

Peter leaned forward a little, and laid his hand on the edge of Stiles’s bed. “I know that I’m not what you had in mind but I’m an unmated alpha. I know enough about you to know that I really like you, and I think that we could be happy together. I would be honored if you would consider me for your alpha bondmate.”

Stiles head jerked up and his eyes flew to Peter’s. His eyes were huge, shocked, and his mouth opened but no words emerged.

Peter smiled ruefully. “I know this is the wrong time. It’s too soon, and too late at the same time but I know that you don’t have much time to decide. I’m not trying to take advantage of that, I’m not, but I wanted to at least let you know that I’m an option, if you want me to be.”

Stiles was quiet for a long time, long enough his heart rate slowed and his body, which had tensed up at Peter's unexpected offer, had slumped back into his pillows. “I don’t have much of a choice, do
I?" Stiles finally said. "I'm almost out of time. If I don’t accept you I’m going to have to go to the government office and get matched with some stranger.” Stiles terror and loathing of that option were painfully apparent in his voice. "At least I know you a little.”

Stiles tried to smile but it was sad, wobbly thing that faded almost before it began. “At least you want me and not just any Omega.”

Peter started to reach out and then paused. “May I touch your hand?”

Stiles nodded hesitantly and reached out to meet Peter. Peter’s hands were warm and he wrapped both of his hands around Stiles's. Stiles lips started to tremble at the touch, and when Peter held out his arms, Stiles didn’t hesitate before he leaned forward. It was awkward, with Stiles still half-curled around his knees, and Peter leaning over from the chair but Peter wrapped his arms around Stiles and pulled him into a hug. Stiles was tentative at first, then turned his head so his face was tucked in against the side of Peter's neck. He inhaled deeply and his breath shuddered out of him in a long shaky sigh.
Stiles only let go of Peter when he heard footsteps on the stairs. He pulled away and sat back against his pillows just as his father stepped into his open doorway. Stiles knew his father well enough to know he was still furious and he spoke just as his father opened his mouth.

“Peter, can you please go downstairs? I need to talk to my dad.”

“Of course,” Peter said as he rose. “Thank you for letting me speak to you.” He walked over to the door and there was a tense moment when John didn't move out of the way. Peter stood waiting patiently, keeping his expression bland. Eventually, John shifted aside and watched Peter walk to the stairs with a frown.

“Dad.”

John stepped into Stiles’s room and shut the door.

Downstairs Peter met Talia’s anxious face with a shrug. They stood at the bottom of the stairs and they both tried to pretend that they weren’t listening to the hushed discussion Stiles and his father were having in his room.

“I don’t want a government match dad. Peter’s offered to be my bondmate.”

“Offered.” John scoffed. “He’d be lucky to have you as a mate. He should have begged you to accept him, not offered like he’s the one doing you a favor.”

“It wasn’t like that dad. He made it clear it was my decision. He’s always been nice to me when I’ve been at their house.”

An exaggeration, Peter thought. He’d been polite to Stiles but they hadn’t really spent enough time together for Peter to be nice or much of anything else to Stiles.

“I know him a little bit, and,” Stiles voice wobbled, and caught, “And his family and that’s better than someone I don’t know at all.”

“They could match you up to an alpha closer to your own age. There are hundreds, thousands of alphas out there Stiles, all across the country enrolled in the government match. I know that you thought it was …” his dad paused awkwardly, “I know you thought Derek and you were meant to be…”

“Stop.” Stiles voice was sharp. “I was stupid. Obviously just stupid and wrong. I don’t want to talk about it.”

John sighed and there was a distinct creak as he sat on Stiles’s bed. “Please, Stiles, you don’t have to take the first Alpha who shows up at the door, especially not one of the Hales.” Talia winced a little at the loathing in the sheriff’s voice and glanced at her brother who’d obviously heard it as well. The Sheriff had been slow to warm up to the idea of his sixteen year old son bonding with anyone at all, and it had taken most of the past six months for him to get comfortable around the Hales. Any warmth he’d started to feel for them was obviously gone.

“I don’t have time Dad. I’m almost in heat now,” Stiles interrupted. “That’s why we had to move the bonding up. I might have two, maybe three days before I need to bond. It’s not like I’m going to have time to get to know anyone. I’ll just be looking at profiles online. I don’t even know if I’ll have
enough time to meet with anyone face to face before my heat starts.”

John groaned, and his voice was pained when he spoke. “But you could pick someone your own age, with similar interests. Derek and Peter aren’t even the only alphas in Beacon Hills. Aren’t there a couple of alphas at your school?”

“Those guys are assholes, Dad. They didn’t give two shits about me until they found out I was an omega. There’s no way I want to bond myself to one of those idiots. I don’t know why you’re so hung up on age. I don’t care about Peter’s age.”

A lie. Talia and Peter glanced at each other at the faint skip in Stile’s heartbeat but said nothing.

“Stiles...”

“Please, Dad this is hard enough. I don’t want to leave home. I don’t want to start some kind of last-minute nationwide hunt for the perfect mate. I just want to stay home and have my first heat in my own room with D...Peter.”

Talia and Peter both winced at Stile’s slip. Silence fell upstairs, broken only by Stiles's harsh unsteady breathing. John finally sighed and they heard another creak from the bed as the Stilinskis embraced.

“I’m sorry kiddo. I know this isn’t how you wanted things to go.”

Stiles was quiet again for a long while, before he finally said, “It’ll be okay. I’ll be okay.”

Talia bit her lip, and she stepped away to stare out of the window by the door. Even Peter had to blink hard at the desolate, desperate tone of Stiles’s voice. He sounded like he was trying to convince himself of something even he didn’t believe.

“Stiles, I will support whatever you want to do. If you really want to bond with Peter Hale, then I will support your decision. But please, please let’s just check in at the center and hear what they have to say. There’s a reason why there’s an omega support service. You can’t be the only omega in the world who’s been stuck looking down the barrel of their heat without a bondmate. Let’s just go talk to them and maybe look at a few profiles, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Let’s at least sleep on this, okay? Nothing has to happen today.”

Peter didn’t hear Stiles’s reply, but he did hear the soft sounds of a kiss and the Sheriff murmuring, “We’ll figure this out. It’ll be okay.”

Talia rejoined Peter by the stairs when John and Stiles descended.

John walked straight to the front door and glared expectantly at the Hales. Stiles hovered on the bottom step, obviously in no mood for any kind of prolonged farewell. Talia and Peter both started towards the door, but Peter paused at the foot of the stairs.

“May I come over tomorrow?”

“He’s going to be busy.” John’s voice was brusque.

“Dad, stop.” Stiles looked down at Peter. “I promised my dad that I would at least stop by the OSS office in the morning. Maybe we could do something tomorrow afternoon?”
“Are you still comfortable going out?” Peter asked.

“Not really. I’m okay in a drive-through but I don’t want to go out anywhere too public. The attention from alphas is getting kind of intense.” He shivered a little at the memory of his last stop in the grocery store. There had been at least one alpha in the store and even though he’d been walking with a woman and a small boy, he’d followed Stiles with a focused, hungry stare.

“How about I bring over something for dinner and we could watch a movie?”

“That sounds okay,” Stiles said.

“Is there anything in particular that you’d like to eat?”

“Peter’s an excellent cook.” Talia said. “He studied in Italy.”

There was an awkward silence after she spoke, and Stiles shrugged. “I like Italian food. I...anything is fine. I don’t know.”

Stiles’s eyes started to fill up with tears.

Peter risked holding out his hand and felt a tiny thrill when Stiles didn’t hesitate before he reached out and took it. “It’s okay Stiles. I’ll take care of everything. How about five?”

“No.” John interrupted. “I don’t get home until six.”

Peter nodded. “Of course. How about six-thirty? I’ll bring everything over and make dinner, okay?”

Stiles nodded and gave Peter’s hand a quick squeeze before he dropped it. “I’ll see you then.”

Stiles was already climbing up the stairs when the door slammed shut behind them.

Peter and Talia got in Talia’s car and were halfway home before either of them spoke.

“Thank you Peter.” Talia said quietly.

“I didn’t do it for you.”

“I know. But thank you anyway.”

They didn’t say anything more and when they got home, Peter went straight to his private bathroom and climbed into a scalding hot shower. He tried to relax, but spent the entire shower thinking about Stiles, and what he must be doing at that moment, now that he has some time and privacy. He was scowling when he got out of the shower, and he didn’t bother to get dressed before he grabbed his cell phone and made a call. The call went straight to voice mail and he left a terse message.

“Norman, it’s Peter. Give me a call as soon as you get this. I have some business for you.”
Chapter 4

It was dark when Stiles jerked awake.

He blinked, or tried to, but he could barely open his eyes. His eyes were swollen and blurry, and they ached. He peeled his face off of his pillowcase and sat up. For a second, he couldn’t remember what had happened, why he was lying on top of his bed still fully dressed and feeling like he’d been run over by a truck. His breath hitched and suddenly, he remembered.

_He’s not coming. He …he left a note. He said he’s not coming._

It was somehow even more shocking and horrible than the first time he had heard it.

He’s not coming.

Stiles buried his sore face in his hands but it didn’t feel like he had any tears left. He felt scraped raw, as if he’d been cracked open and hollowed out by rough hands. His breathing hitched again and when he tried to inhale, he choked a little on the congestion in his nose. He rolled over and grabbed a tissue off his bedside table and blew his nose. He forced all thoughts of Derek, of Peter and Talia, of everyone and everything out of his mind and let his body move automatically. He pulled off his clothes and dropped them into the laundry basket. Even that made him ache a little, remembering how happy he’d been to fold the brand new sheets he’d bought for his first heat.

He made himself keep moving, finished undressing, and pulled on his pajamas from the night before. He felt like he was a million years old, every movement slow and creaky and pained. He shambled into the bathroom and brushed his teeth. He blew his nose again, and then washed his face. He stared at his red blotchy face in the mirror until he felt the hot throb of tears building up behind his eyes. He made himself look away and splashed cold water over his face until the burning sensation receded.

He started back to his bedroom but his feet carried him past his own door to his father’s. His dad usually slept with the door open and tonight, as soon as he stepped into the doorway his father rolled over and sat up in bed so quickly that Stiles knew he hadn’t been asleep.

“Are you okay?”

Stiles shook his head. “Can I sleep with you tonight?”

His father raised the covers in invitation and lay back down. Stiles shuffled across the room and climbed into bed. His father’s warm, familiar scent surrounded him as he cuddled up against his side. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d allowed himself this comfort. He knew that his dad had read the same books about omegas that he had but he rarely offered more than the occasional hug. He suspected his dad thought that that was enough, and Stiles had been too embarrassed to ask for more. He felt like he should be too grown-up to need cuddles, no matter what his status. He knew his dad didn’t really understand his almost constant craving for this kind of affectionate touch.

Stiles spoke without thinking, “Do you ever wish I’d been born a beta?”

His dad was silent for a long time, long enough that Stiles knew the answer even before he said it out loud.

“Sometimes I do. There’s nothing wrong with being an omega, Stiles. You know I don’t believe in any of that sexist nonsense about omegas being the weakest status, or about what they can and can’t do. It’s just, being a beta is all I know. I wish you could do what I did, take your time, go on dates,
meet someone and fall in love when you’re ready. I hate this...this deadline you have looming over your head.”

Stiles pulled back a little and looked at his dad. His face was just visible by the light coming in through the windows. “I didn’t know that’s how you thought about it.”

“I know. I figured the whole thing was stressful enough for you without adding my feelings to the mix.” John sighed. “When I found out you were an omega it felt like someone turned on a big stopwatch counting down the minutes until I lost you to your alpha.”

“You’re not going to lose me, dad.”

“I know. I know that it’s supposed to be no different than if you were a beta and you decided to get married but god, it just feels different. You’re so young, Stiles, you don’t even know. I know you feel like an adult but let me tell you kiddo, I am an adult and sixteen is still practically an infant from where I’m standing. There’s so much waiting for you and I want you to have it all. Knowing that you don’t have a choice, that your body gets to decide when you need to bond and that you literally can’t live without bonding to some worthless asshole alpha, well, it just rubs me the wrong way.”

John trailed off.

“It’s never felt like that to me,” Stiles said quietly. “I don’t know if it’s just biology or growing up knowing this was going to happen, but I’ve always known it was going to be like this. It doesn’t feel like a trap or a burden. I always thought it was special. All my life it’s been in the back of my mind that there’s one person out there for me and I’m meant for one person. This past year when my bonding hormones started showing up I thought, finally, I’m going to get to meet my alpha.” Stiles voice became even quieter. “I thought I had.”

John reached around with his arm and pulled Stiles tight against him in a fierce hug. Stiles closed his eyes and swallowed down the grief that was sitting like a massive stone in his chest.

“I wish your mom was here.”

The grief grew, joined by the familiar ache that never really went away. Me too, Stiles thought, but he kept the words to himself, knowing it would only make his dad feel worse. Stiles inhaled, a long wet wavering sound and buried his face more firmly in his father’s chest. He kept silent, hoping his father would keep talking. He loved it when his dad talked about his mom, even though it hurt to hear. Sometimes he felt like the only one who remembered her, and his memories of her felt thin and faded from the passage of time.

“You were our miracle baby. Everyone told us that we’d never manage to have kids if we got married but we didn’t care. Your mom’s doctor told her that insurance wouldn’t cover any infertility services between a male beta and female alpha.” John went quiet for a moment. “We always figured we could adopt but your mom was so optimistic. She always said it might be rare but it wasn’t impossible. She really believed that it would work out.”

“Then your mom got pregnant with you...God, Stiles, I wish I had taken a picture of her face when her doctor came into that room, holding the test results in one hand and looking totally flabbergasted. Your mom knew right away what that meant and she looked so ridiculously smug and happy. It was like someone had flipped on a light inside of her, once she knew she was going to be your mom and that light just stayed on, right until the end. She loved you more than anything.”

John heaved a sigh. “I always feel like I’m screwing up being your dad. Some of it’s because you’re an omega but some of it is just that your mom was always the brains of our operation. She was just so good at being your mom.”
Stiles smiled. “Yeah, she really was.”

John shifted and looked down at Stiles, and waited until Stiles was looking up at him.

“You are literally one in a million kiddo, don’t you forget that. You are the boy Claudia Stilinski adored from your very first breath to her very last. She would want you to be happy.”

Stiles nodded but didn’t try to speak. He sniffled wetly and remembered the very last hug his mother had given him. She’d dropped him off at school and given him a quick, hard hug, and a kiss. He hadn’t really been paying attention and was already running into the school when she’d called after him and said she loved him. He’d waved over his shoulder and the next time he’d seen his mother she’d been lying in a hospital bed, covered in bandages and tubes and wires, unconscious. He hadn’t even been able to hold her hand.

“We should get some sleep. I called and the OSS office opens at eight. I left a message so they’ll be expecting us.” John paused. “I really want you to give this a chance. Maybe you’ll find someone you wouldn’t have found otherwise, someone perfect.”

“There isn’t anyone perfect,” Stiles said, and he had no idea how sad his voice sounded. His dad’s arms tightened around him again and Stiles let his eyes droop shut but his brain wasn’t so easily silenced.

“Dad, what do you think about Peter?”

John was silent for a long moment. “Well, I’m not feeling too fond of any of the Hales right now, to be honest. I know they’re not all to blame, but I just can’t help but think there must be something wrong with the whole family if they can raise a kid who’d do something like this to another person.”

“I don’t know a lot about Peter. I know he’s been around at some of those family dinners but we haven’t talked all that much. I know he likes baseball and he’s kind of a snob about his wine. His background check…”

Stiles jerked upright. “Dad! You ran a background check on Peter?”

“I ran a background check on every single person who lives in that house over the age of sixteen. If they expected me to drop my baby boy in their alpha laps I wanted to know exactly who I was dealing with.”

Stiles flushed and pressed his burning face against his father’s chest. “Oh jeez, Dad.”

John cleared his throat. “Other than the fact Laura Hale has racked up a couple thousand dollars in parking tickets in New York City, the whole family came back clean. No criminal records, no suspicious activities. As far as Peter… if you were a beta I’d never want you to date someone so much older than you. It just doesn’t sit right with me that just because you’re an omega you could legally bond with some forty year old but if you were a beta that would be statutory rape.”

“Peter is not forty.”

“Stiles, that is not my point and you know it. I just think he’s too old for you. He’s been to college and has a job, travelled, seen the world a little. He’s already done a lot of things that are still in your future. You aren’t at the same places in your lives. You won’t get to share those experiences together like your mom and I did.”

Stiles was quiet.
“When Talia Hale came up to me and asked if I would consider a match between you and her son, I thought, well, if you have to bond to someone, a nice kid about your age from a good family seemed like a pretty good match. You two seemed to hit it off and even with all the formal stuff, the bonding contract, and the chaperoned visits, and everything, I still thought, at least you’d have some time to get to know each other. It wasn’t dating but it was something.”

“This thing with Peter offering to be your bondmate when your back is to the wall, well, it feels like he’s taking advantage of the situation.” John waited, but Stiles said nothing.

“The other thing about Peter is that he’s going to come with baggage, Stiles, a lot of very ugly baggage. I know you think knowing the Hales is an advantage but have you thought this through? What about Derek? He’s part of Peter’s family and if you bond to Peter he’ll be your family too. He’ll be there, sitting across from you at the dinner table every night as long as you both live at the Hale house, and lord knows hardly anyone in that family ever moves out.”

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Stiles said in a small voice.

“I know. Peter Hale wouldn’t be my first choice for you for all those reasons.” John fell silent for a moment. “At the same time I can kind of understand why you’re considering him.” John sighed heavily. “I just don’t know kiddo. I wish I could be more help but I think we’re both going to have to trust your instincts. I don’t know how to give you advice on picking out a partner for the rest of your life at sixteen.”

“I will say this Stiles, and I mean it very seriously.” John tilted his head down and met Stiles’s eyes in the dark. “If which ever alpha you choose doesn’t treat you right, I will be happy to make you a widower.”

“Dad...”

“No Stiles, I mean it. You know I wouldn’t say something like that lightly. If that’s what it takes to break your bond and set you free, I’d do it and pay the price gladly.”

Stiles heard the absolute sincerity in his dad’s voice, and a tiny knot of fear he hadn’t even realized he possessed unwound. He closed his eyes and exhaled. No matter what happened at the OSS the next day, or with Peter, or with anything, at least he had his dad watching out for him. He pressed even closer to his dad, and took another deep breath of his scent. His entire body relaxed and a wave of exhaustion swept over him.

“Love you, “Stiles mumbled, and drifted off to sleep.
The Omega Support Services office in Beacon Hills was a nondescript red brick building located behind city hall. The waiting area was tiny, painted a pale powder blue and furnished with thickly padded benches rather than chairs. The walls were decorated with cheerful illustrated posters about omega health and wellness and a faded print of a flower garden. Almost as soon as they walked in, a tall heavy-set man who was a lot younger than Stiles had expected came into the waiting room to greet them. He had closely cropped hair that didn’t disguise his receding hair line, and a bushy black beard which appeared to have a drop of coffee trapped beneath his lower lip. Stiles stared at it as he looked at them quizzically, then over their shoulders.

“Hello, are you the Stilinskis? John and Tso…Tso…”

“Just call me Stiles. Yeah. Hi.”

“Oh. I’m sorry. I couldn’t tell from the name but I assumed that you’d be female. We don’t see very many male omegas.”

Stiles shrugged, not really knowing what to say to that. Everyone knew male omegas were rare.

"You can call me Sheriff." John said flatly. Stiles glanced at him from the corner of his eye. His father didn’t look too impressed. Jamie started a little and looked at John as if suddenly noticing the uniform.

Jamie laughed a little nervously and held out his hand to John, then Stiles.

"I'm sorry for making assumptions. I'm Jamie Rowe, I'm a licensed social worker and I specialize in omega support and counseling. Why don't you come into my office and we can talk."

Stiles looked at his father and rolled his eyes behind Jamie’s back. The office was small, but neatly organized. It was almost entirely utilitarian but a row of scraggly plants crowded the windowsill and there were several brightly colored pictures that had obviously been made by a small child taped to the walls. A massive travel mug sat on his desk, filling the office with the scent of fresh coffee. Another thickly padded bench sat across from the desk. Stiles idly wondered why the OSS was furnished with benches instead of chairs, and then answered his own question when he instinctively scooted across the bench to sit pressed against his father’s side.

“So what can I help you with today?”

Stiles looked at his father who was looking at him expectantly. “I’m about to go into heat and I don’t have a bondmate.” Stiles bit his lip after the words left his mouth. It was the first time he’d said them out loud, even to himself, and they stung. He sat up a little straighter, ignoring the fact that it pressed him closer to his dad.

“Okay.” Jamie nodded, “That’s pretty common. I can definitely help you with that.” He pulled a pair of glasses out of his pocket and slid them on, turned to his computer, and started typing. “When approximately are you going into heat?”

“Um, day after tomorrow probably.”

Jamie stopped typing. His head swiveled back around to stare at Stiles, his eyes round, looking even bigger through his glasses. “The day after tomorrow? Seriously?”
Stiles nodded. “Give or take a day.”

Jamie’s mouth opened, then closed, and finally he managed to say in a strangled tone, “You left it a little late, didn’t you?”

“Hey!” John interjected. “This is not helping. We did not come here for you to be judgmental, we came here for help.”

“Dad, it’s okay.” Stiles lifted his chin. “I had a bond arranged. We just found out yesterday that the alpha changed his mind.”

Jamie froze and Stiles had to look away from the appalled, pitying look that swept across Jamie’s face. “Oh my god that’s horrible! I’m so sorry! What kind of alpha would even do something like that? I…God. Okay.” Jamie took a deep breath and rubbed his hands across his face, almost knocking his glasses off. “I’m sorry. I’m really off my game today. I swear I’m not usually this much of an idiot.”

He took another deep breath and said, “So we’re not going to have much time. I assume you want to see as many alphas as you can in the next day and a half?”

“I guess.”

“Yes, he does.” John added.

“OK. We can do this. Time is obviously the problem so I’m going to cut some corners here. Stiles, I just need to make sure but have you seen a doctor and had your bonding hormone levels tested?”

Stiles nodded. “Once every six months since I turned fifteen. I presented six months ago and my last test a couple weeks ago showed that I’d probably be going into heat sometime this week.”

Jamie glanced at John, who was nodding.

“Okay, there are actually quite a few more questions I need to ask but first, come with me.”

Jamie led them to back to the waiting room and through another door which opened onto a small room that was empty except for a desk on which sat a huge monitor, with a computer tower tucked underneath.

“Let’s get you started looking at the profiles in the database and then I’ll fill in the paperwork with your father.”

Jamie sat down and opened up a program, then turned to Stiles and his father.

“We can search the database however you like. The goal of the search is to narrow it down because there are a lot of alphas out there looking for omega mates. Let’s start with the basics. I’m going to eliminate all the alphas who only want a female omega. That should…well, that definitely helped a lot but honestly not as much as I thought it would. Do you have a preference as to gender? Male? Female?”

Stiles shook his head.

“Are there any specifics that are important to you? Appearance? Education level? Income?”

“Location. I want to stay near my dad.”

“Okay, that works. I’ll narrow the records to alphas within a hundred mile radius or willing to
relocate. Is there anything else that’s important to you?”

“What about age?” John asked.

“We can definitely narrow by age. Alphas can’t register until they are eighteen so that’s the youngest an alpha will be in the registry and they’re allowed to stay on the registry until they reach their 60th birthday.”

“Sixty! Most omegas present in their teens!” The sheriff looked outraged. “The average age of presentation is seventeen!”

Jamie looked at John over the top of his glasses. “Mr. Stilinski, the OSS is a federal office and we operate under federal regulations. Do you have any idea what percentage of the legislature that makes those regulations are alphas themselves? I’d bet that a fair number of them are in this very database. To be honest, I’m kind of surprised that there’s a cutoff at all. However, we can narrow the profiles with whatever age range you like. What would you like your upper limit to be?”

“Eighteen.” John said, at the same time Stiles said, “Twenty-five.”

Jamie looked between them and then turned back to his computer. “I’ll just put in twenty-five. We can always lower the age if there are too many profiles. Anything else that’s really important to you?”

“Can we start there?” Stiles asked.

Jamie nodded and typed some more. “That is still a lot of records. I’d like to get it to under a hundred for you to look through, otherwise it gets overwhelming. Is there anything else that’s a deal breaker for you?”

“Are people allowed to register if they have criminal records?” John asked.

Jamie nodded. “It’s allowed for people with two or fewer misdemeanors. More than two or any kind of felony and you’re off the registry permanently.”

John shook his head. “No. No criminal backgrounds of any kind.”

Jamie nodded and typed. “That only eliminated a couple dozen people. Anything else?”

Stiles frowned. “Maybe limit the location to California, and willing to relocate.”

Jamie nodded. “Okay that helped but there are still over three hundred profiles.”

Stiles looked at Jamie helplessly. “Aren’t there any other criteria that you think would be easy to eliminate?”

Jamie stared at the computer screen and looked thoughtful. “There is a question about language. Normally I’d say to keep your possibilities open but frankly you have too many possibilities and too little time. We could eliminate anyone who doesn’t speak English at all.”

“Yeah, OK. I’d like to be able to speak to my bondmate and I don’t exactly have time to take any language classes before I go into heat.”

“Alright, that actually eliminated quite a few more. What else?”

“Education?” John asked. “Can we eliminate anyone without a high school degree?”
“We could but it would definitely knock a lot of the youngest alphas out of the running.”

“Dammit.” John said, at the same time Stiles said, “Do it.”

Jamie typed some more and said, “Okay, we’re almost there. What else?”

Stiles sighed. “Eliminate the female alphas. I like girls but I think I might like boys a little bit more.”

“Okay that did it. We’re down to seventy-two profiles.”

“Seventy-two!” Stiles yelped. “That’s crazy!”

“Just think of it as having options,” Jamie said. “Here, sit down. Just skim through the profiles. Just look at the photos, read the bios, see if you get a good feeling from any of them. It’ll get easier as you start to go through them and you realize what things you are excited about and what things you aren’t. Click on this box in the corner for any you’d like to consider in more depth and click here to delete a profile from your list. I’m going to go back in my office with your dad and we’re going do some paperwork. I’ll check on you in just a bit and see how you’re doing, okay?”

“But what am I supposed to be doing? What happens after I mark the ones I like?” Stiles asked.

“Ideally, you’ll narrow this down to twenty or thirty profiles you like. Once we get it down to that number I start calling and arranging for interviews for tomorrow. Not everyone I call will be available for an interview with so little notification so you can expect your list to shrink quite a bit. To be honest, this is the shortest time frame I’ve ever dealt with so I can’t really give you an estimate of how many interviews I’ll be able to arrange. I usually don’t like to have our clients do more than two or three in-person interviews per day but honestly, with how little time you have before your heat I want you to see as many alphas as you can tomorrow so you have the widest possible selection. I won’t schedule more than, let’s say fifteen?”

Seeing Stiles horrified face, Jamie immediately backtracked. “How about ten? We only schedule the start time of the interview. You can give the alphas as much or as little time as you like. I’ll also arrange for guards in case any of the alphas get out of hand. I’m a beta so I can’t smell your pheromones but if you’re really that close to your first heat I suspect we are going to need extra security for you during the interviews.”

“Alright, start looking at the profiles and we’ll be back in soon.”

“Okay.”

Stiles watched his dad and Jamie leave, closing the door behind them. He turned back to the computer and started flipping through the profiles. There was a prominent color photo at the start of each profile and almost all the alphas were gorgeous, glowing with the vibrant good health that went hand in hand with their alpha status. He read the biographies each alpha included with their profile, and skimmed the lists of hobbies and interests. He was a little startled by how much variety there were in the profiles. He’d half expected a list of the kind of alpha overachievers everyone associated with the status, but he realized that narrowing the age range must have weeded out a lot of the high profile professions. There were none of the congressmen or senators Jamie had alluded to, no CEO’s, or professional athletes. Stiles spent a minute fantasizing about skimming through the list for some big name celebrity and taking them as his alpha. He imagined the look on everyone’s face as his rock star alpha pulled up in front of the school in some flashy car that would make Jackson Whittemore’s Porsche look like a used Hyundai and then dropped him off with a kiss.

Stiles smirked a little at the image, but kept scrolling through his current list. As much fun as it was to
imagine showing off, he had no interest in living in the limelight. The thing he wanted most, family, was something he was hoping to build with his alpha. His smile slid off his face as he suddenly remembered a moment he’d shared with Derek. They’d been lingering at the door after their first family dinner, still talking and reluctant to have the evening end.

*I really want a big family someday,* he’d said to Derek.

*Me too.* Derek had smiled at him shyly, and then added, *you can take Cora home with you right now if you’d like,* right before his little sister had yelled in outrage from where she’d been trying to spy on them. Derek had turned just in time to catch her as she leapt at him and had tickled her into a screaming mess while Stiles laughed.

Stiles felt his eyes start to burn and he forced his eyes to the ceiling and blinked until it faded. He could still have a family, he told himself firmly, it just wouldn’t be with Derek. He turned back to studying the profiles.

Most of the profiles on his list seemed to be college students studying in a wide variety of fields. There also seemed to be a higher than average proportion of cops and firefighters. Alpha protective instincts in action, Stiles thought. He wondered why there weren’t more military alphas on his list, then realized that narrowing geographically had probably eliminated most of the active duty alphas assigned to military bases.

In addition to the main profile picture most of the alphas had opted to include other photos. He deleted one profile when all the additional photos were of the alpha posing shirtless to show off his admittedly fantastic physique, and another which showed the alpha half-hard in a skin tight swimsuit, making a duck face at the camera. He paused over one file that showed two identical appearing alphas posing together. They were cute but they appeared to have applied with one profile. His curiosity led him to click in the corner to add them to his list.

“How are you doing in here?”

Jamie was back and his father was behind him, looking annoyed. When Stiles looked at him quizzically he mouthed, “Paperwork” and rolled his eyes. Stiles made an over the top pout of sympathy and dodged the light swat his father aimed at his head.

“How good,” Stiles said. "Are you guys all done?”

“Yes, I got all the information I needed. Do you want any help with the profiles? Did you want to change any of the search criteria?”

Stiles shook his head. “No, it seems okay. Can my dad stay and help me look through these?”

“Of course. I’ll be in my office. Just give a yell if you need any help. I’ll check on you both in a bit.”

His dad sat next to him and Stiles pulled up the four profiles he’d checked as being interested in. They looked at the profiles together and when Stiles asked for his dad’s opinion, his dad seemed strangely tentative.

“What do you think of this one Dad? He’s twenty, getting his degree in chemistry and pre-med at Stanford. Three sisters, loves comic books and plays the violin.” Stiles pulled up the additional photos which showed a brown-eyed alpha with short black hair and a wide smile. “He’s pretty cute.”

There was a furrow between his dad’s eyes that never quite goes away as they work through all the profiles. He contributed very little as Stiles clicks through the profiles although he did point out details from the profiles here and there. They were looking at the last profile when Jamie came back.
“How’s it going in here?” he asks, sounding far more enthusiastic than Stiles feels.

“I’ve got it down to ten. Well, maybe eleven. Look at this one – are these guys applying together?” He clicked on the profile with the identical twins.

Jamie squinted at the profile. “Yes they are. I’ve only seen this once before but occasionally twin alphas will apply for a single omega. They both get to put profiles in, which doubles their chances of showing up on an omega’s list and it certainly helps them stand out in the crowd.”

“ Weird.” Stiles stared at the profile for another minute, and then shook his head. “Not for me.” He deleted the profile. “So I’ve got ten.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to add a few more? Some of these alphas won’t be available for an appointment tomorrow. You may only get to meet a few of these.”

“I don’t think I could handle more interviews than this anyway.”

“Stiles, are you sure?” his dad asked.

“Yeah, I am. These were the only ones that seemed like they might be a good fit.”

“Alright,” Jamie said, looking distracted. “I need to get on the phone with these alphas ASAP. I’ll call you tonight with a schedule for tomorrow. I’ll make appointments for one alpha per hour starting at eight in the morning, but like I said you can spend more or less time with the alpha depending on how you feel. We hold these meetings next door. There’s a separate entrance for the alphas so just come back to the door you came in today and I’ll take you to meet them. That way, if anything gets too crazy we’ll have an easy way to get you out of the situation. I gave your dad a sheet that goes into more details about what to wear, what not to wear, things like that. If you have any questions I’ll give you my cell number and you can text or email me, okay?”

Jamie hustled them to the front entrance, and shook their hands. He retreated back to his office and Stiles could hear him already dialing the first phone number before the door shut behind them.

“He’s already calling them.”

“Really?” John turned back and craned his head like he would be able to see Jamie at his desk. He sighed. “You know, the one thing I do envy is those omega senses of yours. They would make my job so much easier.”

Stiles wrinkled his nose. “The sight and hearing maybe, but I don’t think you’d like the increased sense of smell. Especially right now, with my heat coming on, everything stinks.” He stepped around a piece of trash with his nose wrinkled in disgust.

“You know, he wasn’t that bad,” Stiles said. “I thought he was going to be a nightmare when we met him.” Stiles looked up at his dad. “This whole thing wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be. I’m glad you made me come.”

His dad didn’t say anything until they were in the car. “That was ...well, I understand why you didn’t want to go this route. It was a whole lot more clinical than I thought it would be.”

“Really? What did you think it was going to be like?” Stiles asked curiously.

“I guess I didn’t really. Maybe it’s because you’re so short on time, but you were right. It was kind of, well, strange. It was so impersonal. Maybe it wouldn’t seem so strange if you were looking for someone to date, but trying to pick someone to bond to the day after tomorrow...” John shook his
head. "I can see why sticking with someone you know even in passing might be more appealing."

He started the car, and pulled out of the parking lot. Stiles stared out the window, and then spoke without turning back to his dad. "You're right though, I should at least keep my options open. But, yeah, dating like a beta is sounding pretty good right about now."

His dad reached out and gave Stiles's shoulder a squeeze, then returned his hand to the wheel.

Neither of them said anything for the rest of the ride.
Chapter 6

John dropped Stiles off at home after the visit to the OSS office and went to work. Stiles wandered from room to room but didn’t really feel like doing anything despite the fluttering pulse in the back of his head that was telling him that he needed to hurry, to clean, to organize, to prepare. He eventually flopped down on the sofa and watched reruns of cartoons until he dozed off. He woke up having slept through lunch, feeling starved. He looked at the time and made himself a quick sandwich to tide him over until Peter arrived with dinner. He checked his phone while he was eating and saw that he missed a half dozen texts from Scott. The temporary ban on seeing each other had been hard on them both, but on his last day of school he’d looked up from his history book to the sound of Scott inching his desk closer to Stiles while he was very obviously sniffing him. He’d goggled at his best friend and he wasn’t sure which of them was more embarrassed when Scott had snapped out of it just as he was leaning over to nuzzle Stiles’s arm. Stiles had submitted his leave of absence form that very afternoon, and he and Scott had agreed to not see one another in person until after Stiles had bonded.

Stiles thought about calling him, but couldn’t stand the thought of explaining what had happened. He knew Scott would be furious and hurt on his behalf, and he felt like he couldn’t deal with Scott’s emotions on top of his own. He could even imagine Scott offering to bond with him instead and he wasn’t sure he’d have the strength to refuse, even knowing Scott was entirely straight. He knew Scott’s alpha status would override his orientation and allow the bonding, but he couldn’t stand the thought of bonding to someone who would only want to be intimate with him four times a year when he was in heat. Worse yet, if Scott found a female omega and somehow convinced her to bond to an alpha who already had an omega mate, Stiles would be stuck, physically bonded to an alpha who didn’t love him the way he wanted to be loved, playing the third wheel for the rest of his life.

He texted Scott back instead of calling, and kept it vague, explained that bonding stuff was keeping him busy. He declined an invitation to meet online later, and begged off any further texting saying he had to get ready for dinner. The exchange left Stiles feeling restless and anxious.

He gave in to his nesting instincts. He felt calmer as he allowed himself to put all the towels in the house though the wash, then spent a half hour cleaning the fridge of anything that seemed suspect. Unfortunately, his heightened sense of smell led him to toss anything that didn’t smell completely fresh and by the time he’d finished, the fridge looked sadly bare. He jotted down a grocery list for his dad and then went upstairs to shower and change. He dithered for a moment about what to wear, until he realized what he was doing and changed into a random clean tee shirt and jeans.

The doorbell rang before his dad was home. Stiles didn’t think much of it, ran down the stairs, and had opened the door before he realized that he was alone with an alpha, on the cusp of his heat. He tensed up but other than one, long lingering inhale and a slow slumberous blink, Peter didn’t seem to react.

“Hello, Stiles.”

“My dad’s not home yet.”

“That’s fine. If you wouldn’t mind taking these bags I can wait for him out here.”

Stiles wavered. This felt like the start of a dozen terrible movies about innocent isolated omegas on the verge of heat and the obsessive determined alpha stalkers who wanted them. He knew Peter though, and he opened his mouth to invite him in. Even as he did so, he suddenly had a flash of trying to explain to his dad why he’d thought that was a good idea, and he could picture the exact look of disappointment his dad would have on his face.
“Yeah, okay. Just leave the bags at the door.”

Stiles hovered behind the half-closed door until Peter set down two large brown paper bags with handles and stepped away. He turned away entirely, giving Stiles a moment to dart out and grab the bags, then shut and lock the door. Stiles carried the bags into the kitchen and started to unload them. He pulled out a huge pasta pot, a colander, and a baking dish from one of the bags before he abandoned it in favor of the other. The second bag held a variety of food and Stiles relaxed when he noticed how fresh everything smelled. He was just pulling out two different blocks of paper-wrapped cheese when he heard the familiar sound of his dad’s keys in the lock.

“Hey, Dad!”

His father walked into the kitchen, followed by Peter. Stiles was surprised how happy he felt to see Peter, now that his dad was there, and wondered if it was because it was Peter or if it was because Peter was an alpha. He'd been feeling more clingy as his heat approached and the warm smile Peter directed his way made him feel like preening. He shoved down that impulse under his father’s watchful gaze and greeted Peter with a smile and an aborted wave. Peter wrapped him up in a warm hug that was over before Stiles could do much more than draw in the breath for a startled yelp. He deflated as soon as Peter let him go, feeling utterly unsatisfied and hungry for more. Peter stepped back and away from Stiles before his maneuver could earn more than a stern look from John.

His father excused himself to go change and vanished up the stairs after pointedly reminding them both that he’d be right upstairs, would leave his door open, and would be back in a minute. Peter nodded and dutifully started to unload the bags. Stiles hovered nearby and watched him.

“You weren’t kidding when you said you’d take care of everything. We do have pots and pans you know.” Stiles said.

“I thought if I brought everything over there would be less work for you and your father afterwards.” Peter pulled out a small covered pot that was wrapped with cling film and set it down on a burner on the stove. A bunch of brilliant green basil emerged next, and then a meat mallet. Stiles drifted a little closer to peek into the bag as Peter worked.

“What are you making?”

“I thought I’d make chicken parmesan. You both seemed to like it a couple of months ago when I made it for dinner.”

“You made that? That was delicious, dude. I thought Talia made that.”

Peter snorted. “My sister once burned a bag of microwave popcorn so badly we had to have the kitchen professionally cleaned. She’s now officially banned from cooking forever. She’s lucky we even let her in the kitchen to use the coffee maker. And don’t call me dude.”

“You cook?” Stiles asked dubiously. Peter nodded. “Sometimes. I really only cook when I feel like it. Julia asked me to cook that night because she was running late with Cora on a school field trip.”

“Julia’s a pretty amazing cook. You must be good if she asked you to take over.”

“She is good. We were just lucky Marcus was her favorite brother.” Peter filled up a pot with cold water and added a sprinkle of salt.

“Did she move in when Marcus and Talia bonded?” Stiles asked curiously. “I feel like I can never get her to talk about herself.”
Peter shrugged. “She likes you. I’ve heard her say so but you’re right, she doesn’t like to talk about herself very much.” He hesitated, and then continued, “Her family is pretty conservative and when she didn’t present as an alpha or an omega, her parents didn’t take it very well.”

“That’s ridiculous. There’s way more betas around than alphas and omegas put together.”

“I think that was part of the problem,” Peter said. “Her parents were big believers in alpha superiority, the whole idea that alpha traits like sharper senses and greater strength equals an inherently superior human being, the kind of nonsense that’s been around since the dark ages. Apparently, they are the kind of people who are extremely proud of their pure alpha-omega lineage and when Julia was born and wound up being a beta she was seen as an embarrassment.” He rinsed the basil and started to shred it.

Stiles made a face. “Julia’s awesome. She’s been so nice to me since we met. She could tell I was really nervous at the beginning and she really went out of her way to make me feel welcomed. Plus, she’s really funny and all the kids adore her.”

“We all adore her. Luckily for us she shows no sign of wanting to leave. I know Talia offered to help set her up if she wanted to live independently but she said she was happy at home.”

Stiles was quiet for a minute. “Is it true no one ever moves out?”

Peter’s gaze was sharp, but it melted so quickly into a look of understanding that Stiles had to look away.

“We’re pretty tight knit, especially with an omega mate around, but there are no rules about moving out. Laura’s living in New York right now, for school.” Peter started unwrapping the cheese and he didn’t look at Stiles as he said as casually as he could manage, “If my mate, for example, wanted to live somewhere else I would definitely consider it.”

There was a charged silence and neither Peter or Stiles looked at one another. Stiles watched Peter grate cheese into a bowl and blurted out, “Do you want any help?”

Peter smiled at Stiles, and just like that, the tension was gone. “I’d love some. Would you mind peeling some garlic?”

Peter placed two bowls and three large heads of garlic in front of Stiles. Stiles had just peeled the first layer of papery skin off of the garlic when he heard his father come back down the stairs. John stepped into the doorway of the kitchen, and visibly relaxed when he saw Stiles peeling garlic and Peter across the room from him, putting water on the stove to boil.

“John, I brought some soda to go with dinner. Would you like one?”

“Sure.”

Peter pulled out two six-packs of long neck bottles from the bottom of one of the bags and set them on the counter. “I brought black cherry and root beer. Which would you prefer?”

“Root beer, please.”

Peter opened one of the bottles and handed it to John. “Here you go.”

“Dad, why don’t you go sit and take it easy. I’ll help Peter and we’ll join you in a minute.”

John stared at Stiles, then at Peter, and jerked his head in a nod. “Alright. I’ll keep the volume low.
Just let me know if you need anything.” He directed the last part of the sentence pointedly at Peter, and after a moment’s hesitation, retreated to the sofa. A minute later the TV clicked on and the sounds of a game show abruptly decreased in volume until it was mute.

Stiles sighed a little in exasperation and turned back towards Peter. Peter pulled out an enormous paper wrapped package and when he unwrapped it, there were an alarming number of chicken breasts sitting on the counter.

“Whoa, how much chicken are you making Peter?”

Peter looked up. “I was going to make a full pan. You’re about to go into heat. I thought you’d probably need at least a few extra servings tonight and if there were any leftovers I was going to leave them here for you and your father for tomorrow.”

“Oh, okay, that’s really nice of you.”

Peter grinned at Stiles. “Well, I am trying to show you what a fantastic provider I am, just in case you aren’t swept away by my charm and stunning good looks.”

Stiles startled himself by laughing. Everything had seemed so serious and scary since Derek had run out on him that he had felt like he might never laugh again. It felt amazing to be standing in his kitchen and to feel light-hearted enough to laugh.

“I might also be kissing up to your father a little. No matter what their status, everyone knows the way to a man’s heart. I heard you telling Julia about that tofu nugget recipe the last time you were over for dinner. I figured the poor man might appreciate a little real food.”

They both heard John mutter “Damn straight he would,” under his breath in the living room.

“One piece!” Stiles yelled, “And I’m making a salad.” He turned back to Peter. “Those tofu nuggets would have been fine if I hadn’t forgotten to season the tofu before I baked it.”

Peter scoffed and pulled a plastic container out of the fridge. "I already made a salad to go with the meal." He pulled off the lid and tilted it towards Stiles.

“Wow, that looks fancy,” Stiles marveled. “Are those artichoke hearts?”

“Yes, and some chopped sun-dried tomatoes. The problem with most salads is that people stick to the same five or six boring ingredients and you end up having to drown the thing in dressing to make it taste like anything.” He replaced the lid and stashed the container back in the fridge.

Peter pulled out a couple of eggs and Stiles wandered out to check on his dad. He was slumped on the sofa, staring at the TV through heavy-lidded eyes. His dad gave him a weary smile and raised his eyebrows in silent question. Everything okay?

Stiles nodded and headed back into the kitchen. Peter was whisking eggs in a bowl. Stiles grabbed a root beer from the counter and took a sip. It was strangely spicy, and had just enough carbonation to sizzle on its way down his throat. He licked his lips and hummed in contemplation. He decided he liked it. He threw his head back and took a couple of big swallows before drawing back. He licked a hanging drop from the end of the bottle, and then licked his lips again.

“Wow, that’s really good.”

Peter had stopped whisking. His hands and arms were suspended in mid-motion, like he’d been abruptly frozen. A flush was burning across his cheekbones and even as Stiles watched, he
swallowed, so loudly it sounded like a gulp. A wave of warm alpha scent drifted across the kitchen and Stiles’s eyes drooped shut as the smell surrounded him. He sighed a little in pleasure and shifted with the restless energy that had been brewing at the base of his spine all week.

Peter stared at Stiles intensely for a moment, and then his eyes bounced from Stiles to the entryway to the living room and then back again before he cleared his throat and started whisking again, harder than he had been. He was careful to keep his eyes on the chicken as he breaded it and set it to fry in some olive oil.

Stiles looked at him quizzically, wondering if he’d done something wrong, when Peter asked, his voice pitched slightly lower than normal, “So, how did things go at the OSS office this morning?”

Stiles shook off his confusion at Peter’s strange behavior and asked, “Scoping out the competition?”

“Yes.” Peter stated baldly, startling Stiles into another laugh.

“It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. I mean, it wasn’t great but it wasn’t terrible. I kind of wish I’d checked it out even after Talia approached my dad about the whole bonding thing. It might not have been so bad if I had more time. I mean, betas have all those online dating sites and they manage to fall in love all the time.” Stiles bit his lip. “I agreed to meet with some alphas tomorrow. The OSS guy I saw is going to call me tonight with the details.”

Peter finished assembling the dish and slid the whole pain into the oven. He turned and looked at Stiles. “I had thought we could watch a movie after dinner but it sounds like you have an early day tomorrow and honestly, you and your dad both look tired. Why don’t we call it a night after dinner?”

Stiles nodded, feeling a little relieved.

“That would be great Peter.”

“Shall we join your dad in the living room?” Peter asked, and then held out his hand. Stiles took it with only the slightest hesitation. He gasped quietly when Peter used it to draw him into a hug. He tensed for a minute but Peter didn’t do anything other than hold him wrapped in his arms. Stiles sighed, and let himself relax into the hug. His head tipped forward until his face was pressed against Peter’s shoulder. Peter slowly curled towards Stiles until his nose was pressed against the base of his neck. Stiles shivered as Peter slowly stroked it up the side of neck, his cheek, his temple, inhaling as he went. He stopped when his lips reached Stiles’s temple, where he pressed a soft kiss into his hair.

“Stiles,” he murmured, just as John called from the living room, “Stiles? Everything okay in there?”

“Everything’s fine.” Stiles said, not moving away. Slowly he straightened and Peter released him slowly, not trapping him but making it clear it was Stiles’s choice to pull away. Stiles squeezed Peter’s hand, straightened up, and walked out of the kitchen.

They sat with John and they all watched the tail end of a sitcom. Peter disappeared into the kitchen twice, once to drain the pasta and a second time to add cheese to the top of the chicken. Both the Stilinski men hopped up eagerly when Peter started to carry the food to the table.

Peter had set the table with plates and Stiles grabbed utensils and another round of sodas for everyone. Peter served him a double helping of chicken on top of a mound of pasta, then served John one piece of chicken on a more modest serving of pasta. He set the salad bowl conspicuously by John's place. John sighed a little, but didn’t say anything when Stiles gave Peter an approving thumbs up.

Stiles took a bite of the chicken on his plate, and his eyes open wide. He remembered enjoying this
meal months ago when he’d had it at the Hale’s house, but he didn’t remember it being like this. He cut another bite and crammed it in before he finished the first, breathing in and out to cool the food in his mouth.

“Oh my God. Peter,” he mumbled, and then bent over his plate and started to eat in earnest. He had to remind himself to slow down enough to chew.

“Good?” Peter’s voice was amused.

Stiles didn’t even bother to answer. The hot, rich, blend of chicken and cheese and sauce and pasta was everything he hadn’t realized he had been craving. He shoveled pieces into his mouth as fast as he could cut them off. He’d inhaled the first two pieces of chicken and before he could finish chewing the last bite, Peter slid a third, even larger piece onto his plate.

“Thanks,” Stiles mumbled, and he glanced up to see Peter smiling at him, looking overwhelmingly pleased with himself. His dad was looking a little horrified, and Stiles crammed in another bite before he forced himself to sit up. He chewed the bite he had in his mouth and then wiped his mouth with his napkin. “Sorry, I didn’t realize how hungry I was and this chicken is amazing.”

“I made plenty, Stiles, help yourself.”

“It is really good,” John said. “I remember this from one of the dinners over at your house. It was the first time in months Stiles let me have meat and cheese at the same meal.”

Stiles paused long enough to roll his eyes and nudge the salad bowl closer to his dad. John sighed.

Stiles ate his way through three more pieces before he pushed his plate away. He drained the last of his root beer and then slumped over in his chair.

“I am full of chicken and regret. So much regret. I should not have had that last piece. Ugh.”

Peter and his father both laughed, and then looked at each other in companionable amusement.

“So I guess I won’t offer you any dessert?” Peter teased.

“Dessert?” Stiles head lifted for a moment but the movement sent him slumping back down. “No. No thank you. I’m going to curl up right here and digest the five pounds of chicken and cheese I just inhaled. Go on without me.”

“I’d be happy to have dessert,” John said, ignoring Stiles long, heartfelt groan.

“I’m too full to stop you. Only one serving. A small one. Don’t think I didn’t see that second helping of chicken you snuck onto your plate.”

Peter stood up, walked into the kitchen, and came back with a carton and a couple of bowls.

“Relax Stiles. It’s just some lemon sorbet. Dinner was so heavy I thought something light for dessert might go down easier.” Peter dished up a couple scoops for the sheriff and some more for himself.

“Thank you for dinner, Peter,” John said. "It really was delicious." Stiles groaned again in agreement.

Stiles and John’s phones both chirped, and John reached over and grabbed his off the counter.

“It’s Jamie. You’re all set for tomorrow, starting at eight.”
Stiles felt some of the good humor that he’d felt throughout the dinner recede. He’d almost – almost – forgotten why they were having dinner with Peter.

“Noooo,” Stiles whined, trying to keep his tone light, “I still won’t be able to move by eight o’clock tomorrow. Why does it have to be tomorrow?”

Peter must have sensed Stiles’s change in mood and he stood up to clear the table. “I guess my dastardly plan to feed you right into my clutches has worked.”

John and Peter cleared the table while Stiles took his dad’s phone and reviewed the schedule for the next day. Jamie had managed to schedule six interviews which struck Stiles as somewhat amazing, given the late notice. The pictures from the profiles associated with each name flashed into his mind as he read them, and he started to feel the anxiety that had receded with dinner start to knot up his shoulders. He listened to Peter and his father as they worked together to wash and dry the dishes, and then the rustling sounds of Peter packing up. He sighed, sent a quick message to Jamie, and set the phone down.

Peter was wrapping foil around the leftover chicken, and gave John instructions on how to re-heat it for tomorrow. He and John both turned to look at Stiles when he was done. Stiles wasn’t sure what expression was on his face, but he suspected that some of his tension must be showing by the concerned looks that instantly sprang up on both of their faces. He tried to smile, but it felt far flimsier than the ones from earlier in the evening.

“Thank you for dinner Peter. It was amazing.”

Peter smirked at him. “Hey, look at you, standing there under your own power. I guess I should have insisted you eat dessert.”

Stiles winced and rubbed his hands ruefully over his stomach. “Yeah, barely standing. Me and my food baby might have to sleep it off on the sofa tonight.”

“Well we can’t have that.” Peter strode over to Stiles and slid one arm under Stiles’s, bent and slid his other arm behind Stiles’s knees. He lifted him up against his chest, and smirked when Stiles squawked and clutched at Peter’s neck.

“Where would you like to go, my darling?”

Stiles tentatively linked his arms around Peter’s neck and said, “To my room?”

They both glanced at the sheriff who looked wary but a little amused. “You have one minute and then I’m coming up after you.”

Peter didn’t hesitate. He carried Stiles out of the kitchen and up the stairs. He took Stiles right to the threshold of his room, then stopped. He looked at Stiles and murmured, “I think I’d better stop right here. I don’t think I could stand to lay you down on your bed and then just leave.” He loosened his arms and lowered Stiles to his feet. As soon as Stiles was standing he stepped closer so that there was only a bare hint of space between their bodies.

He leaned forward and Stiles checked his instinct to pull back. Kissing on the mouth was completely forbidden for unbonded omegas for fear that any kind of fluid exchange could trigger the bonding process. His breath came a little faster as Peter leaned in, and Peter’s warm breath passed over his lips like the faintest caress. At the last possible moment, Peter turned slightly and the kiss landed on Stiles’s cheek, so close to the corner of his mouth that Stiles shivered in excitement and fear. Peter pulled back, but not far. Stiles could feel the brush of his lips as he spoke. He closed his eyes.
“Thank you for a lovely evening, Stiles,” Peter said softly. "Goodnight." He pressed forward for one more gentle kiss, and was gone.
Peter liked to win. This was not, by any means, a unique trait among alphas. Peter liked to think that the degree to which it satisfied him, and the lengths to which he’d go in order to achieve it were what set him apart. Alphas were notorious for their competitive drive, for turning every interaction into a pissing contest to prove their superiority. Peter hated to waste his time, almost as much as he liked to win. He prided himself on the fact that he maintained iron control over his alpha instincts. He found it immensely gratifying that he had earned a reputation as the reasonable alpha, the one to turn to at his law firm and in his family when a clear head was needed.

When Stiles had opened that door, all pale skin and wide amber eyes, and that sticky sweet luscious smell of omega heat had rolled out in front of him like a welcoming cloud…well. Peter had impressed himself with his own restraint. The instinct to drop the bags he was holding and push the boy back through the open door, to drag him down to the floor and pin him there underneath his body had been nearly overwhelming. Even now, he could feel the ache in his nail beds and gums where fangs and claws waited to emerge. Only alphas from unbroken alpha-omega bloodlines were still able to affect the alpha transformation but Peter only allowed himself to transform in public when it served his purposes. He had never used it to frivolously to win an argument or prove a point, never used it to impress a potential lover. Tonight, standing in front of Stiles, he’d had to curl his transformed fingers to hide the claws that had erupted as soon as he had seen Stiles.

Stiles would probably have been impressed. Even if he didn’t want to be, omegas had their instincts too, and a mate who could grow claws and fangs for his defense was almost certainly going to appeal to the primitive omega hidden somewhere in Stiles’s hind brain, the omega who expected to be wooed and won and cherished. But Peter had already decided that he wanted to win Stiles honestly. He didn’t want to use the crude lever of biology to have Stiles as his mate. He wanted Stiles to want to be his mate, to open his heart and mind along with his body for Peter’s taking. Appealing to instincts was easy. He wanted the bright mind behind those lambent eyes to make a reasoned decision and to decide on Peter.

When Talia had suggested the match between Stiles and Derek, Peter had done his research on Stiles. Let Talia roar and go toe to toe with the rest of the world. Peter had his own ways to protect his family. His alpha blood ran no less hot that Talia’s but he preferred to channel his aggression in the form of an well-aimed knife rather than some bloody all out brawl.

There wasn’t much. Stiles was young. Alpha mother, dead in a car accident when he was eleven, beta father, a sheriff who worked too much and spent far too little time at home for a single parent raising an omega child. A diagnosis of ADHD which Peter suspected was misdiagnosed omega anxiety disorder, and excellent grades, enough that he’d likely be able to have his pick of colleges. Just enough trouble in his school records to prove he had some life to him, a few detentions for mouthing off, skipping school, one for filling his chemistry teacher’s classroom with pamphlets on erectile dysfunction. It was easy enough to discover that he had a thriving business selling term papers on-line to college students. Peter read a few samples of Stiles’s papers and they were good, good enough to pass for solid college level work. Overall he’d approved of the match, and he’d told Talia so. It wasn’t until Stiles had turned to him that first night, his first dinner at the Hale house with his father hovering anxiously behind his shoulder, and held his hand out with a wide grin that Peter realized just how lucky Derek really was.

He parked in the driveway in his usual spot and walked into the house. He bypassed the living room to unpack the bags he’d take over to the Stilinskis. Talia was in the kitchen, hands wrapped around a mug of hot coffee. Peter glanced at the clock, then raised an eyebrow at her and she grimaced. “It’s
decaffeinated. We’re out of tea.”

He nodded, putting away the pot and the grater. He knew what Talia wanted to know but Peter didn’t like to give anything away for free. Talia might be the head alpha of their family by virtue of being the eldest, but Peter liked to remind her, frequently, that it was his choice to defer to her.

“How did things go?”

Peter gave a one-shoulder shrug and swallowed down a smile at the sour scent of frustration that started to drift in his direction.

“Peter.”

He turned back towards Talia, eyebrows raised in bland inquiry, as if he had no idea what on earth she might be asking about. Talia however, knew him too well. She loosened up her stiff posture, leaned back against the counter, and asked in a voice that was almost casual, “How’s Stiles?”

“He’s handling it.” Peter placed the damp utensils into their drawer and asked, “Have you heard anything from Derek?”

Talia’s lips tightened into a hard, flat line and she shook her head. “Nothing. No calls, no texts, nothing. Laura says she hasn’t heard from him either.”

Peter nodded in acknowledgement, and then said, “Stiles went to the OSS office and is having interviews with some alphas tomorrow.” The words were bitter in his mouth, although he was careful not to let it leak through to his voice.

Talia looked sympathetic, and furious. “That should never have happened. He should be at home looking forward to his bonding, not scrambling to find an alpha with his brain swimming in heat hormones. How could Derek do this? I thought I raised him better than this.”

Peter shook his head and said nothing. There was nothing he could say to comfort Talia. He knew his sister blamed herself to some degree, but he agreed with her. She had raised Derek better than this. He said good night and left his sister brooding over her coffee in the kitchen. He walked up the stairs to his rooms, and closed the door firmly, more to keep himself in, than to keep anyone out. There was a clamoring alarm at the base of his skull warning him that his omega was ready to mate and out of reach. He felt like he was going to claw himself right out of his skin, desperate to break through his door and run until he was back with Stiles. He forced down the alpha transformation that was prickling urgently beneath his skin. He suspected that if he allowed even that much, that he would lose control entirely.

He made himself go through the motions of a normal evening. He brushed his teeth, dressed for bed, and sat down at his desk to check his messages. A familiar voice made him straighten up in his chair, and he hit the call button.

“Hey Peter.”

“What have you got?”

“Well, they’re in Las Vegas. Derek Hale and Katherine Argent appear to have driven straight from Beacon Hills to Sin City where their first stop was the Little Chapel of Love. They are now Mr. and Mrs. Hale. Mazel tov. Unfortunately, they bought the deluxe Endless Romance package which included the USB drive with all of the photos of the happy couple, so no wedding photos. I did manage to obtain a scan of the blushing bride’s driver’s license. I’ve sent it to your email as an attachment. The newlyweds then checked into the the Sunrise/Sunset suite at the Four Seasons
Hotel, and as far as I can tell, they’ve been camped out in the room and ordering room service. They’re definitely splashing out – multiple $500 bottles of champagne, chocolate-covered strawberries, lobster, caviar, the works. Derek is paying for everything with a credit card. I can’t get any clear shots into the room so no photos of what they’re up to in there and they’ve been refusing maid service so no sound or video footage yet. I called the room but they have a do not disturb lock on the phone so no verbal or visual contact with either of them.”

Peter hums, then is quiet. Norman doesn’t ask any questions. They’ve worked together often enough for him to know Peter’s habits. Peter can hear the faint sounds of clinking glasses behind Norman’s breathing, and the distant sounds of slot machines.

“Did anyone at the chapel say anything seemed strange? Any signs that Derek or this Argent girl were hesitant or reluctant about the wedding?”

“Nothing like that. The only one who really remembered them was the photographer and the only thing that really caught her attention was that both of them were sober. Apparently that’s not too common for 1 a.m. weddings at the Little Chapel of Love. She did say the groom was pretty quiet and the bride did most of the talking.”

Peter thought some more.

“Listen, my nephew drives a black Chevy Camaro, I’ll text you the license plate. I’d like you to take that car and have it transported back here to Beacon Hills as soon as possible.”

“I’m not going back to jail for you, Peter.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. My sister is also on that lease. It’s all perfectly legal, although I would appreciate some discretion.”

Norman scoffed. “Mmm-hmm, that sure sounds perfectly legal when you put it that way. I want danger pay.”

It was Peter’s turn to scoff. “Oh please, danger pay for boosting a car from a hotel parking lot? You should be paying me for enabling your hobbies.”

“Danger pay, Peter, and the usual terms if I get caught.”

Peter sighed. “Fine. Danger pay and I want the Camaro in my front yard in the next 72 hours.”

“You’ll get the Camaro when you get it.”

“Seventy-two hours.” Peter hung up on the call and flipped open his lap top. He opened his e-mail and there it was, Katherine Argent’s driver’s license. His eyebrows rose when he saw that she was twenty-three. He’d imaged that Derek’s beta girlfriend was some starry-eyed teenager, some high school girl who’d read Romeo and Juliet a few too many times and imagined herself as the ill-fated beta. There was nothing starry-eyed about the woman in the photo. She was pretty enough, even in the DMV picture: bottle-blond hair, a generous curve to her lips when she smiled but it was a woman’s face, not a girl’s. Peter started at her face, trying to see the person who’d chosen to run off with an eighteen year-old alpha and marry him in a 24-hour Las Vegas wedding chapel. He pulled out his cell phone and sent a text to Norman. Get me a deep background check on Katherine Argent, ASAP.

Peter sat back and laid his phone down and started drumming his fingers. Something was wrong. There was nothing about this situation that seemed consistent with the nephew Peter had known his entire life. Derek despised the city, any city. Sometimes he even complained that Beacon Hills was
growing too urban, too many cars and too many people. Peter could not imagine Derek agreeing to spend time in Las Vegas under any circumstances, much less wanting to marry and honeymoon there.

Peter knew that Derek had wanted an omega mate since he’d presented as an alpha at age twelve. He had been the one who most eagerly listened to Marcus’s stories of how he and Talia met, the one who was the most likely to cry at sappy romantic movies. He was so much less outgoing than either of his sisters, quiet and a little awkward, shying away from the attention he received as a maturing young alpha rather than basking in it. He had watched the easy affection his parents had bestowed on each other every day and had obviously seen it as the highest possible prize. He had been looking forward to registering in the national alpha registry when he turned eighteen the way other kids look forward to getting their driver’s license. When Talia had come home with a possible omega match, Derek had been so excited that no one, not even Cora could bring themselves to tease him about it.

He thought of those few dinners he’d attended, remembered the faint burn of envy in his gut as he watched Stiles, then watched the way Derek’s eyes had been pinned to Stiles’s every movement, his face soft with happiness and longing. It was true Peter hadn’t joined in on the last three family dinners, once due to work, and twice by choice, but it was hard to understand how Derek had gone from that, to this, to walking away from his bond, walking away from his promised omega.

Peter tapped his fingers on the desk. He could charter a plane, be in Las Vegas in just a few hours. He knew exactly where Derek was, and with whom. He could find his nephew and untangle whatever mess he’d made and rush him back to Beacon Hills before Stiles went into heat. Maybe.

Unless Derek really had lost his mind and fallen in love so fiercely, so desperately that all his previous truths has been ripped away. Maybe he really did love this girl so much that he didn’t care that she was a beta. Maybe Las Vegas seemed beautiful, if he was seeing it with her at his side. Maybe he had suddenly learned to love champagne, if he was drinking it to celebrate his wedding. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

If he was right, and there was something more to the situation than met the eye, he might be able to save Derek, might be able to wrest things back on track, give Stiles and Derek the happy ending that both their families had been so sure they were destined for.

Maybe.

If he left, Peter might not make it back before Stiles went into heat. There would be no chance to see Stiles, to court him as much as he was able in the scant time he had left. If Peter left, he would likely be losing any chance that Stiles might choose him as his alpha.

Peter liked to win.

No, Peter thought. There was something wrong but if he left, he might be leaving Stiles in the exact same situation as Derek had, with his heat looming and no alpha in sight. Nothing was worth that.

He plugged in his phone, read for a while, and went to sleep.
Chapter 8

The first interview was a disaster.

Matthew Simmons, twenty-five, was the oldest alpha Stiles had chosen to meet with. He was a firefighter who lived two towns over from Beacon Hills, and worked as part of the Forest Service elite firefighter team. He volunteered with a child mentoring program for at-risk youth, loved line-dancing, and he had a large, close-knit family he ate dinner with every Sunday night. He was gorgeous, with pale grey eyes and curling auburn hair that fell in fat little corkscrews that made Stiles want to tug on them. He also completely flipped out as soon as he scented Stiles.

It took Stiles a few minutes to catch on. Jamie had ushered him to the door but let him go in by himself. There were already three beta guards in the room, whom Jamie said would be silent and as unobtrusive as possible while keeping an eye on Stiles and the alphas. Stiles had greeted Matthew and attributed his silent half nod to the strangeness of the entire situation. Stiles had seated himself in one of the two chairs in the room, and had been startled when he realized that Matthew had followed him to his chair, rather than taking the other one.

“What are you doing, dude?” Stiles had asked nervously, as Matthew had loomed over him. Stiles’s heart sank when he realized that Matthew’s pupils were enormous, and he was audibly inhaling Stiles’s scent without any pretense he was doing anything else. Stiles squeaked when Matthew dropped to his knees and buried his face in Stiles’s lap. He dug his fingers into Stiles’s waistband and started to pull.

Stiles’s panicked gaze shot to the beta guards who were already moving forward. Matthew gave a low growl as they approached and Stiles yelped a little as Matthew’s grip tightened around his hips. He was so worked up he didn’t seem to notice his blunt nails were digging into Stiles’s skin, and his growls took on an animalistic timber. The guards fell into what looked like a well-rehearsed routine. One grabbed Matthew by the shoulder and yelled, “He’s mine!” Matthew released Stiles and turned to face the guard, who had already backpedaled rapidly across the room. Matthew was practically roaring in fury, blind to anything except the potential challenger in the room. A second guard shoved Matthew forward and stepped between him and Stiles. As soon as Matthew was physically clear of Stiles, the third guard who’d stepped to the side lifted a Taser and shot Matthew, who stiffened, then fell to the floor.

“Holy shit!” Stiles jumped out of his chair and stumbled to the corner of the room closet to the door. He huddled there, watching as the guards secured Matthew’s arms and legs with alpha-strength zip ties and called for a medical team. One of the guards, who looked older than the other two, gave Stiles a sympathetic look. “Don’t worry kid, it happens.”

“It happens? What happens? He...what was that?”

A couple of EMTs entered the room with a stretcher and Stiles’s father and Jamie were right behind them. His dad headed straight for him and Stiles lunged forward and practically threw himself into his open arms.

“Are you okay?”

“No. Nope. Nope. I’m really, really not.” Stiles was shivering and for a change, he didn’t feel anxious, he felt terrified, as if he’d just stepped forward a second before a bus had crashed right behind him. He pressed himself closer to his dad and closed his eyes. His hips still ached from
Matthew’s desperate grip.

“I’m sorry Stiles,” Jamie said. “This was the atypical reaction I was warning you about. Sometimes just encountering an omega who has presented but not bonded will set off an alpha’s rut. No one has figured out a good test to predict whether a particular alpha will have that response, so that’s why we always have guards at these meetings.”

Stiles pulled away from his dad. “Atypical reaction? I thought that meant that they wouldn’t like the way I smell or I don’t know, that they’d break out in a rash or something, not that they’d try and fucking jump me in front of three guards! Jesus, that was crazy!”

Jamie sighed. “Yeah, I’ll be honest, that reaction does happen but it’s unusual for it to hit quite that fast.” He looked at the clock. “Look, you still have almost fifty minutes until the next interview. Why don’t you come back to the office and just take it easy. I have something that might help”

Stiles drank two cups of hot chocolate practically sitting in his dad’s lap before his hands stopped shaking. Jamie rummaged around in his desk drawers and then his filing cabinet before emerging with a triumphant sound bearing a spray bottle.

He set it down on his desk and sat facing Stiles and his father.

“So, I know I gave you that list on how to prepare for your meetings. All that stuff, the special soap, the laundered clothes, I don’t think any of it is going to be enough for your situation. I am going to recommend this.”

Jamie pushed the spray bottle closer to Stiles and John.


“Technically, it’s a bio enzymatic cleaner.”

“For puppies.” Stiles said flatly. “There’s a puppy on the label.”

Jamie flushed at his tone. “Look, this is good stuff. The last guy who worked here left me a list of tips that they just don’t teach us in grad school and this was one of them. This stuff is organic, it only has a little bit of scent, and it does a pretty good job of keeping your omega scent covered up long enough that you might be able to talk to these guys.” He leaned forward, looking at Stiles earnestly. “I know this seems really weird but after the way that first alpha reacted I’m really afraid that’s how they’re all going to react. The two alphas who are here and waiting right now have both been really restless, more than I’ve ever seen before, and they haven’t even gotten close to you. Usually we deal with omegas who have just barely presented and we still sometimes have to use this stuff. It can interfere with scent bonding so we only use it if we absolutely have to but I think we do. You are practically all the way over on the other side of the spectrum, right near your heat. I think if we don’t at least try this, you’re going to have a very bad morning watching all of your prospective alphas getting tased and hauled off to the hospital.”

Stiles glared at the grimy white plastic bottle with the sad puppy staring out from the label and thought, I am never telling Scott about this.

Jamie explained what they needed to do, shut the blinds, and stepped out of his office. Stiles stripped down to his underpants and held his arms out while his dad sprayed him with the cleaner. His dad didn’t say anything but the look on his face said enough. Stiles let the spray dry, and then his dad applied a second layer. Stiles got dressed and then a third layer was applied directly into his clothing. Stiles did have to admit that it had a light, pleasant odor, almost like fresh lemons. Since he couldn’t
smell his own scent he couldn’t tell if it was working or not.

“So much for dressing up,” Stiles said glumly. He’d worn a relatively new, freshly washed blue button down shirt and his newest pair of jeans. The puppy spray left him feeling sticky beneath his clothes and his entire outfit vaguely damp and rumpled. His hair was also damp and now stuck up in clumps. Stiles brushed at the wrinkles in his sleeves then looked at his dad.

“I look like a lemon-scented hobo.”

His dad laughed and tried to finger comb his damp hair back into some kind of order. Stiles couldn’t decide if the grimace on his dad’s face was from the feel of the tacky hair against his fingers or from the way his hair looked. He covered his face with his hands and moaned.

“It’s actually a good look for you,” his father said. “It’s very laid back. You kind of look like a surfer.” Stiles lifted his face and glared. His dad’s lips twitched. “A very fresh-smelling surfer.”

Stiles burst into tears.

He felt humiliated. He knew he was being ridiculous but he seemed to have absolutely no control over the sobs that were racking his body. His hands flew back up to cover his face and his dad was there, holding him tight.

“I’m sorry kiddo, I had no idea this was bothering you so much.”

“It’s not,” Stiles choked out. “This is stupid. I don’t even know why I’m crying. It’s just...” he waved his hands from where they were trapped against his dad’s chest. “It’s just everything. That alpha, the guards, this stupid wrinkled shirt, and that stupid spray...” He looked up at his dad, eyes swimming. “How did this happen? I don’t even understand why this is happening.” He pressed his face against his father’s chest, hard, and mumbled so quietly John could barely hear him. “I liked him so much.”

John swallowed against the lump that rose in his throat and kept his arms around his son. Jamie opened the door, a cheerful smile on his face, his mouth open to speak but he froze when he saw the Stilinskis. John shook his head and Jamie retreated, and shut the door behind him. Stiles cried quietly except for the hitches in his breathing until the front of John’s shirt was soaking wet. He cried until it hurt too much to continue. He could feel more tears pressing against the back of eyes but he clenched his eyes shut and forced himself to calm his breathing. He pulled away and sniffed wetly, then brushed at the wet patch on his father’s uniform shirt. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.” His father said, gruffly. His own eyes looked red, although his face was dry. Stiles nodded and left the office, brushing by Jamie who was hovering outside his own office door. He went into the small bathroom and locked the door. Even over the running water he could hear his father murmuring quietly to Jamie. He cupped his hands and splashed water on his face until he looked less blotchy and patted himself dry with paper towels. When he left the bathroom Jamie and his father were both hovering outside.

Stiles looked at the clock and asked, “Is the next alpha ready for me?”

Jamie glanced at his dad, then back at Stiles. “Are you ready? We don’t have to rush. Everyone can wait.”

Stiles shook his head. “There’s no time. I just washed my face. Do you think I should spray on more of that stuff?”

Jamie stared at him searchingly before he finally nodded. “I think it’d be safer.”
“Dad?”

His dad vanished back into Jamie’s office and emerged carrying the puppy spray. Stiles closed his eyes and let the light mist settle on him without comment. He gave it a minute to dry and opened his eyes.

“Ok, let’s go.”

Jamie nodded and Stiles waved at his dad, and followed.

The older guard was waiting outside of the closed door for him this time. He looked at Stiles sharply, and Stiles attempted a smile which only seemed to increase the guard’s concern.

“You okay kid?”

Stiles shrugged. “Let’s do this.”

The second alpha was Nicholas Ramirez, nineteen, studying psychology and criminal justice at UCLA. He was taller than Stiles by almost a foot, swam competitively, and worked part-time in his parent’s restaurant. He had striking green hazel eyes which had almost caused Stiles to eliminate him because he was feeling far less fond of green eyes these days. He smiled at Stiles excitedly as soon as he entered the doorway and the smile didn’t fade as Stiles hovered nervously in the doorway for a long minute before he steeled himself to enter. Nicholas had stood when he entered but didn’t offer his hand. Stiles smiled at him and sidled to the chair across from him, trying to not get too close.

“Hi.” Stiles said.

“Hi!”

They both fell silent.

“Well, this is super awkward,” Stiles said.

“I would have offered to shake your hand but Mr. Rowe told us we weren’t allowed to initiate any contact.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Stiles glanced at the guards but all of them were staring into space like the world’s most awkward conversation wasn’t crashing and burning right in front of them.

“So I saw that you swim. That’s awesome.”

Nicholas lit up. “Do you swim too?”

Stiles shook his head. “No, I play lacrosse. Well, kind of. Mostly I sit on the bench while other people play lacrosse.”

Nicholas cocked his head. “Is that the one that’s like field hockey? With the sticks?”

Stiles nodded stiffly.

“Oh. That’s cool.”

Crickets, Stiles thought. If there were crickets in the interview room at least there would be something to listen to besides the deafening silence. “Did Jamie tell you anything about me?”
Nicholas shook his head. “Not a lot. He told me your name was Stiles, your age, and that you were about to go into heat so there wasn’t a lot of time for courting or anything.”

Stiles sighed. “Yeah. I’m actually going into heat tomorrow or the next day. This is going to be a pretty freaking short courtship.”

Nicholas’s eyes went wide and for the first time since Stiles entered the room he lost his smile. “Tomorrow?” he squeaked. “Seriously?”

“Maybe.”

Stiles tried not to sigh as Nicholas stared at him, mouth opening and closing as he struggled for something to say. He’d never really been on a date and he was starting to think if they were all like this it was a miracle anyone ever got married at all. Ever. He flipped through Nicholas’s profile in his mind, groping for something, anything to talk about.

“Why don’t you tell me about your family’s restaurant?” Stiles suggested.

Nicholas seemed to snap out of his daze and the smile reappeared. “It’s the best Mexican-Thai fusion restaurant in LA. You haven’t lived until you’ve tried our Pad Prik King burrito.”

Things went a little better after that. Stiles thought half the fusion items Nicholas described sounded gross but kept his opinion to himself. The restaurant was a family business and almost every member of his family worked or had worked in the restaurant at some time but Nicholas’s ultimate goal was to work in the FBI. Stiles tried not to hold that against him but thanks to Scott’s dad he thought of FBI agents as douchebags. It became apparent pretty quickly that even though they were the closest in age, they had very little in common.

Stiles waited until there was a lull in the conversation, which didn’t take long, and then stood up. He had to pull back his hand when he started to move it forward out of force of habit.

“It was nice meeting you.”

Nicholas was smiling. “Yeah, you too. No matter how this turns out I really appreciate you considering me.”

Stiles nodded and looked at the guard by the door. He stepped forward and hovered conspicuously while Stiles exited. Jamie was standing outside, leaning against the wall, typing something into his phone.

“Are you seriously just lurking in the hallway while I meet with these guys?” Stiles asked.

Jamie shrugged. “Well, yeah. I want to be nearby if you need me.”

Stiles stared at him a moment, then smiled. “Thanks.”

Jamie smiled back then walked with Stiles back to his office.

Stiles used the restroom, allowed his father to reapply the puppy spray, and drank another cup of hot chocolate. Someone had made a doughnut run and Stiles ate four while squinting suspiciously at his father, who refused to make eye contact with him. There was a half hour until the next interview was scheduled to start so Stiles sat next to his dad and played a game on his phone.

Alpha number three, Maxwell Paulson, wouldn’t stop bragging about himself. Stiles stared into the dark brown eyes that had looked so striking in his picture, and were even more so in person and tried to figure out how long he’d have to listen to this guy before he could walk out. He tried to keep the
pained look off of his face but figured he must not have succeeded when Max suddenly stopped in the middle of a sentence.

“I’m boring you to death, aren’t I?”

Stiles startled a little bit and Maxwell looked chagrined.

“I’m really sorry. I get chatty when I’m nervous and my idiot sister convinced me I should try to impress you.” He made a face. “I don’t usually use a list of all of the scholarships I’ve won as an ice breaker.”

Stiles shifted a little, suddenly much more awake and interested in the alpha in front of him. “Well you have accomplished a lot.”

Maxwell shrugged. “I guess. My whole family has been nothing but betas forever so as long as I can remember it’s been, ‘Oh, Maxwell’s an alpha, we expect such big things from him’, and ‘Maxwell’s going to be a star, blah blah blah’. It’s hard to not try and live up to that.”

Stiles nodded, “That doesn’t sound like a lot of fun.”

“Ugh, here I go talking about myself again. Just shoot me.” Maxwell leaned forward and buried his face in his hands. “I’m sorry, I just, you’re really pretty. It makes it hard to think.”

“You think I’m pretty?”

Maxwell shot up straight, “What? No! I meant handsome! I definitely wasn’t trying to impose some kind of stereotypical feminine omega role on you or anything!”

Stiles laughed. “Don’t worry about it. I was flattered.”

“Oh thank god.” Maxwell looked up. “I didn’t sleep at all last night after I got the call and my entire family spent the whole day giving me terrible advice. Dress up, but don’t dress up too much, be myself, but not too much. I mean, what am I supposed to do with that?”

Stiles laughed again, feeling himself relax a little. “Tell me about it. I got an informational sheet telling me to not wear anything too tight or too revealing. I felt like I’d fallen into some kind of time warp and was about to go to prom circa 1950. I spent an hour last night trying on tee shirts trying to decide if they were too tight.”

Maxwell laughed and leaned forward a little. “Well you look great, hardly trampy at all.”

This time, they both laughed.

Maxwell was twenty, born and raised in San Francisco and was working on a degree in Chemistry and pre-med studies at Stanford. He had only one year left to go and was gearing himself up for medical school applications.

“My advisor says I should apply widely but I’m a California boy. I think I might go into some kind of shock if I was more than a couple hours away from the beach. I’m applying to every school in California but I have exactly zero interest in going anywhere else.”

Stiles nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean. My guidance counselor is starting to make noises about applying to some East Coast schools but I like snow a solid three to five hour drive away, not falling on my head completely at random.”
Maxwell was the first alpha that Stiles spent the entire hour with, and as he was leaving one of the security guards he hadn’t spoken to gave him a discrete thumbs up. Stiles flushed a little, but smiled at the idea that his guards were pulling for him.

Jamie was waiting for him in the hall.

“Well? How did it go?”

Stiles shrugged and waited until they were back in the office before he turned to Jamie and his dad and said, “I kind of liked him.”

“Yes!” Jamie said, and gave a fist pump. Stiles and his dad both turned to stare at him. “What? I was kind of getting nervous.”

“He’s smart, he’s funny, I mean there weren’t massive sparks or anything but I liked him enough to want to get to know him better.” Stiles cracked open the bottle of water his dad handed him and drained half of it in one go.

“Well that can be arranged!” Jamie said cheerfully. “Are you up for the next interview?”

Feeling more hopeful than he’d felt all day, Stiles nodded. “I’m ready.”
Chapter 9

Alpha number four was A. James Dann, half-Korean, half-German, adopted from Korea when he was two years old. He was gorgeous with thick, dark golden-brown hair and dark grey eyes that tilted up just the slightest bit at the corners. He was a student at UCSD, studying political science, played the cello, spoke six languages, and spent his free time outside, hiking, kayaking, and mountain biking.

“The A is for Aristotle,” he blurted, almost as soon as Stiles walked in.

“What?” Stiles asked.

“That’s the first thing everyone wants to know. What the A in my name stands for. It’s Aristotle. My mom is a philosophy professor at SDC. I think she was trying to bring the name back.”

Stiles smiled at James and sat down. “How’d that work out for her?”

James rolled his eyes. “Let’s just say my three younger brothers are named Jean-Paul, Locke, and Soren.”

“Soren?”

“Kierkegaard.”

“Wow. That sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“I have kind of a sketchy name situation going on myself. I wouldn’t have asked.”

James sighed. “Well, that figures. The very first omega I meet who’s the slightest bit interested in me and the first thing I do is tell them I’m named Aristotle. Yay me.”

“Dude, it could be so much worse.”

James snorted. “Aristotle. I think half of my high school class ended up reading the entire Wikipedia entry on him just to be able to make fun of me appropriately. Can you even imagine how sad it was to listen to a pack of morons trying desperately to make jokes about an ancient Greek philosopher? You can’t. You literally cannot imagine how very sad it really was.”

Stiles laughed. It was startled out of him and he relaxed further. After Maxwell he’d started to have hope this whole day wasn’t actually cursed and now he was sure of it. James was so good-looking that Stiles felt a little dazzled, like he should be wearing special goggles to protect his eyes. He didn’t have the same friendly rapport that he’d had with Maxwell, but there was something about James that drew him in, made him feel like he was renewing a friendship with someone he’d known forever. Their conversation was less free flowing than it had been with Maxwell but they seemed to gravitate toward deeper topics. James talked about how hard it had been at times to be adopted, to always stand out as different from the rest of his family, and in turn Stiles found himself talking about his mom, and how he’d felt for so long like the only kid in the world without a mother.

James leaned towards Stiles the more he talked, and Stiles found himself doing the same. As they got closer James’s scent became more and more obvious to Stiles, even over the faint lemon smell of the spray. The scent was warm and spicy and seemed to curl up in Stiles’s belly in a warm ticklish wave
that made him wish that they were sitting on a bench rather than individual chairs so he could slide closer to James, maybe even lie down with his head on James’s lap. Stiles stared at James’s long fingers and wondered how they’d feel stroking against his scalp. He startled a little when he realized he’d stopped listening and focused back on what James was saying, hoping his blush wasn’t too obvious.

“Are you interested in police work because of your dad?”

“I know not a lot of omegas go into alpha-dominated fields like law enforcement but I just feel like I’d be good at it, and I really love the idea of helping other people. I mean, I’m not a hundred percent sure. I feel like there’s so much I still don’t know but don’t think I’m romanticizing it. I see how it affects my dad when he has a bad case, and I know the hours are terrible, but it just feels like it’s what I’m meant to do.”

James nodded eagerly. “I totally understand. I’ve wanted to be a diplomat for as long as I knew the job existed. I mean it’s just so perfect. I don’t there’s any other job where you get to experience so many other countries, and I mean really experience them. You really get to immerse yourself in everything, the language, the food, and the customs, and at the same time you’re representing America and helping build our relationship with other countries. It’s kind of the best of all possible worlds.”

Stiles shifted in his chair, suddenly feeling uneasy. “Is that why you’re studying political science?”

“Definitely. What I’d really like to do is join the State Department as part of the Foreign Service. I already speak Korean and Russian which are both considered critical needs languages, so I think my chances are really good. I have another year before I can apply, but I’ve applied for an internship and I think there’s a pretty good chance I’ll get selected for my first choice at the embassy in Russia.”

“That sounds like a lot of traveling.”

“Yeah, it is. Assignments usually last about two years but there’s a lot of support for family. There’s only a few places that they don’t allow families to accompany you, and those are all short tours. My mentor is married and has three kids and they love it. They’ve already lived all around the world and one of them hasn’t even started high school yet. It’s awesome.”

“What about your family? Your mom, your brothers, won’t you miss them?”

James looked confused. “Well, yeah but you get vacations to see them once a year, two or three weeks I think.”

“Oh.”

James smiled dimmed a bit. “You don’t like to travel?”

“No, I do but I guess I’d probably prefer the reverse – staying at home near my family and traveling for a couple weeks.”

“But if we...if you were with your mate, you’d have your family with you.”

Stiles was already shaking his head. “Not my dad.”

“But...”

“You never know how much time you have, you just don’t. My dad’s a beta. Best case scenario, he might live to be 80, maybe 85. He’s already 46. If I’m really, really lucky I might get forty more
years with him.” Stiles felt his eyes water and averted his gaze. “I’m going to have to live over half
my life without my dad. Half my life without any parents at all.” He wiped his eyes on his arm.
“There’s no way I’m giving up any time with him I don’t have to.”

Stiles looked up. Jamie looked horrified. It actually made Stiles laugh a little. He felt like he’d been
seeing that look a lot these days.

“Sorry. I’m a little emotional with my heat and everything and this is just one of my hot buttons,
obviously.”

“I didn’t mean to make you cry!” James blurted. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Stiles smiled at him and wiped his eyes again. “It wasn’t you. It’s been kind of a long day.” He stood
and stepped closer to James. He offered a hand and surprised, James took it.

“You are a great guy. Some omega is going to be really happy with you someday, but I don’t think
we’re going to be a good fit.”

“But...” James looked stricken as he realized that Stiles was ending the interview and his grip on

“Don’t offer to change for me. No one is worth that. It sounds like you have a plan, a really great one
that you’ll love and that you’ll be amazing at. Would you really be happy living in Beacon Hills
working as some city councilman or something and thinking well at least I have an omega mate?”

James slowly shook his head. “But...I really like you. You’re cute and funny and kind of perfect.”

“No one’s perfect,” Stiles said softly. He summoned a smile from somewhere. “You’re amazing
James, and I’m really happy I got a chance to meet you. I think if things were different and we were
both betas, I would have chased you around forever until you agreed to date me.” Stiles felt his smile
wobble and he dropped it entirely. “Just imagine, we could have been college sweethearts and
broken each other's hearts.”

“Just imagine.” James said quietly.

“I hope you have a really great life.” Stiles said, and he meant it. James stood and the guards whom
Stiles had forgotten were even there stepped forward.

“No, I’m okay, can I just...” James held out his arms. “Please? Just once?”

Tentatively, Stiles stepped forward and James wrapped his arms around him in a hug. Stiles closed
his eyes and leaned into James. James was tall enough that he had to bend his head down to
delicately scent along Stiles’s neck. He stopped abruptly, pulled back, and sneezed twice.

Stiles looked at him quizzically.

“Why do you smell like lemons?” he asked. He sneezed again.

Stiles laughed until he was crying against James’s shoulder.

Stiles heard the door open and Jamie was there, leading him out of the room. Stiles didn’t look back.

Stiles headed straight to the bathroom and didn’t come out until he had himself back under control.
His dad was hovering outside the door and led him back to Jamie’s office, where he spent the next
twenty minutes curled up on the bench with his head pillowed on his dad’s leg. He shook his head
when his dad asked him if he wanted to talk about it. He closed his eyes and tried not to imagine what life might look like if his mom were still alive.

They took a break for lunch at 12:30. John ran out and grabbed fast food from a drive-through for everyone, including the guards, but Stiles only picked at his meal. Normally he loved burgers and his dad had even sprung for curly fries, but he could taste how processed and semi-stale the bread on his burger tasted, and the oil the fries had been cooked in tasted almost rancid. He thought of Peter’s chicken parmesan and wished he had enough time to run home.

Alpha five was a disappointment. Liam Wooten was twenty, tall and tan, with shaggy blonde hair and soft brown eyes the color of milk chocolate. As soon as he walked in the room, Stiles stopped and cringed away from the smell coming from the alpha. The alpha who’d been smiling when the guard had opened the door looked concerned and started to rise out of his seat. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

Stiles felt terrible but he put his hand over his nose and stepped back. “I’m sorry. Your scent... I don’t think this is going to work. Sorry. Thanks for coming.” Stiles rushed out of the room so quickly that he almost ran into Jamie who was still right outside the door.

“Stiles? What’s wrong?”

Stiles shook his head and kept walking. He didn’t stop until he was almost through the door to the other office and there he stopped and took a deep breath. “Wow, that guy reeked. I’ve never smelled anything like that. Usually I really like alpha scent. I mean, some are definitely better than others but ugh. That guy smelled like hot garbage.” Stiles rubbed at his nose. “Jeez, I’m going to be smelling that all day.”

They walked into Jamie’s office where the sheriff was on the phone. He looked at Stiles with concern but Stiles shook his head and mouthed, “It’s fine.”

Jamie looked thoughtful. “There’s probably something wrong with him. He might be using drugs or have some kind of illness. It’s extremely rare for alphas to get any kind of illness, but it does happen.” He looked at Stiles. “I’m going to tell him he’s dismissed, but would you mind if I try to figure out why you had that reaction to him?”

Stiles shook his head. “No, be my guest. Just don’t be mean about it.”

Jamie smiled at Stiles. “I won’t. I promise.”

Stiles paced the office restlessly waiting for Jamie to return. His father finished on the phone and held up his arm in invitation. Stiles sank onto the bench and leaned against his dad.

Jamie looked somber when he came back. “Well, it turns out that Liam smokes a lot of marijuana and may occasionally ‘party hard’, as he put it.”
John frowned. “So no drug testing on the registry?” he asked. “I guess it wouldn’t be practical.”

“It would be impossible.” Jamie said bluntly. “There are just too many alphas on the registry and way too many VIPs. It would be a logistical nightmare.” He turned towards Stiles. “This may actually have been a wake up call for him. I explained what happened and he got very upset with himself. He knows that this may be the only time in his entire life he might get called to meet with an omega and his drug use blew it for him. I pointed out that no omega would accept a mate disabled with drug use and gave him some information on treatment programs. He took it, so maybe he’ll actually follow through.”

Jamie sat down and looked at the Stilinskis. “Your last interview isn’t until almost four o’clock in the afternoon. Do you want to go home for a little while?”

“God, yes.” Stiles said.

Jamie laughed. “Are there any alphas you’re ready to dismiss?”

“Well, Matthew is out, right?”

Jamie grimaced and nodded. “Yeah, it usually takes a few days for an alpha’s rut to pass. If things were different I’d say you should give him another chance but I think in this case, he’s out.”

“I think I’d like to dismiss Nicholas. We didn’t connect at all. James...” Stiles thought about James’s beautiful grey eyes and his spicy scent, about how comfortable and right he’d felt, even at their first meeting. He sighed. “He was pretty great but I don’t think it would work out. I liked Maxwell.” And Peter, he thought.

“Okay, I’ll dismiss Nicholas and James, and ask Maxwell to stay. You can meet with Taylor Reed at four and decide what you want to do next.”

“You mean chaperoned dates?”

Jamie frowned. “Well, usually but I don’t think you should go out into a public setting and I really don’t recommend inviting any alpha you don’t intend to bond with into your home.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” Stiles said, thinking about Matthew.

“I can arrange for the office to stay open late tonight and maybe you could have a longer, more casual meeting with Maxwell and Taylor, if that meeting goes well. We could arrange for some take out, you could sit, eat, chat.”

Stiles sighed. What he really wanted to do was go home and change into his pajamas and sleep for a hundred years. “Okay.” He thought about it for a moment, and then asked, “There’s another alpha that I’m considering. Could I arrange for a dinner meeting with him here tonight?”

Jamie frowned a little. “Of course. Is he in the registry?”

“I don’t know. He’s older so he wouldn’t have been on the original list.

Jamie turned to his computer. "What’s his name?"

“Peter Hale.”

Jamie tapped and scrolled, and eventually said, “It looks like he formally withdrew from the registry but he’s eligible to re-register if he wanted to. It shouldn’t be a problem but of course the OSS can’t
accept liability for anything he might have in his background since he’s not registered anymore.”

“Peter doesn’t have any kind of criminal record or anything.” Stiles said, giving his dad a glance from the corner of his eye. “I’ll call him and see if he’s free this evening.”

Jamie looked at his calendar. “I need to speak to the guards but why don’t we plan for you to be back her at 4 to meet with Taylor, with a longer meeting with Maxwell right after, let’s say, 5-7, and then Peter from 7-9 and…” his voice trailed off as he realized how late an evening that would be.

“How about I meet with Taylor at 4, and just spend an hour with each alpha after that. I don’t think I could stand much more than that anyway.”

Jamie frowned a little, looking concerned. “That’s just so little time. Maybe we could hold open the possibility of more chaperoned meetings tomorrow, depending on how your heat goes? Maybe in the morning?”

Stiles shivered, suddenly realizing that sometime tomorrow he might be bonding with Peter or Maxwell or maybe even Taylor, whom he hadn’t even met yet. He strangled down a distressed whimper and looked at his dad.

His dad stood up and shook Jamie’s hand. “Let’s just play this by ear. We’ll be back by four. We can talk more then.”

Stiles had his dad drop him off at home, with a promise that he’d be back in order to drive him to his interview. Stiles grabbed the mail and let himself into the house under his father’s watchful eye. He locked the door and made himself a plate of leftover chicken parmesan. He flipped through the mail and paused when he came to a letter addressed to him. He lifted it to his nose and smiled when he caught Peter’s scent on the envelope. There was no stamp so Peter must have hand delivered it. He ripped it open and found a letter wrapped around a few photos and a chocolate bar wrapped in an embossed black wrapper.

Stiles lifted the bar to his nose and sighed at the amazing rich odor. The letter was short, hand-written in an elegant script.

Dear Stiles, Thank you for having dinner with me last night. I hope your interviews go horribly but please, stay safe. Call or text me if you need anything at all. Peter.

He had included three phone numbers, labeled cell, home, and work, his e-mail address, and the physical address of the Hale house. Stiles found himself smiling and set down the letter and the chocolate so he could look at the photos. They were photos of Peter. The first showed a very startled-looking chubby baby, propped on a sofa beside a teddy bear that was bigger than he was. When he flipped it over there, Peter had written ‘Me, age six months old.’ Stiles smiled but the next photo made him laugh out loud. A very young Peter who looked like he was about five or six was sitting on the chest of a red-faced girl who looked suspiciously like Talia. She’d been wrapped up in a blanket and her mouth was open like she was screaming. Peter on the other hand looked outrageously smug and had his arms raised in victory. ‘Playing with Talia’ was written on the back. The next one also made Stiles laugh, even as he cringed in sympathy. It was a posed school picture with Peter looking like he was in his early teens. He had an outrageously terrible haircut, with long stringy frosted bangs falling into his eyes, but cut short enough on the sides that his ears appeared to be enormous. He also appeared to be wearing some kind of carpet posing as a hideous sweater, and his teeth were a blaze of silver braces. On the other side Peter had written, “Talia will inevitably show you this school picture if you choose to bond with me. Now you’ve seen it.” The last one was the most recent. It was a picture of Peter and Cora, standing outside in the sun. Cora was making a vampy face at the camera and Peter had his arm slung over her shoulders and was smiling at her affectionately. They both looked a little wind-blown, but happy. On the back Peter had just written their names, and the date.
Stiles smiled and pulled out his cell phone. He entered Peter’s contact information, and then sent him a text.

Thanks.

The reply was almost instantaneous.

You’re welcome.

Stiles hesitated. Can we meet tonight?

Of course. When and where?

Stiles entered the address of the OSS and the time and hit send.

Is there anything else you need?

Stiles thought about asking for food, for hugs, just to have Peter come over and sit with him so he wouldn’t have to be alone. He looked out at the empty living room and sighed.

Nope. See you tonight.
Taylor Reed was fine. Stiles knew he was tired and restless, but he did his best to give Taylor a fair shot. It was difficult. Taylor was so polite that he seemed a little wooden, and Stiles was finding it hard to get a sense of who he really was behind the perfect posture and please and thank-you’s. He never seemed to show any real excitement, not when talking about his studies or his family or even his athletic endeavors. Stiles didn’t understand how someone could reach the point of making the US Olympic water polo team without showing some kind of passion for the sport, yet Taylor talked about it like he was describing a book he’d read and could barely remember.

The only real emotion that Stiles was able to detect in Taylor was enthusiasm at the idea of bonding with an omega mate. It was obvious fairly quickly that Taylor had a detailed plan for his future and bonding to an omega was a big part of it. What was less obvious was whether he was interested in Stiles for anything other than the fact he was an omega. He barely asked Stiles any questions, answered all of Stiles’s questions briefly, and spent most of the time talking about the logistics of their possible bonding.

“I’d be willing to relocate after college. I’d need to be able to find a job, but if I couldn’t find one in Beacon Hills I’d be willing to look for work nearby. Even without a lot of work experience I can’t imagine that it’d be that hard to find a job as a mechanical engineer.”

Stiles nodded and tried to be attentive, tried to give Taylor the minimum courtesy he deserved for having driven all the way to Beacon Hills to meet with him, but it was hard. There just wasn’t anything particularly compelling about him. He was reasonably handsome, and reasonably interesting, but overall there was nothing about him that excited or intrigued Stiles. He ended the interview after half an hour. Taylor didn’t look particularly upset, just nodded and thanked Stiles for his time.

One of the guards escorted him to Jamie’s office, and right before he opened the door, the guard paused, and looked at Stiles. “You’re a good kid. You’ll find someone, don’t worry.” He patted Stiles on the back and opened the door.

Jamie was on the phone. He rushed to end the conversation when Stiles entered, and hung up abruptly. “Stiles! Is everything okay? I just had to make a quick call.”

“No, no problem. Taylor was okay but I don’t think I need to do a longer interview with him.”

“Okay, I can dismiss him. That leaves just Maxwell and Peter Hale.”

Stiles nodded. “Yeah.”

“Do you need to take a break or do you want to push on into the longer interviews?”

Stiles sighed. “I’d kind of like to just get started.”

“Alright, let me dismiss Taylor. Once he’s gone I’m going to move Peter into the alpha waiting room. I can have the outside doors locked so it’ll be secure.”

“Wait, is Peter already here?”

“Yes, I called him to set up the meeting. He said you’d already gotten in contact with him but when I explained that you were doing your longer meetings tonight, he asked when he should show up. I told him the sooner the better so he’s been here since about three o’clock.”

“Oh.”
“Maxwell is in another office so I’ll have him moved back to the interview room we’ve been using all day.”

“Can I see Peter first?”

Jamie looked surprised, but nodded. “This whole thing is up to you Stiles. You can see Peter first, last, whatever you want. Let me just get the guards.”

“No, it’s okay. Peter doesn’t need them.”

Jamie immediately frowned. “Stiles…”

Stiles shook his head. “No, seriously, it’s okay. I had dinner with him just yesterday and he was fine. Plus I was just Whoops-a-Daisy’ed a half hour ago.”

“That stuff isn’t foolproof,” Jamie said dubiously, “But if you’re really sure, it is up to you.”

Stiles sat on the bench and chewed his thumbnail. His dad had been planning on coming back for the evening interviews but he’d gotten caught up in something at work. When he’d called, Stiles had told him it was fine, but right at that moment he was wishing he’d been a little more selfish. Even with Jamie and the guards, he wished his dad were there to sit with him. His bounced his legs until the bench was squeaking, and had his cell phone clenched in his free hand when Jamie finally came back.

“Alright, since you wanted to see Peter first I have him in the interview room and Maxwell in the waiting room. Follow me.”

Stiles followed Jamie down the short corridor they’d been walking through all day until they came to the door of the interview room. A guard was standing on each side of the door.

“We are going to stay right here in the hall so if you change your mind or you need help, just say the word.”

Stiles swallowed, and nodded. “Ok. I will.” He nodded at the guards and opened the door.

Peter was waiting, sitting in one of the padded interview chairs. He looked up as soon as Stiles entered and he stood up. Something flashed in his eyes when Stiles closed the door behind him and they were alone.

“Hello Stiles.”

“Hi Peter.” Stiles bit his lip and blurted out, “Can you hug me?”

Peter looked a little surprised but he didn’t waste time with stupid questions. He stood and opened his arms and Stiles walked into his embrace.

It was good, really good. Peter was about the same height as Stiles, maybe slightly shorter, but he had a broad, muscled chest and thick, strong arms that felt wonderfully warm against Stiles’s back. Stiles tucked his nose against Peter’s neck and breathed deeply. Peter did smell the tiniest bit like Derek, like all of the Hales, a faint familiar undertone that marked them all as family. He tried to decide if it was that bit of familiarity that he liked or the scent of the man himself. He felt Peter lean down to scent him, felt Peter suddenly go still when he caught the scent of the puppy spray instead of Stiles’s natural scent, but again, he didn’t say anything, just snuggled closer after that initial hesitation. He breathed deeply as if he hadn’t even noticed the masking scent of lemons. Stiles liked how sharp Peter was, how quickly he was able to pick up on subtle clues and understand the
situation without having to have things explained to him.

Stiles didn’t even notice the way Peter was slowly shifting them until his back was pressed up against the wall. Peter had moved them so Stiles was in the corner, with Peter standing between him and the rest of the room. Stiles stiffened in alarm, but when he looked up, it was still Peter was looking at him, still in control.

“How are you doing this?”

“How can you be so close to me and not…”

“How are you doing this?” Peter asked with an exaggerated leer. Stiles flinched back a little, remembering his first interview, and Peter stopped, face suddenly serious.

“Yeah, that. One of the alphas I interviewed kind of lost his mind.” Stiles shivered and then shrank away when Peter growled. Peter pressed his lips together and turned his head away. He took a dozen deep breaths before he straightened up, looked back at Stiles, and asked, “Did he hurt you?”

Stiles shook his head. “No, the guards tased him unconscious as soon as we all realized he’d lost it. I’ve been drenched in this freaking spray all day to cover my scent and it occurred to me that we had dinner together last night and you even,” his voice dropped, “kissed me without going nuts. How are you doing it?”

“I have amazing self-control.”

Stiles squinted at Peter dubiously, who smirked back at him. Peter leaned forward and whispered against his ear, “I do have amazing self-control but I do have a little secret. I can’t tell you until after we’re bonded.”

Stiles drew back a little to look at him. Peter looked back, the slightest smile on his lips. Stiles started to look at Peter, really look at him in a way he hadn’t before. He was gorgeous, and different enough from Derek that Stiles didn’t have to worry about constantly comparing the two of them. He was older than he’d ever imagined his mate would be, with soft creases across his forehead and at the corners of his eyes. His eyes…

“You have really pretty eyes.” Stiles said.

The smile got a little wider.

“Thank you.”

Stiles reached up and paused, hand hovering over Peter’s face. “Can I touch you? Will you be okay?”

Peter’s smile twisted into a smirk. “You can touch as much as you like, anywhere you like, my darling.”

Stiles made a face at him.

“I’ll let you know if it gets to be too much,” Peter said more seriously. “I wouldn’t let you endanger yourself.”

Stiles touched Peter’s chin, the sharp curve of his cheekbone, the thick bulge of muscle between his
neck and his shoulder. He closed his eyes, then opened them, trying to imagine waking up to Peter’s face lying next to him. His fingertips brushed the corner of Peter’s mouth, exactly where Peter had kissed him the night before, then traced the curve of his lip. Stiles bit his lip, then leaned forward and brushed his lips against Peter’s, once, so lightly the touch was barely there. When he looked up Peter’s gaze had darkened and his eyes were fixed on Stiles’s mouth.

“You really want me as your mate? Not just an omega, me?” Stiles asked, and Peter’s eyes snapped back up to meet his.

Peter nodded. “Just you.”

“Jamie said you weren’t on the registry.”

“I withdrew from the registry right after that meeting I told you about. I told you, I had completely given up on the idea of an omega mate until I met you.”

Stiles was quiet for a minute.

“Do you want kids?” he asked abruptly. “Kids of your own? With me?”

“I’d love to have kids with you, but I’m not in any hurry. I have no problem waiting for a while, until you’re ready. I know you want to go to college and honestly, I’d like to spend some time with you just having fun together, before we start having children.”

“Would you want me to carry them?”

Peter recoiled. “No, definitely not.” His voice was sharp, and a little too loud.

Stiles looked at him with his brows raised, and Peter took a deep breath, and started speaking in a calmer voice. “I know it’s your body and you can do with it what you like but… if my preference has any bearing on your choice, I would absolutely prefer to use surrogates.”

“Why?”

“I’ve been waiting my whole life to meet you. The last thing I’d want is to lose you to a bad pregnancy.” His voice became hesitant. “Is that something you really wanted to do?”

“What? No, definitely not. Surrogates all the way. I’ve been sure of that since watching that horrible reproductive health video in eighth grade.” Stiles snorted, “Scott wouldn’t stop crying for like an hour afterwards. I just needed to know because I know some alphas are weird about that.”

Peter snorted. “This isn’t the third world. There’s no way I’d ask you to go through something with a fifty percent mortality rate when there are perfectly good alternatives available.”

Stiles nodded. He ran his hand over Peter’s arm, over the curves of his biceps down to his wrist. He slid his fingers down over Peter’s hand and wove their fingers together.

“Do we have to live with your family?” he asked quietly.

“We don’t have to do anything. We would decide things like where we would live, together.” Peter frowned. “I’d like you to give it a chance, though. I think if you gave it a try you might really enjoy living at the house with everyone. I know you’ve been lonely, with just you and your dad.”

Stiles dropped his eyes and pulled his hand away, wrapped his arms around himself in a hug. “It’s fine.” He muttered. “We’re fine.”
“Stiles.” Peter reached out, lifted Stiles’s face with one warm hand on his cheek. “It’s not being disloyal to admit your dad isn’t enough for you. I know you love him, and it’s obvious he loves you, but there’s a reason why alphas and omegas tend to live with their extended families. There’s a reason why they say an omega is the heart of the home.” Peter let his hand drop, and then reached forward and gently pulled Stiles’s arms down. He ran his hands down Stiles’s arms and clasped both of Stiles’s hands in his. Stiles kept his eyes fixed on Peter. “I also know that you are more than your status. Maybe you won’t like it. If you tried it, and it made you unhappy or uncomfortable, we could move out and live somewhere else. I wouldn’t mind.”

Stiles was silent for a long moment, staring into Peter’s face as if he could read the truth there. Finally he said, “Can you promise you won’t hurt me?” Stiles voice broke on the last words, and Peter knew he wasn’t just asking him to be physically gentle with him. Stiles was hurt, still terribly hurt by what Derek had done.

Peter reached out and pulled Stiles against him, held him tight until Stiles had stopped trembling. He pulled away, just far enough away for them to look each other in the face. “I wish I could. I would never want to hurt you, and I can promise I will never deliberately do anything to hurt you. I'll never abandon you. I'll never choose anyone else over you. I promise that I will hold your happiness as dear to me as my own.” Peter gave a crooked smile. "When you get to know me better you'll realize what a huge concession that is for me."

Stiles stared into Peter's eyes, thinking over what he'd said, the sincerity in his voice, and finally nodded. “I liked Maxwell. He seems like a good guy. I'd like to talk to him one more time, but...”

Peter waited.

“I think I want to bond with you.”
Maxwell’s entire face lit up in a brilliant smile when Stiles walked into the room. “Hey, Stiles!”

Stiles smiled back. “Thanks so much for waiting. I know it’s been kind of a crazy long day.”

Maxwell shook his head, “No problem. Seriously though, you must be exhausted. Have you been doing this all day long?”

Stiles sighed as he sat. “Since eight o’clock this morning.” Stiles paused to look at Maxwell for a moment. *My mate,* he thought, trying to imagine introducing Maxwell to Scott, to his dad. His eyes traced over Maxwell’s face, the thick fringe of eyelashes around his dark brown eyes, down his long neck to his broad shoulders.

“You’d make cute babies,” he blurted, then blushed. “Um, I mean, do you want kids?”

Maxwell grinned. “Thanks. I think you’d make cute babies too. Yeah, someday. I mean, I’d kind of like to get through medical school first, but someday I’d like to have a houseful of kids. I liked growing up with sisters, although a brother or two would have been nice.” Maxwell stared past Stiles for a second. “Actually, if we mated it would be two against three.” His eyes narrowed. “We could totally crush them!”

Stiles cocked his head. “What?”

Maxwell shook off his vision and focused back on Stiles. “Sorry. My sisters always make us play boys against the girls because I’m the oldest and an alpha. So for years, I’ve had my butt kicked at every water balloon fight, tug of war, you name it. But if we mated, they’d have to let you be on my team.” He looked at Stiles pleadingly and held out his hand, “Join me, and together we can rule my sisters as alpha and mate.”

Stiles laughed out loud. “Hang on there, Darth. As noble as your cause is, we should probably talk about it a little bit more.”

Maxwell laughed good-naturedly and settled back in his seat. “Oh well, it was worth a try.”

“You definitely get points for the reference.” Stiles said. “So...did Jamie tell you I’m probably going into heat tomorrow?”

Maxwell sat up abruptly. “Holy shit. Um, sorry, I mean he mentioned it was soon but he didn’t say it was that soon. Wow.” He looked at Stiles, running his eyes over him from head to toe as if he were looking for some physical sign of Stiles’s impending heat. “Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

Stiles smiled at him. “I’m okay at the moment. So, what do you think about the heat thing? Too soon?”

Maxwell cleared his throat and looked over at one of the beta guards, then back at Stiles. A blotchy red blush started to burn in his cheeks. “Other than the fact it sounds like the start of a cheesy porno, no, I have absolutely no problem meeting a sexy omega who’s just about to go into heat and is thinking about taking me as their bondmate.” Maxwell shook his head vigorously. “Nope. No problems here.”

Stiles rolled his eyes and ignored the matching blush that wanted to escape. “No, dumb ass, I meant as far as your schedule. Aren’t you taking like a ton of super important classes right now?”
Maxwell looked at him incredulously. “Seriously? I can catch up. This...you, are so much more important than my organic chemistry class.”

Stiles stared at Maxwell’s earnest, handsome face and felt torn. A minute ago, he’d been sure that he’d choose Peter. Now, sitting with Maxwell, he just didn’t know what to do. Maxwell would be a great mate. He was funny and kind and he liked a lot of the same stuff Stiles did. He could imagine hanging out with Maxwell in a way that was difficult to imagine doing with Peter. He’d never met Maxwell’s family but if he chose Maxwell, that meant he would never have to worry about seeing or dealing with Derek ever again. Maxwell was also much closer in age to Stiles than Peter – he’d have decades longer with Maxwell than he’d likely have with Peter. But there was something about Peter, some spark that he just wasn’t feeling with Maxwell.

“What was the last book you read?” he asked impulsively.

Maxwell looked a little confused but answered honestly. “Not including textbooks, um...probably the first Game of Thrones book? But I didn’t finish it. I liked the show better.”

“Me too,” Stiles said. “Do you think you might be able to hug me? Without losing control?”

“I think so.”

Maxwell and Stiles both stood, and Maxwell held his arms out. Stiles stepped closer and was starting to lean in when Maxwell jerked away and growled.

“What is that?” His voice was tight.

Stiles bent down and sniffed his arm. Peter. He stepped back, only to have Maxwell grab his arm. He held up his hand when the guards suddenly all stepped forward, and he looked only at Maxwell.

“Maxwell. You’re hurting my arm. Please let me go.”

There was a tense moment before Maxwell suddenly released Stiles’s arm and staggered back, both hands raised.

“Sorry. I...sorry.” He fell back into his chair, and covered his face with his hands.

Stiles sat down as well, and the guards slowly went back to their previous positions against the walls. “I’m sorry Maxwell. I didn’t really think that through.”

Maxwell shook his head, but didn’t move his hands from his face. Stiles could hear him breathing deeply, in and out, his outward breath sounding more like a low growl than a regular breath. The beta guard standing at the wall behind Maxwell was staring at him with concern. He looked at Stiles and gave a short shake of his head. Stiles stood up and slowly started walking to the door, keeping his eyes on Maxwell. Maxwell's entire body tensed when he heard Stiles move, but he made no move to stand up. Stiles quietly walked out of the room with one of the beta guards behind him.

Stiles’s dad was waiting in Jamie’s office when Stiles walked in. Stiles brightened when he saw him and hurried the last few steps into the office. “Dad!” Stiles threw his arms around his father and buried his face into his chest. “That really, really sucked.”

“What’s wrong?”

Stiles stepped back and shook his head. “Maxwell could smell Peter’s scent all over me, and he got upset. I could tell he was trying to hold it together but he could barely concentrate enough to string two words together.” Stiles frowned. “I really didn’t want things to end between us like that.” He
sighed. “I guess I was kind of hoping we might be able to be friends, even if we didn’t end up bonding.” He missed the look his dad and Jamie exchanged over his head.

“Why was Peter’s scent all over you?” His dad’s voice was carefully neutral.

“Uh...” Stiles felt himself start to blush. “I met with him first and we hugged.”

His dad ran a hand over his hair and he cleared his throat. “Does that mean you’ve made a decision?”

Stiles slumped down onto the bench. “Yeah, I did. I met with Peter first and I decided that I want to bond with him.” Stiles paused, then threw his hands in the air. “Surprise!”

His dad sighed, and then sat next to him. “If you’re sure that’s what you want.”

Jamie interrupted. “Stiles, if you’re sure, I’m going to go inform Maxwell of your decision and dismiss him. I think he’d be better off if he gets out of here and heads home as soon as possible.”

Stiles nodded. “I’m sure. Can you tell him...I don’t know. Just make sure he knows it’s not his fault I didn’t choose him.” He watched Jamie leave, closing the door behind him, and turned back to his dad. “Are you disappointed that I’m choosing Peter?”

His dad was quiet for a minute before he shook his head. “Stiles, I appreciate you going through all the interviews. I know they were hard on you, especially this close to your heat, but it makes me feel a lot better you at least got to look around a little at your options before making a choice. If Peter’s who you want, if he feels right to you, then I’ll support you.”

Stiles sighed. “I know it’s strange. Maxwell seems like a better fit on paper but there’s just something about Peter that just...I can’t explain it. I wish I could.” Stiles was quiet for a moment. “It’s not that he makes me feel safe, exactly. He’s really smart and sometimes I feel like I can see him struggling to say what he really means instead of what he thinks I want to hear. He’s trying so hard but I think the part that’s really hard for him is not just doing whatever the hell it takes to get me to agree to bond with him.” Stiles shifted a little on the bench. “I mean, he’s had some opportunities to kind of... push the issue and he’s been really great about stepping back and letting me have the time to think things through. I don’t get the feeling he lets a lot of people decide things for him.”

His dad blew out a breath, and then wrapped his arm around Stiles. He pressed a kiss against his temple and muttered, “You would go for the bad boy, wouldn’t you?”

Stiles jerked away and stared at his dad in outrage. “Dad! That’s not what I meant at all!”

His dad stared at him with one eyebrow raised until Stiles felt the heat of a blush roll up his neck. It only worsened when his dad smirked a little, and his eyes snapped to the opening office door with relief.

It was Jamie. He stopped just inside the door and asked, “Would you like me to get Peter, or would you prefer to talk privately first?”

“What do you usually do?” John asked.

“Well, we’re skipping about twenty steps in the usual process of making a match, so I’m really kind of winging this part. I do think it’d be best if we all met together.

“Okay.” Stiles said.
Jamie vanished back into the hallway and returned a minute later with Peter, who smiled brilliantly at Stiles as soon as he saw him, and greeted John. John and Stiles scooted over on the bench and Peter sat on the end, near, but not touching Stiles. Stiles felt the hot flush, which had receded when Jamie had entered the office, come roaring back. He was sitting next to his bondmate.

Jamie dropped into his chair and viewed them all with a weary version of his usual cheerful smile. “Congratulations, Peter, Stiles on your match. I’ll be honest, I don’t get involved in this part all too often, but I am happy to offer any assistance I can. Stiles, you’re going into heat tomorrow?”

Stiles nodded. “Probably, give or take a day. I haven’t had any of the main symptoms yet.”

“Have you talked at all about where you’re going to spend your heat?” Jamie asked, looking between him and Peter.

“I have my bedroom at home all set up. My dad was going to spend the week with friends,” Stiles looked at Peter.

Peter turned towards Stiles and his father. “That would be fine. I should probably move in tomorrow morning.”

The office went silent as Stiles reeled with the sudden realization that he was out of time. He hadn’t chosen Peter for months of chatty, chaperoned family dinners. He’d chosen him, and tomorrow they were going to have sex and physically bond together for life. His breathing sped up as he cast a wild-eyed glance at Peter, who was staring at him with concern. He looked up at his father who looked almost as stricken as Stiles. Stiles reached out and grabbed his dad’s hand and clutched it like a lifeline. He looked at Jamie last, not knowing what to say.

“Stiles.” It was Peter. He held out his hand and Stiles grabbed it with his free hand, holding on to it almost as fiercely as he was holding onto his father’s. “Breathe, my darling.”

Stiles did exactly that, gulped in a lungful of air, and then another one, until he was breathing again. He closed his eyes and focused on breathing, and nothing else. After a few minutes he felt less like he was about to have a panic attack and opened his eyes to all three of them staring at him with concern.

“Sorry. Everything just felt...really sudden.” He took another deep breath and turned to Peter. “So, tomorrow. I think it’s probably a good idea. What time do you want to come over?”

The sheriff shifted on the bench and cleared his throat. He addressed Peter. “Do you think you’re going to be able to control yourself around him? I don’t want him rushed into anything.”

“Dad, he’s doing fine now. He’s been fine this whole time.” Peter answered seriously. “I have, and will control myself. I wouldn’t do anything to hurt Stiles. I won’t do anything before he starts his heat that he doesn’t agree to, and I won’t bond with him until he is fully in heat.”

His father frowned a little but just said, “I have a bag mostly packed. I’ll finish that up in the morning and let Melissa know I’ll be heading over there tomorrow. They’ve been expecting me sometime this week.”

“Wait, Dad, can you not tell Scott about Peter and...the whole thing that happened? I want to tell him myself, after my heat.”

John sighed heavily. “I’ll try kiddo, but it’s hard to promise that. You know he’s going to be all over
me as soon as I walk in the door. I think this is the longest you two have been apart since that time Scott had mono.”

Stiles sighed as well. “Yeah. I just thought I should be the one to tell him, but I don’t want to have to deal with anything else right now. Can you just tell him the basics, and then tell him I can’t talk? I’ll just turn off my phone and talk to him after everything.”

“Have either of you discussed contraception?” Jamie asked. There was another awkward silence as Stiles hunched down on the bench and tried to avoid eye contact with anyone. His dad shifted in a way that suggested he was doing the same, although Stiles didn’t look up to check. Jamie’s voice was gentle, but insistent. “I know there are limits on what kind of contraceptives you can use during bonding but you might want to discuss this tonight, before Stiles is fully in heat. Even with Stiles being male, the possibility of conception is extremely high during bonding sex between an alpha and an omega, almost 85%. Have you talked about whether you want to conceive during this heat?”

Peter answered Jamie as Stiles remained silent. “Stiles and I have discussed this a little, and we absolutely do not want Stiles to get pregnant. I’ll make sure Stiles and I discuss this privately tonight or first thing in the morning.”

Jamie nodded and dug two manila envelopes out of his desk. “Here. I usually give informational packets to everyone who matches through the OSS. I took out anything that didn’t apply to your specific situation.” He smiled at Stiles. “So basically this is full of pamphlets on contraception and resources for pre-natal services in case the contraception pamphlets don’t work.” He handed one envelope to Stiles, and another to Peter.

“I need to make some arrangements for tomorrow,” Peter said. “I want to make sure we have everything we might need. Stiles, is there anything in particular you want to eat?


“Maybe I should just bring you a ten pound bag of sugar and a spoon?” Peter asked, in an overly solicitous tone.

Stiles’s chin jerked up and his eyes narrowed. He heaved an exaggerated sigh and he made his voice sad and syrupy-soft. “Well, I guess if that’s the best you can do...” He smirked when Peter bristled in outrage. When he turned back to Jamie he caught him hiding a grin with his coffee cup.

They agreed to meet the next morning at Stiles’s house at ten in the morning. Jamie hugged Stiles and his dad, and then gave them both his business card with his private cell phone number scribbled on it, and made them promise to call if they needed anything. Before he allowed them to leave, he stuffed half a dozen pamphlets on other services offered by the OSS into their hands. The three of them walked out to the parking lot together and as Stiles was about to get into his dad’s cruiser, Peter spoke.

“John, could I drive Stiles home? I’d really like a chance to speak to him for a moment privately.”

The sheriff looked between Peter and his son and frowned. “I don’t know if that’s such a great idea.”

“Please. I’ll drive him straight home and we’ll be right behind you.”

John shook his head. “How about I get into my car and check in with dispatch, and you both can have five minutes together before I come check on you.”
“Dad, come on.”

“He’s not your bondmate yet, kiddo. Take it or leave it.”

“We’ll take it.” Peter waited until John had climbed into his car and slammed the door shut before he wrapped his arms around Stiles and lifted him up into a tight hug. Stiles stiffened a little in surprise but relaxed when Peter buried his face against his neck and said, “Thank you, Stiles. Thank you for choosing me.” He drew back and looked at Stiles with the warmest, most purely happy smile Stiles had ever seen on his face. Peter leaned in and kissed the corner of Stiles’s mouth, and then the other. “Thank you, my darling.”

Stiles smiled, then reached forward and tentatively did the same, kissing the corners of Peter’s smile. “My alpha,” Stiles whispered.

Stiles slept well that night, if only because he was exhausted from the past couple of days. He woke up later than he’d intended, feeling groggy, and stumbled into the shower before he remembered today was the day. He lingered in the shower, acutely aware that today he might be sharing his body with another person for the first time. He washed himself thoroughly, then washed everything again. He was contemplating a third round when the water started to run cold, and forced him to stop. He dried off and went back to his room where he got stuck in front of his closet. Should he dress up? Wear something easy to take off? Maybe he should just wear fresh pajamas? Was that too suggestive? What would Peter wear? Should he even wear underwear? Stiles was well on his way to seriously freaking out when the doorbell rang.

Peter. He pressed his palm over his chest where his heart was pounding and forced himself to take a few deep breaths. He could hear Peter and his dad talking quietly, so he grabbed clean jeans and a tee shirt, figuring he could always change later if he needed to.

His dad and Peter both looked up when Stiles walked down the stairs. Peter’s arms were full of grocery bags. Stiles was relieved to see that Peter was dressed casually, plain black slacks and a dark red Henley. He smiled up at Stiles as soon as he saw him, and Stiles felt his tension ease slightly.

Peter turned to Stiles’s dad and nodded, then said, “I’m going to go put these away. Might take me a while.” He disappeared into the kitchen.

Stiles’s dad was hovering by the front door, his uniform hat clenched in his hand and he looked even more nervous than Stiles felt.

“Well, I guess this is it.”

“Yep.”

John looked towards the kitchen where Peter was unpacking groceries and then back at Stiles. His mouth opened, shut, and then he took a deep breath. “Is there anything else you need?”


His dad made a face like he’d heard everything Stiles hadn’t said, and swept him up into a fierce hug. “If you need anything, just call.”

Stiles clung to his dad for a long time before he took a deep breath and forced himself to let go. He managed a wobbly smile for his dad, who didn’t even try to smile back. He pressed a kiss to Stiles’s forehead, then turned and left.

Stiles was alone with Peter.
Chapter 12

It took Peter multiple trips to empty his car. He had several bags of groceries which Stiles helped to put away, a rolling carry-on suitcase, and two large boxes.

“Is that a fridge?” Stiles asked, as Peter started unboxing it.

“I bought it for your room, for your heat. I thought it’d be nice to have cold drinks on hand.”

“Have you done this before?” Stiles asked. “I mean, I know you’ve been with betas, but have you ever shared a heat with an omega?”

Peter shook his head. “I did some reading online last night.” He smiled at Stiles. “There aren’t that many widowed omegas out there looking for partners. You’ll be my first and only omega lover.”

Stiles smiled back, comforted by the thought that at least some of this was as new to Peter as it was to him.

“I thought you might like this in your room even outside of your heats, and if you decide to live in a dorm when you go to college, you could always take it with you.”

Oh. Stiles felt oddly conflicted. He was glad Peter was acting like he was free to choose his own future but part of him wondered why Peter was already planning a future where they lived apart.

“Oh. Stiles felt oddly conflicted. He was glad Peter was acting like he was free to choose his own future but part of him wondered why Peter was already planning a future where they lived apart.

“Of course, I’d like to encourage you to consider the economically sensible option of living with a roommate instead.” He gave Stiles a toothy smile. “A rich, doting, alpha bondmate, for instance, who would be able to afford a much nicer apartment near campus than some rat hole of a dorm room.”

Stiles relaxed enough to laugh a little, and just said, “Yeah, we’ll see.”

The doorbell rang. Peter glanced at his watch, and went to answer it. Stiles trailed after him but stayed several steps away from the door. The deliveryman showed no reaction to him, but Stiles didn’t get any closer, even when he handed Peter a massive flower arrangement.

“What’s this?” Stiles asked.

Peter carried the arrangement to the dining room table and set it in the center. “We don’t have a lot of time, but that doesn’t mean I can’t court you in what time we have left.” He walked back to the door to collect two more arrangements and set them on the small table by the door. Stiles watched as the delivery man delivered nine more arrangements before Peter thanked him, and closed the door.

Stiles looked around at the dozen different vases full of flowers cluttering the dining room table and the floor near the door and laughed shakily. He looked at Peter. “You are freaking crazy, dude.”

“You deserve nice things. And don’t call me dude.” Peter said. He lifted up two arrangements and raised his eyebrows at Stiles. “Where would you like them?”

Peter and Stiles worked together to place the arrangements around the house, and Stiles smiled when he realized that none of the flowers were very fragrant. They were perfect for his heightened sense of smell, making everything smell fresh and green without overwhelming him. He chose a huge square vase full of sunflowers and irises for his room and set it on his desk. He touched the petals lightly and smiled, then went back downstairs.
Peter was unpacking a stack of filled glass containers with lids onto the counter.

“What are those?”

“I did a lot of prep work last night. I wasn’t sure how much cooking we’d want to do but I thought you’d prefer homemade food to an endless parade of pizza and Chinese delivery. Everything is ready to stick in the oven when we want it.”

Stiles peeked through the glass, trying to figure out what each dish held. “Is that lasagna?”

Peter glanced over. “Yes, and the one below it is shepherd’s pie. I tried to bring a variety that I thought you might like.” Peter pulled out a smaller round dish from the bottom of the bag and added it to the pile.

“Is that homemade mac and cheese?” Stiles asked excitedly.

Peter smiled at Stiles. “It’s homemade bacon mac and cheese.” He laughed when Stiles gave a little hop of excitement and clutched the container to his chest. “I take it you’d like to have that for lunch?”

“Can we just have it now? For brunch? I haven’t eaten anything yet.”

“Sure, but I also brought everything to make pancakes.”

Peter laughed at the conflicted look on Stiles’s face. “We could always have both.” He laughed again at Stiles’s vigorous nod. He turned on the oven and started looking for a bowl.

Peter set Stiles up with a manual juicer and a sack of oranges while he made pancake batter. He chopped up one of the chocolate bars he’d brought over for Stiles and added the chunks to the batter. Peter carefully poured out three perfect circles of batter onto the pan before he looked at Stiles.

“Did you want anything with these? I remember you asked for whipped cream and syrup but did you want any bacon or sausage or anything?”

Stiles shook his head. “Just pancakes and mac and cheese.” He wrinkled his nose. “Der…” He stopped before he could finish the name.

Peter flipped the pancakes and poured new ones before he looked at Stiles.

“Stiles, it’s okay for you to say his name. It’s even okay if you need to talk about him. I know this has all been going really fast and I can’t imagine you’ve had a lot of time to process everything that’s happened in just the last couple of days.”

Stiles stopped squeezing the oranges and looked at Peter. “It…doesn’t bother you?”

Peter shook his head. “He’s a part of both of our lives. I haven’t wanted to bring him up in case you weren’t ready or willing to think about him, but I have no problem if you want to talk about him.”

Stiles dumped the last of the orange juice into the pitcher. “You’re right. I’ve been so busy that I haven’t had a lot of time to think about…Derek, and everything. I don’t really want to think about him. It…I still don’t understand why he didn’t say something sooner, you know? It still would have really hurt, but it’s like he did it in the worst possible way, like he hated me. It just felt like it came out of nowhere.”

Peter turned off the stove and took Stiles’s hand. “Did you …do you love Derek?” Peter asked
quietly.

“Not really. I mean, maybe a little? I didn’t get to spend very much time with him since our bond was arranged, just those chaperoned visits to your house.” Stiles gave a sour chuckle. “He never tried to meet with me outside those visits, nothing like all those sappy romance movies where the alpha sneaks around and does crazy stuff to see their intended omega. I guess I know why now.”

Peter squeezed his hand and stayed silent.

“I liked him a lot. I wanted to love him. I wanted to fall in love with him and get bonded and live happily ever after. I didn’t think I was asking for that much. I just wanted to find my alpha, my one person, someone I could love with all my heart and who would love me too. I really liked Derek and he was gorgeous and I thought maybe he could be that person for me.” Stiles looked away. “I guess he didn’t feel the same way.”

Peter pulled Stiles into his arms and held him. He waited until Stiles’s damp sniffles had stopped and his breathing evened out before he spoke. “I think everyone wants that. Spending time with you these last few days..., well, I’m trying to remember when all this other stuff suddenly started seeming more important to me.”

“What other stuff?” Stiles asked.


Stiles’s face suddenly contorted. “Oh God, you’re a lawyer!”

Stiles blushed when Peter lifted his eyebrows. “Sorry. I just remembered. My dad kind of hates lawyers.”

Peter smirked a little, but didn’t look offended. “Yes, I guess as a sheriff he probably would. I’m not that kind of lawyer. Talia is the one who does criminal law in our family, not me.”

“What kind of lawyer are you?”

“I work part-time in environmental law.”

“Really?”

“Does that surprise you?”

“I guess you kind of seem like you would be in something more imposing. Corporate law or something. Something really competitive and cut-throat, wearing thousand dollar suits and orchestrating shady backroom deals.”

Peter laughed out loud. “Why Stiles, I do believe you are stereotyping me. Are you saying I’m a soulless money-grubbing shark looking to crush the little guy under my gilded heel?”

“No! Wait, what?”

“Relax, I’m kidding. I do appreciate the occasional shady deal but mostly I take cases to protect the environment from businesses who are trying to use the world as their own personal toilet. Unfortunately, a lot of that work is pro-bono so I also dabble in investing on the side.”

“So you’re a good guy.” He laughed when Peter made a face.

“I think of it more as self-preservation. Some human beings are just too dumb to know that you don’t
shit where you sleep, and if takes the long arm of the law to slap some sense into them, then I’m very happy to be doing the slapping.”

Peter finished making the pancakes and then whipped a pint of heavy cream. Stiles set the table and as soon as the mac and cheese was done, they ate together. They were interrupted by another delivery and Stiles laughed as soon as he saw the stack of boxes from Beacon Hill’s fanciest bakery.

Peter set a line of boxes along the counter in the kitchen. “I’m not a baker but I thought you might enjoy these a little more than a sack of straight cane sugar.” Peter had bought two different cakes, two pies, three dozen different cookies, and a dozen cupcakes.

“You are ridiculous,” Stiles said fondly, even as he took down a pair of plates. “How did you even arrange for all this?”

Peter shrugged and took the plate that Stiles was offering him. “Bakeries open early, and anyone will deliver if you offer them enough money.”

Stiles took a bit of everything, and then went back for a second slice of the chocolate cake. Peter nibbled at a cookie to keep Stiles company at the table. Afterwards, they worked side by side in the kitchen to get everything cleaned up and put away. Being in the kitchen with Peter was starting to feel familiar and comfortable.

Even as Stiles relaxed in Peter’s presence, he started to feel increasingly restless. He found himself fidgeting, tapping his fingers, shaking his legs, feeling like ants were crawling under his skin. The sensation seemed to recede the closer he was to Peter and he found himself drifting closer and closer to him as they worked. The first brush of his arm against Peter’s felt amazing, like the first brush of calamine on a rash, and Stiles groaned in relief. Peter looked at him quizzically.

“It just feels really good to be close to you,” Stiles said.

Peter’s face shifted and for a bare second Stiles thought he saw a ravenous hunger before Peter glanced away and took a deep breath. When he turned back, Peter had a small, pleased smile on his face and nothing more. Stiles stared at him, suddenly aware of how much Peter was controlling himself. He thought about Matthew from his first interview, and the alpha at the grocery store, and Maxwell, covering his face and growling, unable to speak. He wanted to reach out, to touch Peter and tell him how much he appreciated the effort he was making, but he was afraid that he’d make things harder for him. He smiled back instead, and when Peter turned back to washing the dishes he stood close enough to him that their shoulders were touching.

After their impromptu brunch, Peter took Stiles’s hand, and led him into the living room. Peter pulled Stiles down on the sofa beside him, close enough they were still able to hold hands. “We should probably talk about your heat.”

Stiles felt his shoulders start to hunch, but forced himself to stay still. “Okay?” he asked, trying not to wince when his voice came out high and thin.

“Relax, it’s nothing bad, but we should at the very least talk about contraception.”

Stiles nodded, relaxing a little. Between the mandatory yearly health and reproduction classes at school and his last appointment with his pediatrician, that was possibly the one topic related to his upcoming heat he felt comfortable discussing.

“I think we should exclusively have anal sex during this heat, to eliminate the possibility of pregnancy.”
And wham, just like that Stiles felt adrift again. He knew that was an option but it was a lot easier talking about theory in a classroom or in an medical exam room than sitting on a sofa next to an alpha making plans for that afternoon. Oh, no big, Stiles thought, we can eat a couple slices of pie, maybe have some anal sex. It'll be great.

Help. I need an adult. Stiles looked at Peter who was waiting for his response with an expectant look on his face. A different adult.

“Stiles?”

If you’re old enough to go into heat, you’re old enough to discuss it without blushing. Or giggling. Or throwing up, he told himself sternly. “Yes. Great. Let’s do that. The anal sex. Yes. Awesome.” Stiles watched Peter’s lips twitch and his heart sank a little.

“I mean I’m not saying I won’t go down on you...” Peter said sincerely.

“Stop.”

“A little oral, maybe some rimming...”

“Oh my god Peter, stop!” Stiles lunged forward and clapped his hand over Peter’s mouth, then added a second one when Peter kept trying to talk. “Look, I want to try everything eventually, but I really don’t want to get pregnant right now. So whatever you want to do is fine. I trust you.”

Peter’s eyes, which had been sparkling with laughter, went soft, and he brought his hands up to pry Stiles’s hands off his mouth. He pressed his lips against them in a kiss. “I’ll try not to let you down.” He said softly.

Stiles stared at Peter helplessly for a moment, and then mentally shook himself and pulled his hands free. “I expect better than that, Hale. I want fireworks and rainbows and...and... cupcakes.” Stiles hummed to himself. “Actually, I want real cupcakes right now. Do you want one?”

Peter sat back and shook his head. “You go ahead. I’m still full from brunch.”

Stiles went into the kitchen and took a pink-frosted cupcake from the box. He ate it in two messy bites, then wiped his hands and mouth on a napkin. He took a deep breath before he headed back to the living room.

Peter had unpacked the second box he’d brought over and there were now a stack of familiar smaller boxes on the coffee table. “I thought we might play some games together.”

“Board games?” Stiles asked, dropping down next to Peter.

Peter nodded, and then leaned in until he was looming over Stiles.

“There’s no surer way to get a glimpse of someone’s innermost soul than by playing monopoly with them,” he intoned gravely.

Stiles laughed and pushed Peter away. “Don’t be creepy.”

Peter waggled his eyebrows and leaned a little closer. “I also brought over a couple other games, including this ‘couples game’ from Talia.” Peter gingerly picked up a box with a glossy photograph of roses and lit candles on the cover and made a face.

“Urgh, let’s just play Monopoly.” Stiles said.
“Ok,” Peter said easily. He set the other game aside and reached for the monopoly box. “I’ll be banker.”

Forty-five minutes later Stiles watched, stunned, as Peter cackled and scooped up his last two pieces of property. “How did that just happen? I never lose this game when I play with my dad and Scott.”

“That’s because you’ve never played with me.”

Stiles squinted at Peter suspiciously. “Wait a minute, were you cheating?”

Peter drew himself up, affronted. “Why would I stoop to cheat at a child’s game?”

“Maybe because you’re ridiculously competitive, like every other alpha in the world?”

Peter pointed at Stiles. “You take that back.”

“Take what back?”

“I am nothing like every other alpha in the world.”

Stiles fought down a smile at Peter’s offended tone. “Just admit you cheated, you cheating cheater who cheats.”

“I did not cheat.”

Stiles stared at him, an incredulous expression on his face. “Peter.”

“There are certain advantages to controlling the money…”

“Ah ha!”

“I may have taken advantage of some of them, but that doesn’t mean I cheated.”

“I knew it! Cheaty Mc Cheaterson! Oh my God,” Stiles said, “My bondmate cheats at Monopoly!”

Stiles covered his face with his hands. “Why didn’t I think to check for that during the interviews?”

Suddenly he was falling and he gave a little shriek as he ended up on his back on the sofa, with Peter looming over him.

“It’s too late now, my darling. You’re stuck with me forever.” Peter stared down at him, gaze intense before he slowly backed off. He gave an exaggerated cackle and raised his hand to twirl an imaginary mustache. “If it makes you feel any better, we always play in teams on game night.”

“So you’re saying you’ll cheat for me?”

“I’m saying,” Peter leaned back in until his next words brushed across Stiles’s lips, “I’ll make sure we both win, no matter what.”

Stiles felt a little breathless. He was a little afraid, not of Peter, but he was acutely aware that they were alone, that the only thing standing between him and Peter was Peter himself. That itchy, restless energy that had been building in him suddenly seized control of his brain, made him want to do something, although he wasn’t quite sure what. Peter was staring at him again, that focused hungry gaze that made Stiles feel like there were little sparks under his skin.

“May I kiss you?” Peter’s voice was soft.
Hesitantly, Stiles nodded.

Peter leaned forward and lightly pressed his lips fully against Stiles’s, who flinched back, looking faintly revolted and licked at his lips thoughtfully.

“Was that okay?” Peter asked, brow furrowed a little at Stiles’s reaction.

“Kissing on the mouth is weird.”

Peter smiled down at him. “You know, this is a little weird for me too.”

Stiles looked at Peter quizzically.

“I’ve spent the last six months trying to stuff you into a little box labelled, ‘Family member – do not kiss.’ I’m feeling a bit like that very special uncle right now.”

Stiles snorted and gave a fleeting, genuine smile. He looked up at Peter and licked his lips again.

“Can we try it again?” Stiles asked. “Kissing?”

“Of course.”

The next kiss was softer. It was still restrained, just the press of closed lips but softer, more accepting. Stiles relaxed a little as it continued, and tilted his head to match Peter’s when he shifted slightly.

Peter drew back a little and asked, “Okay?”

Stiles nodded.

Peter brought his free hand up to cradle Stiles’s cheek for their next kiss, but otherwise kept the kiss light and undemanding. It was Stiles who tried to increase the intensity of the kiss, opening his mouth slightly and Peter moaned as the sweet taste of an omega on the cusp of his heat pressed against his lips. He allowed Stiles to draw back but let his lips cling to Stiles’s mouth for just a moment and left his palm pressed gently against Stiles’s cheek. When Stiles leaned back in, Peter opened his mouth as well, and this time their open mouths pressed together for a long lingering kiss. Peter let his tongue flicker out to caress Stiles’s.

Stiles suddenly stiffened and drew back. He dropped his head to stare at his own crotch and looked back up at Peter, his eyes wide.

“I…I think I’m getting an erection,” Stiles whispered.

Peter smiled a little. “Is this the first time?”

Stiles was staring back down when he answered absently.

“Yeah. I mean, I know that everything is finally going to power up once I go into heat and bond but, wow, that is weird.”

“Does it feel good?”

Stiles frowned. “I don’t know. It’s mostly just weird. Can you kiss me again?”

“I will kiss you as much as you want, my darling boy.” He leaned back in and kissed Stiles again, and then again until Stiles’s lips were tender and red. Peter was panting when he forced himself to draw back, and his arms were now bracing himself over Stiles rather than holding onto him. His
entire body was tense and his arms were trembling like holding himself away from Stiles was taking all his strength. Stiles... just felt confused. He felt like he was waiting for something that just wasn’t happening. Peter stared at him searchingly, then groaned and planted his forehead on Stiles’s shoulder. Stiles felt like he should apologize, although he wasn’t quite sure why.

Peter was quiet, except for the sounds of his breathing. Stiles liked the feel of Peter’s weight on top of him. He wished Peter would move so his entire body was above Stiles, but he was laying askew, only his face and chest over Stiles, and the rest of his body off to the side. It suddenly occurred to Stiles why Peter was laying like that, and he shifted a little, wondering if Peter would move over him if he asked.

“I think I like kissing okay but I think I like cuddling a lot better.” Stiles said, absently, still absorbed by the feel of Peter’s body against his.

Peter laughed a little breathlessly. “Why don’t you wait until we’re fully bonded before you decide? You might change your mind.”

“Maybe.”

Stiles pressed one hand against Peter’s chest and started to sit up. He yelped when Peter growled and pushed him back down. “Sorry”, Peter mumbled. “…just give me a minute.”

Stiles watched as Peter slowed his breathing, and felt his body slowly relax above his. Finally, Peter started to draw back and said, “Slowly please. I do have excellent self-control but no fast movements. Don’t act like you’re trying to get away from me. I can’t take that right now.”

“Okay.”

They both got up slowly and Stiles backed away from the intimacy they’d shared on the couch. He went to the bathroom and when he came back he hovered near Peter a little uncertainly. Peter had brought some DVD’s and Stiles gratefully accepted the offer to watch one. Peter raised his arm in offer and Stiles happily snuggled beneath it. Peter took the peeled garlic from Stiles and started to crush it with his knife. “Have you done any traveling?”

Stiles shook his head. “Not really. I’ve been on some class field trips, but the furthest I’ve ever traveled was to Disneyland.” He chose another cupcake from the box and took a large bite.

“Is there anywhere you ever wished you could visit?”

Stiles took another bite of cupcake, savoring the rich cream cheese frosting. “I haven’t thought about it much. My dad doesn’t get a lot of time off and he’s been saving for college forever, so there’s never any money to go anywhere. Usually we just hang out at home when he gets a vacation. Sometimes we go camping or fishing, but nothing fancy.” Stiles shrugged. “I always thought it’d be fun to see new places, but it always felt like it would be really far off in the future.”
Peter put down the knife he was using to mince garlic, and looked at Stiles curiously. “You realize
that you’re going to be my bondmate, right?”

Stiles crammed the last of the cupcake in his mouth and nodded.

“Has it occurred to you that when I travel, I’d want you to come with me?” asked Peter, as he started
slowly mixing the garlic into a bowl of softened butter.

Stiles froze, mouth still full of cupcake.

“When I was asking you if there was anywhere you wanted to visit, it wasn’t a fun theoretical
question. I was asking where you might like to go for your spring break in a couple of months.”

Stiles swallowed down the lump of cupcake in his mouth, and grabbed a napkin for his face. “Yeah,
I get that now. Um, wow. I don’t know. Can I think about it?”

“Oh, of course, my darling. Actually, if we time things right, we could have our ceremony and use your
spring break vacation as our honeymoon.” Peter looked at him out of the corner of his eye as he
picked up a slice of bread and started buttering it. Stiles was starting to understand Peter better, and to
recognize his more subtle expressions. Peter had lobbed that comment into their conversation like a
grenade, and the look on his face was pure mischief.

“That’s a good idea.” Stiles said, as casually as he could. Stiles watched Peter’s lips quirk up into an
amused smile. Peter put down the bread and pulled Stiles into a hug.

“That was very impressive. You can pass out now, if you need to.” Peter said.

Stiles grabbed two fistfuls of Peter’s shirt and tried to shake him back and forth. “Peter, stop. I
promise you can tease me forever after this heat, but I am seriously going to end up as the only
sixteen year old in the cardiac care unit if you don’t stop. Honeymoon! Gah!” Stiles dropped his
forehead on Peter’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Stiles.” Peter’s voice was contrite but he was still smiling. “I’ll try to hold off planning the
ceremony for a couple days.” He patted Stiles on the back when he groaned.

They managed to finish the garlic bread and ate dinner at the table. Stiles ate three servings and had
two slices of cake for dessert. Working together, it didn’t take long to clean up after dinner, and it
was still fairly early when Stiles yawned and looked at his watch. “I guess I’m not going into heat
today.”

Peter shrugged. “That’s okay. I’m not in any rush. I enjoyed spending this time with you before we
need to bond.” He leaned down and dropped a soft kiss on Stiles’s mouth.

Stiles smiled at Peter shyly. “It was nice.” He thought about it, and then asked “Can we sleep
together? In the same bed? If it wouldn’t be too hard for you?”

Peter bit back several inappropriate responses and simply said, “Of course.”

Stiles shuffled his feet then jerked his head towards the stairs. “I’m just going to take a shower.”

“Perfect. That’ll give me a chance to check my messages.”

Peter watched Stiles walk upstairs and closed his eyes against the impulse to jump up and chase him,
up the stairs, down the hall, straight into his bed. He took a deep breath and picked up his cell phone.
There was an e-mail message from Norman waiting on his phone. *Picked up the package - on my way to BH. Bcheck still in progress. Prelim report attached.* Peter pulled out his notebook computer and turned it on.

There wasn’t much in the attachment. Katherine Jane Argent had no criminal record, had never been sued, or filed for bankruptcy. Her credit score was solid, if unremarkable. She had a few hundred dollars in a checking account, a few thousand in a retirement account. She’d been a relatively good student in high school, and had gone on to earn a BA in History from Fresno State, paid for with a variety of student loans and grants. She moved around after she’d gotten her degree, working off and on as a substitute teacher, most recently at Beacon Hills High School for the past year.

Peter frowned and rearranged the puzzle of Derek and Kate Argent in his mind. Not only was she older than Derek, she had presumably been his teacher. Derek had just turned 18 in November, which meant that she’d started a sexual relationship with an underage student. Now she’d eloped with him to Las Vegas and Derek was paying all the bills.

He’d never been so personally pleased that he managed the Hale finances. He pulled up Derek’s accounts. He nodded in satisfaction that they looked untouched. So far it appeared Derek and his new wife had been living on one of his credit cards, and he raised his eyebrows at the balance they’d managed to accumulate in just a few days. He went through and cut off Derek’s access to his checking and savings accounts, and then to the general family account. Then he went through and reported all of Derek’s credit cards stolen, except for the one he was currently using, and had them cancelled. He also removed Derek from the family credit card account that they all had access to for emergencies.

“There. Let’s see how the lovebirds do without any money to feather their little nest.”

He heard the shower switch off and any interest he had in Derek and his new wife faded abruptly. He logged off his accounts and shut his notebook down.

“Peter?”

“Coming,” he called. He doubled checked that the front door was locked, and when he turned back Stiles’s sweet scent rolled over him in a cloud of moist air. Peter gave himself a moment to just breathe, and his head fell back against the door as his fangs dropped and his claws erupted. He dug the tips of his claws into the solid wood of the door and a surge of sheer primitive satisfaction tore through him. He was alone with his chosen mate, and Stiles was preparing himself even now for Peter’s claim. Peter let his head roll forward and choked down the triumphant snarl that rose in his throat. There would be time for that later. He turned his red-tinted gaze to the stairs and started forward.
Chapter 13

Stiles was a little nervous about sleeping in the same bed with Peter. He loved the idea of it, of lying next to another person all night long, to be able to reach out and know that he wasn’t alone in the dark. He still had a few faint memories of sleeping beside his mom on nights that his dad worked late, and of how safe and loved he’d felt with her curled up next to him. He hoped that sleeping next to Peter, next to his bondmate, would feel the same. He listened to Peter getting ready for bed in the bathroom and fidgeted. He pulled the sheets back a little, then pulled them up, then pulled them back half-way. He felt strange getting into bed without Peter, but felt even stranger hanging out next to his bed without any clear purpose. He stared down at his feet and wondered if he should have clipped his toenails.

Stiles froze when the bathroom door opened. A cloud of scents rolled into the room first, mint toothpaste and soap, and then there was Peter, standing in the door to his room, looking unexpectedly serious. Like Stiles, he was dressed for bed, although he was wearing a coordinated set of pajamas instead of an old tee shirt and mismatched bottoms.

“I should say we don’t have to do this, but I don’t think I can,” Peter said. He walked into the room, towards Stiles. Stiles took a step to the side so he was across the bed from Peter and froze when his action set off a flicker of something furious and desperate in Peter’s eyes.

“Don’t,” Peter bit out. “Don’t run. Don’t hide from me.” Peter advanced until he was right in front of Stiles and he wrapped one broad hand around Stiles’s back and hauled him up close, their bodies just touching. Stiles blinked at him, but didn’t resist. Peter brought up his free hand and laid it on Stiles’s shoulder, right at the base of his throat. He leaned forward and scented the side of Stiles’s neck, up into his hair line. Peter sighed, deeply, and then rubbed his cheek against Stiles’s. “I’m trying to be good. I’m trying to wait for you to be in heat. I can do this, I can, but...” he drew back and looked at Stiles, “I really need to be close to you.”

Stiles looked at Peter and could see the fraying edges of his control. He looked like he was trying to brace himself for Stiles to take it back, to ask to sleep apart, and as nervous as he was, Stiles didn’t want that for either of them.

“Okay,” he said quietly, and gave Peter a soft kiss. Peter’s hands tightened, held Stiles against him while one kiss turned into many. Peter was smiling when he drew back, even if his breathing was unsteady.

Stiles thought it would be awkward, sleeping with another person, that it would take time for them to get comfortable with one another. He was wrong. Peter slid in bed behind him like he’d done it a thousand times before, and Stiles pushed back against him. His body slotted in against Peter’s like Peter had been designed for his personal comfort. One of Peter’s arms slid under Stiles’s neck, and the other wrapped protectively around Stiles’s waist, hand on Stiles’s chest, and pulling Stiles close so he was pressed against Peter from chest to hips. Stiles relaxed into the embrace and his eyes were closing when he suddenly realized that there was a warm, hard lump poking him in the back. Stiles wasn’t sure at first what it was, but Peter groaned when he wiggled back against it and his arms tightened around Stiles. Stiles swallowed down a giggle and inched his hips forward. His eyes dropped again and he basked in the cloud of warm alpha scent - Peter’s scent - and the warm brush of breath on the back of his neck.

“Peter…” Stiles started, then bit his lip, not sure of his words, “Do...do you want to do it? Sex?”

Peter’s arms tightened around him. “Stiles...”
Stiles wiggled until he turned onto his other side and was looking into Peter’s eyes.

“I wouldn’t mind,” Stiles said. “I know it’s not going to be fun for me until we bond, but maybe if we did it, it’d trigger my heat. I’m sick of waiting. I just want to go into heat and bond, so let’s just do it.”

Peter groaned, and closed his eyes. “Stiles, please stop. I’m not sure I’m strong enough to say no.”

“Then don’t say no. I know you want it.” Stiles glanced down at the front of Peter’s body. “I’m saying it’s okay. Let’s just have sex now.”

“It’ll be easier for you if we wait until you’re fully in heat. There’s a reason why it’s recommended to wait. Plus I promised your father I’d wait.”

“But if we’re going to be having anal sex, why can’t we just go for it? I know you won’t hurt me and we have like a huge bottle of lubricant right there.” Stiles reached out and poked Peter in the chest. “My body is not the boss of me.”

Peter was already shaking his head. “I’m not going to have sex with you before you’re physically ready.” He drew up one hand and brushed it over Stiles’s cheek. “You’re not in heat yet, my darling.”

Stiles sighed, then flipped back onto his other side so his back was against Peter’s chest once more. He wiggled back against Peter’s body and deliberately gave an extra wiggle once Peter’s erection was pressed back against him. He smirked when Peter groaned and gritted out, “Stop that, you brat.” Despite his grumpy tone his arms were gentle around Stiles. Stiles settled in, torn between feeling annoyed at not getting his own way, and relief that he hadn’t, and went to sleep.

When he jerked awake it was still dark, and he was so hot he thought he was going to die. “Get off me.” He pushed at Peter’s arm which didn’t budge. “Peter, come on. I need to get up.” Peter tensed, and then rolled forward so he was lying partially draped over Stiles’s back. He dropped his nose to the nape of Stiles’s neck and inhaled, long and deep.

“Peter, please. I need to get up.”

Stiles didn’t think Peter was going to listen at first. Slowly, glacially slowly, and with fits and starts Peter pulled back just enough to let Stiles slide out of the bed. Stiles lurched upwards and then suddenly Peter was right behind him, hands clenching and releasing on Stiles’s hips. Stiles stumbled down the hall and into the bathroom, Peter barely a step behind him, and he flipped on the light. Stiles flinched away from the flare of light and peed, not even caring that Peter was hovering behind him. He shook, flushed, and tucked himself away, then shambled over to wash his hands. He squinted at himself in the mirror as he washed his hands. There was a hectic flush in his face, his cheeks so flaming red he looked like he’d just been slapped. Stiles touched his cheek, hand trembling at the heat he could feel rising off of his skin.

“Omega blush,” he said quietly. He looked up and met Peter’s eyes in the mirror. Peter’s pupils dilated despite the bright light in the bathroom and his hands on Stiles’s hips tightened.

“You’re in heat.” Peter’s voice was harsh, breaking on the words. He threw his head back and inhaled, deeply, and Stiles felt strangely exposed. He felt a trickle between his legs and his eyes went wide. His right hand shot down to waistband of his pants and he reached inside, ignoring Peter’s hot groan. He reached under his cock down to the soft little ridge that had marked him as an omega since the day he was born. It had been feeling tender all week and now when Stiles ran his fingers over it, it felt swollen and he could feel moisture all along its length. His eyes went wide and flew up to
Peters. “It’s…happening. I’m opening.”

Peter crowded up close behind him and slid his hands up beneath Stiles’s shirt. He dropped his nose to run along Stiles’s shoulder. “I can smell it.” Peter voice was harsh, more growl than words, and the hard bulge that Stile’s had fallen asleep against felt enormous squeezed between their bodies.

Stiles’s hands reached up and snagged in the neckline of his shirt. He felt hot, so hot that his cotton tee shirt suddenly felt like it was a wool blanket. Peter grabbed Stiles’s right hand, brought the damp fingers up to his mouth, and sucked on them desperately.

“My room …Peter, the bed, come on.” Stiles felt disconnected from his body. His brain and senses seemed almost unbearably sharp, everything felt too bright, too loud, too real, but his body felt wobbly, unsteady, foreign. Every movement felt forced, and a little off, like his entire body had been reborn while he slept. Peter didn’t seem much better, but he wrapped his arms around Stiles and supported them both as they made their clumsy way from the bathroom back to Stiles’s bedroom.

Peter led him back to the bed. Stiles fell on his bed and yanked at his own clothing with uncoordinated hands. His tee shirt was already off and he was pulling at his pajama bottoms without much success. He felt frantic. The heat was boiling up in his gut and lower, and he knew Peter was the cure.

“I feel so hot. I gotta get this off. I’m burning up. Help me Peter.”

Peter curled his fingers around Stiles’s waistband and pulled downward, hard enough that Stiles yelped and fell back. His underwear came down half way, and Stiles squirmed and wiggled and whined plaintively as he tried unsuccessfully to shove them the rest of the way off. Peter crawled onto the bed, knelt, and tangled his fingers with Stiles’s while together they worked his underwear down and off his legs. Stiles was finally naked.

A wave of lush scent from Stiles was released into the air and Peter swayed. He felt the alpha transformation sweep over him entirely out of his control and reared back onto his knees. He flexed his clawed fingers, and let his jaw drop open to make room for the fangs that erupted from his gums. He blinked, then blinked again when he realized that everything had taken on a dim reddish cast.

“Look at you,” Stiles said, awed. He reached out and touched the tips of Peter’s claws. Peter licked his lips over his fangs and fought down the urge to roar, to preen, to demonstrate his power for his mate. He flexed the muscles of his chest, letting them bulge and ripple, enjoying the way Stiles’s eyes lingered on them.

Stiles reached up and rested the tip of a finger against the tip of one of Peter’s fangs. “Your eyes are glowing red. Do I look different to you?”

Peter stared down at Stiles, at the tangle of smooth pale limbs laid bare before him, and let go, threw his head back and roared his triumph to anyone who cared to hear. He dropped back down on top of Stiles and buried his nose behind Stiles’s ear, right at the hair line where his scent was rich and ripe. He lapped at the skin and reached to fill his hands with his mate. His claws receded when he touched Stiles’s skin and he ran his hands down Stiles’s chest and flank, down to his hips. Stiles’s cock was soft against his leg. Peter reached down and cradled it in the palm of his hand, started to slide down Stiles’s body to take a closer look, maybe a taste, but Stiles tugged on Peter’s shirt impatiently.

“Come on Peter, come on, get in me, let’s do this. I need you.”

Peter was more than ready. He pulled off his clothing as fast as he could, ripping when he couldn’t get it off as fast as he’d like. He slithered down Stiles’s body, ignoring his protests, kissing here and
there until he was down between Stiles’s legs. He lifted the soft pink curl of Stiles’s cock and gave it a gentle kiss before he pinned it against Stiles’s belly with one hand. Beneath it was Stiles’s pussy, a tiny, pink slit that was just starting to open, with Stiles’s split omega scrotum framing it. Peter gently rubbed the pad of one finger over it and Stiles gasped in shock at the strange sensation. Peter rubbed it again and pressed the pad of one finger against it. It parted slowly, reluctantly, only now opening for the first time, now that Stiles was in heat. The deeper he pressed, the richer the scent that emerged, and hypnotized, Peter leaned forward and licked at the tender skin around the new opening. A drop of Stiles’s natural lubricant rolled out and Peter lapped at it eagerly.

“Come on Peter, let’s go, let’s go, come on, please. Just get in me.” It was the tone of Stiles’s voice that broke through to Peter. He sounded desperate, frantic, and Peter shook off his own pleasure for what Stiles needed. He reached over to the night stand where he’d set a brand new bottle of lubricant and filled his palm. He rubbed it over his fingers until they were dripping and he brought his fingers down to Stiles’s anus. Peter slid in one long, thick finger and Stiles groaned.

“Oh yes, come on Peter, get in me, hurry.”

Peter wanted to linger, but he could tell from the grimace on Stiles’s face that he was frustrated and uncomfortable. Stiles was squirming, his thighs shifting restlessly. Peter used a couple fingers to open Stiles up, despite Stiles’s bitter complaining that he didn’t need it. He climbed over Stiles and leaned forward, kissed Stiles deeply, and then reached down to stroke himself with the lube left in his hand.

“What are you doing? Come on, I’m ready, let’s go.”

“The closer I am to coming the better it will be for you.” He buried his face against Stiles’s neck and kept stroking. He grunted when he felt Stiles’s soft fingers brush lightly against the against the head of his cock and looked up. Stiles was staring down the length of their bodies, desperation lost for a moment to sheer curiosity as he watched Peter stroke his own cock. “Does that feel good? Scott said it feels amazing.”

Peter’s fangs which had receded dropped again and his voice was harsh when he said, “Don’t talk about other people when we’re in bed.”

Stiles blew out a breath, his impatience back. “Well, I wouldn’t if you would just fuck me already. Come on.”

Peter reached down and pulled Stiles’s hips onto his lap, positioned his cock and pushed in. Stiles grimaced and tensed and Peter waited until Stiles was urging him on, then inched forward until he was completely inside. “Is this it?” Stiles asked, his voice dubious. “Are we having sex?”

Peter laughed a little, gasping when it made him shift inside of Stiles’s body. “Not quite yet, my darling.” He braced his arms on either side of Stiles, then bent down low to kiss Stiles softly. He drew his hips back a little, then pushed forward. He did it again, a little harder, then again before Stiles shifted a little beneath him, drawing his legs up on either side of Peter’s hips. Peter paused, gasping a little, hips jerking as he tried to focus on Stiles who was staring up at him, looking disgruntled. “This first time... this first time is just for me. But every time after this, I promise, every other time will be for both of us.” He kissed Stiles once, then pressed his face against Stile’s neck and started to move in earnest.

Peter’s cock was sliding slickly now, a rhythmic push and pull that only seemed to fan the flames of Stiles’s impatience. He still felt disconnected from Peter who had tucked his face into the crook of Stiles’s neck and was chasing his own pleasure. Peter was grunting a little with each hard shove inwards, and the ticklish strange sensation of slick skin rubbing on slick skin made Stiles feel like squirming away. It was happening, it was finally happening, he was having sex with his alpha and
he still felt like he was missing the punchline. He winced a little at the pressure on his hips as Peter’s hips sped up, barely pulling out now before quickly shoving back in again.

Stiles sighed, wrapped his arms around Peter’s back, and closed his eyes. He spread his fingers wide, enjoying the flex of Peter’s muscles beneath his hands more than anything that was happening between his legs. Peter’s thrusts were frantic now, and he’d started to growl continuously, a low throbbing noise that he could feel rumbling against his belly where Peter’s body was pressed against his as he moved. Peter had finally started to slow a little and Stiles could feel his knot, the fabled alpha knot he’d read so much about, start to grow. It didn’t hurt exactly but it didn’t exactly feel awesome either. It changed the rhythm of Peter’s thrusts, and Stiles curled his hips upward trying to relieve the growing pressure at the rim of his anus.

Stiles thought of all the glorious, lurid descriptions of bonding that he’d read and wondered which part of all this was supposed to be transcendent, sublime, ecstatic. Right now, he mostly felt jostled and feverish, and a little uncomfortable. He stared over Peter’s shoulder and wondered if it would be rude to look at his cell phone. He rubbed his hands over Peter’s straining back and was just starting to wonder if he was defective when Peter groaned his name, long and low, and stopped moving altogether. Peter’s face was pressed into the side of his neck and he was gasping for breath like he’d just run for his life. His hips were crowded up tight between Stiles’s thighs, and he could feel a hot wet surge as Peter came inside of him. Stiles had never felt so alone.

Peter leaned back a little to look at Stiles, “Oh my god Stiles. Oh god. I’m knotting you!”

“I kind of noticed.”

Peter laughed, sounding a little unhinged. Stiles would have drawn away if he wasn’t trapped between Peter and the mattress. Peter’s hair was standing up like it was electrified, his mouth was hanging open, and he seemed to be having trouble keeping his eyes open. His entire body was shaking, and he seemed to be struggling just to keep his head up.

“It’s amazing, so, so amazing.” Peter leaned down and kissed Stiles, a sloppy kiss that turned into Peter smearing his mouth across Stiles’s chin and down his neck. His hips twitched forward, and each time Peter would gasp and shiver and another wave of heat would surge into Stiles. “I’ve never knotted anyone before, I’ve never…Jesus, I think my heart is going to explode. I didn’t understand that it was going to be like this. Stiles. Oh, god, Stiles…you’re so amazing.”

Stiles smirked a little, suddenly feeling amused at seeing sly, sophisticated Peter so completely undone. He might be the one losing his virginity, but Peter was the one who was out of control. He was babbling, stunned, clumsy in a way Stiles had never imagined Peter could be.

Stiles tightened his muscles slightly, just to see what effect it would have on Peter, and smirked when Peter yelped and convulsed, his arms and legs shaking as another hot splash rolled into Stiles. Stiles waited a beat, then did it again, harder, and for longer. Peter jerked, and buried his face deeper against Stiles’s neck where he whimpered while he came again.

Stiles was so lost in his own amusement and Peter’s reactions that it took him a while to notice the burning that was starting up in his belly. It felt like Peter had pumped him full of heat, and now the warmth was spilling over everywhere inside of him The tingling warmth made his entire body relax, even the tense ring of muscle around Peter’s knot. Peter moaned when his cock slipped just a little bit deeper into Stiles’s body, and Stiles felt another hot splash inside him. Stiles felt warm, and full, and so relaxed that he took a deep breath and thought he might go ahead and take a nap.

Stiles had just been starting to doze when he noticed that the warmth was getting more intense, past the point of comforting, past even the heat that had woken him up earlier and it was getting worse
minute by minute. The restless impatience was back and Stiles felt a bead of sweat roll along his forehead, then another. His entire body felt like it was on fire and he was shaking, teeth clenched. He clutched Peter, grateful for his anchoring weight.

“Wait. Stop. I can’t...” do this, Stiles wanted to say, even though he knew this was out of his hands now, out of Peter’s hands. He’d read all the books, the pamphlets, had seen the videos. No amount of research could have prepared him for this. This was bonding, the biochemical alpha key opening up the omega lock, triggering his physical and sexual maturation, binding them together so that Stiles’s body would only ever recognize Peter’s scent and semen as mate, ensuring that when his next heat came, only Peter would be able to put out the flames that he was even now igniting.

It hurt, genuinely hurt, in a way that he hadn’t expected. If he’d been asked to describe it, he wouldn’t have had the words. He felt scrubbed raw, on fire, cut adrift. He reached down with one trembling hand to touch his cock, to try to soothe it, but he yanked his hand away when the lightest touch made him feel dizzy. His pussy was open now, he could feel it, and was steadily leaking moisture. The bed, the entire room, was thick with Stiles’s and Peter’s combined scents. Peter was rocking a little bit, arms around Stiles, still coming in regular surges, and every wave of ejaculate felt like gasoline being thrown on a fire that was already completely out of control. Stiles clung to Peter’s broad shoulders and clamped his legs around Peter’s back. He closed his eyes and clung to a single thought like a life line in a boiling sea - Peter will save me. Peter will make this better.

Stiles didn’t know how long they were locked together. He shivered and burned and clung to Peter until eventually Peter’s knot deflated and he was able to withdraw. Stiles keened, feeling desperately empty and abandoned, even though Peter had only shifted his body to the side. He felt Peter shift further way and clutched at him with desperate hands. Peter returned, bearing a bottle of water and held it to Stiles’s mouth. Stiles took a few clumsy swallows, splashing water everywhere, then Peter drained the rest of the bottle. Peter’s cock was still hard, or maybe hard again, flushed dark red, and wet from where it had been inside Stiles. There was a curve at the base – Peter’s deflated knot - and Stiles had never wanted anything so badly as he wanted that cock back inside of him.

This time, when Peter touched him, it was like nothing he’d ever imagined. Peter reached out and touched Stiles’s cock, just the lightest stroke from the bottom to the tip and Stiles arched off the bed. For the first time in his life he felt his penis become erect. The faint swelling he’d felt on the sofa earlier when kissing Peter had been nothing, the slightest twitch compared to what was happening now. The heat in his body filled his cock until it moved, stretched, changed its shape entirely, until it was a burning length tucked up hard against his belly. Everything felt raw, painfully sensitive, tingling like it had all been asleep for the past sixteen years and was only now waking up. Peter touched him again and Stiles cried out at the touch. Before Stiles could recover Peter was on him again, warm and heavy. He pushed Stiles’s legs up and apart and draped one over his shoulder. Peter used his free hand to aim his cock and slid back into Stiles. This time the slippery hard push of him made Stiles’s eyes roll back into his head.

Peter pushed in, then shifted, and on the very next thrust landed against something that made Stiles throw his head back and scream out loud. Peter grunted in satisfaction and launched into a steady, thudding rhythm. Stiles felt like he was dying – he had no control over himself, not the newly hard cock bouncing against his belly with each one of Peter thrusts, not the legs that were shaking and jumping in Peter’s firm grip, certainly not over the noises he was making that were getting louder and louder with each solid thrust. Stiles’s hands flailed in the air until they landed on Peter’s thickly-muscled arms and they were the perfect thing to hold, the absolutely perfect thing to hold onto while he threw back his head and shook apart.

When Stiles became aware of anything besides his own overwhelming pleasure, Peter was still above him, knotted inside him, and shaking. The burning was back, and this time the feel of Peter
coming inside him made him gasp, and gasp again until he was feeling light-headed. Peter looked
down at him and with a smirk started to twist his hips, just a little, just enough that the head of his
cock nudged against Stiles’s prostate over and over again.

“Oh god Peter, Peter stop!” It must have been hurting Peter - Stiles felt like his body had clamped
down on Peter’s knot like an angry fist, but the look on Pete’s face was pure pleasure. He came
again with a grunt, and then he was still. Stiles almost felt relief until he realized that he himself was
still moving. Stiles stared down to where his hips had started to hitch up in a hard fast rhythm that
bounced the head of Peters cock off his prostate over and over. He kept going until Peter reached
down and wrapped his arms around him and twisted, flipping them over until Stiles was on top,
suddenly sitting in Peter’s lap, still knotted together. He yelped a little and braced himself on Peter’s
chest. He rearranged his legs and felt the possibilities of the position open up to him even as he got
his feet beneath him. He lifted himself up the inch or so the knot would allow and dropped himself
down. He’d lost the spot that Peter had seemed to find so easily and he grunted and shifted around
and then grunted again when he found it and started bouncing up and down. Peter was staring up at
him, still looking stunned and ecstatic, and he wrapped his broad hands around Stiles’s hip and
steadied him. Stiles threw his head back and rocked and bounced until his entire body lit up with
another orgasm. He fell onto Peter’s chest, still tied together by Peter’s knot.

Peter maneuvered the blanket over them both when Stiles started shivering and wrapped Stiles up in
his arms.

“Oh my God!” Stiles suddenly sat up and Peter’s eyes flew open as he looked at Stiles’s bright,
grinning face. “Pop songs make so much more sense now!”

Peter exploded into laughter, mouth open, his whole body shaking with it. He wrapped his arms
around Stiles again, rolled Stiles beneath him, kissed his grinning mouth, and they laughed together
until they were smothering giggles against one another’s necks. Together, they drifted off to sleep.
Chapter 14

Stiles had been wrong about kissing.

So, so wrong.

There were several new activities vying for his new favorite thing to do, ever, but kissing was firmly in the top two or three. There was something about being so close to Peter, to having Peter’s long fingers wrapped around his jaw or fisted in his hair, the hot humid intimacy of sharing breath that Stiles loved. He could barely remember what it felt like to kiss Peter before they’d bonded, the few lukewarm kisses they’d shared on the sofa. Now kisses made his toes curl, made him hard, made him ache for more.

Stiles had not understood how much would change when he bonded. Before, when he’d looked at Peter, he’d been able to appreciate that Peter was handsome man, in the same way he appreciated a pretty flower or a particularly vibrant sunset. Now, when he looked at Peter, he saw all the delicious, dirty things Peter could do with his hands and his tongue and his cock, and Stiles’s mind filled in all the things that they could do together. Looking at Peter now was like having a hot hand stroking straight down his belly. He looked at Peter and he wanted...everything. The only thing that made it bearable was knowing Peter felt the same. The way Peter watched him took on new meaning, the hungry look from beneath Peter’s half-closed eyes when he rose up to straddle Peter’s lap, the way Peter tracked his mouth as he moved it over Peter’s skin, the way the smooth flow of Peter’s words skipped and paused when Stiles stretched in front of him, arms and legs akimbo. Now, Stiles understood desire.

Stiles also understood why his father had been afraid for him, because sometimes, when he was stretched out under Peter, panting, shaking, wrecked with pleasure, he didn’t feel old enough to handle something so intense, so vast and overwhelming. Even knowing Peter was his mate, that they were physically bound together, it was still terrifying to find himself so completely open and vulnerable to someone else. He wondered how anyone ever felt old enough to deal with sex.

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“What was the secret?”

Peter nibbled at Stiles’s neck, and Stiles gasped and tilted his head to the side, offering more access.

“The secret, Peter. You said that there was some secret that let you be around me before I went into heat. What was it?”

Peter pulled himself off Stiles with a little sigh and turned to look into Stiles’s wide curious eyes.

“You really want to know?”

“Yes!”

“I have a friend. He’s a reproductive endocrinologist at UCLA. He works with omegas all the time, so he figured out a formula of birch oil and Vaseline that enabled him to better tolerate working with omegas near their heats. It doesn’t entirely block the scent, but it helps mask it. I called him and got his recipe.”

Stiles looked confused. “What? Why did I need to wait until we were bonded to learn that?”
Peter made a face. “Making someone imagine you stuffing a q-tip up your nose is not attractive. It’s not something you tell someone you’re trying to impress.”

Stiles started to laugh. “Seriously? You didn’t want to tell me because you didn’t think it was sexy?”

“Well, it’s not.” Peter muttered.

Stiles leaned forward and kissed Peter’s pouting lips. “Aww, you’re my sexy alpha mate no matter what.” He rolled over so he was on top of Peter. “It’s kind of hot imaging you sticking a …ack!”

Stiles squawked as Peter leaned up and sealed their mouths together. Stiles moaned and lost whatever he’d been about to say to the heat of Peter’s kiss.

Stiles was breathless when he spoke. “Peter, can we maybe…”

“No.”

“But…”

“Not until we both get contraceptive implants.” Peter said firmly.

Stiles sighed and flopped onto his back. “But what’s the point of having awesome new body parts if you don’t get to use them?” he whined.

Peter rolled over on top of Stiles and gave him a wicked smile. “Who said we couldn’t use them?”

“But you said…”

Peter slithered down Stiles’s body, pushed his legs up, and draped them over his broad shoulders. Stiles’s heart started to race. Peter leaned forward and blew over the tender lips of Stiles’s new opening. Stiles groaned. Peter made an exaggerated sympathetic face.

“I guess you’ll just have to make do with this.” Peter’s face vanished down between his thighs. Stiles’s head lolled back as he felt Peter’s hot, wet tongue start to work its way inside him.

“Oh kay,” Stiles groaned, not sure what he was agreeing to, but knowing for sure he didn’t want Peter to stop.

It was quite some time later when Stiles fell back against the bed, panting, and he hadn’t regained his breath when he started to talk.

“Wow, it is not fair that alphas get to start doing this at twelve and omegas have to wait for years and years. I mean, even betas get to start having orgasms, when, at what, thirteen? Fourteen? Sco…I mean, my alpha friend, presented when he was twelve. He’s had four more years of orgasms than I have. That is not right.” He rolled over and poked at Peter’s side. “How old were you when you presented as an alpha?”

“Eleven.”

“See! You owe me, like, five years of orgasms.”

“You’re right, it isn’t fair, but there’s a pretty big difference between developing a few new bits at the base of your cock and needing to bond. Can you imagine if omegas presented at eleven, knowing they’d have to go through their first heat just a few months later?”

Stiles suddenly looked nauseated. “Ugh no. I didn’t even really think of that.”
“There’s a reason why omegas are the last to present, and honestly, I think if your dad had a choice omegas wouldn’t present until they were twenty-one. Or maybe thirty.”

Stiles made a face. “Okay, if I can’t mention Sco...my alpha friend while we’re having naked time, you definitely do not get to mention my dad.”

Peter nodded. “Let’s make that all friends and relatives and you have a deal.”

They climbed out of bed and showered separately as their one attempt at showering together had led to neither of them getting any cleaner and made them miss breakfast. By the time Stiles finished and joined Peter downstairs, he’d heated up the shepherd’s pie and cut up some fruit. He’d also made fresh lemonade, from actual lemons which seemed to astonish Stiles, who’d offered him a can of concentrate from the freezer. They ate lunch together on the sofa. Stiles was distracted by the flex of Peter’s forearms when he dished out the shepherd’s pie, but he was hungry enough he contented himself with just sitting next to Peter and eating.

“Is there anything else you want to do today?” Peter asked.

Stiles looked at Peter incredulously. “Are you kidding? No. I just want to have sex, all day, every day, as often as we possibly can until Johnny Law comes and tears us apart.”

Peter smirked. “You mean your dad?”

Stiles nodded. “At some point he’s probably going to insist I get out of bed and go back to school.”

Stiles sighed and shook his head. “Man, I never thought I’d want to live in one of those countries where omegas are basically pampered sex slaves.”

Peter scoffed. “You’d hate that after the first forty-eight hours. You’d go crazy with boredom. At some point I’d have to go back to work and then what would you do all day? Crochet?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I kind of forgot that you have a job. When do you have to get back to work?”

“I told them that I’d be back in about a week, give or take a few days.”

“Your boss was okay with that?”

Peter made a face.

“I don’t have a boss, Stiles. I have colleagues. Frankly, they’re lucky to have me and they know it. I could tell them I was taking a month off and no one would say a word.”

“Wow.” Stiles said, “That’s kind of...arrogant.”

Peter shrugged. “If by that you mean I know my worth, then, yes, I am.”

Stiles stared at him a moment longer, then smiled. “I think I want to be you when I grow up. How on earth did you end up in environmental law? I never really thought about it, but when I hear environmental lawyer I kind of think of a vegetarian in sandals who yells at people to recycle and rides a bike to work, not...” Stiles waved a hand at Peter.

“Well, I do try to recycle, although I prefer my Mercedes-Benz to riding a bicycle. I did actually start out as the kind of lawyer you probably imagined when we met. I did corporate law right out of law school because it was the most competitive field. I spent six years billing a hundred hours a week and got paid hand over fist for doing something I kind of enjoyed. It was like a nonstop battle of words and wits with millions of dollars at stake. It was fun.”
Peter shrugged. “Then I got head-hunted by a man I despised. Blackwood sat me down over three hundred-dollar steaks and told me he thought I’d fit right into his firm, and he meant it.” He made a face. “I realized he was right. So, I quit and came home, and spent six months contemplating what kind of life I wanted.” Peter was quiet for a moment. “I arrived home a few weeks before Marcus died, and well, with everything that happened, I never left.”

“I wish I could have met Marcus.” Stiles said softly. “I’ve never met another male omega.

“Marcus would have loved you. He always hoped one of his kids would be an omega.”

“Did he ever carry any of his children?”

Peter was quiet for a moment. “Talia carried Laura, Derek, Cora, and Davey. Marcus carried Ollie.” Peter’s mouth twisted. “That’s how he died. Marcus decided he wanted to experience pregnancy, just once. He knew the risks. Everyone always knows the risks, but you always think, well that kind of thing happens to some omega in a third-world country, somewhere omegas are married off and bred before they’ve even presented, and male omegas are treated like women or worse. Not here, not with good pre-natal care and a modern hospital.”

Stiles reached out and tentatively wrapped his hand around Peters, which was clenched around his fork.

“He made it almost all the way to thirty-two weeks. Then everything seemed to go wrong all at once and they had to rush him into an emergency C-section. He was so excited about having another baby and he never even got to hold Oliver.”

Stiles felt his eyes fill with tears. “That’s awful.”

Peter looked away for a long moment, and when he looked back his face was calm. “Anyway…”

“Don’t.” Stiles blurted.

Peter looked at him quizzically.

“Don’t do that. The hiding”

Peter’s face smoothed out again, all expression gone.

“I want to be the person you don’t have to hide stuff from. Please.”

Peter stared at Stiles for a moment, then his expression softened. He reached out and touched Stiles’s face. “I’ll… I can try.”

Stiles squeezed his hand.

There was silence between them, but it wasn’t awkward. Peter squeezed Stiles’s hand. “Dessert?”

Stiles smiled and jumped up. They walked hand in hand to the kitchen where they both picked out some dessert from the boxes Peter had had delivered, then returned to the sofa.

“After Marcus, I decided I needed to stay here in Beacon Hills and was looking at opportunities when I met Barbara Lindeman, who was looking for a partner. We hit it off and it turned out there were certain satisfactions I got from that practice, and so, here we are.”

“Like being the good guy?”
Peter smiled crookedly. “More like getting to use my evil powers for a good cause.”

Stiles laughed. “That’s even better than being a good guy.”

“I’ve always thought so,” Peter said and placed his plate on the table.

“I think I might want to go into law enforcement, like my dad.”

Peter hummed. “I remember you talking about that at that first dinner. I remember thinking I couldn’t imagine Derek being bonded to a cop.”

Stiles looked up at Peter. “That’s what you thought? Not that an omega shouldn’t go into such a dangerous field?”

Peter shrugged. “People have always tried to make themselves feel superior by putting down someone else. Think about the struggle female alphas faced getting taken seriously, or the history of omegas in general. History almost always proves the people trying to do the oppressing are assholes in the end.”

Stiles set down his empty plate and turning to face Peter, crawled on top of him, straddling his lap.

Peter raised his eyebrows. “Already?”

Stiles shrugged. “What can I say? Talking about social justice gets me hot.”

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Heat-leave from school usually lasted one week and heat itself rarely lasted more than two or three days. Stiles stretched his leave to eight days by coming up with increasingly flimsy excuses why he wasn’t absolutely sure he was entirely over his heat. Stiles felt no guilt whatsoever for exaggerating his symptoms so he could stay alone with Peter and focus on having as much sex as humanly possible. His father had started calling on the fourth day, and from the increasingly unimpressed tone of his voice, Stiles figured his time with Peter was limited.

It helped that his heat had started shortly before the weekend, but by Wednesday morning his father decided enough was enough. Stiles started awake from his doze, tucked under Peter’s body when his Dad knocked loudly on the front door of the house, opened it, and yelled, “I’m coming in. Everybody better be wearing pants!”

Fortunately, they weren’t tied together by Peter’s knot, so Stiles flailed until Peter let him up and he lunged to the bedroom door and shut it before either he or his father could be scarred for life. He dug out his old Batman robe which was too tight and too short, and scuttled to the bathroom to take a shower.

His father might not have been able to smell alpha or omega pheromones but he absolutely was able to smell the after effects of the massive amounts of sex he and Peter had been having, or at least Stiles guessed that’s why he came out of the bathroom to his father walking around the house, opening all the windows, and looking pained.

“Sorry.” He said guiltily.

“I expect you to go to school today, and you,” his Dad said, pointing to Peter, “You go to wherever you go when you’re not here, in my house, banging my son.”

“Dad!” Stiles flamed red, although it didn’t prevent him from stealing a glance at Peter.
“Just tell me you kept it confined to your bedroom.”

“Uhm…” Stiles glanced at Peter again, and then looked away shiftily. “Kinda. More or less.”

Stiles’s dad covered his eyes with his hand. “Stiles, I swear to God I am bringing home a black light tonight and there better not be a single spot lighting up outside of your bedroom or else…”

Stiles tried to look offended but gave it up almost immediately. “You might need to give me a few hours to do some cleaning after school first.”

“Oh good lord, Stiles. Just go to school.”

The sheriff walked out of the room, muttering under his breath, quietly enough Stiles couldn’t make out what he was saying.

Peter dressed and threw together breakfast for everyone. John changed into a fresh uniform and still looked grumpy when he came downstairs, but he seemed to perk up at the omelet and buttered toast that Peter handed him. Stiles came running downstairs, shoveled his omelet into his mouth in four huge bites, kissed a bemused Peter, and ran out the door with his toast clenched between his teeth.

Peter stared at the door and said, “I guess he must be running late.” He poured two cups of coffee and brought them to the table.

“That’s pretty much Stiles in the morning, every morning.” John said, taking one of the cups.

Peter shook his head and blew on his coffee. He took a drink and then turned his attention to John.

“John, I’d like to talk to you about our living situation.”

The sheriff looked up from his plate.

“I’d like to invite you to move into the Hale house.” John was already shaking his head when Peter continued, “Wait, before you say no, please hear me out.”

“It’s not normal or natural for omegas to be alone. If you look around you’ll see most omegas are the center of a large extended family. There’s a reason for that. Stiles is alone far too much for an omega, and I don’t think that me moving in will solve that. My hours at work are flexible, but even so, Stiles is likely going to be home alone hours before you or I get home from work.”

“Stiles is used to it.”

“He shouldn’t have to be.” Peter said bluntly.

“Now wait just one minute…”

“I’m not trying to insult your parenting, John. I know you’ve done the best you can but those panic attacks Stiles gets? The so-called ADHD? I think he has omega anxiety disorder from being alone too much.”

John deflated. “Stiles’s pediatrician thought that might be the case too. Stiles insisted on going to a different doctor for a second opinion, and we had to go to two more after that before someone was willing to call it ADHD and start him on Ritalin.”

“Stiles loves you, and I can tell he is nothing if not loyal. He wouldn’t ever tell you that you weren’t enough for him, but you’re not. You and me together, are not enough. He needs to be at the center of a family, and that’s something I can provide for him. The thing is, I know he would be so much
happier if he could have you close too. Would it really be so bad? I know you’d be losing some privacy by moving in but think of everything you would gain. Family dinners.” Peter’s lips twitched. “No more tofu nuggets. Support when you’re tired or sick. Support for Stiles. We’re your family now too, John. You’d be able to work late and know there’s someone there for Stiles, and family waiting for you to come home. There would always be someone around if you want some simple companionship, people who wouldn’t expect anything of you except the pleasure of your company.”

“Marcus and Talia added onto the house after Cora was born.” Peter’s voice became quiet. “They were planning on having more children, before Marcus died. There are four bedrooms in the new addition that are just sitting empty. You could have your pick of them.”

“It’s not just the idea of moving into your house that bothers me, it’s that, well…” The sheriff was silent. “This is the house I shared with Claudia. This is where we were family all together for a little while. It’s hard to leave that behind.”

“Keep the house. No one is saying you have to get rid of it, but please at least give it a try. It would mean so much to Stiles, and to me.”

“I’ll think about it.”

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Stiles had a pretty good memory. He clearly remembered many of the details from his health class about the effects of heat and bonding on omegas. He knew that he’d likely gain some height and muscle after his bonding was complete, and that he could expect mild heats a few times a year for several years to come. What he didn’t remember was anyone telling him that he would lose about 100 IQ points after he bonded. It felt like the majority of his brain had rededicated itself to a single task – tracking Peter, and figuring out ways he could be persuaded to have sex.

Scott was hovering anxiously by the front door of the school and he only looked more worried when he saw Stiles. “Dude, are you okay?”

“Oh my God, Scott, there’s something wrong with my brain.” They spoke at the same time.

“Your dad told me about Derek.”

For an instant, Stiles genuinely didn’t know what Scott was talking about. He felt a pang of hurt at Derek’s name when he remembered, but he had more important issues to worry about. “No, it’s fine. I mean it sucked but I bonded to Peter and it all worked out great. That’s not the problem.”

“What is it?” Scott asked.

“Dude, I cannot stop thinking about sex. Like, every ten seconds I’m thinking about sex.”

“Seven seconds.”

“What?”

“I read somewhere the average guy thinks about sex every seven seconds.”

Stiles stared at him. “Are you messing with me? How does anyone ever get anything done?”

Scott shrugged. “I don’t know. I think it’s pretty normal to be thinking about sex.”

“You don’t understand. This cannot be normal. I’ve been away from Peter for,” Stiles looked at his
watch, “Thirty-five minutes, and I feel like I’m going to go crazy.”

Scott smiled at Stiles. “That’s great man. I was really worried when your dad came over. I’m happy everything worked out for you.”

“How is that working out? Yesterday, I got turned on watching Peter fish olives out of a jar.” Stiles’s eyes went unfocused. “He has the best hands.”

Scott just laughed. “It’ll wear off. At least you don’t have to go through this phase without any hope of sex on the horizon like I did.”

Stiles drew back and stared at Scott, horrified. “What? You mean it was like this for you?”

Scott nodded. “Remember that summer I walked around with a jacket tied around my waist pretty much non-stop?”

Stiles nodded.

“Let’s just say I wasn’t really worried about getting cold.”

Stiles wrinkled his nose. “Ugh, that sucks.”

The bell rang and they cut their conversation short and joined the last-minute press of people pushing through the doors into the school.

That night, Stiles beat Peter and his Dad home. He spent a few minutes checking for suspicious stains on the sofa and spritzed it with fabric deodorizer. He wiped down the dining room table with a fond smile, then did the same for the shower enclosure in the hallway bathroom next to his room. When he was finished, he fished a pizza out of the freezer and pre-heated the oven, then settled down at the dining room table with a mound of accumulated homework. He had just pulled the pizza out of the oven when Peter came home, and they were half-way through the pizza when his Dad came home from work, looking worn out. He sat at the table and ate his share of the pizza and the apple Stiles insisted on slicing up for him. Stiles and Peter did the dishes, before Stiles settled back down at the table to work on homework. Peter set up across the table from him with his notebook computer and they worked together companionably until his dad called down from his study upstairs to say he was going to sleep. Stiles and Peter both decided to call it a night. They packed up their work and took turns getting ready for bed.

While Stiles was brushing his teeth, Peter moved Stiles’s bed frame a careful half inch away from the wall. He welcomed Stiles to bed with a wicked grin and greedy hands.

“Uhm, Peter, my dad...” Stiles had choked out breathlessly, even as Peter started to kiss his way down Stiles’s chest.

Peter looked up at Stiles. “He’s an adult and technically, so are you, now that you’re bonded. He knows we’re not just holding hands in here.”

“But...ut,” Stiles squeaked as Peter’s fingers slid under his waistband. “He’ll hear us.”

Peter licked his lips slowly, even as his hands started to inch Stiles’s boxers down his hips. “I guess you’ll just have to be quiet.”

Stiles whimpered.

Peter teased Stiles with his mouth and hands until Stiles forgot entirely about trying to keep quiet,
about his dad sleeping down the hall. By the time Peter had him braced on his knees and chest, Stiles had his hands fisted in the sheets, and demanded Peter go harder, faster in a hoarse shout. Peter muttered filthy things in Stiles’s ear as he fucked him, promises and threats and endearments, all winding Stiles up until he came, shrieking into the mattress, against the background sound of his headboard thudding dully against the wall.

The next morning, Stiles overslept. He ran out of the house with a homemade breakfast sandwich in one hand and a kiss from Peter. Peter made a second sandwich and set it in front of John. Peter looked at John’s weary face, and the slump in his shoulders and said blandly, “The soundproofing in our house is excellent.”

John had thrown a weak glare in his direction without making direct eye contact and walked out without another word. Peter allowed himself a small smile when he saw that John had taken the sandwich with him.

The three of them moved into the Hale house that weekend.
Chapter 15

It had been easier than Peter would have ever guessed to share his rooms with Stiles. It had been the one part of bonding that he had dreaded, losing his refuge from the rest of his family. Stiles was young, and an omega besides. Peter had been afraid his private space would become a noisy communal spot, with an open door and an unending parade of his family and Stiles’s friends. Even though Peter loved his family, he also relished his time alone, to work, and think, and read without fear of interruption. The idea that there was going to be someone else sharing his rooms had been hard to accept, even if it was Stiles.

Peter walked around his rooms on Saturday morning, staring at the boxes on his bedroom floor. Stiles and his father had returned to their house to grab another load, and Peter was carrying boxes from the living room to the upstairs bedrooms. It struck Peter as odd, that his rooms felt empty, and too quiet, after spending nearly every minute of the past week with Stiles. Peter emptied out a couple of drawers in his dresser, and a drawer in his bathroom. Clearing out a space in his closet wasn’t difficult either. His first hint of disquiet came when he was trying to figure out how to share his desk with Stiles. He liked his desk and study exactly as they were, and he found himself with his hands full of files and papers, unable to reasonably clear out a drawer for Stiles in his desk without destroying his system of organization. He set the papers down and dropped into his desk, suddenly nervous about the impending changes. He’d been so eager at the chance to woo and win Stiles he hadn’t spent very much time thinking of how an omega mate would fit into his life.

Peter slumped down until his forehead touched the top of his desk. He was bonded to someone who was in high school. His mind boggled as he remembered his own high school experience which was now mercifully many years past. Homework, the SAT’s, prom...Peter raised his head off of his desk and let it fall again in a dull thud. Was he going to have to go to another prom? Peter knew that omegas presented in their mid to late teens. That was part of the reason Peter had let go of the dream of bonding to an omega before he’d met Stiles. But now he was bonded and the realities of it were not something he’d spent a lot of time thinking about. In his fantasies before Stiles, there had always been some beautiful omega choosing him above all other alphas, someone he could parade around for other alphas to envy, a companion who would fit seamlessly into his life without question or complaint, someone who would give him children when he was ready, then stay at home to raise them flawlessly.

Now his fantasy omega was here and real, in the form of a gorgeous, mouthy, sixteen-year-old boy named Stiles, and Peter needed to find a way to fit him into his life and his room and his desk. He sighed and stood, and went back into his bedroom. Peter’s rooms were on the third floor, and the rooms had been renovated to suite Peter’s taste when he’d decided to move back in permanently. They took up almost half the third floor, with a spacious bedroom, walk-in closet, large private study, and bathroom. He looked at the small sitting area at the end of his bed and thought that with a little re-arranging he’d might be able to fit the desk from Stiles’s former bedroom under the window. He wondered if Stiles would want something more private, and thought about the logistics of turning some part of the guest room next door into a private study for Stiles. Stiles had already made it clear that he’d prefer to share a bedroom with Peter than have his own, but Stiles was used to having a quiet house. He’d been free to study at his desk, or the dining room table without having to take a house full of other people into consideration. Peter decided to wait and talk to Stiles about the matter later. He stacked Stiles’s boxes neatly against the wall and then went downstairs to carry John’s boxes up to his room on the second floor.

John had chosen the small suite of rooms on the second floor that Peter had recommended, with its own bathroom, a small study, and a huge bay window that overlooked the preserve. The main selling
point for John had been that the rooms were on the opposite side of the house from Peter and Stiles’s. They’d moved John’s furniture over first thing in the morning and Stiles had already made the bed. Peter set down the box he was carrying and walked over to the desk. There was a single framed photograph on the desk, the one thing that John had hand carried from his house, separate from everything else. Claudia Stilinski had been beautiful. In the photograph she was standing outside by a lake, holding an infant Stiles in her arms. They were looking at each, and laughing, just starting to turn towards the camera, their faces similar despite the years separating them. Peter reached out and his fingertips hovered over the glass, over the face of the child who would grow up to be his bondmate. He wondered if he was seeing a hint of what his own future children might look like.

The crunch of tires turning onto the road towards the house snapped him out of his reverie. He went down the stairs to help the Stilinskis finish moving in.

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It took about a week for the effects of having Stiles in the house to become obvious. Peter suspected that it only took as long as it did because of the lingering discomfort about Derek and his decision to abandon Stiles. Other than Julia, every other Hale was an alpha, and all of them were uniformly horrified and ashamed of what Derek had done. Even Ollie, who was six, understood that Stiles had been hurt by his beloved older brother, and had taken it upon himself to make an apology card for Stiles, lavishly decorated in lop-sided frowny faces. Cora, Talia, and Davey all individually cornered Stiles the first day and apologized for Derek. Later that night, in the privacy of their bedroom, Stiles pressed his face against Peter’s neck and cried, a little for himself, and for the rest of the Hales who all seemed so hurt and disappointed in one of their own.

As awkward and painful as the apologies had been, they did help clear the air. Within a few days Stiles had fallen into an easy routine and it seemed that the rhythms of the house changed to embrace him. Breakfast was casual, often thrown together by Peter or Julia, or even pastries Talia brought home from the bakery, and it was well attended by everyone, according to their schedule. Stiles was further from the high school, but having breakfast waiting, as well as Cora and Davey who were unrepentant bright-eyed chatty morning people, brought Stiles to the table to sit and eat, rather than running out the door. After school, Stiles spent most afternoons in the large open family room, with some combination of Cora, Davey, Ollie, and Julia nearby, and did his homework. He and Peter had moved his desk from his old house and it had fit under the window in Peter’s, and now Stiles’s bedroom. He did occasionally use it, but for the most part he preferred to work at the dining table downstairs, set between the kitchen and the family room. The entire open space was rarely empty, but Stiles didn’t mind the noise of the younger Hale kids running around, or their constant attempts to get him to stop what he was doing and play with them.

After he caught up on the homework that had accumulated from his heat leave, he spent almost as much time playing with the kids as Julia did, and the two of them started to become good friends. Julia made dinner most nights, and everyone made an effort to be at the table in time for dinner. Stiles’s dad stiff attitude had thawed when he realized how upset the rest of the family was on Stiles’s behalf, and it didn’t take long before he relaxed into the family routine. Julia or Stiles would keep a plate aside for him on nights he worked late, and since Talia often was up late with work she’d brought home, she often kept him company while he ate.

Peter was quietly amazed at the difference in the atmosphere of the house since Stiles had come to live with them. Nothing was as soothing and pleasant to alpha senses as a contented omega, and within a few days of Stiles moving in, the inevitable tension of so many alphas living in one house started to dissipate. Peter hadn’t even realized how much he’d taken to avoiding Talia and Cora to try and ease the stress until he noticed that he was lingering at the dinner table instead of heading up to his rooms as soon as he was finished. He suddenly was able to remember how much enjoyed
spending time with his sister without the constant need to avoid triggering her aggressive impulses while subduing his own. It had built up so gradually after Marcus died that he hadn’t even been aware of it, until Stiles had moved in. Everyone smiled a little easier, took the extra minute to bite back the words that might start an argument. Even the younger kids who hadn’t presented seemed a little bit less irritable.

Despite how warmly everyone had taken to Stiles, and Stiles to them, Peter’s (and now Stiles’s) rooms were just as off limits as they’d ever been. The parade of people Peter had feared had never materialized. There was no doubt that he was sharing his rooms. Stiles wasn’t shy about laying claim to his share of the space. A motley collection of band tee shirts and a dozen pairs of equally ratty jeans hung in a cluster in Peter’s closet, side by side with Peter’s sleek suits. A worn white surfboard took up residence against the wall by the desk, and the nightstand on Stiles’s side of the bed filled up seemingly overnight with a variety of odds and ends, including a squat silver lamp that listed to the side every time Stiles turned it on. Some nights Stiles would join Peter in their rooms to just read quietly nearby, watch a movie together, or just talk, and Stiles seemed to enjoy the quiet time they spent together as much as he enjoyed being surrounded by the family.

Peter blamed the distraction of Stiles and John moving in for the fact he didn’t notice that he hadn’t heard from Norman. It was unusual for even a thorough background check like the kind he’d requested on Kate Argent to take more than a couple weeks. He didn’t notice how long this one had taken until he looked down at his phone and saw a missed call that day from Norman’s familiar phone number. Peter frowned when he realized that he hadn’t heard from Norman in almost four weeks. Peter rarely lost track of projects he was working on, and he felt annoyed as he locked the door to his office and sat down to return Norman’s call.

His tone was flat when he answered Norman’s greeting with, “What took you so long?”

“Look Peter, you think you can do better you can come out here and do your own god-damned legwork!”

Peter pulled the phone away and stared at it. He’d worked with Frank Norman for years and in all that time, he’d always been unflappable. He had a certain acerbic turn of phrase that had always amused Peter, but he’d never raised his voice at Peter before.

“This background check on your niece-in-law turned into a fucking nightmare. It was like kicking a turd and finding out it was hiding a hornet’s nest. I’m charging you danger pay for this one, Peter. Don’t bother arguing.”

Peter felt his eyebrows rise at the tone of Norman’s voice and said, “Really? I haven’t received any files from you.”

“There’s practically nothing to send, Peter. I’ll type up a report, but to be honest, this is one of the shittiest background checks I’ve ever put together. There are not a lot of facts and a whole lot of guesswork on my part. Your girl is from Los Angeles. Her father still lives there. Her mother abandoned the family when Kate Argent was twelve. The mother is a dead end. To be honest, she’s such a dead end, I think she’s actually dead. She vanished right at the time she supposedly abandoned her family and there isn’t a single shred of fucking evidence of her doing anything afterwards – renting an apartment, applying for a credit card, nothing. Kate’s father is a fucking nightmare, which is another reason I’m inclined to think something happened to his wife. That would be one Gerard Argent, works off and on as an auto mechanic, dishonorable discharge from the marines, drinks heavily, likely a functional alcoholic, and runs his own little beta supremacy group in his copious free time.”

“Beta supremacy?” Peter asked, amused, “Seriously? That seems a little far-fetched.”
“Yeah, it’s the kind of far-out crap you’d expect, alphas and omegas are on the decline, evolution has spoken, betas are the natural order, blah blah blah. It’s a little hard to tell what exactly their beliefs are, honestly. Every single person I talked to from his group was drunk, and mean as shit. I had to do this whole thing on foot. Those people are not hooked up to the modern world. No social media, no website, barely any kind of paper trail at all. They’re all tight-knit, and secretive as hell. As far as I can tell, Gerard has about half a dozen drinking buddies that I think compose the core of his group. They all drink at a dive bar that appears to be owned by one of the members.” Norman blew out a breath. “You’re very lucky that I’m good at what I do. It took two weeks of drinking in that shithole every night complaining about my parole officer before I could even get one of those fuckers to so much as pass me the peanuts. I’m also pretty sure if I’d been an alpha I wouldn’t have made it out of that bar alive.

“Did you talk to Gerard Argent?”

“God, no. I saw him, heard a little of what he had to say second hand, but that man is stone-cold. Barely talks at all, and when he says jump, that crew of his are up in the air before they ask how high.” Norman made a frustrated sound. “All I could get is that his group wants betas to stand up against alpha oppressors and their omega whores. There weren’t a lot of details on how that was supposed to happen, but it sure as hell didn’t seem likely those guys were writing letters to the editor or staging a march. Half of this is from shit I’d overhear when some alpha showed up on the TV and the guys might say a few words. They’re not looking to recruit, at least not casually.”

“As far as I could tell, their political activism seems to consist of ganging up on any alphas they stumble across. I got that little tidbit from a bum who was hanging around outside the bar, by the way. They may be drunks, but they all play their cards close to the chest. It took some digging, but I went through police records and put together a pattern of attacks on isolated alphas throughout Los Angeles. I can’t be sure it’s all Gerard’s men but there did seem to be a pattern of extremely vicious attacks over the past fifteen years with multiple assailants targeting single alphas in isolated locations using bats and tire irons. I guess it’s pretty easy to feel like the superior status when the odds are six or seven to one. I talked to my friend at the LAPD who said a few of the cases had been linked together about five years ago and investigated, but the whole case went cold, and no one one’s done any work on it since. I also found one assault on an omega-alpha couple which got some local media attention that matched the other attacks: multiple assailants, tire iron as the weapon. The alpha was dead on the scene and the omega died of her injuries at the hospital. It doesn’t look like anyone in the group or the group itself is under investigation. When I ran the couple names I managed to overhear, both of them had records, one with an assault charge but dismissed for lack of evidence. They’re doing a good job staying under the radar. As far as I can tell they don’t seem to be linked to any other major groups and they don’t seem to have the resources to do anything on any kind of major scale.”

“This is almost all observation and guesswork, Peter. They are a closed society and I’ll be honest, a couple of nights ago I think I pushed a little too hard. I looked up and Gerard was giving me the hairy eyeball. I pretended to get puking drunk and called a cab and got the fuck out of there. I will not be returning to that neighborhood of LA anytime soon, I can tell you. He is a scary son of a bitch.”

“What a charming family Derek has married into.”

“Yeah, no kidding. It doesn’t look like Kate Argent is involved but I can’t be sure. She moved out when she was seventeen and doesn’t seem to be in contact with her dad that I can tell. I can’t be sure because she doesn’t have much of a digital footprint. No cell phone, no Facebook, no twitter, nothing. She has a younger brother, Christopher Argent who moved out the same year as Kate even thought he was only sixteen. I’m not sure what he was up to but he joined the army as soon as he
was legal. He got out after five, and is now working at a gun shop in Lake Tahoe. He’s married, one
daughter, no contact between him and his dad or him and Kate, as far as I can tell. No cellphone or
digital footprint for him either. It’s like Gerard raised them to be allergic to modern technology.”

Peter was silent. If she was younger, running away with Derek would make more sense, a whirlwind
act of rebellion against the beliefs of her father. But she’d already run away at seventeen, so that
seemed unlikely. It was hard to imagine a woman growing up in an environment like that falling into
a whirlwind romance with a young alpha at all, Peter thought.

“What about Derek and Kate Argent?” Peter asked.

“Well he and Mrs. Hale had to move out of the Four Seasons in a hurry. According to the front desk
his credit card maxed out and every other card he tried was declined. It’s a little unclear exactly how
they managed it, but they relocated from Las Vegas to Los Angeles and are currently finishing their
honeymoon in a studio apartment that rents by the week. They’re across town from where Kate grew
up and where Gerard still lives, so she didn’t exactly take him home. Your nephew is now working
part time on weekends as a bouncer at the Trinity, a dance club in a neighborhood just shitty enough
to be exotic.”

“A bouncer?” Peter shook his head at the idea of Derek at a club in any capacity. “He’s only
eighteen.”

“Let’s just say I don’t think they spend a lot of time checking anyone’s ID at the Trinity. The club is
not doing great, financially. With his alpha strength and reflexes, and his pretty face, they probably
didn’t ask a lot of questions. They’re paying him under the table so no pesky tax forms to fill out.”

“What about his wife?”

“She hasn’t made any attempt to pick up any substitute teaching jobs that I can tell. She seems to
spend most of her time at their apartment or at the Trinity.”

“They’re living off what, a couple hundred dollars a week at most? That’s a pretty far fall from the
Four Seasons.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like the party has stopped. I’ll send you some nice shots I got of Mrs. Hale
loading up on booze and mixes at the local liquor store, paid for in cash. The nearest pizza parlor
already knows what they’re going to order – large combo, no mushrooms every couple days, also
paid for in cash. Apparently she’s a great tipper.”

“Anything else?”

“No. I can send you the address of the club and the apartment but I don’t have a phone number for
the apartment. I’ll send you a written report, and everything I managed to dig up in a couple days but
then I’m done with this case. I’ve got another job waiting for me in Sausalito and I have to tell you
that I wouldn’t mind putting a few hundred miles between me and Gerard Argent.”

“He spooked you that badly?” Peter asked.

Norman was quiet for a minute, and when he spoke, his voice was grave. “Peter, I know killers. I’ve
been around them before and they’ve got a feel to them. I can’t explain it, but Gerard Argent has it in
spades. The fact that he isn’t in jail just means he’s smart. I don’t know what you’re going to do, but
be careful. I’m not sure if he and his daughter are still in touch, but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t need
much of an excuse to take things personally.”

Norman hung up without saying goodbye.
A few minutes after Norman had hung up, Peter’s computer chimed. He opened up a blank e-mail with an encrypted zip file. He opened the file and found himself staring at a series of photos of Kate Argent in a sun dress and flip flops, walking into a liquor store, then walking out again with a heavy plastic bag. She was wearing sunglasses in all of the pictures, and her expression was difficult to decipher. There was also a much shorter series of photos of Derek. The lighting in the photos was quite poor and if Peter hadn’t known Derek so well, he wasn’t sure he would have recognized him. Derek was dressed all in black, walking through a nondescript door. Peter stared at the picture for a long time before he closed the file and turned his computer off.

Peter was quiet at dinner that night, his thoughts wrapped around everything he’d learned from Norman. He caught Stiles glancing at him once or twice, looking slightly concerned, so he wasn’t surprised when Stiles followed him upstairs after dinner. Stiles waited until they were in the room with the door closed before he spoke.

“Is everything okay?” Stiles asked, as he followed Peter to the closet.

Peter finished taking off his shirt and dropped it into the hamper. He reached out and drew Stiles closer to him by the hips. Leaning forward, Peter dropped a warm kiss on Stiles’s neck, right under the hinge of his jaw, then another when Stiles’s breath hitched.

“Everything is fine. I just found out that I have some business in LA this weekend.”

Stiles pulled back slightly. “All weekend?”

“I was going to drive down on Friday and stay until Sunday night.”

Peter watched disappointment flicker over Stiles’s face. “Oh,” he said. Peter lifted one hand to Stiles’s face, and felt a warm surge of affection when Stiles nestled his cheek into Peter’s palm. “It’s kind of ridiculous but I’m going to miss you.” Stiles mumbled.

“Actually, I was wondering if you’d like to come with me.”

Stiles pulled back a little, smiling. “Really?”

Peter smiled back at him.

“Really. I’d have some errands to run Friday and maybe Saturday, so you’d have to amuse yourself for a few hours at the hotel, but I’d be free the rest of the weekend. I thought we could do a little shopping, play tourist, maybe hit the beach? What do you think?”

Stiles stood up and wrapped his arms around Peter’s neck. “Yes! That sounds awesome. I’ve never really gotten to check out L.A.” He leaned forward and kissed Peter. Peter kissed him back him back, then pulled back, laughing, when Stiles tried to press closer.

“Not in the closet, you heathen.” He looked down at Stiles’s pouting face fondly, then steered Stiles out of the closet by his hips.
Visiting Los Angeles with Peter was a series of eye-opening jolts for Stiles.

He’d started to settle into his new relationship, felt like was getting to know Peter, and like he’d made the right choice choosing Peter as his bondmate. Stiles had been terribly afraid that they’d have nothing in common, once the biological compulsion to bond had faded. It had been a relief, and a delight, to realize that Peter wanted a true partner and friend, not just an omega bondmate for sex and offspring. Almost every day, Stiles discovered some new facet of Peter’s personality that deepened his affection for his alpha, and he hoped that one day he would have his happily ever after.

Stiles loved living with the Hales. There was almost always someone around, and that someone usually wanted to be near Stiles. Davie and Ollie treated him like furniture and he loved being surprised by a solid little body pushing into his lap and flopping down like it was their right. All the Hales were affectionate with one another, and with him, and he felt satisfied by the sheer number of warm, affectionate touches he received for the first time in years. Stiles discretely stopped taking his Ritalin and felt calmer and happier than he could remember feeling since his mother died.

He knew the Hales were well off. It was hard not to notice, even though none of them were particularly flashy. The Hale house was easily one of the largest and nicest in Beacon Hills. There were twelve bedrooms, almost as many bathrooms, and it was set on several private acres surrounded by the preserve. Peter and Talia drove extremely nice but understated cars, and just a few nights ago at dinner they’d been discussing putting in a swimming pool as casually as Stiles and his dad might discuss vacuuming the carpet. He’d gone grocery shopping with Julia a couple of times and been overwhelmed by the sheer amount of food needed to the feed the family, and Julia’s utter disregard for the prices as she threw things into the cart. If she was in the mood to make shrimp, they bought shrimp, even when the price per pound made Stiles’s eyes pop.

None of that prepared him for travelling with Peter.

They drove down to LA in Peter’s other car, which Stiles had never seen before. It turned out Peter owned two Mercedes, the sedan he used on a daily basis to commute to work and a sleek cobalt blue convertible that was waiting in the driveway when Stiles tumbled out of the house on Friday afternoon, excited to get started on their trip. Peter had slung Stiles’s duffle bag into the trunk, and then held the door open for Stiles, who glanced guiltily at his jeep before cooing over the sleek lines of the beautiful car.

The inside of the car looked like a spaceship, if spaceships had heated adjustable bucket seats with lumbar support. They’d pulled onto the highway headed south before Stiles finished adjusting his seat, programming his favorite stations into the radio, and settling back into the smooth leather with a groan so heartfelt that Peter laughed out loud.

“I take it you approve.”

Stiles let his head loll over to look at Peter. “How could you keep her from me for so long?”

“Her?”

Stiles stroked his hand over the dashboard. “Oh yes, anything this beautiful deserves a name.” He suddenly sat up and squinted at Peter suspiciously. “You don’t have any other super sexy secret cars that I don’t know about, do you?”
Peter shook his head. “Just this one.”

“When we get back home I want you to drive me to school in this car every day until Jackson Whittemore chokes and dies on his own envy.”

Peter laughed again. “I think something can be arranged.”

The sun was starting to set when they passed an exit for downtown. Stiles sat up. “Um, Peter where are we going? Did we just miss our exit?”

“I know you’re not that familiar with LA so I thought we’d stay somewhere nice, a little bit out of the way. I usually stay downtown when I have business but this time we’re going to stay in Bel Air. It’s close to shopping and far enough away from the seedier parts of town.” Peter glanced over at Stiles, who was staring out the window. Most of the houses were hidden behind greenery and gates but the few that could be seen from the road were massive with beautiful landscaping. Once, they passed a woman in a car Stiles was sure he recognized from TV and he bounced excitedly when he waved at her, and she waved back.

The hotel was beyond anything Stiles had ever imagined, much less experienced. He’d known in the back of his mind that they probably wouldn’t be staying at a chain hotel but when the pale pink building came into view between the trees, he started to wonder what he’d gotten himself into. They pulled up under a green awning where a valet pounced on Peter’s keys as soon as he’d opened the trunk and pulled out his overnight bag and Stiles’s worn duffle bag. Stiles trailed behind Peter and straightened his posture. They walked by a couple who were both wearing sunglasses even though it was starting to get dark, and dressed like they expected to be photographed at any minute. He tugged at his tee shirt and started to feel acutely uncomfortable. He stood quietly by Peter while he checked in, then trailed him as he led the way to their room.

The hotel room was not a room. Stiles trailed behind Peter into the room, eyes wide when he saw the size of it, and kept walking towards an open doorway. There was another room, which contained an immaculately made king-sized bed. There were windows everywhere and a set of patio doors led out into a walled-in patio with two reclining longue chairs set up near a small swimming pool.

“We have our own pool?” Stiles hissed at Peter.

Peter shrugged. “I thought you’d like that better than a view of the lake.” He smiled at Stiles and nodded towards a pair of low cabinet doors. “You should check out the mini-bar.

Stiles opened it cautiously and gave a little scream. “Oh my god! They have gummi bears! And potato chips!” Stiles reached out, then drew his hand back.

“What are you doing?” Peter asked.

“Those things are probably like ten dollars each.” He closed the door and opened up the other side of the cabinet. He stared at the shelves stocked with full-size liquor bottles and glassware. “Whoa.”

“Help yourself to whatever you want, my darling. I can afford to buy you some over-priced gummi bears.”

Stiles closed the cabinet door and trailed Peter’s voice to where Peter was standing inside the bedroom closet, hanging his clothes onto the thickly padded hangers. Stiles watched him for a minute, then turned and walked back out into the bedroom. He dropped his duffle bag on the bed and sat down.

“Stiles? What’s wrong?”
Stiles looked up from where he’d been staring blankly at the enormous flat screen television mounted across from the bed. He sighed.

“Nothing.” Stiles rubbed his arms. “I mean, I knew you had money but I didn’t realize that you were really...I mean, I thought it meant you could have a nice car and go on vacation if you felt like it, but... I don’t know Peter, this is like a whole other level of having money.” Stiles gestured to the room around them. “I mean, how much is this place? Two, three hundred dollars a night?”

Peter’s mouth twitched slightly. “Something like that.”

Stiles covered his face and bent over his lap. “Oh god, do not even tell me how much this hotel room is costing you. It’s just, it, I... it’s kind of intimidating. It kind of makes me feel like a gold-digger.”

Stiles felt the bed shift slightly as Peter sat next to him. “Did you choose to bond with me because of my money?”

“No, of course not.” Stiles said, looking up at Peter. “I’d never bond to someone for such a stupid reason. I didn’t even know you had money like this, but it just feels like I got so much more out of bonding to you than you did bonding to me.”

Peter snorted. He shifted and Stiles yelped as Peter pushed him back on the bed. Peter crawled on top of him, and Stiles’s legs fell apart and came up on either side of Peter’s hips so they were pressed together. “Do you not remember going through the match? All those alphas, including me, all desperate for a chance that you’d even consider them?”

Stiles felt his face go warm, and dropped his gaze from Peter’s bright blue eyes. He knew Peter thought it was adorable he blushed so easily. Peter dropped his face down into the crook of Stiles’s neck and Stiles let his head roll to the side as Peter inhaled deeply, then pressed a warm kiss against his neck.

“You could have gone through that registry full of alphas, all of whom would have gone down on their knees for a chance to meet you, and picked someone with a fortune that would make my money look like pocket change.” Peter murmured. “You could have had anyone, chosen anyone, but you chose me.”

Peter drew back and Stiles felt pinned under Peter’s sharp blue gaze. “You’re not a gold-digger, Stiles. I’m just an incredibly lucky man.”

Stiles opened his mouth to argue, but Peter leaned down and kissed him, and all the words in his brain melted away except for “more” and “Peter” and “yes.”

Afterwards, Peter took a careful shower and got dressed.

“Your meeting is at eleven o’clock at night?” Stiles asked from the bed.

Peter shrugged. “I work strange hours sometimes. I need to meet someone, but it shouldn’t take more than a couple of hours.”

Stiles stared at him with a world of curiosity and calculation behind his eyes but all he said was “Using your evil powers for good?”

Peter smirked. “Exactly.”

Peter paused by the side of the bed. “Stiles...can I please ask that you stay in tonight?”
Stiles looked at him quizzically.

“It’s just, well, I’m very uncomfortable with the idea of you roaming around an unfamiliar city by
yourself. I know you’re smart and capable, but I’d feel much better about going out if you could
promise me that you’ll stay here until I get back. Please.”

Stiles looked at Peter for a long moment, and then sighed enormously. “Fine. I was going to find
some nightclub that would believe I’m twenty-one and go cruising for hot celebrities, but I guess for
you I can stay in this amazing bed all by myself. He flopped back into the mound of pillows. “I’m
totally going to eat all the gummi bears in the mini-bar though.”

Peter leaned forward and gave Stiles a tiny kiss at the corner of his mouth, careful not to touch him
anywhere else. “Thank you.” He stood up and walked over to the mini-bar, and came back with a
small leather binder. “Here. The room service menu. They deliver dessert.”

Stiles struggled out of the pile of pillows and snatched the menu. “Oh yes! I’m totally going to order
one of everything.” He flipped open the menu, then looked up at Peter as he slid on his shoes. “Do
you think this place has pay-per-view porn?”

Peter smirked. “I’m pretty sure it doesn’t but knock yourself out.” He held up his phone. “Text me if
you need anything.”

Peter took a taxi to Trinity rather than risk his beloved car. Trinity had opened at 10 pm and when
Peter arrived at 11:30, there was no line outside the door. There was someone standing at the door,
but it wasn’t Derek. It was an enormously muscled Asian man, dressed all in black, standing with a
bored expression on his face. The front entrance was brightly lit with blue and red lights, and a
discrete gold-lettered sign. Other than a quick glance, the bouncer didn’t say anything to Peter as he
walked into the club. Peter headed straight to the bar. He fought not to roll his eyes at the religious
imagery that had been used to decorate the club, and ordered a martini. The bartender was a pretty
beta wearing a tiny halter top. Peter pretended to leer at her breasts and told her to keep the change.
He reclined against the bar and carefully looked around. The club was surprisingly busy, given the
lack of line outdoors. It seemed to be mainly a young professional crowd, although there did seem to
be several gay couples on the dance floor as well. He skimmed the entire space, then got up,
clutching his drink, and projected the air of a man on the prowl. He walked the entire club and hid a
frown when he realized that Derek wasn’t there. He drained his martini and walked back to the front
door.

The Asian bouncer was still standing in the same spot. Peter had to lean in to be heard over the
pounding music pouring out of the open door. “I’m looking for Derek Hale. Is he working tonight?”

The man just stared at him, face utterly blank. Peter pulled a fifty out of his wallet and held it out. “I
just want to know if he’s working tonight.”

The bouncer glanced towards the door, then slowly took the money. Peter waited patiently as the
folded bill vanished into the man’s front pocket before he spoke. “Off tonight. Works tomorrow.”

Peter waited, but the man returned to staring straight ahead.

“What does he work all night? From 10 until close?”

The bouncer jerked his head once before he went back to ignoring Peter.

Peter called for a taxi and waited impatiently for one to arrive. He was back at the hotel by one
o’clock, and he let himself into the hotel room quietly.
Stiles was asleep, half-buried under a mound of pillows. A stack of empty plates smelling of chocolate and strawberries was stacked on his night stand and the TV was showing cartoons. Peter stripped off his clothes and slid into bed next to Stiles, who turned towards him in his sleep. There was a crinkling noise as he cuddled closer to Peter, and Peter reached down beneath him and pulled out a half-empty bag of gummy bears. He stared at it for a minute and found himself pressing his lips together to keep from laughing. He tossed the bag towards Stiles nightstand, curled around him, and went to sleep.

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Saturday morning Peter drove them to a small building that looked more like a private office than a store and led Stiles up three flights of glittering metallic stairs. There was a single door at the top of the stairs, without a sign of any kind, which Peter opened without hesitation. The door opened up into a small waiting room with a couple of complicated looking metal and plastic chairs, and an extremely thin man with white hair sitting at a tiny desk, typing furiously into his phone. He glanced up when they entered and jumped to his feet. “Peter! And you must be Stiles! Look at you! You’re adorable!”

Stiles flinched back when the man swooped towards them, but he stopped just short of making any contact. He eyed Stiles up and down with a squinted expression on his face, and Stiles was suddenly acutely self-conscious of every single thing he was wearing, from his worn sneakers to his nearly-new Stud Muffin tee shirt. He stared back at the man in front of him. He looked like he was in his thirties but his white hair looked natural, with a few lingering black strands at his temples. He was in slim-fitting black slacks and a pale purple silk shirt with a long, skinny scarf looped around his neck.

“Stiles, this is Micah, my personal shopper and tailor. Micah, this is Stiles, my bondmate.”

Micah beamed. “Congratulations to you both!” He turned to Peter and asked, “So, you said you needed some things for Stiles?”

Peter nodded. “He’s still in high school, but he’s going to need some formal pieces for nights out, black tie, and at least one suit, maybe a few pieces for every day wear as well.”

Micah led them through a frosted glass door into a huge stark white room, half of which was mirrored. Stiles was directed to stand on a small platform surrounded by mirrors, and then directed to move into various positions as Micah pulled a measuring tape from a drawer and started to measure him.

“So, tell me Stiles, is this the kind of thing you normally wear?”

“Uhm, yeah.”

“And you’re, what, fifteen? Sixteen?”

“Sixteen.”

Micah hummed, and Stiles squeaked as Micah’s quick, impersonal hands measured his inseam.

“Boxers, briefs, something in between?”

“Boxers.”

“Pity.” Micah said. “Are you open to changing that?”

Stiles looked imploringly at Peter, who was sitting in a chair and watching Stiles with a faint smile.
Peter shrugged.
“I guess.” Stiles said.
“Excellent. So how long ago did you bond?”
“About a month.”
“So still a little growing to do. Hobbies?”
“Uhm, playing video games, lacrosse...”
“Playing or watching?”
“Both?”
“Do you exclusively dress as a male?”
Stiles stiffened. “Yes.”
“That’s too bad. You have fantastic proportions. Even adding a few feminine touches to your wardrobe would really make you stand out in a crowd.”
“I don’t want to stand out.” Stiles mumbled. “I want to blend in.”
Micah drew back a little, and frowned at Stiles. “Why on earth would you want to blend in? You are an omega! It’s not like you’re unbonded. You don’t have to hide anymore. You’re young, you’re hot, you should be making every alpha - scratch that - every person in sight drool and cry over what they missed out on.”
Stiles shook his head. “I just want to get through high school without anyone else slipping tampons into my locker.”
“What?” Micah and Peter spoke at the same time. Peter stood up.
Stiles shrugged. “It’s not that big a deal. A couple of alphas at my school figured out I was an omega and started kissing up to me like that would make me fall into their arms once I presented.” Stiles rolled his eyes. “As if. One of them had a girlfriend and she was pretty pissed when Ken brought me flowers. She stuffed a bunch of tampons soaked in red food coloring into my locker.”
“Was she expelled?” Peter demanded.
“What? No, Peter. She was just upset. It didn’t really matter.”
“That is still completely unacceptable behavior. What’s this girl’s name?”
Stiles stepped down off the platform and walked over to Peter. “Peter, I really appreciate you being upset on my behalf but seriously, it didn’t bother me. If anything I felt bad for her. I don’t need you to destroy her life, okay? It’s high school. People are assholes.” Stiles stared up at Peter’s sour expression, and quirked a tiny smile. “My Alpha.” He reached up and kissed Peter.

Peter looked calmer when Stiles drew back. He reached out and took Stiles’s hand, raised it to his lips, and pressed a kiss onto Stiles’s knuckles. “People aren’t allowed to be assholes to you anymore. If anyone gives you trouble, any kind of trouble, you let me know.”
“I will.” Stiles promised. Stiles lost himself for a moment staring into Peter’s sharp, sincere gaze until
Micah cleared his throat.

“Well, exclusively male it is. Stiles, if you would…” he said, waving Stiles back onto the platform.

Peter reluctantly let go of Stiles’s hand and Stiles returned to his former position.

“Turn around please. What colors do you usually like to wear?”

Stiles felt like he’d been run over by a small, intensely personal tornado when Micah was done. His entire body had been measured, including his head, hands, and feet, and he’d answered enough questions about himself that he felt like Micah probably knew more about him than his own father. Once he was done, Micah had drifted over to Peter and they’d had a short, intense discussion before Peter and Stiles were suddenly being walked to the door, with an agreement to return later that afternoon. They walked back down the stairs and emerged into the bright morning sunlight before Stiles turned to Peter, blinking, and asked, “What was that?”

“It’ll be worth it. Micah has an amazing eye. He’ll do the boring part so we can have some fun. Come on, let’s go to the beach.”

They drove down to the Santa Monica Beach where they parked Peter’s car in a garage and walked down to the shore. They kicked off their shoes and walked along the sand, right at the edge of the waves.

“I think I’ve been to this beach before.” Stiles said uncertainly. “I think I remember the Ferris wheel.”

“You’re not sure?”

Stiles shook his head. “Not really. I think it was a long time ago, before my mom died.” He was quiet for a few moments as they walked. “My mom loved the beach. We used to go to the beach all the time before she died. She was teaching me how to surf.”

“Is that why you have a surfboard?”

Stiles nodded. “Yeah, it was her favorite. I promised myself that I would learn how to surf someday and take her board out.”

Peter squeezed his hand. “You have time,” he said gently.

Stiles nodded. “I know. It’s just, me and my dad haven’t been back to the beach since she died.” Stiles voice got quieter. “Going to the beach makes me remember my mom and I love that, but I think it reminds my dad too and it hurts him too much. So we don’t go.”

Peter stopped, and pulled Stiles into a hug. “I’ll take you,” he said quietly. “I’ll take you to the beach whenever you want. I know it’s not the same, but just tell me when you’re missing her and I’ll take you.”

Stiles buried his face against Peter’s and nodded. He sniffed wetly, then drew back a little. He laughed a little, and said thickly, “Geez, I’m sorry Peter. I feel like I’ve cried on you more this past month than I cried all last year.”

Peter shook his head. “It’s been an eventful month. You’re entitled. But...I don’t mind. I want to be the one you turn to when you need someone.” Peter paused and Stiles laughed again at the deeply startled look on Peter’s face.
“I can’t believe I just said that.” Peter said.

“Did you not…”

“No, I meant it, every word.” Peter stared at Stiles, an unreadable expression on his face. “I tend to think of other people’s emotions as their own problem to deal with, but with you...I…” his voice trailed off.

Stiles dropped his gaze and squeezed Peter’s hand. He cleared his throat. “Yeah. Me too. I mean, I, you know.” Stiles darted a quick glance up to see Peter staring down the beach, a happy quirk of a smile pulling up the corners of his lips. He squeezed Stiles hand and they started walking again.

The morning sped by. They walked as far as the Pier and went for a ride on the Ferris wheel, then had burgers for lunch. They strolled back toward the car along the beach, and passed an area set up as an adult playground where they watched a blonde girl with long dreadlocks perform an impressively complicated routine on a set of hanging rings. Stiles sank back into Peter’s car, legs sore from walking so far on the beach, a little gritty from sand, and slightly sunburned. He closed his eyes and had the perfect memory of feeling exactly this way, years ago, only with his mom and dad sitting in the front seats of the car, and everything had been right with his world. He rolled his head towards Peter when he got into the car and smiled, unaware of how completely happy he looked at that moment. “Thanks, Peter.”

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“Holy crap!”

The formerly white room at Micah’s shop had undergone a complete transformation since that morning. There were three racks full of clothing, and several individual pieces were displayed on hangers around the room. Stiles glanced at the nearest display of shirts and realized they were all in his size. It looked like Micah had created a small store, just for Stiles.

He turned to Peter and Micah in a panic. “I don’t need this many clothes!”

Peter shook his head. “These aren’t all for you, my darling. Micah brought a sampling of things he thought would fit you well, color, cuts, and styles, and now you’re going to try on anything that catches your eye. Or my eye, as the case might be.”

Peter turned to one of the racks and started to go through it. Micah stood near him and together they discussed names of designers that Stiles thought he might recognize from flipping through magazines. Stiles drifted off to the other side of the room where there were three identical tee shirts in three different colors hanging against the wall. Stiles fingered one of the shirts. It was just a plain deep grey tee shirt, but it didn’t feel anything like the plain cotton tee shirts he bought when they went on sale at the mall. The fabric felt thicker, smoother under his fingers, and there was a silky quality to the fabric that clung to his fingers. Stiles frowned.

“Good choice.”

Stiles looked up at Peter who was standing next to him, examining a button-down shirt that was hanging nearby.

“Fashion is more than just clothing. It’s art and it’s a useful one. Clothing can be armor and a disguise, and it can be a tool. When you wear this shirt,” Peter held up the shirt he’d been examining, “You’re telling the world what to expect from you. When you wear this shirt,” he said, stepping closer and running his hand down the front of Stiles’s Stud Muffin shirt, “You’re sending an entirely
different message. Clothes can emphasize the truth you want known, or hide what you don’t want to share.”

Stiles thought about Lydia Martin and nodded slowly. “Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“I don’t want to change you Stiles. I just want to give you more options to be who you are.”

“You don’t have to buy me things Peter.”

“I know. I like to. Plus, as my bondmate I’m hoping you’ll attend some formal events with me, and it’s only fair I buy you the kind of clothing people are expected to wear to those things.”

Stiles thought about it, and finally nodded. “Okay.”

Stiles agreement was all Micah needed. Stiles found himself standing on the platform again, trying on a few different suits. One of them looked suspiciously like a tuxedo. Micah and Peter murmured back and forth between the two of them and once Stiles was asked to choose between a deep charcoal grey and a subtle navy blue. Micah took notes and made marks on the suits with a little triangle of blue chalk. After the suits, Stiles tried on a half-dozen pairs of shoes, then half a rack of more casual clothing. Stiles was happy to see many of the casual pieces actually looked like something he would have picked out for himself, if he had better taste and more money.

Micah gave him a few different styles of blue jeans to try on, and he was amazed at the difference between them. One pair of deeply indigo jeans seemed to fit him perfectly, and when he turned around to look at the back, he was amazed at how fantastic his ass looked. As an omega, he had slightly wider hips than an alpha or beta male, and he always found it difficult to find jeans that fit him well. He ran his hands over the slight curves of his hips to slip his hands into the back pockets of the jeans. His eyes caught sight of Peter in the mirror. Peter was unabashedly staring at him, running his eyes over Stiles’s body in a gaze so focused Stiles could almost feel it against his skin. Stiles suddenly felt a warm twist of satisfaction in his gut. All of Peter’s intelligence and formidable will, caught and held by the way he looked in these jeans. Stiles slid his hands out of his back pockets and around to the front, to curl around the hem of the sweater he was wearing. He twisted his body, just a little, just enough he could arch his back, and tensed his arms as if he were about to strip off the sweater. Peter tensed, shifted in his seat like he was about to jump out of it, towards Stiles.

“How are those jeans?” Micah asked. He circled Stiles and nodded. “Those look great.” He glanced at Peter to get his opinion and caught a glimpse of Peter’s expression as he turned away. Micah winked at Stiles. “I’d definitely go with this brand.”

“Get the sweater too.” Peter’s voice was slightly hoarse. He stood up and stroked a hand over the silky deep blue sweater covering Stiles’s chest. The sweater was thin enough that Stiles inhaled sharply when Peter’s palm passed over his nipple. “It suits you.”

At the end of the visit, Stiles had six heavy shopping bags, and a promise that his altered suits would be delivered to Beacon Hills at the end of the month. He also had a business card from Micah with his contact information and a quiet conversation that if Stiles ever wanted or needed something, that all he had to do was call.

Afterwards, Peter took him out for Japanese ramen. The restaurant was fairly small but the smells drifting from the building convinced Stiles that waiting in line would be well worth it. Peter swore it served the best ramen in LA, and Stiles was excited to try something that was new to him. They ordered and had just been seated when Peter said, “I was hoping we could shop for our bracelets while we’re here.”
Stiles froze in the act of picking up his chopsticks. Peter stiffened when Stiles stared at him with a small frown furrowing his brow, and didn’t say anything. A waitress arrived at their table with glasses of water, then retreated, before Peter finally spoke in a quiet voice. “Unless you don’t want bracelets.”

Stiles shook his head and Peter’s lips pressed together. He turned his gaze over Stiles’s shoulder.

“No, it’s not that. I want bracelets Peter. I just, I don’t think I’m going to want the bracelets that you’re going to want.”

Peter’s gaze snapped back to Stiles and Stiles looked surprised at the expression of relief lighting up Peter’s face.

“What…of course I want to bond with you! I am bonded with you, in every way that matters.” Stiles reached out and took Peter’s hand. “How could you even ask me that after today? I know everything started kind of badly but you made everything better. You make me happy, every day. How could I not want to formally bond with you? All we’re deciding about now is the accessories.”

Peter laughed a little shakily. “Well, accessories are important.”

“I just don’t want anything crazy, Peter. I don’t want some massive thing dripping with diamonds. I want something kind of plain, something that doesn’t catch a lot of attention. I just can’t see sitting in class with like, a thousand carats of diamonds on my wrist.”

“Well, maybe not a thousand.” Peter said, but before he could say anything else, someone was standing at the side of their table. Stiles looked up and he frowned. It was a very pretty dark haired woman who seemed entirely focused on Peter.

“Peter, hi! I didn’t know you were going to be in town.”

Peter glanced up, and smiled. “Olivia. I thought you were still in Beijing?” He stood up and stepped out from the table.

“No, I just got back a few days ago. I’ve been meaning to call you.”

They leaned in, and only Peter turning his head kept Olivia’s kiss from landing on his mouth. She looked at Peter in confusion while Stiles struggled against a sudden surge of anger and outrage. His first impulse was to jump to his feet and shove her away from Peter, out the door, and then possibly out into traffic, so he forced himself to sit still, and hid his fisted hands beneath the table.

Peter gestured to Stiles. “Olivia, this is Stiles. We’ve just recently bonded.”

“What!?”

Olivia’s voice was loud enough that Stiles jumped. She glanced at Stiles. The pleased look on her face was gone, and she looked, well, devastated. Stiles felt a tiny thrill of vindictive pleasure, followed quickly by a surge of pity, and anger. He’d barely started to wonder who this woman was to Peter before she spoke again, to Peter.

“You got bonded? You didn’t even tell me you were thinking about courting anyone!”

“I didn’t really have the chance, Olivia.”

“I’ve only been gone for a month! How did this happen? How could you do this to me?” Stiles’s heart sank. It was sounding more and more like this woman, Olivia, had every right to be yelling at
Peter. He glanced around and cringed a little when he realized that everyone in the restaurant was watching this drama unfold.

“I never made you any promises, Olivia. I did consider you a friend but I made it very clear I wasn’t looking for anything more than that.” Peter kept his voice low, but it was cold in a way Stiles had never heard it before.

“I know,” Olivia said sharply, then took a deep breath. “I know.” She said more quietly. She wiped the back of her hand over her cheek and Stiles dropped his eyes away when he realized she was crying.

“I guess I just assumed that someday in the future when I was more settled in my career and you’d gotten done playing the field that we would wind up together.”

“Olivia...”

Olivia turned away. “I know Peter. It sounds stupid now that I’m saying it out loud. I should have guessed that you were just waiting for some little omega to come along.” Her voice turned biting. She turned and glared at Stiles, taking her time and looking him over with a faint expression of disgust. She turned back to Peter. “Really, Peter? What can this...this child give you that I can’t?”

Stiles looked back up at Peter whose face was stony. When he spoke, his voice was cutting, and suggestive. “Everything.”

Olivia’s face twisted, and she turned away. She headed straight for the door, and a man who had been hovering back by the hostess followed her. Peter sat down, and gradually the silence around them filled up with the quiet sounds of conversation and eating.

Peter sighed. “I am sorry about that, Stiles. Are you okay?”

Stiles wasn’t sure. “Is...was she your girlfriend?”

Peter shook his head. “Absolutely not. Like I said to her, we were friends, well, with benefits I suppose. We’ve both dated other people since we’ve known each other, but if she was in town, and I happened to be in town, and we were both unattached, we would sometimes spend time together.”

Stiles bit his lip. “So you never thought about being serious with her?”

A waitress came to their table and they ordered. Peter waited until she left before he answered. “Olivia and I worked well together. We’re both attractive, and successful, and I enjoyed having a beautiful, intelligent woman on my arm as much as she liked being on the arm of a rich alpha.” He stared at Stiles downcast face. “Maybe if things had worked out differently I would have considered marrying her, but if I had, it would have been because I didn’t want to be alone, not because I wanted to be with her.” He reached out a hand across the table, and Stiles reached out to take it. “I never fought for her. I’ve never invited her to Beacon Hills, she’s never met my family. I’ve never once argued with her about what kind of jewelry we should use to mark our claims on one another.”

Stiles smiled weakly. “Okay.”

The ramen arrived. It was as amazing as Peter promised. By the end of the meal the tension from the encounter with Olivia had largely faded away, and they walked back to the car hand in hand. They drove back to the hotel and ordered dessert from room service, eating together on the bed. At ten o’clock Peter rose to take a shower.

“You’re going out again?” Stiles asked.
“I have to. I need to meet with someone. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Stiles didn’t say anything but he had an uncertain look on his face that spoke volumes. Peter faced Stiles and waited to speak until he was looking at Peter.

“This is exactly the same business I was dealing with last night. I am not planning on seeing Olivia, now, or likely ever again. If I ever do, I will let you know. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Okay.” Stiles said, and after a long moment, Peter turned away to put his shoes on. “Peter?”

Peter looked at Stiles.

“You were right about the pay-per-view. Hurry back.”

Peter barked out a laugh and blew Stiles a kiss as he slipped out the door.

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There was still no line in front of the Trinity, even at 10:30 on a Saturday night. This time though, instead of a bored stranger, Peter’s nephew was standing by the door, arms crossed over his chest, staring at nothing.

Peter watched him for several minutes from the cab before he paid the driver and got out. Derek barely seemed to notice him approaching until his head went up and he sniffed the air. His eyes went wide and his gaze snapped to meet Peter’s.

“Uncle Peter?”

“Hello, Derek.”
Chapter 17

Derek looked awful.

Peter’s anger, his contempt, all the biting words he’d composed over the past month faded away as he looked closer at his nephew. Derek looked exhausted. He was thinner than he’d been the last time Peter had seen him, and he had dark circles under his eyes, like he hadn’t slept in days. There were new grooves cut into the skin on either side of his mouth and between his knotted eyebrows, and he didn’t look older so much as he looked worn down, as if he’d been sick for a long time and recovery was still uncertain. For just an instant, when Derek first recognized him, he looked utterly relieved, but even as Peter watched, Derek’s face twisted with disappointment, and fear.

Peter took all of this in, in a glance, and after a long frozen moment, he spoke.

“Come home, Derek.”

Derek flinched, and dropped his eyes.

Peter took a step forward, now so close to Derek that he was forcing Derek to look back up at Peter’s face.

“Whatever you’ve done, whatever you think you’ve done, it doesn’t matter. We’re your family. Come home.”

Derek dropped his gaze again and shook his head.

Peter reached out and dropped his hand on Derek’s shoulder. “Your mom misses you, Derek. Cora, Davey...Ollie asks us every day when you’re coming home.”

Derek gave a shudder and his hands came up to cover his face. Even through his fingers Peter could hear Derek’s harsh breathing and beneath his hand he could feel Derek tremble.

“Well, hello there.”

Peter turned.

Kate Argent walked out of the club. Her voice was a little husky, low, smooth, and there was pure challenge in her eyes. She was prettier than she’d been in her driver’s license photo but she had a hard edge to her which made her seem much older than her years. Peter dropped his hand and stepped back from Derek so he could turn and face her. Kate stepped in, sliding between Derek and Peter, angling herself so Peter had to take another step back. She wrapped an arm around Derek’s neck and pulled him down so she could kiss his cheek. Derek’s eyes closed. He turned towards Kate, and wrapped his arms around her.

“Now, are you bothering my baby?” Her voice was exaggeratedly patient and inwardly Peter bristled. He despised being patronized. He raised his eyebrows and allowed a thread of irritation into his voice. “And you are...?”

“Mrs. Derek Hale.” Kate let her head drop to the side, and stroked the hand she had draped over Derek’s shoulder down his back, and slid her hand into the back pocket of his jeans. “Oh, I do so love the sound of that. Don’t you, sweetie?” Her smile was so wide it looked a little false, like something she’d practiced in the mirror.
Peter listened to the smooth beat of her heart but there was nothing to indicate she was lying. Derek nodded and buried his face against her neck. Peter could only see the side of Derek’s face, but he didn’t look like he was smiling.

“And you are?” she asked.

“Peter Hale. Derek’s uncle.”

“Uncle! Derry sweetie, why didn’t you tell me he was your uncle?”

Peter felt his lip curl, both at the nick-name and Kate’s overly sweet tone of voice. It was the same way most people cooed at babies, asking silly questions they never expected to have answered. He waited, but instead of protesting, Derek just murmured, “I’m sorry, I just didn’t have a chance.”

Kate slid out from Derek’s clinging embrace and held out her hand. “Katherine Hale. You can call me Kate.”

Peter hesitated for a bare instant but decided to go with a polite approach, rather than start out blatantly hostile. There was something about this woman that made him feel wary, as if he were facing a potential enemy with unknown skills. He rapidly considered his approach, and decided it could only benefit him if she underestimated him. He reached out and shook her hand, deliberately making his grip too firm, a stereotypical alpha handshake. Kate squeezed back just as hard.

“Nice to meet you, Kate.” Peter said blandly.

“Let me grab Doug to watch the door for a minute, and the three of us can sit and get to know one another.” Kate gave Peter another broad smile and then disappeared back into the bar, leaving Derek and Peter standing together.

“Be nice to her, Uncle Peter.” Derek’s voice was low and urgent.

Peter looked at Derek.

“I mean it.” Derek’s eyes glanced toward the inside of the club and then back at Peter. “Don’t be mean to her. Don’t insult her. She’s my wife. I don’t want you guys to fight.” Derek looked at Peter’s implacable face. “Please, Uncle Peter, please don’t…”

“Here we go!” Kate sang out, cutting off whatever Derek had been about to say. Doug, it turned out, was the muscular bouncer who’d been at the front door the night before. Peter forced himself not to go stiff when he realized why exactly Kate Argent had known he would be here tonight looking for Derek. Doug didn’t bother looking at Peter, just took his place besides the door and folded his arms.

“Don’t take all night. I’m supposed to be backing up the bar tonight.” Doug grumbled, with no trace of the heavy accent he’d used with Peter the night before.

Peter and Derek followed Kate to the far corner of the room, past the bar. There were a dozen small tables near the back, one of which had a ‘reserved’ sign on it.

“A good friend of mine owns the club.” Kate said, after they sat down. “He saves a table for me whenever I’m in town.”

Peter watched Derek shift his stool until he was pressed against Kate’s side. He leaned against her until she laughed and slid a possessive arm around his waist. Derek leaned down and pressed a kiss against her bare shoulder.
“You’ll have to excuse us, we’re still newlyweds.” Kate said with a pleaded little smile. She leaned down and Derek turned his face towards her. They exchanged a long, slow, wet kiss that left Derek breathing hard. Kate was not, Peter noted, as she pulled away from the kiss and faced Peter.

“So I see. Speaking of which, Derek, I’m a little disappointed I wasn’t invited to your wedding.”

Derek tensed, his shoulders lifting like he was expecting a physical blow, and he turned his face against Kate’s neck, away from Peter.

A cocktail waitress in a black sequined mini-dress and wimple appeared besides them. They all looked at her as she unloaded an open bottle and three glasses on the table in front of them, then left without a word.

“Speaking of which, I thought we should celebrate,” Kate said, scooping up the bottle and filling all three glasses. “I hope you like champagne.”

Peter nodded but all of his attention was on Derek, who’d stiffened as soon as the waitress had appeared. Before Peter could reply, Derek turned and snatched up his glass and drained it in three long swallows before he set the glass back down on the table. Almost as soon as he was done, he was leaning into Kate again, not looking at Peter.

“To family,” Kate said, holding out her glass expectantly. Peter hesitated. He pressed his lips together when he saw Derek look at him pleadingly, and reached out with his glass. The glasses clinked together and they both drank. Peter only took a sip and placed his glass down. Kate took a deeper drink, and then set her glass down as well.

For a moment, there was only the throbbing beat of the music as Peter looked at Derek, then at Kate, and waited for someone to speak. Derek poured himself another glass of champagne and chugged it down.

“Derry, sweetie, you need to slow down.” Kate said and laughed a little when Derek mumbled an apology. “My boy loves his champagne, doesn’t he?” She reached out and pinched Derek’s chin, then refilled his glass. Kate turned back towards Peter. “He hasn’t really learned to appreciate the finer things in life.”

“Derek is eighteen. He shouldn’t be drinking at all.”

Kate shrugged. “I’m not his mommy. He can take care of himself.” She took another sip of champagne.

Peter watched Derek drain his third glass and then pour himself another one.

“So... Kate. If you didn’t want to play mommy, why would an ...older...woman, such as yourself, decide to marry an eighteen-year-old boy?”

Kate and Derek both stiffened for an instant, Derek choking on his glass of champagne, before Kate leaned forward, still smiling widely. “Well, look at him. I saw his gorgeous face in my class and I just couldn’t resist.”

“You were his teacher. It was your job to resist.” Peter wanted to growl when he realized that the music was too loud. Even if he concentrated, he wouldn’t be able to hear the subtle changes in their heartbeats that would betray any lies.

Kate shrugged and took another sip from her glass. “We didn’t start dating until after he was done with my class. He was almost eighteen.” She reached towards Derek and ruffled his hair. “Close
enough, anyway, right Derry?”

Peter watched Derek finish his fourth glass of champagne and then reach towards Kate’s glass with a wide-eyed, hopeful look directed at her. Kate laughed, and pushed it over to Derek, shaking her head. “Look at him. How can I say no to such a cute face? But no more after that, Derry. You’re working tonight, and I don’t want Josh to have to fire you.”

“You got Derek this job?” Peter asked.

Kate nodded and set her hand down high on Derek’s thigh. “Derek wasn’t having much luck finding anything on his own, and Josh and I go way back. He agreed to take Derek on temporarily until he finds something more permanent.”

“Derek hasn’t even finished high school. What kind of job do you expect him to find?”

“It was Derek’s choice to quit school. He was the one that wanted to run away and get married.”

Derek was sitting hunched on his seat, leaning against Kate, his eyes glazed from the champagne he’d thrown back. He set the empty glass on the table. He was silent while Kate talked, not meeting Peter’s eyes, but he nodded.

“He never wanted to go to college. He was just too scared to tell his mother.”

“The way he was too scared to tell her about you? We’d never even heard of you until Derek left a note saying he was running away with someone named Kate. Not one word.”

Kate’s smile dimmed, and this time, when Derek started kissed her shoulder she shrugged him off.

“I’m sorry. I was just worried that you might get in trouble,” Derek said softly, “for dating a student.” Peter could barely hear him over the music. Derek had always been quiet, especially for an alpha, but Peter barely recognized this almost silent, apologetic boy, who even now was sneaking his arms around Kate’s waist. Kate resisted him for a minute, sitting stiffly and still looking only at Peter, but soon she was relaxing into his embrace, her smile looking less brittle. The entire exchange left Peter feeling uneasy.

“Derek,” said Peter as he watched his nephew pressed closer into Kate’s body. “You know your mother would have understood. She just wants you to be happy.” Peter made his voice warm and earnest, even as he spoke the lie. Talia might have understood Derek not wanting to immediately attend college, but there was no way she would have agreed to let him drop out of high school. As far as backing out of his arranged bonding with Stiles...there, Derek would have had a true fight on his hands.

Stiles. Peter watched Derek leaning against Kate and decided against mentioning Stiles. Derek hadn’t asked about him, and Peter was concerned that mentioning Derek’s former promised omega bondmate would drive him even further into Kate Argent’s arms. Peter watched Derek cling to Kate and felt increasingly frustrated. Derek hadn’t spoken to him directly since their brief moment alone at the door. He was starting to suspect that he wouldn’t, as long as Kate was there to speak for them both.

“May I speak to my nephew privately for a moment?”

Kate looked at Derek, who didn’t bother looking at her before he spoke. “Kate’s my wife. Whatever you have to say to me, you can say in front of her.” Derek’s voice was slow and deliberate, the voice of someone who’d drunk too much and had to work to make the words come out correctly. “We don’t keep secrets from each other.” He reached out and took Kate’s hand.
Peter growled a little under his breath. He considered grabbing Derek and physically propelling him out of the club and into a taxi, but even as he watched, Kate wound one arm around Derek’s neck, and then they were kissing again. If Derek resisted...well, Peter knew he wouldn’t get very far, fighting against Derek, Kate, and likely the other bouncer at the door. Peter’s mind picked through the rush of words fighting to come out.

“Derek, come home.” Peter said finally. Derek and Kate separated when he spoke and Derek laid his head on her shoulder.” Peter pressed his lips together for a moment, then forced himself to continue. “Just because you got married doesn’t mean you have to leave. Kate could come with you. The house is big enough for everyone.”

Derek eyes barely had time to widen before Kate was laughing. “Wow, that’s a great offer, living with the in-laws in pokey little Beacon Hills.” Kate shook her head. “I don’t think so. We’re doing just fine here in L.A.”

Derek mouth trembled for a moment, before he pressed his lips together, and his gaze dropped away from Peter’s. “Kate’s my wife, my family. I chose her. I...I do miss home, miss everyone, but my future is here, with her.” As far as Peter could tell over the music, Derek’s heartbeat was steady. He turned and wrapped his arms around Kate, burying his face against her shoulder. Peter stared at Kate’s triumphant smile and stood. He shoved his hands into his pockets when he felt his claws start to emerge. This wasn’t working. He nodded, once, although Derek still hadn’t lifted his head from Kate’s shoulder.

“You can always come home Derek. Always. No matter what. Remember that.”

Peter turned away, and walked out of the club.

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Peter got back to the hotel later than he had the night before, but Stiles was awake, barely, eyes heavy as he stared at the TV. Peter toed off his shoes, stripped off everything except his boxer-briefs, and crawled into bed next to Stiles. Stiles opened his arms and wrapped Peter in a tight embrace.

“Did you get your business done?” Stiles mumbled sleepily.

Peter was silent. He stared blankly at the flickering TV screen. He reached for the remote and turned it off. Finally, he shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“Will you need to stay tomorrow?” Stiles asked, eyes already sliding shut.

Peter slowly shook his head. “No, I can always come back if I need to. Besides, I was hoping in the morning we could sleep in, and then go for a dip in that pool on the patio.”

Stiles hummed, and then tucked his head against Peter’s shoulder and drifted off to sleep. Peter held him, thinking about Derek, until he fell asleep.

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Peter was slow to wake up the next morning. Stiles was still asleep, his face next to Peter’s on the pillow, one hand resting on Peter’s chest. Peter blinked awake, slowly breathing in Stiles’s rich omega scent, and feeling the lingering tension from the evening before slowly fade. Stiles’s hand twitched, and then Peter was staring into Stiles’s slumberous honey-colored eyes. Stiles blinked, and then smiled sleepily. Peter was suddenly struck with a pang of pity for Derek, who’d thrown away waking up with Stiles by his side, just like this. Derek had thrown away having that smile, and those warm, beautiful eyes directed at him for the rest of his life. Peter and Stiles lay in bed, lazily
cuddling, and luxuriating in waking up slowly. Eventually, Stiles got out of bed, grumbling about too many room service sodas.

Peter ordered room service for breakfast. He threw on the robe provided by the hotel to answer the door and watched as the attendant set up the table on the patio, complete with flowers, cloth napkins, and silverware. Stiles shambled out of the bathroom, face damp under a snarl of bedhead, and joined him at the table just as Peter pulled back the cover on a basket of pastry. Stiles smiled happily and reached for the basket as he sat down. They ate quietly for a while, letting the coffee that had arrived with breakfast work its magic on them. By the time they both finished eating, they had perked up and started to talk. Stiles was describing the bizarre Japanese game show he’d watched the night before when Peter stood up and untied the belt of his robe.

“And then they all rode these little bicycles…um, Peter, what are you doing?”

Peter looked at him quizzically as he shoved his boxer-briefs down. “I was going to go for a swim.”

“Naked?” Stiles voice sounded scandalized and his hand drifted towards Peter, holding his napkin as if he were going to use it to cover him up.

Peter laughed out loud. “Yes, grandpa, naked here in our private pool. Are you going to join me?”

Stiles looked around nervously. He relaxed a little when he realized there was no way anyone could see them. The patio was surrounded by high white walls and thick swathes of hot pink bougainvillea.

He stood up, and after another quick glance around, started to peel himself out of his shirt.

“Let me.” Peter murmured, and helped Stiles pull his shirt over his head. He bunched up the shirt, still warm from Stiles’s body, and held it up to his face, inhaling deeply. “Mmmm…delicious.” Stiles felt his cheeks start to warm up in a blush, and dropped his hands to his waistband. Peter’s hands covered his, and slowed his motions. They both stared down as the waistband slowly skimmed over Stiles’s belly, and then lower, until Stiles’s cock came into view. Peter pushed Stiles’s pants down to his knees and watched as Stiles gave a little shimmy until the pants fell down far enough he could step out of them. He wrapped his hands around Stiles’s hips and pulled him in close until they were standing pressed together.

“Good morning, my darling.”

Stiles tasted like coffee and chocolate. Peter took his time, sliding his hands up Stiles’s body to cradle his face as he kissed him slowly, teasingly, refusing to let Stiles draw him deeper. Peter felt Stiles’s hips jerk forward, rubbing against Peter in a bid for more friction. With one last brush of his lips, Peter stepped back and released Stiles.

Stiles hung for a moment, suspended, eyes closed, mouth turned up and waiting. Peter couldn’t help himself – he reached out and ran his thumb along Stiles’s bottom lip, just for a moment, before he turned, took three steps, and dropped feet first into the pool. Peter had to bend his knees to submerge himself completely.

He hadn’t cleared the surface of the water before he felt the surge of another body hitting the water besides him. Peter stood up and wiped the water from his face. Stiles was standing besides him, still dry from the chest up, looking surprised.

“It’s heated.”

Peter leaned back into the water and floated onto his back. “Of course.”
Suddenly Stiles was leaning over him, blocking out the sky.

“You were kind of in the middle of something, Peter.”

Peter grinned, then rolled in the water. He grabbed Stiles around the waist and pulled him up against him. Stiles flailed, then grabbed at Peter, his arms wrapping around his neck. Peter slid his hands down and wrapped one broad hand around each thigh. He lifted Stiles off his feet, and encouraged Stiles to wrap his long legs around his lips, then shifted his grip to Stiles’s ass. Stiles gasped as Peter settled him closer to his body, trapping both of their cocks between them, side by side. Peter lifted and pulled, and Stiles groaned at the slick pressure of their bodies moving against each other in the water.

Peter kept it slow, pulling and lifting and rubbing Stiles against him as the warm water shifted around them. Stiles nipped and licked and sucked on the strong curve of Peter’s neck, encouraging him to go harder and faster, which Peter entirely ignored. Eventually, Stiles was left clutching Peter’s broad shoulders and begging in a breathy, desperate voice. Peter loved to hear Stiles begging for his touch.

“Oh god, Peter, please, please, I want to come, please...”

Peter pulled a little harder on the next lift, and reveled in Stiles’s gasp. The next one was even firmer and soon their bodies were pressing together in hard, driving rhythm as the water churned around them. Stiles gasped, then gasped again, and then he was using his legs to pull them even closer together. Peter grunted at the pressure, then pulled as Stiles pushed, and the hot slippery pressure around his cock slid down, and up, and down, and he heard Stiles wailing, his blunt nails digging into Peter’s back. That was it. Peter’s head fell forward into the curve of Stiles’s neck, and he came.

~~~

Peter and Stiles drove home late Sunday afternoon. Stiles kept the bag from the jewelers sitting on his lap, his fingers tangled in the white silk cord handle. It had been their last stop in Los Angeles, and Peter had been surprised how easy it had been to find bond bracelets that suited them both. After Stiles insisted on something plain, Peter had worried that Stiles would refuse anything from the jewelry store he had in mind. Stiles had looked wary when they’d pulled up in front of the small store front, but he’d followed Peter inside without complaint. The salesman was an elderly man who’d beamed at them when they asked to see his bond bracelets, and he’d made a point of showing off the bracelet he himself wore. Between his enthusiasm, and the lack of any price tags, Stiles had relaxed enough to enjoy looking at the beautifully crafted jewelry.

Stiles was admiring a platinum bracelet with heavy, flattened links designed to fit snugly around the wrist when Peter had nudged forward the bracelet beside it, which had the same pattern but with diamonds added in the center of each link.

Stiles had looked up at Peter, a smile quirking his lips. “Really? Bling does not equal love, Peter.”

The salesman snorted, and then held his hands up when they both turned to look at him. He looked at Stiles disapprovingly. “Of course it does. Who argues with someone trying to buy you diamonds?”

“Yes, Stiles, who argues with that?”

Stiles gave Peter a flat look, and then tentatively reached for the bracelet Peter had pointed out. Peter helped him fasten it around his wrist and Stiles held it out at arm’s length.

“It really is kind of nice.” He twisted his hand a little and the salesman helpfully moved a lamp on the counter to shine directly on the bracelet. Stiles’s breath caught a little when the perfectly cut stones
blazed in the reflected light. “Wow.”

“You won’t be in high school forever, my darling. You shouldn’t deny yourself something beautiful just because some kids, whose names you won’t even remember in ten years, might tease you about it.”

Stiles nodded absently, his gaze still fixed on the bracelet on his wrist. Peter smirked a little, and reached out to catch Stiles’s hand. Stiles pressed his hand into Peter’s, and looked up at him.

“Are you sure?”

There was still a glimmer of uncertainty in Stiles’s eyes and the vulnerability in his voice made it clear he wasn’t just talking about the bracelet.

Peter stared at Stiles seriously, and nodded. “I’m absolutely certain.”

Stiles stared at him for a moment, judging Peter’s response. Then his body visibly relaxed and Stiles leaned forward until he was tucked against the curve of Peter’s chest. He raised his hand and laid it against Peter’s chest so the bracelet was in front of him. Stiles looked at it, considering, and then decisively turned to the salesman. “We’ll take this one.”

The salesman had cleaned the bracelet and packaged it up for Stiles and Peter to take that day. There had been another matching bracelet, but it needed to be re-sized for Peter. Peter paid for everything discretely while Stiles was distracted by a case of estate jewelry that included some ornate old-fashioned omega collars. They’d stopped for gas, and snacks, and then they’d set off on the long drive back to Beacon Hills.

They’d chatted for a while but Stiles had grown quiet as the drive went on, turning on the radio and staring pensively out the window at the passing landscape. Peter used the time to think about Derek and his wife. He was still unsure about the strange dynamic between Derek and Kate, but he knew something was wrong. He also knew he needed to get Derek alone if he wanted to unravel what was going on between them. Peter frowned. He was going to need help.

Peter grimaced a little. He loved his sister but she was a blunt instrument. She had no tact and was seemingly incapable of subtlety. She’d been torn between furious anger, worry, and disappointment since Derek had run off, and Peter couldn’t figure out a way to get her assistance without it leading to her alternately hugging Derek and screaming at him. He had been hoping to keep a discrete eye on Derek until enough time had passed that Talia would have accepted Derek’s decision and started to miss him. His encounter with Derek convinced him he shouldn’t wait. Peter felt a faint twinge of the headache he always got when he had to work with Talia, but he ignored it. He needed to get Derek away from Kate, and preferably back in Beacon Hills, and Talia seemed like the best way to accomplish that. He looked at his watch, and realized that they’d arrive shortly before dinner time.

With any luck, he’d be able to find Talia working in her study so he could discuss what he’d found out, and what he hoped to do, privately.

As it turned out, Peter didn’t have to look for Talia. She was waiting for them on the front porch when they pulled up the driveway. She watched as they unloaded the car and smiled stiffly at Stiles as he shuffled past her, his arms draped in shopping bags. Peter set the bags he was carrying down on the porch and waited as the door swung shut behind Stiles. He listened with Talia as Davey and Oliver both screamed in excitement when they spotted Stiles. He smiled at the sound of shopping bags hitting the floor and three sets of feet running through the house.
“Peter,” Talia stepped close, and kept her voice whisper quiet. “I need to go to Los Angeles. Tonight. Derek’s been arrested.”
Stiles drove himself to school on Monday.

Peter and Talia had both left abruptly late Sunday afternoon to deal with an urgent situation that had come up back in Los Angeles. Peter had parked Vanessa, as Stiles had christened the blue convertible, in the garage and taken his usual sedan instead. He’d barely taken the time to throw fresh clothes into his overnight bag before he’d found Stiles, made vague promises to explain things when he got back, and disappeared after a quick goodbye kiss.

Peter’s sudden and unexpected departure had left Stiles feeling unsettled, but with Davey and Ollie demanding his attention, he was soon enfolded back into the warm bustle and noise of home. His dad arrived not long after Peter and Talia left, so even with them gone, the table was a lively one. Ollie had begged Stiles to help him with his bath, and by the time both younger boys had been tucked into bed, Cora had cornered Stiles about the pile of shopping bags he had dropped in the living room.

He spent the rest of the evening unpacking the bags of clothing, and modeling almost every piece of clothing for Cora and Julia’s entertainment. There had been several surprises in the bags, including a pile of silky boxer-briefs in beautiful jewel tones, and a few pieces of clothing that Stiles was certain he had not chosen or tried on. After he held one up and realized just how translucent it was, he’d shoved it back into the bag with a mumbled excuse, and had been more cautious pulling items out of the bags.

Stiles slept poorly without Peter. It was the first time he’d had to sleep alone since they had bonded, and he hated it. The bed felt too big, too cold, and lonely. He got up once, thinking about sleeping with his dad, but stopped before he made it to the door. He went back to bed and curled up on Peter’s side of the bed. Stiles tossed and turned before he finally fell asleep hugging Peter’s pillow.

On Monday morning, Stiles showered and walked into the closet he shared with Peter. He stopped in front of the section where his clothes hung. There was a clear division between his new clothes and his old. He reached out and fingered the deep blue indigo of his new jeans. He bit his lip and glanced over to his old jeans, then slowly pulled down the new pair. He got dressed choosing all new things: boxer briefs, jeans, heather green shirt, light jacket. He reached for one of his new pairs of shoes, but veered at the last minute and grabbed his old red sneakers. He stood in front of the full length mirror and stared at himself. The new clothes fit him well, better than any of his old stuff ever had, and were far more flattering, but he still felt like he was missing something. He straightened his posture and thought about what Micah had said in the store.

“You know you want this,” he said to his reflection in his best sexy voice. He grimaced a little, and tried again. “You only wish you could get with this.” He waved at himself, popped one of his hips to the side, and pouted his lips.

“Ugh.” Stiles ran his hands through his hair. “This is impossible.” He tried to remember how he’d felt when Peter stared at him, when he’d known that he had all of Peter’s attention and interest. He closed his eyes and let his body relax. He kept his back straight, but his shoulders loose.

“I’m an omega.” Stiles told himself, “Rare. Desirable. Sexy. I could have anyone I wanted.” He opened his eyes, and then opened them even wider when he saw his reflection. He looked...well, good. Tall, loose-limbed, with a curving smile that seemed to hint at the words he’d just spoken out loud. As he watched, the confident omega in the mirror vanished and it was just him, Stiles Stilinski, with his usual grin looking at himself. He sighed a little, but kept smiling. He could do this.
Scott was running late and sent Stiles a text saying he’d see him in their second-period history class. Stiles made good time and arrived while the halls were full of students. He didn’t really register the first few double-takes as he passed, but by the time he had walked through the entrance and down the hallway to his locker, he’d become aware of a soft murmur of voices following him, and more than one person blatantly staring at him. He fought the urge to hunch his shoulders, and forced himself to grab his books for the morning without reacting to all the whispers.

Stiles jumped when he closed his locker and Lydia Martin was standing right next to him. “Whoa, Lydia, jeez, you almost gave me a heart attack.” Stiles watched Lydia scan him from the top of his head down to his old worn sneakers.

“What are you wearing?” she demanded.

“Clothes?” Stiles answered uncertainly.

“Stiles, that’s not what I meant.” She said impatiently.

“You know my name?”

Lydia rolled her eyes at him. “We’ve been in school together since kindergarten. Of course I know your name. I was just never interested in speaking to you before. Is that a John Legacy jacket?”

“Yes?” Stiles vaguely remembered seeing a strip of white silk inside the jacket that might have had that name on it. Or had it been the blue one?

“Ugh,” Lydia said. “This is so obviously wasted on you.” Lydia walked around Stiles, with a thoughtful twist to her lips. “All right, who did this?”

“What? What do you mean?” Stiles knew he sounded like a moron but this was easily the longest conversation he’d ever had with Lydia, the girl he’d spent most of his childhood hoping would present as an alpha. He’d had an embarrassing number of fantasies of her elaborately courting him with grand, romantic gestures, and then formally bonding with him as the entire school had watched enviously. His intense crush had cooled when it became obvious that Lydia was a beta, and then further still when she’d started dating Jackson Whittemore, but he still admired Lydia. He’d shared enough classes with her to be aware of her brilliant mind, and he often wondered what she could do, freed from her role as the most popular girl at Beacon Hills High. It was hard to look into that perfect face that had featured in so many of his daydreams, and try to put together a coherent sentence.

“I know it wasn’t you, Stiles.” Lydia said, “No one develops taste this good overnight. Someone who knew what they were doing helped you pick out these clothes. Who was it?”

Stiles opened his mouth, torn between confessing everything immediately and trying to say something funny to make Lydia laugh, when he heard a familiar voice.

“Whoa, Stilinski,” Jackson slid up next to Lydia and draped one arm across her shoulders. Lydia twitched impatiently and reached up to drag her long, loose curls out from under Jackson’s arm. “What happened? You don’t look like you’ve been rolling around in a Hot Topic dumpster for a change.”

Stiles glared at Jackson but before he could say anything Scott skidded up next to him. “Hey! I made it on time!” Scott looked at Stiles and did a double take. “Wow, you look great! Is this what you and Peter did in LA?”

“Who’s Peter?” Lydia asked sharply.
“Stiles’s bondmate. Peter.” Scott volunteered. Stiles felt torn between glaring at Scott for stealing his thunder, and just enjoying the hilariously flabbergasted expressions on Lydia’s and Jackson’s faces.

“Bonded? You’re an omega?” Lydia asked, her voice becoming almost shrill. “A male omega at Beacon Hills High? How did I not know this? Why didn’t you have a presentation party? Is this why you were gone last month?”

“That’s why Ken and Sean were acting all weird around you! I thought they’d made some kind of bet with each other.” Jackson exclaimed.

“Who is this Peter? Does he go to a different school?” Lydia asked.

Stiles shook his head. “Peter Hale. He isn’t exactly in school anymore.” He wondered if either of them would recognize the name. Beacon Hills wasn't all that big, and he knew Jackson's dad was a lawyer.

Both Lydia and Jackson froze, and the smirk on Jackson’s face vanished as his jaw sagged open. Stiles grinned. This was way more fun than he’d imagined.

“Peter Hale, the lawyer?” Jackson asked in a stunned voice.

“He’s thirty-four.” Stiles said blithely, enjoying the astonished look on Lydia’s face.

“He’s loaded, is what he is,” Jackson said bluntly. “All the Hales have money, but Peter is one of the richest men in Beacon Hills. My mom is always trying to get him to go to her fundraisers. He’s one of the biggest donors in town.”

Lydia was still staring at Stiles. “My mom has been chasing Peter Hale for years and he’s never given her the time of day.” Her expression was slowly morphing into one of glee. “She is going to lose her mind when she hears he bonded to one of my classmates!” Stiles shrugged, a little disturbed at the thought of being in some sort of competition with Lydia’s mom.

The first bell rang. Lydia looked at her watch, then back at Stiles. “You got bonded to a hot, older, rich guy who wants to dress you up and spoil you.” Lydia flipped her hair again and looked Stiles over one more time. “I must say I’m kind of impressed. I didn’t think you had it in you. Come sit with us at lunch.” Her eyes flicked to Scott. “You too, I guess.”

She turned. “Jackson, come.”

Stiles and Scott watched Lydia sailing down the hall, cutting though the thinning crowds without effort as Jackson trailed in her wake.

“Well, you must be doing something right if Lydia Martin is approving of your life choices.” Scott said.

“Yeah I guess I am.” The late bell rang and Stiles groaned. “Hold that thought, buddy. We’re going to be late. Let’s talk more at lunch.”

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At lunchtime, Stiles got his tray and headed towards the table where Lydia Martin sat. He half expected Lydia to have forgotten their conversation from the morning, but she waved him over and patted a spot next to her. Jackson was sitting beside her, at the head of the table, talking to Danny
who was sitting on his other side.

Stiles nodded at Danny as he sat down. He knew him in passing from shared classes, but other than a group project in sixth grade, he couldn’t remember the last time the two of them had spoken. Danny looked vaguely confused but nodded back amiably. Stiles picked up his bottle of water and was opening it when Scott walked over to the table and sat next to him.

“So, Peter Hale. How did that happen?” Lydia asked.

Stiles froze and looked into her expectant face. As much as he knew of her, he didn’t really know her, not really, and the last thing he felt like doing was dragging out the whole complicated story for her entertainment. Everything with Peter felt too intensely private, and everything that had happened with Derek was still too painful. He forced his shoulders to relax and shrugged. “The usual, I guess. I was looking at my options, and when Peter heard I was an omega, he asked if he could court me.”

Stiles smirked a little, remembering Peter’s high-speed courting. “He was kind of amazing so I chose him.”

“You’re an omega?” Danny had broken off from his conversation with Jackson and it was obvious neither of them had been listening to Stiles. “Male omegas are considered sacred in Hawaii. In the past they were usually reserved for the king. Their offspring were considered blessed.”

Stiles nodded. “I didn’t know about Hawaii, but a lot of cultures consider male omegas lucky or special. Unfortunately, that means that throughout history male omegas spent a lot of time basically under house arrest to whatever guardian had control of them, and forced into political or religious marriages against their will.”

“But..” Jackson started, stuttered, stopped, and looked flustered. “I thought the whole heat thing...” he trailed off.

Stiles flushed, and glanced at Danny and Lydia, both of whom looked fascinated. “Yeah, I mean, we do have to bond at our first heat, but heat isn’t permanent. It doesn’t change how you feel. It’s really just an overwhelming compulsion to bond. Once it wears off, you’re just you again, only permanently physically bonded to your alpha. If you’re lucky you might fall in love with your alpha, but if not, you’re kind of stuck.”

“That sounds horrible.” Lydia said. “Imagine not being able to change your mind, ever.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s how marriage is supposed to work,” Danny said dryly.

“Well, yes, technically, but at least you have options if it doesn’t work out.” Lydia said.

“There’s a case of an omega trying to separate from her bondmate happening in Los Angeles right now. It was all over the local news while I was there this weekend.” Stiles said. “It’s really ugly. The omega says her alpha cheated on her and is suing for millions of dollars for spousal support and loss of future fertility and the alpha is saying his omega is the one who cheated on him with some internet mogul. Supposedly, he released a sex tape of the two of them and it’s all over the internet.”

“Well, that sounds pretty much like a good-old fashioned beta divorce.” Lydia said. “Replace the sex tape with some nude photos and a little extortion, and you’d pretty much have my parents’ divorce in a nutshell.”

Stiles shook his head. “Well, kind of. They’re still going to remain physically bonded even if she leaves him. She won’t be able to have any biological kids without her alpha, and her heats are going to suck. She’ll probably have to spend them in the hospital. You can separate from your alpha and
everyone calls it breaking the bond but nothing really breaks the bond. It’s like that saying from health class: fluid-bonded, forever bonded.”

He couldn’t imagine going through something like that with Peter. Just the thought of that kind of betrayal and anger between him and someone he’d been so intimate with made him feel like the spaghetti he’d just eaten was going to come back up. “It’s horrible.”

Danny and Scott both nodded in agreement.

“It’s strange to think that you’re basically married.” Lydia said. “Have you had your bonding ceremony yet?”

Stiles shook his head. “Not yet. We were talking about having it right before spring break.”

“What? You didn’t tell me that!?” Scott said. “I’m still your best man, right?”

Stiles rolled his eyes. “Of course you are. Peter and I just talked about the ceremony this weekend when we bought our bracelets.”

“Bracelets? What kind of bracelets?” Lydia asked eagerly.

Stiles smirked. “Sparkly ones,” he said, figuring the answer would drive Lydia crazy.

Lydia and Jackson looked at each other, and rolled their eyes.

“Sparkly.” Lydia said, just as Scott asked, “Hey, now that you’re bonded, you don’t have to be all secretive about being an omega anymore, right?”

Stiles fidgeted. “It’s not really a big secret or anything, I just…I don’t mind if family and friends know, but I’m not going to make a big announcement or anything.” He turned to Lydia. “My dad was nervous about me about having a formal public presentation, especially since male omegas get so much attention. I wanted a local mate anyway, so I didn’t mind.”

Danny leaned forward. “I don’t blame him. Do you remember that kidnapping case a few years ago? That French singer?”

Stiles nodded. “Exactly. I know I’m much less of a target now that I’ve bonded, but people are crazy.”

“Wait, what was this?” Lydia asked.

Danny turned to her. “There was a pop star in France and someone let it slip to the press that he was an unbonded omega. The press went crazy, and some prince from the middle of nowhere decided to have him kidnapped. The pop star vanished for about a year and a half, and then showed up at the French Embassy in Turkey with a permanent collar still locked around his neck.”

“I remember that!” Lydia said. “Didn’t that guy go back to his alpha less than a year later?”

“Well, the prince was stinking rich.” Jackson said dismissively.

Stiles’s lips pressed together in a thin line. “That asshole had custody of their kid, thanks to his country’s shitty, backward alpha-centric laws. Could you blame him for not wanting to abandon his child? Money isn’t everything Jackson.”

Jackson stiffened and looked away. “I guess not,” he mumbled.

“Anyway, since betas don’t present, and I was way too old to present as an alpha, I just didn’t say
“Anyone and everyone assumed that I was a beta.”

“Everyone except Ken and Sean,” Jackson said.

Stiles rolled his eyes. “Yeah, Ken sits behind me in Economics and since he’s an alpha he managed to catch my scent and figure out I was really an omega. Suddenly he goes from taping notes on my back that say, “Pinch me, I like it” to bringing me flowers. What an asshole.”

“So no one else figured it out?” Danny asked.

Stiles shook his head. “Nope.”

“Well, who’s going to hide they’re an omega? Remember when Amber presented? Every alpha in the school and half the betas were drooling all over her. She invited over five hundred people to her presentation party. It was pathetic.” Lydia said, so dismissively Stiles wondered privately if she hadn’t been invited.

Stiles shook his head. “Yeah, not really my thing. I just wanted one alpha.” A small smile curled across his lips.

Lydia stared at Stiles for a moment, then she smiled too. “I hear older men are amazing in bed.” She purred.

Scott and Jackson turned as one, and said, “Lydia!”

Stiles just shrugged, and kept smiling.

~~~

Peter didn’t come home that night and he looked tense and unhappy when he called Stiles to let him know that he wasn’t sure how long he and Talia would be gone. Stiles smothered down his first, disappointed reaction, and the dozen useless questions that followed. After a moment, he asked quietly, “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Peter’s face relaxed, and he smiled at Stiles from the screen of his phone. He shook his head. “Not yet. Stiles...look, I know you must be terribly curious, and I will say that what Talia and I are dealing with is urgent but it’s not anything dangerous to any of us. I promise, I’ll explain everything to you as soon as I can.”

“Do have any idea when you guys might be coming home?”

Peter shook his head. “I’m sorry, my darling, but I really don’t. Talia and I are working with some other lawyers, and honestly, it’s been a tangled legal mess. I’m hoping to be home by the end of the week, but this whole thing could drag on for quite a while.”

Stiles sighed but tried to smile. “It’s okay, I understand. I just miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

Stiles looked at Peter and said, “Go ahead, and do what you need to do. I can tell you’re still busy. Try to get some sleep, though, okay?”

Peter looked startled, then smiled at Stiles warmly. “Thank you. I’ll be home as soon as I can.” Peter blew him a kiss, and signed off. Stiles sighed again and glared at the empty expanse of bed next to him. He set his phone down on the nightstand and settled in for another lonely night.
It was a strange week for Stiles. His social group which had formerly consisted almost entirely of Scott expanded to include Lydia and Danny and to a lesser extent, Jackson. Jackson remained somewhat distant, although he had warmed up to the point that he nodded to Stiles when they passed each other in the halls. Stiles was enjoying getting to know Danny and Lydia, and happy about his growing friendship with them both. He would have been even happier if Peter wasn’t still in LA. His only contact with him consisted of irregular late-night video phone calls, and Peter looked more tired and frustrated every time he saw him.

Stiles had given up all hope of Peter or Talia getting back anytime soon, so seeing Peter’s car parked by the house when he drove home Friday after school was even more exciting than it might have otherwise been. Stiles parked quickly and ran inside. Julia and Cora called out greetings as he passed, and he returned them absently as he ran up the stairs. He heard them both giggling, but ignored it.

Peter was in the shower. Stiles knocked on the door.

“Can I come in?”

“Only if you’re Stiles,” Peter called out.

Stiles entered the steamy bathroom and repeated, “Can I come in?”

“Please.”

Stiles stripped out of his clothes and dropped them into the hamper. He slid open the glass door of the shower and stepped in. The shower was large enough he could watch Peter tilt his head back and rinse his hair without getting in his way, and as soon as he wiped his eyes and looked at Stiles, Stiles stepped forward into his open arms.

The first hug was amazing. Stiles felt like he’d been aching for something and didn’t even realize it until Peter’s arms were wrapped around him again.

“Ohhh...I’ve missed you so much. I missed this.” Stiles tried to burrow closer to Peter, even though they were already pressed tightly together. “Oh my god, Peter. You feel amazing.”

Stiles looked up at Peter. “Are you done? Did you wash everything?”

“I...”

“Close enough,” Stiles said, then snatched the towel off the rack. He pulled Peter out of the shower enclosure while swabbing haphazardly at himself, and then patted Peter dry. Stiles rubbed Peter’s hair briefly with the towel, then threw it to the ground. He grabbed Peter’s hand and dragged him to the bed.

“I take it you...” Peter’s bemused voice cut off as Stiles dropped to his knees and sucked Peter’s still soft cock into his mouth. Stiles had done this for Peter often enough that he knew what Peter liked, but right at the moment, Stiles was more interested in satisfying himself. He loved to feel Peter slowly expanding in his mouth, loved to feel the physical change that was proof of Peter’s desire for him. He rolled the head of Peter’s cock on his tongue, desperate for the taste of his alpha, and he pulled off long enough to bury his nose in the clean damp crease of Peter’s thigh and inhale deeply.

Even the shower hadn’t been able to entirely wash away his alpha’s scent and Stiles breathed it in, in long, slow breaths. He nuzzled gently at the base of Peter’s cock and pressed kisses against the soft swell of his scrotum.
“Missed you,” Stiles groaned and then sucked Peter back into his mouth. He sucked at Peter until Peter’s cock was fully erect, and flushed, and Peter’s muscular thighs were trembling under his hands. He pulled off with one long, lingering slurp, and then he knelt back on his knees, legs spread wide, his own erection pressed firmly against his belly. He waited until Peter’s glazed eyes focused on him, and he reached up with two fingers and slid them into his mouth. He sucked them as lavishly as he’d sucked on Peter’s cock, then brushed them down the length of his arched body from his reddened lips, down his throat, paused for a quick brush against his nipple, and then down, past his cock, and beneath. He found the tiny, tender lips of his pussy and groaned deeply when he tucked his fingertips right into the entrance, right where his natural lubrication was slick and fragrant. He twisted his body, and started to grind his hips down on his fingers, then looked back to Peter, meeting his sharp, glowing red gaze.

Stiles licked his reddened lips. “Want you in me...”

Peter leapt forward. He wrapped his arms around Stiles and heaved, and Stiles was flying. He landed half on the bed on his belly, his legs still hanging off of the end. He barely had time to grab at the sheets before Peter was on him, pushing his thighs apart, and pushing into him, straight up inside his pussy where Peter had only been a handful of times before. Even though Stiles was wet and eager, it was a tight slide. Stiles gasped, and Peter went still. He leaned over Stiles and slowly scented him, from his shoulder, up the nape of his neck into the short hair at the base of his skull. Stiles squirmed around the thick, hard, hot length of Peter’s cock buried inside of him and Peter wrapped his broad hands around Stiles’s wrists, and pressed them to the mattress. Stiles wiggled his hips, trying to get enough leverage to push back on Peter but he was just high up enough on the bed that his feet didn’t touch the floor. Stiles kicked his legs helplessly, and whimpered.

“Oh, god, Peter, please. I can’t wait.”

Peter brought his lips down until they were brushing Stiles’s ear. “You’re lucky that I missed you too.” He whispered, in a voice so full of dark promise that Stiles shivered. Peter pulled back, and started to move, long, solid strokes, that made Stiles bury his face in the covers and start to cry out with each hard inward thrust. Peter had him pinned, and Stiles was forced to lay there and take it, long hard stroke after stroke in a rhythm that gave him no time to catch his breath. Stiles felt his entire body winding tighter and tighter, and the pressure inside him was pushing him higher and higher. Peter didn’t stop, just kept up that same pounding rhythm until Stiles thought he was going to shake apart from the pleasure. Stiles’s legs jumped and twitched, and he pressed his mouth into the covers to muffle his screams until he felt light-headed from lack of oxygen. Alpha, he thought wildly, Peter. Mate. He came, seeing sparks, gasping for air.

Peter didn’t stop. He fucked him through his first orgasm and then shoved him into another one that made him squirm and sob, as his overwrought body came again, then once more as Peter sped up and fucked him in short, sharp strokes until he too, came with a groan and collapsed on Stiles.

They lay together, Stiles feeling half-smothered and half-delighted by the weight of Peter on his back. He moaned when Peter’s cock went slack and slid out of him, and Peter heaved them up on the bed, and curled around Stiles’s back, keeping one heavy arm draped across him.

“Orgasms are awesome.” Stiles panted. “So good. Missed you.”

Peter chuckled breathily. “Yeah. I could tell.”

Stiles closed his eyes to relish the feel of Peter’s skin against his own, and he must have dozed off for a moment because he started awake when he felt Peter start to move. They took turns in the shower and getting dressed. Peter went first and when Stiles emerged, pulling his shirt down over damp skin, Peter was sitting in an armchair with a stack of papers in front of him.
“Did Talia come home with you?” Stiles asked.

Peter shook his head. “There’s still some work she needed to do in L.A. I actually need to go back tomorrow but I wanted to see you and explain what’s going on.” Peter set aside the papers he was holding. “Please, join me,” he said, and nodded to the other chair.

Stiles frowned at Peter’s serious tone.

“Stiles, I...there’s no easy way to say this. I wanted to tell you first, privately, but then I need to tell everyone else in the family.”

Stiles walked over to the second armchair facing Peter’s and dropped into it. “Peter, what is it? You’re freaking me out.” Peter leaned forward, and Stiles mirrored him, until they were close enough for Peter to take Stiles’s hands in his. Peter took a deep breath.

“Talia and I went to Los Angeles to see Derek.”

Stiles entire body jolted, as if Peter had reached out and slapped him. Without thought Stiles pulled his hand out of Peter’s and sat back in the chair. His arms came up, and he wrapped them around his own chest. It had been over a month, almost a month and a half since Derek had left him. He hadn’t really thought about him since, had tried not to think about him, although it was hard to forget him entirely when he was living in Derek’s former house. He was in most of the scattered family pictures hanging on the walls, but Stiles had become quite adept at skimming his gaze over any of the pictures that contained Derek. Derek’s room was down at the end of the hall, on the same floor as Peter and Stiles’s room, and his door remained closed at all times. There was still a trace of his scent in the air, but it faded with each passing day. The only one who ever really mentioned him in front of Stiles was Ollie, who was young enough to miss him terribly, and too young to realize that Stiles tended to stiffen up and go silent whenever he asked when Derek was coming home.

“Oh. What about him?” Stiles asked in a strained voice that was desperately trying to be casual.

“We never told you exactly what happened with him when he broke things off.” Peter paused when Stiles flinched, but kept speaking. “That day we showed up at your house, he’d vanished from the house at some point the night before, and he left a letter saying he was running off with a woman, a beta that none of us had heard of.”

Stiles hunched into himself and forced himself to keep looking at Peter.

“Okay. I guess I kind of wondered what happened,” he said. He blinked hard against the burn that was building up behind his eyes. “So he was dating someone when he was courting me.” Stiles voice broke a little on the last word. He closed his eyes just as they overflowed, and covered his eyes with his hands. Peter went silent. Stiles pressed against his eyelids until he saw sparks, and fought not to give into the massive surge of hurt and sadness rising up in him. All the time he’d spent with Derek, imaging a lifetime together and thinking he might be falling in love, Derek had been doing the same with someone else.

“Keep going, Peter. I want to know everything.” Stiles said unsteadily.

“He eloped with a woman named Katherine Argent. They...”

“Wait, Kate Argent?” Stiles sat up, looking startled, his eyes huge and wet. “Do you mean Mrs. Argent, the substitute history teacher?”

“Did you have her for class?” Peter asked sharply.
“Not really. Well, kind of. I mean, she covered for my economics class for one day but then she took over senior history when Mrs. Fitzhugh got sick.” Stiles jumped to his feet and wiped the tears off his face. He ran his hands though his damp hair. “Wait, Peter, wait, are you saying Derek ran off with a…a…sex offender?”

Peter seemed to freeze up in front of him. He stared at Stiles silently, hardly seeming to blink before he choked out, “What?”

“I mean, Derek only turned eighteen a couple months ago. If they were seeing each other before then, it was statutory rape. She was his teacher!”

Stiles dropped back into the armchair, hands over his mouth, his hurt and sorrow forgotten for a moment in his shock.

“God, is he okay? What did she do to him? Did she get arrested? Is that why you and Talia had to go to LA?”

Peter stared at Stiles blankly.

“Peter? Oh my god, did she murder him?”

Peter shook his head and took a deep breath. “I don’t have the whole story but Derek married her, and then three nights ago, he attacked her badly enough that she had to be hospitalized. Talia’s still in LA trying to get things sorted out but Derek is under arrest for aggravated assault.”

“He used a weapon?” Stiles asked.

Peter shook his head. “He transformed and attacked her with his claws. That’s automatically assault with…”

“A deadly weapon,” Stiles finished. “Oh god, poor Derek.”

“Poor Derek?” Peter echoed, sounding baffled.

“Well, yeah. Can you imagine Derek attacking someone without a good reason? She must have done something really terrible to him to make him transform and attack her.”

Peter nodded slowly. “I think so, and so does Talia, but Derek’s not really talking to us. We had to get him another lawyer, a classmate of Talia’s, and we’re not sure he’s even talking to her. We know he must have had a good reason but he’s just shut down.” Peter sighed. “I have to say, Stiles, that I’m surprised to hear you taking Derek’s side so easily. After everything, well, I assumed that you wouldn’t think very much of him.”

“I don’t.” Stiles said tightly. “I kind of hate him for handling things the way he did. But, even if he is a massive jerk, I wouldn’t want something like this to happen to him.” Stiles paused, then shook his head. “Maybe he would have found a better way to end it if he hadn’t had all this other stuff going on, I don’t know. At least I didn’t get stuck bonded to someone who didn’t want me or love me.”

Peter nodded. “One of the things I need to talk to you about is about how you feel about Derek coming back home. When this gets straightened out, he won’t have anywhere else to go. Talia, well, honestly, we both would like to be able to let him move back in, if you’d be willing to consider it.”

“Of course he can come back. This is his home.” Stiles said.

“It’s your home too, Stiles. We don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”
Stiles snorted. “Of course it’s going to be uncomfortable. It’s going to be weird, and horrible, and super awkward to have to live in the same house as the alpha who completely rejected me.” Stiles wrapped his arms around himself, and looked straight at Peter. “But I can’t kick him out of his home just because it’s going to be uncomfortable for me. He’s going to need his family.” Stiles went quiet. “I guess I’m going to be part of that, now.”

“Would you want to move out? Back to your old house?” Peter asked uncertainly.

Stiles shook his head almost immediately. “I love it here. I love having everyone around. My dad loves it too, I can tell.” He smiled lopsidedly. “I guess that’s why it’s so hard for me to deny that to Derek. Now that I’ve been part of a big family, I can’t imagine losing that. We’re just going to have to figure out a way to get along.” Stiles paused, and then bit his lip. “We should probably tell my dad separately from the rest of the family. His eye still twitches every time anyone says Derek’s name. He might need a little extra time to, um, process all this.”

Peter pulled Stiles’s hand gently, tugging until Stiles stood and moved over to sit in Peter’s lap. Stiles had to hunch down to cuddle against Peter, but it was worth it, especially when Peter wrapped his arms around him.

Peter pressed his forehead against Stiles’s shoulder. “Thank you, Stiles.” he said simply.
Chapter 19

I chose not to use archive warnings but please be aware there is some implied non-con/dubious consent in this chapter.

Stiles was still at school when he received a text from Peter telling him that Peter and Talia were home, with Derek. Peter had gone back to LA after spending a single night in Beacon Hills, and he’d been there with Talia for the past week. Stiles had gone to school and tried his best not to worry about what was happening in LA. He missed Peter, even though they spoke each evening. Stiles had gotten the impression that Peter and Talia had spent their time in LA talking to every single person in the legal system that they knew, who had any chance of helping Derek, and begging Derek to talk to his lawyer. Stiles had been able to read the relief in Peter’s face the day Derek had finally agreed to speak up in his own defense, and things had moved very quickly after that. While Peter did not say so explicitly, Stiles suspected Derek’s expedited release was far more due to his family connections and Alpha status than the efficiency of the California judicial system.

Stiles had been nervous about seeing Derek again, for the first time since everything had changed, and the text ramped up his anxiety to near panic levels. The next text he received was Peter offering to pick him up from school, and after a brief hesitation, Stiles accepted. He didn’t want to make Derek’s homecoming seem like a big deal, but it was. The thought he might walk into the house and run into Derek without any warning was strangely terrifying, although Stiles wasn’t sure exactly what he was afraid of.

His last class dragged on, and Stiles was grateful he wasn’t having any tests that day. He was distracted, and anxious to see Peter. He texted Scott to let him know he was going home right after school, and headed straight for the door as soon as the bell rang.

Peter was waiting in the parking lot, leaning against Vanessa. Stiles grinned at the careful tableau Peter had created. The blue convertible was sparkling in the late afternoon sun, and Peter was wearing his favorite black leather jacket and sun glasses, his body stretched in a long, lean line against the side of the car. Someone bumped into him from behind and he heard a girl say, “Who is that?” in an overly loud voice. Stiles grinned, and walked straight to Peter, who pulled him up against him, and kissed him, thoroughly.

Stiles opened his eyes when the kiss ended and grinned up at Peter. “Exhibitionist.”

“Sometimes,” Peter said, his lips curving into a satisfied smirk.

Peter took Stiles’s backpack and walked him to the other side of the car. He held open the door, and Stiles slid in, trying not to look at the small crowd that had gathered. He caught a glimpse of Jackson, staring at the car, and settled back into the seat while Peter walked back to the driver’s side and got in.

They drove past the turn off for the house, and Stiles turned to look quizzically at Peter.

“I thought you might appreciate a little detour before going back to the house. It’s not far.”
Stiles sat back, and they turned a short while later, down a road that Stiles recognized. He turned to Peter and asked, “The Point? Isn’t it a little early in the day to be making out in the backseat of a car?”

Peter turned a disapproving look on Stiles. “It’s never too early if you’re with the right person.”

Stiles barked out a laugh and leaned as close to Peter as the seat belt permitted. “I stand corrected.”

There was a tiny park at the summit of the tallest of the hills surrounding Beacon Hills. There were a couple of educational plaques, a few faded wooden benches, and several large decorative boulders. Peter pulled into the tiny parking area, got out of the car, and pulled a couple of bags out of the trunk. He held out his hand to Stiles.

“I thought we were going to make out?”

“We can, but I actually wanted to talk to you.”

Stiles tensed. “This is about Derek, isn’t it?”

Peter squeezed his hand. “In a way. I know you’re worried about him coming back to live at the house. I thought you might appreciate a moment to prepare yourself.” Peter gestured to one of the benches and Stiles sat down.

“I also wanted to tell you a little more about what happened in Los Angeles, if you want to hear it.” Peter made a face. “It’s less than you might think. Derek did talk to his lawyer but he hasn’t said anything to me or Talia.”

Peter rummaged around in the small insulated bag and pulled out two cold sodas. He opened one and passed it to Stiles, and set the other one beside him on the bench. Stiles watched as Peter held up a familiar paper bag.

“Are those from the cafe?” Stiles asked.

“They are. I would have made something for you but I didn’t have a lot of time.” Peter opened the bag and held out a paper container out to Stiles.

Stiles flipped it open. “They’re still warm,” he said happily, and shoved a curly fry into his mouth. He hummed appreciatively with his first bite. “My favorite.” Stiles took another one, and smiled at Peter. “You take such good care of me.”

Peter set the container between them, and picked up his own soda. “You’re easy to care for.”

Stiles tensed, and looked away from Peter.

“What if I’m not?” Stiles asked hesitantly. “Derek...he got to know me and he decided that I was such a terrible omega that he didn’t want to bond with me. I tried to talk about this with Scott and he couldn’t...it was useless. He was so hung up on the idea that any alpha would reject an omega that he couldn’t hear anything else. You always hear about how rare omegas are and how alphas fight over them, and kidnap them, and...” Stiles sighed. “Derek had me. I was his, all signed and sealed, and he ran away from me.”

Peter shook his head. “Stiles...”

“I’m not even sure I want to know why Derek changed his mind. I mean, I think he changed it, but how am I supposed to know? I thought he really liked me. The way he looked at me, and the things
he said...I really thought we had something more than just ... compatible body parts.”

“Stiles,” Peter said gently, “I can’t speak for my nephew but I think the situation is more complicated than him losing interest in you and falling in love with someone else. I saw Derek and Kate Argent together in Los Angeles. There was something profoundly wrong between them. Whatever Derek told his lawyer was enough that all charges against Derek were dropped even though Argent’s lawyer was pushing for attempted murder. I think she manipulated him somehow, or found some way to force him to do what she wanted.”

Stiles groaned, and set the box of fries down on the bench. “I feel bad for him, I do. There’s a reason why a relationship like that is classified as a crime. But...he was courting me when she started teaching. If he lo...liked me, if he wanted to mate with me, how could that even happen?”

Peter sighed. “That is the question. I just don’t know what could have happened.”

Stiles went quiet for a moment, and took another swig of his soda. “I said he could come back home, and I meant it. It’s just hard. I’ve been so happy with you that I could just ignore all this and now I suddenly have to deal with it. It still hurts.”

Peter shifted the plastic container and moved over until he was sitting next to Stiles. He draped an arm around Stiles’s shoulders, and Stiles slumped over until his head was resting on Peter’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry that you’ve been hurt, I really am, but it’d be a lie for me to say I’m sorry this happened. Getting to know you, having you as my mate... it’s been more than I ever imagined and frankly, I imagined a lot.”

Stiles gave a faint, amused snort.

“I don’t know why Derek made the choices that he did, but his stupid, thoughtless loss has been my gain. Even if he never understands how much he gave up, I do. Anyone would be lucky to have you share their life.”

Stiles turned into Peter’s arms and buried his face against Peter’s neck. He stayed there for a long time, and when he pulled away his eyes were red-rimmed, but dry.

“I think the fries are cold. Sorry.” Stiles said quietly.

“That’s okay.”

“We should probably go home.”

Peter gathered up their trash, and then offered Stiles his hand. They walked back to the car together.

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Peter and Stiles were both quiet while they drove back to the house. Talking with Peter had helped, but Stiles was still worried about seeing Derek again. Stiles stared out the window and tried to imagine what it’d be like. He wanted to think he could be cool, polite, unaffected, but he suspected it was far more likely that he’d scream, or start crying, or maybe even throw up.

For five dizzying months he had thought Derek Hale was going to be his bonded mate, the person he’d been waiting to meet his entire life. He still remembered the thrill of excitement he’d felt when his father had brought home Derek’s photo and an invitation to dinner. He’d agreed immediately, then taken the photo to his room and stared at it forever, wondering if Derek might be the one, his one, his alpha. At that first meeting Derek had seemed like everything Stiles had wanted in an alpha
– strikingly beautiful, kind, and intelligent. He was almost the same age as Stiles, had a large family that he adored, and lived in the same town as Stiles and his father. He was quiet, and gentle, and endlessly patient with his little brothers. Derek had been perfect. It had been easy for Stiles to agree to the match, and every subsequent encounter seemed to confirm that Derek was the one Stiles was meant to bond with.

Stiles had gladly embraced every intimacy their formal courtship allowed. The first time he’d held hands with someone who wasn’t his mom or dad was with Derek, under the table during dinner. He could still remember the thrilling sensation of having a shared secret, the sweetness of the tremble in Derek’s warm fingers, the way the heat in their clasped hands seemed to warm up every part of him. He’d given Derek his first real kiss, a warm press of lips on Derek’s prickly cheek that had left him feeling daring, and then thrilled by the heated, happy look Derek had given him before he’d leaned in and kissed Stiles back. Derek had been quiet when they were together, but he always seemed happy to spend time with Stiles. Derek had opened up his entire life and had invited Stiles to make himself at home. Stiles had done exactly that.

For five perfect months Stiles had walked around believing that maybe something good and easy and right had finally happened for him, and it was the best thing, the most important thing. He had found his bond mate. His nervous trepidation of his first heat transformed into an eager anticipation of joining together with Derek. The idea of losing control didn’t sound so scary if Derek would be there to hold him. He’d fantasized about their bonding ceremony, going to college together, their future kids, his entire potential future, all at Derek’s side. Even thinking about his mom and wishing she could have been there couldn’t make him as sad as it usually did, because he knew how happy she would have been for him.

Even now, months later, the day Talia came to his house and told him that Derek wasn’t coming is still too painful to think about. It’s still something of a blur, but that moment before, right when he realized what was about to happen, what Talia was about to say, that moment of hopeless, desperate despair was engraved on Stiles’s heart like a wound that was still raw. The only reason it hadn’t been worse, the only reason he’d been able to hold it together even as well as he had that day, was the sheer wrenching terror of realizing that he was alone, abandoned, and his heat was only days away. He’d been too afraid of his immediate future to give in to his grief.

Stiles leaned back in his seat, took some deep calming breaths and glanced over at Peter. It had been okay, he reminded himself. Not what he had planned, not what he had thought he wanted, but not as bad as it could have been. He’d made it through and now he had Peter, who looked at Stiles with such warm affection that Stiles sometimes felt it like a physical touch. Peter, who sometimes stared at Stiles like he wondered how he’d ever gotten so lucky, who made Stiles feel the same way. Right from the beginning, when he’d been caught up in his worst nightmare, being physically bonded to an alpha he barely knew, somehow Peter had made it okay. No, Stiles thought, Peter had made it much more than okay.

Stiles was amazed by how much he liked Peter, who in so many ways was so very different from Derek. It scrambled Stiles’s view of the world. He’d always thought that there could only be one perfect person for anyone, a soulmate who would fit you in every way. He didn’t understand how he could fit so well with Peter when he’d thought he fit so well with Derek. Other than being quiet in very different ways, and their deep affection and connection to their family, Peter and Derek had almost nothing in common. Stiles had thought he was falling in love with Derek, and now here he was, just a few short months later, feeling a growing affection for Peter that he was hesitant to call love, but which he suspected was exactly that.

Stiles wasn’t sure what he expected from Derek, now that he was back in Beacon Hills. He expected Derek would probably apologize, but he tried to imagine how he would feel if Derek didn’t. Maybe
Derek had only felt relief in escaping from an unwanted mate. The thought made Stiles’s heart hurt. Even now, Stiles couldn’t believe that everything Derek had said was a lie, that the soft looks and touches had all been faked. Stiles was sure that, in the beginning at least, Derek had wanted him as his mate. He frowned. He’d never noticed any moment when he started to question if Derek was as invested as he was in their relationship. It made him feel stupid, and sad, and vulnerable. How could he ever trust his own judgement again, if he could misread someone he’d felt so close to? How could he trust that Peter was sincere, if he hadn’t been able to tell with Derek?

Stiles shook his head to clear it, and reached out to Peter. He laid his hand on Peter's lap and Peter took his hand without speaking. He was bonded to Peter. They weren’t just courting, they were physically bonded. Either things were going to work out with Peter or…no. Things were going to work out with Peter. There was no other option and luckily, it seemed to be true. Stiles loved spending time with him, and Peter seemed to enjoy spending time with Stiles. Stiles actually took comfort in thinking about Olivia and how blunt Peter had been with her. Peter wouldn’t waste his time trying to make someone believe something that wasn’t true, just because it might make them feel better. Peter might have been a bit cruel to Olivia, but at least he’d been honest. Peter liked Stiles, might even love him, and Stiles felt the same towards Peter. It didn’t matter what Derek Hale had thought or felt or decided. He just needed to remember that.

They arrived at home and Peter parked his car in the garage. Stiles grabbed his backpack from the trunk and took a deep breath. He squared his shoulders, and walked into the house, with Peter close behind him. He found Julia and Davey in the kitchen, and asked Julia if she wanted any help making dinner. Peter ran upstairs for his computer, and then came back downstairs to settle in at the table to work.

“He’s in his room,” Julia said quietly. “I don’t think he’s going to come down for dinner. He looked...tired.”

Stiles sighed. “He has to come down sometime,” he said quietly. Julia gave him a sympathetic look but didn’t say anything else. Stiles took up a head of washed lettuce and started ripping it into pieces. Julia and Stiles worked together preparing dinner, and one by one the kids wandered into the kitchen. Stiles helped Davey carefully chop the cucumbers and tomatoes for the salad. Ollie joined them, but was more interested in putting black olives on each of his fingers than helping with dinner.

Talia arrived home just as dinner was being set out on the table. Stiles’s dad was working a swing shift so he wouldn’t be back until well after dinner. Cora and Davey set the table, and then they were all sitting down to dinner, without Derek.

“Where’s Derek?” Ollie asked. “Isn’t he gonna eat with us?”

“Derek’s not feeling very well, remember?” Talia explained, “He got hurt while he was away and he’s going to need some time by himself to get better.”

Davey and Ollie protested at once, and Talia let them complain for a few minutes before she stopped them. “He just needs to rest for a little while, until he’s better.”

“We should save him a plate,” Julia said. “In case he gets hungry later.”

“I’ll make one,” Cora said, and after a few more grumbled complaints from Ollie, they moved onto other topics. Stiles made up a plate for his dad and set it in the fridge next to the one for Derek. He stared at the two plates, then retrieved a marker from the kitchen drawer. ‘Dad’, he wrote on one covered plate, and after a pause, wrote ‘Derek’ on the other. He and Peter went up to their bedroom after dinner, and Stiles finally relaxed a little once he was behind a locked door. He worked on homework at his desk while Peter worked in his study. When Stiles finished, he got ready for bed.
and read for a while. Peter joined him a short while later, and Stiles curled up gratefully in Peter’s arms.

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A week passed and Stiles still hadn’t seen Derek. A couple times he’d come down in the morning to see a dirty plate sitting in the sink, but Derek’s door was constantly closed and Stiles didn’t see him at meals or anywhere else. He could tell from Ollie’s and Davey’s complaints that Derek wasn’t spending time with anyone in the family at all. Talia reminded them that Derek was sick, that he needed time to recover, but she walked around with a worried frown on her face when she was at home, and more than once Stiles heard her knocking on Derek’s door. It was Davey and Ollie who felt Derek’s avoidance most acutely. Every day, one or both of the boys knocked on Derek’s door, trying to coax him to play, or even just to come down for dinner, and every day they were turned away. Stiles’s vague sense of relief at not having to deal with Derek was quickly losing out to his sympathy for the disappointed faces Ollie and Davey wore, every time they came back downstairs alone. Cora appeared just as crushed, although in typical tween fashion she responded by getting angry and pretending she didn’t miss her brother.

On Saturday, Stiles came downstairs to see Ollie lying on the couch, staring at nothing. Stiles usually woke early to watch TV with Ollie and Davey, but Ollie was almost always the first one awake.

“Hey, Ollie, what’s going on? Why aren’t you watching cartoons?” Stiles sat on the sofa by Ollie, and threw his arms up to catch Ollie when he sat up, and threw himself against Stiles’s chest.

“Derek won’t come watch cartoons with me.” Ollie looked up at Stiles, sniffing, eyes tearing up. “He won’t do nothing! He won’t play Legos with me, or read to me, and he doesn’t want to watch cartoons, he just lays in bed all day, all the time.” Ollie started crying in earnest. “Why doesn’t he want to play with me anymore? He was gone forever and now he’s back but he’s not! He’s not back, at all!”

Stiles held Ollie, and patted him on the back until his crying trailed away into a miserable whimpering.

“Derek loves you so much. I’ll bet it makes him sad that he can’t play with you.” Stiles hesitated for a moment, then said, “Let me go talk to him. Maybe if I tell him how much you miss him, maybe he’ll come down for a just a little while.”

Ollie sat up so fast Stiles had to lean away quickly to keep Ollie’s head from cracking into his jaw. “Yes! You go ask him, Stiles! Alphas always have to be nice to omegas. That’s what Mama always says! He’ll say yes to you! Go ask!”

Stiles got up, and walked upstairs, looking back once to see Ollie happily turning on the TV and then settling in the middle of the sofa. Stiles paused outside his own door, where Peter was still sleeping, then kept walking down the hall. He stopped in front of Derek’s closed door, hesitated, then forced himself to lift up his hand, and knock.

There was no response for a long time. Stiles knocked again, and then the door opened and there was Derek.

Stiles barely recognized him. There had been a picture of Derek in the trophy case at school, next to a plaque of the basketball team that had won all state last year. He’d had a huge grin, one wide hand wrapped around the top of the trophy, his other draped around one of his teammate’s necks. For five months Stiles had paused at that picture every day, sometimes twice a day, just to see Derek’s smile. He’d loved that picture of Derek.
The boy standing in the doorway looked like he’d never smiled before and likely never would again. He was thinner than Stiles remembered and there was a healing set of scratches scored down his cheek from the corner of his eye to his chin. He had a fading bruise on his jaw, which was half-covered with a patchy growth of a stubble that only highlighted the bruise and purple bags beneath his eyes. He actually looked physically ill, and the stale scent of someone who hadn’t bathed in days rolled out of the open door. When Derek saw Stiles at his door, he froze like a wounded animal spotting a predator.

“Is this because of me?” Stiles asked quietly.

Derek just stared at him, not blinking.

“I…This is your home, Derek. You don’t have to hide in your room if you’re hiding for me. Or from me, I guess. Everyone misses you. Ollie misses you so much and he doesn’t really understand any of this. I know you’ve had a really bad time, and I know we should probably talk about everything that happened, but we don’t have to do it right now. Just…come watch some cartoons, okay?”

Derek swallowed, and nodded. They stared at each other for a moment, and then Stiles turned back towards the stairs. Stiles sat on one side of Ollie, and Ollie stared transfixed at the cartoons on the screen. A few minutes later he heard soft footsteps on the stairs. Stiles kept his eyes fixed on the cartoons, and a moment later sensed Derek, bundled in a dark green robe, sit gingerly on the other side of Ollie. Ollie didn’t bother looking away from the cartoons as he stood up on the sofa, and flopped down into Derek’s lap. Derek brought his arms up around Ollie, as he wiggled around until he was comfortable. Ollie crinkled his nose at Derek’s smell, which was barely masked by fresh deodorant and the robe. He just laid his head back and stayed there.

Stiles couldn’t take the strange silent tension he felt sitting on the sofa next to Derek. The last time they’d been on this couch had been while they’d been courting, sitting knee to knee, hands entwined, whispering back and forth while everyone else had lingered over dessert. He could still remember the sweet, chocolate-scented puff of Derek’s breath against his ear. He stared blankly at the TV for the rest of the episode, and then stood up to go back to his room. He stopped for a moment to meet Derek’s eyes.

“Come down for dinner.” He didn’t wait for Derek’s response. He walked back upstairs, and crawled back into bed with Peter. Peter was awake and he didn’t say anything when Stiles pushed himself into Peter’s arms and held on.

Derek came down that night for dinner. Talia almost dropped a pitcher of iced tea when she saw Derek shuffle into the dining room. He had showered and shaved, and somehow that made him look even worse. The bruise and the scratches on his cheek stood out in sharp relief. Davey jumped up excitedly when he saw Derek and pulled him to sit between him and Ollie. Stiles and Julia looked at each other, then started passing around the food like it was any other dinner. Derek stared at the first dish Davey handed to him as if he’d never seen anything like it before, but eventually reached out and helped himself. He ate quietly, barely needing to talk between Cora, Davey, and Ollie overflowing with news they had all been waiting to share with their big brother. He even managed a few fleeting smiles that never touched his eyes.

Derek thanked Julia for dinner along with everyone else, and helped clear the table. As soon as the last dish was back in the kitchen, he vanished back upstairs with an excuse for Davey and Ollie when they begged him to stay and play.

After that, Derek joined them at dinner most nights. He tried to respond when people spoke to him, but otherwise sat quietly, mechanically eating his dinner. He still spent the rest of the time in his room, although Stiles heard the shower start up in Derek’s adjoining bathroom a few times late at
night when he was up studying. From Ollie he heard that Derek was spending a little time with him in the early afternoon, before Stiles got home from school, but Stiles only saw Derek at dinner, and not once did Derek speak to him directly. Stiles watched Derek trying to quietly slip away after dinner, and decided that he’d had enough. It was time to clear the air between them. He followed Derek, and called his name just as he reached the staircase.

“Derek.”

Derek froze, his shoulder’s hunching. “Yeah?”

“Can I talk to you please? Outside.”

Derek didn’t respond, just turned and followed Stiles out of the back door, and into the garden. There was a curved bench at the edge of the garden, surrounded by a clump of irises. It was far enough away from the house to feel fairly private. Stiles sat, and gestured for Derek to do the same. He watched Derek perch on the edge of the bench, as far away from Stiles as he could possibly get. Stiles watched him and thought about the Derek who’d been so eager to sit close to Stiles that they’d practically been in each other’s laps.

“You don’t have to avoid me, you know.”

Derek hunched into himself and didn’t answer, didn’t look at Stiles.

“Look, Derek, yeah, I am mad that you lied to me. If you fell in love with someone else…”

Derek looked up, his face shocked. “I didn’t!”

Stiles faltered. “But…Mrs. Argent, I mean, your wife…”

Derek was shaking his head. “I never loved her.”

Stiles took a deep breath. “I’m really confused. Can you just…tell me what happened? I thought you were happy and that we were going to be bonded. Then suddenly you were gone. Just tell me the truth, whatever it is. I can’t stand that I don’t know what happened.” Stiles sniffed, and suddenly realized that he was crying. He looked away, and wiped his face. “Just tell me.”

Derek glanced at Stiles, then away, his face stricken. “Please don’t cry, Stiles…I can’t ever…I’m sorry. So, so sorry. I messed up. There’s nothing I can say to make it right, but if anyone…if you want the truth, if you want anything, I’ll give it to you, if I can.”

The silence between them stretched so long, Stiles wasn’t sure Derek was going to say anything.

“A couple of weeks after we arranged the bond, Kate took over for Mrs. Fitzhugh.” Derek’s voice was flat, his words halting, as if he were telling a story he wasn’t particularly interested in. “She was really nice to me. She told me I was too smart, and too special to just be her student. She said she wanted to be my friend.”

Derek’s face twisted in a sneer. “I believed her, everything she said, every word. I was so flattered that she was treating me like an adult who was worth spending time with. Half the guys in class were panting after her, and she just ignored them to talk to me.”

Derek looked at Stiles. “I really did think she was my friend. I even told her about you, and how excited I was to meet you and how much I was looking forward to bonding with you.”

Stiles looked at Derek, and saw that he was crying too, his hands fisted in his lap.
“She said she was happy for me.”

Derek stared over the lawn. “I believed that too.”

“Kate said she was happy, but she started asking for more and more of my time. She kept saying she would hardly ever see me after the bonding and that she wanted to hang out with me while she could. She acted like she really liked me, not just that I was an alpha or good at basketball.”

“She asked me to go with her to a party with some of her friends. She made it seem like it was some kind of honor, asking a student to go with her somewhere.”

Derek wrapped his arms around himself. “The party wasn’t anything like I thought. It was a couple towns over so she picked me up from the library and drove me. I didn’t know anyone there. They had the music cranked up so loud it was hurting my ears, and everyone was drinking, and smoking, and everything stank. People kept touching me and talking about me, but no one talked to me. They acted like me being there with Kate was some kind of joke. I knew I’d made a mistake so I asked Kate to take me home. She kept telling me not to act like such a baby and she kept pushing drinks into my hand.”

Derek shook his head. “I should have known. I should have walked out of that house and just walked back to Beacon Hills or called my mom or Uncle Peter or anyone, but I was too embarrassed. I felt so stupid. I didn’t know what to do, so I just waited for her to take me home.”

Stiles stared at Derek, suddenly terrified by what Derek might say next. He wanted to stop him, to say he didn’t want to know after all, but Derek continued in the same flat voice.

“She pulled me into a bedroom.”

“Oh Derek,” Stiles whispered, but Derek didn’t seem to hear him. “She started touching me and saying how pretty I was, and how much she wanted me. I tried to get her off me but she just wouldn’t stop. She kept pushing and pushing.” Derek looked up, and met Stiles’s eyes for an instant, before he looked down again. “So I stopped fighting. I let it happen. I thought, if I just get it over with, she’ll get off me and then she’ll take me home.”

Derek’s voice went quiet. “I know I don’t have an excuse. I’m stronger than she is. I should have been able to stop her. I still don’t understand why I didn’t.”

“Derek…”

“I never meant to cheat on you, Stiles, not ever. But I let it happen.”

“I told her after that I was done. I didn’t want to see her again. I told myself it was a onetime stupid mistake. I didn’t even want it, so I told myself it didn’t count. I thought I would just never tell anyone and never see her again and it would be like it never happened. I dropped out of her class and just stayed away from her.”

Derek slumped over his lap, eyes fixed firmly on the ground.

“The day before I left, she cornered me at school and told me she was pregnant.”

Stiles’s hands flew up to cover his mouth.

“She told me if I didn’t marry her, she’d have an abortion.”

“Derek…”
“It was my fault. I let her push me into sex. I’m the one who cheated on his promised bondmate. I couldn’t let my baby pay the price for me being so stupid.”

Derek looked at Stiles with hollow eyes. “It’s what I deserved. So I left.”

“It wasn’t you, Stiles. It was never you. It was me. I was stupid, so stupid, and I let myself get flattered and manipulated and I hurt you. It’s all my fault. If I’d been smarter, or less trusting, or god, just less stupid none of this would ever have happened. I let everyone down.”

Derek made a bitter, derisive sound. “You know the best part? I let her ruin my life and it wasn’t even true. After Peter came to see me in LA, she was so angry. She…punished me and then she told me it wasn’t true. She wasn’t pregnant. She’d never been pregnant. She said it had just been so much fun to fuck me the first time that she decided she wasn’t done with me.”

Stiles stared at Derek, stricken. He searched his mind but there were no words that would make any of what had happened to Derek okay.

Derek looked up. “You can’t know how sorry I am that I wasn’t there for you when you needed me. If I could do anything to change what happened I would. The thing with Kate…I never wanted it. I never wanted her. I was just stupid and I let her use me and then I was trapped and I’m so sorry, Stiles that I hurt you.” Derek’s voice broke. “Tell me what you want me to do. If you want me to move out, I will. Anything you want, just tell me what to do.”

Stiles stared at Derek with huge, shocked eyes, still reeling from everything Derek had revealed. Without thinking about it, he shook his head.

“No, don’t move out. I…Derek…I’m so sorry that happened to you. It’s not your fault.”

Derek shook his head and tentatively Stiles reached out, and took one of Derek’s hands. Derek went rigid at his touch, but Stiles slowly wrapped his hand around Derek’s, and squeezed. “It’s not. What that…woman did to you was a crime. It wasn’t your fault.”

Derek gingerly enfolded Stiles’s hand in both of his, and then seemed to collapse over it, bending down until his face was pressed against the back of Stiles’s palm. Stiles felt the humid puff of Derek’s breath against his hand, then the hot wet fall of tears.

Stiles bit his lip, and then brought his other hand to rest lightly on the back of Derek’s head. Derek shuddered, and a ragged sob ripped out of him. A faint movement caught Stiles’s eye, and he saw Peter standing up from the chairs at the side of the house, where he sometimes retreated to read before dinner. From across the lawn, he saw Peter staring at him and Derek, now sitting side by side on the bench, before he turned and walked up the path to the house. The screen door closed behind him, the sound crisp enough that Stiles had a sudden realization.

Peter had heard everything.
On some nights, Derek could hear them. The walls of the house were well-insulated, designed to provide as much privacy as possible in a house full of alphas and omegas, but there wasn’t enough insulation in the world to entirely cancel out alpha hearing. Derek’s bedroom on the third floor was on the opposite side of the house from Peter’s bedroom, but their bathrooms shared a common wall. Before, that hadn’t bothered Derek, it wasn’t something he really noticed. Other than the murmur of an occasional late-night phone call, Peter was quiet. He’d been a good neighbor.

Now, there was Stiles. Stiles was loud. His raised voice would seep through the walls and drift into Derek’s room. It was faint enough that if it had been any other sound, Derek would probably have been able to ignore it. But not Stiles. Not these sounds.

He knew he should grab headphones and crank up some music, but he couldn’t bring himself to do it, couldn’t bring himself to drown out the faint echo of Stiles’s gasping voice. He lay in the dark and listened to the noises coming through the wall.

“Peter…Peter…”

He could hear the distant creak of wood and metal and bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. He wanted to get up and open his bathroom door so he could hear better. He wanted to cover his head with pillows until he couldn’t hear anything at all. He’d kissed Stiles once, after they’d agreed to be bonded, and before Kate. Stiles had smiled at him, then leaned forward and kissed him, right on his cheek. He could still remember the warm tingle he’d felt at the touch of Stiles’s soft lips against his skin. He could remember the silken warmth of skin beneath his own lips when he’d leaned forward and returned the kiss. Stiles’s sweet omega scent had turned that simple touch into a benediction. He’d stared at Stiles’s pretty pink mouth when he’d drawn back and felt only sweet anticipation.

“Oh god, Peter…”

He’d never gotten to hear Stiles say his name, not like that. He’d thought about it. It made him feel ashamed to remember, now that Stiles was mated to Peter, but he’d spent months dreaming about what it would be like to touch Stiles, to have Stiles touch him. He’d fingered the soft bulge at the base of his cock and wondered what it would be like to knot himself inside of Stiles’s body. That had been the best his body had ever felt, when he’d touched himself thinking about Stiles.

He turned to his side, shoved his fingers in his ears, and clenched his eyes shut so tight that they hurt.

He could still hear them.

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Derek fell in love with Stiles at first sight. He didn’t tell anyone. He couldn’t. It was too private, too tender, a revelation the moment he turned to meet the omega his mother had invited over for dinner and he looked into Stiles’s wide, beautiful amber eyes. Derek’s entire body flushed with excitement and terror and joy. “There you are!” he thought, and for almost four and a half sweet months, everything was perfect.

Derek tried so hard to be respectful, to abide by the terms of formal courting, but, oh, how Derek yearned for Stiles. Some nights his desire for Stiles was too much and he slipped out of his house and ran to Stiles’s. He’d sit outside, just close enough to make out the sounds of Stiles eating dinner, walking around the house, doing homework. He knew he was crossing lines, invading Stiles’s
privacy, but some days he felt like he was dying from a lack of Stiles. Being able to sit with his back pressed against the house where Stiles lived eased the ache inside of him. He felt ridiculous, missing someone he saw almost every day, but if he’d had his way, Stiles would have never left after that first dinner. The sheriff was the one who’d insisted on a full formal courtship, on waiting for Stiles’s heat before the bonding, a formal bonding before Stiles could move in to the Hale’s house. Derek had reluctantly agreed. He looked forward to every permissible interaction, and cleaned his room almost daily. He emptied drawers in his dresser, made room in his closet, and imagined Stiles everywhere.

There was a tree near Stiles’s window and Derek knew it would be ridiculously easy to climb it, and sit hidden in its branches and watch Stiles. Some nights he was sorely tempted, desperate for even a glimpse of his intended, but he never went that far. Once he was up in that tree, Stiles’s window would be a short leap away, and...well...

Leaving his house to elope with Kate was the hardest thing he’d ever done in his life. Leaving his room felt like leaving every hope and dream he’d had for a future with Stiles. He shoved a handful of clothing into his backpack and touched one of the new empty hangers he’d bought for Stiles that would now never be used. He thought again about waiting up for his mother, confessing everything, begging her for her help, but Kate’s voice rang in his ears. His mother, his entire family would be ashamed and disgusted. Stiles would despise him for cheating. If he stayed, he’d be killing his baby and be left with nothing anyway. She'd laid it all out for him with cruel logic until he understood that he had no other options. He left silently, without looking back.

At the wedding, Kate acted strangely. She’d been so cool and business-like when she had demanded that Derek marry her, Derek was convinced that Kate was only marrying him for the baby. Standing in front of the minister, as Derek stumbled over the beta wedding vows he’d never expected to say, she actually started crying. She stared at him with tears rolling down her cheeks and said her vows so sincerely, Derek wondered if he’d misread her entirely. She kissed him then, so tenderly that Derek shivered, and kissed her back.

That night, after checking into the hotel, Kate worked her way through half a bottle of champagne and insisted they consummate the marriage. Derek had been dreading this, dreading touching her since he agreed to marry her. The memory of Kate and what had happened at the party haunted him. He only had to close his eyes to remember everything in perfect, vivid, detail. That first shocking kiss, her mouth tasting of beer, pushing against him while he stumbled back. Trying to push her off, trying not to hurt her, still thinking of her as his friend, thinking she must be drunk, confused. Her rough, insistent hands, shoving themselves under his clothes, touching him everywhere. That moment, lying on a pile of coats that reeked of strangers, when he realized Kate wasn’t going to stop. The confusion and shame he’d felt, realizing his body was responding to her touch. Lying there, eyes clenched shut, shaking from the blunt physical pleasure of his orgasm, realizing that he’d let Kate take what he’d promised to Stiles.

On their wedding night, he kept his eyes open and did whatever she told him to. He went down on her until she pushed him away with a disgusted snarl, and then fucked her as gently as he could, worried that he might hurt the baby. He saw her close her eyes, saw how her face softened, and her arms wrapped around his shoulders. When she came, she called someone else’s name.

Before Kate, the worst moment of Derek’s life had been when his father had died. He would have named that moment without hesitation. Now, after Kate, he had so many worst moments that it was hard for Derek to remember anything else.

Kate wasn’t his first. Sometimes he thought of that, and it felt like a relief, one less thing that she had taken from him. He’d dated someone the year before he met Stiles, a pretty brunette beta who’d been
so sweet and kind that he’d seriously considered a relationship with a beta for the first time. He wasn’t sure he was in love, but he cared for Paige, enough to agree when she asked him to come over when her parents were out of town. He’d lost his virginity to her in her frilly pink bed, and she’d been so pretty, and the sex had been so good, that Derek had thought maybe she might be the one. They’d dated for two months and slept together a half-dozen more times before he overheard her talking with one of her friends. Having sex with an alpha was worth putting up with Derek’s personality, she’d said, and then laughed. He never told her, or anyone, why he broke up with her.

Kate liked to drink, and enjoyed forcing him to drink because he hated it. Eventually, he came to like it too. Not the taste, never the taste, but he embraced the numb dizziness that came with being perpetually drunk. It made being with Kate, doing whatever she wanted him to do, bearable. Most of their honeymoon was a blur in Derek’s mind. Drinking made it easier to accept that his body would respond to her touch. It made it easier for him to not think about everything he’d lost. Kate complained he was a lousy lover, and even worse when he was drunk, but Derek didn’t care. She’d gotten exactly what she’d demanded.

Kate liked to hurt him. She started during their honeymoon, and never stopped. Her nails ran along his back and drew blood. She pulled on his hair hard enough to make his eyes water. She liked to push him around, sneering when he didn’t resist her, didn’t fight back when both of them knew he was far stronger than her, and could have ripped her apart. She made it seem like a laughable weakness, that he would never consider hurting the woman carrying his baby, no matter what she did to him. The less he fought, the more passively he acceded to her demands, the wilder and crueler she got. Nothing he did was ever right, or good enough, and her venom came out coated in honey.

The worst was when she would arch her back, rest her hand on her flat belly, and say, poor baby, if only her daddy wasn’t such a loser, a shitty lay, a pathetic excuse for an alpha, her mommy wouldn’t be driven to drink. Then she’d turn to Derek with wide eyes, and say, I hope this doesn’t hurt the baby as she tossed back another drink. It made Derek frantic, paralyzed, unable to do anything except apologize, and try harder, do his best to act like a man crazy with love. Strangely, as much as she acted like she despised him, she loved it when he groveled and clung to her. It was one of the few things that appeased her when she was angry.

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Derek’s mom came to see him in jail in Los Angeles. She brought promises to help him, a classmate from her law school to defend him, and Uncle Peter. Derek didn’t feel anything when he saw them, just the same formless dull grey emptiness that had seized him as he stood over Kate’s bleeding body and realized what he’d done. His mom visited every day she could, and when he refused to speak, she talked and talked, trying to rouse him from his apathy, trying to get him to respond, to work with his lawyer, anything, while he sat, staring at his hands. One day, she started talking about Stiles.

“What about Stiles? Did you even think what would happen to Stiles?”

Kate had said that Stiles would find someone else. Kate had said that omegas were so in demand that Stiles would have alphas throwing themselves at his feet, better alphas than Derek. Stiles wouldn’t even notice that Derek was gone. Each word had hurt, scouring him raw but Derek hadn’t argued. He never argued with Kate. Still, Derek couldn’t bear to hold Kate’s words in his mouth, even to repeat them to his mother. He just shook his head in the face of his mother’s disappointment.

“Can you imagine what it was like for him to be on the verge of his first heat, trusting that you, his promised bondmate would take care of him, when you suddenly vanish and he’s left with nothing? What did you think he would do, Derek? After six months of knowing you were going to be his bondmate, to have just a couple of days to find another alpha? What if one of your brothers or sisters...
was an omega and someone did that to them? Would you want them to meet a complete stranger and be forced into bed with them for their first heat a couple days later?"

Derek thought about Stiles at their first meeting, how quiet he’d been when Derek knew, had seen him in his natural state at school, talking a mile a minute, with a bright, wide smile. After they’d decided to proceed with the formal courting, Stiles and Derek had been given a precious moment alone. Stiles had reached out and tangled his fingers against Derek’s and shyly whispered, “I’m glad it’s going to be you.”

The memory hit him like a knife. He shook his head but he didn’t think his mom really understood. There was absolutely nothing she could say to make Derek feel worse than he already did. He had no excuses.

How could he have done this? It still felt utterly unreal to him. He felt like he was trapped in a nightmare, something he struggled to wake up from again and again only to find each time he was still trapped. He stared at his mother’s sad, angry face and one thought sluggishly percolated up through the seething self-hatred that filled him.

“Is he okay?”

“Do you care?”

Derek dropped his gaze to the floor. He had nothing to say, no way to defend himself or his actions. He didn’t even deserve to know what had happened to his ma…to Stiles.

“Ask Peter,” she said, and left.

Uncle Peter had come to see him the next day.

“Mom wouldn’t tell me what happened to Stiles.”

It was the first thing Derek had said, other than “yes,” and “no,” and “sorry”, all week. His uncle had just stared at him, his face unreadable, for so long that Derek didn’t think he was going to answer Derek either.

“He went through the government match.”

Derek cringed, so ashamed he could barely breathe. He knew how Stiles felt about the match. Is he okay? Is he happy? Did he pick a good alpha? Did he have to leave his dad? Where is he? The words crowded his throat and choked him. Only a shuddering, wet breath emerged.

“He chose me.”

Derek’s head snapped up and he stared at his uncle. Peter? Uncle Peter? Derek’s mind went blank and he stared at his uncle’s impassive face. He tried to imagine Stiles, his bright, beautiful, loud, happy Stiles in Peter’s arms, sharp, sarcastic Uncle Peter, who could be so impatient, and carelessly cruel. The same Uncle Peter who’d stepped in and held everything together when Derek’s father had died, who’d held Derek so many nights when he thought he’d be swallowed whole by his grief. Under it all, a voice was wailing something he’d known all along: Stiles was bonded to someone else.

The first sob took Derek by surprise. It ripped out of his chest, as loud as a shout. He bent over, buried his face in his hands and cried, hard. It felt like the pain that had been building in his chest since he’d left Beacon Hills was overflowing – there just wasn’t any more room for it until he let some out. “I’m glad,” was all that Derek managed to choke out, before he was sobbing again. Glad
you were there for him, he wanted to say. Glad he didn’t have to bond to a complete stranger. Glad it was to someone Derek knew would cherish Stiles the way he deserved to be.

Peter waited until Derek was done, hollowed out and shivering.

“Stiles wouldn’t want you to go to jail,” Peter said. “You need to talk to your lawyer.”

Derek’s gaze snapped to Peter’s face. The impassive expression was gone, and the softer expression he remembered from when his dad had died, from the times Uncle Peter thought no one was looking was staring back at him.

Derek nodded.

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Living with Stiles was Derek’s punishment. Sometimes he saw Stiles sitting on the sofa, and he would look up and smile at Derek. For one amazing second Derek believed that it had all been some terrible dream, that he’d bonded with Stiles as they’d planned, that Stiles was his mate, and had been waiting for him to come home. For one second, he felt like he had the right to walk over Stiles and wrap him up in his arms. The rush of relief never lasted longer than a heartbeat though, before the reality would come crushing down on him. Stiles wasn’t his, would never be his. Stiles would always be waiting for someone else.

But watching Stiles smile, play with Davey and Ollie, and talk and laugh at dinner, was something Derek never thought he’d experience again. He never thought he’d be even a small part of Stiles’s life. It was painfully obvious Stiles still cared about him. After their conversation in the garden, Stiles came to him and forgave him, for everything. He seemed to think that the only thing Derek was guilty of was not asking for help. Everything else, Stiles blamed on Kate. He talked Derek into coming to dinner every evening, and dragged him outside on sunny days to play with the younger kids, and downstairs to watch Saturday morning cartoons, even though Stiles still smelled sad and anxious whenever he was around Derek for too long. He asked Derek to speak to a therapist, and then pushed a business card into his hand a week later when Derek hadn’t done anything about it.

So what if what he had from Stiles was a scrap, the tiniest part of the glorious whole. It was at least something. He tried to set aside everything that he’d imagined, before Kate, and accept what was left to him. He’d had four and a half months of genuine happiness with Stiles. Not everyone got even that much.

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Derek withdrew from school. He was less than a semester away from graduating but he didn’t care. The thought of trying to go back to his life before Kate was impossible. The thought of walking back through the halls where he’d met her and he’d let her into his life was unbearable. He didn’t want to see anyone he’d known before Kate. He’d had friends, teammates, people he’d studied with, but he didn’t want to see any of them. The Derek they thought they knew was dead and gone, and he had nothing left to offer anyone. His mom was unhappy, but for the first time, Derek didn’t really care. He knew he’d let her down, but dropping out of high school seemed like the least of Derek’s failures.

Derek started to go for runs in the preserve, long, long runs, every day, rain or shine. He had done some running in high school, for basketball, but nothing like this. He ran like he was being chased, ran until he was nauseated and shaking, drenched in sweat. He ran until his legs gave out from under him and he collapsed where he stood. He ran until he knew every inch of the preserve, until his shoes wore out, and his body ached all the time. His hands and arms were torn up from running
through underbrush, and he could see the concern in his mom’s eyes, and in Stiles’s. He found a route that he liked, a brutal path that was uphill almost the entire way, through the old growth and untouched until his regular runs formed a thin, well-worn path. At the end, there was a peak that dropped off into a narrow ravine, with a stream at the bottom, surrounded by a grove of craggy trees. The first time Derek had run there, he’d almost stumbled into the ravine, its edges hidden by a tangle of bracken. Derek had dropped to the ground and stared into the ravine. It was deep with a sharp drop off, and the fall was straight down onto the rocky creek below. An unwary runner, maybe at twilight, could easily slip, lose his footing, and fall into the ravine by accident. Entirely by accident.

Derek ran to the ravine every day, and stared down into it until his breathing was slow and even and he tried hard not to think about anything in particular. Then he turned, and ran back to the house.

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Kate bent her head as she walked into the bar. The pungent smell of cigar smoke and cheap booze made her dizzy for a minute. The jacket she wore was two sizes two big, the hood deep enough to keep her face in shadow if she kept her face down.

She lifted her head to look around the bar, ignored the hiss of a man sitting at a table near her, the quiet curse he gave when he saw her face.

There.

She walked briskly across the bar, ignoring the two men who came to their feet as she got closer to her target. She raised her head to glare at them, and they stepped back, allowing her to walk up to the table and pull out a chair. She sat down.

“What mess have you gotten yourself into now?” Gerard’s voice was calm, a little distant, and suddenly Kate felt like she was seven, nine, twelve years old again, and watching him walk away.

“Hi Daddy. I’m glad to see you too.” She said sharply.

“Cut the crap, Katie. You only come to see me when you’ve screwed up. What is it this time?”

Kate lifted her face so it caught the light.

“Gerard grabbed her chin, pushed back her hood and studied her face. Kate tried to hold still under his rough touch. She knew what he saw, the four deep claw marks running from her left temple down and across her face all the way to her jaw. The entire length of the wounds was held together with hundred of tiny black stitches. They were small, tidy, but there were so many that the wounds looked enormous. The one across her nose was deep enough it had carved a groove into the bone. She knew that even with plastic surgery, her face would never look normal again.

Gerard dropped her chin. “Were you sleeping with him?”

“What? Daddy...”

Gerard made a grimace of distaste. “Don’t you daddy me. I know you’ve had a taste for those filthy animals since you were tall enough to sniff them, just like that bitch that dropped you. You got what you deserved, spreading your legs for another one of those things.”

Kate pressed her lips together, pushing down the surge of hurt with long practice and focusing instead on her anger. “That’s what you have to say? I got attacked by an alpha and you blame me? Aren’t you always saying they’re nothing but animals with no self-control? How is this my fault?”
“Well, maybe if you stopped fucking them you wouldn’t keep getting hurt.” Gerard’s voice was still calm, a little bored, the same tone that had told Kate all her life that she wasn’t worth getting excited about. “You’re a beta, Katie, you were meant to stay with your own kind. None of this would have happened if you’d done what you should have, and found yourself a nice beta man to marry and settle down with, instead of whoring yourself to those animals.”

“I’m not a whore.” Kate said tightly.

“Is that what you told yourself when that alpha you run off with dumped you like a piece of trash? You were nothing to him. He talked you into abandoning you family, abandoning everything I taught you, and what did he do? He used you to keep his dick wet until he could get himself a piece of omega tail.”

“Ivan loved me!” Kate snapped, furious at herself for letting her father get to her.

Gerard snorted. “Loved you so much he left you high and dry as soon as some cute little omega wagged her tail at him? He ran off to get bonded before your sheets were even cold.”

Kate froze so she wouldn’t flinch. Her father detested signs of weakness.

“I helped you with that didn’t I, paid him back, and the little bitch he left you for.”

“I didn’t ask you to kill him,” Kate hissed quietly.

Gerard’s voice was equally low. “But you wanted his bitch dead. How did you think he would react to having his omega attacked? Did you really think he’d step aside and watch? You knew exactly what would happen to him when you asked for my help.”

“No, I just...” Kate said weakly.

“I went out on a limb for you Katie. You know how much attention that whole thing attracted? Alpha and his pregnant omega bitch getting beaten to death on the street? I did that for you, and I made sure he knew it too, before I put him down. How do you repay me? By running after the next mutt willing to stick his filthy alpha dick in you.” Gerard shook his head. “You disgust me.”

Kate stood up. “An alpha used me, and then he attacked me. He didn’t even go to trial. His whole family are nothing but alphas and omegas, a whole nest of them, all laughing at how they can do whatever they want to betas and get away with it. His alpha mommy made a deal with the alpha judge and he walked right out of that prison without so much as a ticket. They just let him go, after he did this to me.” Kate pointed at her face. “He turned into an animal and sliced me open and he’s home right now, like nothing happened. Is that justice?”

Gerard picked up his beer and took a swallow. “Don’t think you can manipulate your old man so easily, Katie. I know exactly what you want.” He said scornfully.

Kate pulled a folded piece of paper out of her pocket and slapped it on the table between them. “His name is Derek Hale. He lives in Beacon Hills, California. Here’s everything I know about them, address, phone numbers, everything I know about his family, names, ages. A whole pack of alphas living together in one house, one of whom fucked your daughter. Who hurt your beta daughter and got away with it. Do what you want.”

She turned, and stormed out, her head bowed low.

Gerard took a long drink of his beer and stared at the piece of paper lying on the table.
Peter never expected to be ambushed in his own bathroom, and definitely not by Stiles.

He was brushing his teeth, thinking about a case at work when Stiles wandered into the bathroom and hopped up to sit on the counter. Stiles watched him brush for a moment, before he asked “Will you come to the spring formal with me?”

Peter choked on his toothpaste.

Stiles patted him on the back as he coughed and spluttered. He rinsed out his mouth thoroughly, mind racing as he tried to think of a nice way to refuse. After he wiped his mouth, he turned back to see Stiles looking uncertain, and a little bit hurt. Peter shook his head and reached out for him. “I’m sorry, Stiles, you took me by surprise. Of course I’ll go to the spring formal with you if you want. I would be proud to be seen with you anywhere.”

Stiles looked at him with a slight frown on his face. “Are you sure? You don’t seem very excited.”

The two of them walked out into the bedroom and sat on the edge of their bed.

Peter sighed. “High school was not so much fun that I’ve been eager to re-visit it. I don’t even go to my high school reunions. Plus… I’m a grown man who’s going to be attending a high school dance, and not as a chaperone.” Peter sighed again. “It’s going to be creepy. A grown man in a tuxedo hanging out at a high school dance, at his former high school.” Peter pictured himself standing amidst a sea of flailing, hormonal teenagers, and grimaced.

“You’re my mate. I happen to be in high school. There’s nothing creepy about it.” Stiles insisted.

Peter flopped backwards on the bed. "I'll probably know some of your teachers from when I was in their classes.” Peter groaned and covered his face. "There won’t even be anything to drink."

Stiles grinned, and slid onto to Peter, shifting his hips until he was straddling him. “Hey, you can totally hook me up with booze! I didn’t even think about that.”

Peter glared up at Stiles. “I am not hooking you up with anything. You can drink lukewarm punch with the rest of the kiddies.” Even as he spoke he wrapped his hands around Stiles’s hips. Stiles was wearing one of the silk night shirts Peter had surreptitiously purchased for him at Micah’s shop, and the slide of fabric over skin made Stiles groan in appreciation.

Stiles wiggled his hips and pouted unconvincingly. “Really, Peter? You wouldn’t buy me a bottle of something fancy for our first formal event together?"

Peter shifted his hips to maximize his enjoyment of the friction Stiles was providing and hummed. “Really. Bondmate or not, your father would kill me.”

Stiles sighed, and stopped wiggling. “Yeah, that’s true. Actually, speaking of bonding, my spring break is coming up. Did...did you still want to have our bonding ceremony before then?”

“I do, very much,” Peter said, far more enthusiastically than he had responded to the invitation to the spring formal. He reached out and gathered Stiles's hands in his. “I’ve always thought the bonding ceremony was just a pretty formality for the family, but now...” Peter shook his head, and his mouth twisted into a lopsided smile. "Now I find that I want it for myself. I want the vows, and the bracelets, and the celebration. I want to be able to stand up with you in front of everyone and declare what we are to one another." He looked up at Stiles. "I want to tell the world how lucky I am to have
you."

Stiles smiled down fondly at Peter. Peter stared up at him, and thought that he would never get tired of seeing Stiles happy.

“I want that too,” Stiles said simply, squeezing Peter's hands. “We should get bonded and then go somewhere fun over Spring Break for our honeymoon, like you suggested.”

“Have you thought at all about what kind of bonding you’d like to have? There wouldn’t be very much time to set things up.”

Stiles nodded. “I want a traditional ceremony, outside, with friends and family. Maybe in the garden? Julia says the garden will be blooming right around then.”

“You don’t want a lavish beta-style wedding with a formal reception and all the trappings?” Peter asked, already suspecting the answer.

Stiles shook his head. “We don’t have anything to prove. We’re alpha and omega, bonded together. We don’t have to have a big fancy ceremony or spend ten thousand dollars on an outfit to make people believe we’re going to stay together. We’re just celebrating the fact that we actually are going to spend the rest of our lives together.”

Peter smiled at Stiles. “My family has always had our formal bonding ceremonies at home. Talia and Marcus formalized their bond in that same garden, and so did my parents. I know fancy formal bonding ceremonies are becoming more popular, but I prefer the traditional ones myself. I just wanted to give you the option, if that’s what you wanted.”

“Ugh, you mean like the ceremonies you see on those trashy reality TV shows? No, thanks.” Stiles made a face, but then bit his lip. “Peter...do you think it’s okay to get bonded in the garden with Derek home? I’m guessing if it’s Hale tradition to get formally bonded at home, that’s probably where he and I would have...well. I just don’t want to hurt him. He’s already been through so much.”

Peter sighed. This was a thought he’d had himself, after he had overheard Derek’s confession to Stiles in the garden. Peter had suspected that something wrong had been going on between Kate Argent and his nephew, but he’d been shocked at the depth of her malice. He’d held Stiles that night, after Derek’s confession, while Stiles had cried for Derek, and he himself was haunted by the image of Derek as he’d last seen him in Los Angeles, drunk and clinging to his rapist. Now knowing just how truly terrible the relationship between them had been, how abusive and twisted, he felt stung by his own failure to take Derek with him that night. He also felt a deep sense of sympathy for Derek, knowing better than anyone else could, exactly what Derek had lost when he lost Stiles.

“Stiles, I suspect there’s nothing you can do that isn’t going to remind him of what he’s lost,” he said finally. “I think we have to live our lives, and try to support him the best we can without treating him like he’s a fragile little victim.”

Stiles sighed. He bent over until he was staring down at Peter’s chest, where his hands were resting. “I wish he did hate me,” Stiles said softly, “if only so he wouldn’t be so sad and hurt.”

Peter didn’t say anything. There was nothing he could say that would make the situation easier on any of them. Since their discussion in the garden, the tension between Derek and Stiles had subtly changed, but not lessened, and Derek remained elusive, emerging from his room only for meals, or to play with his younger siblings.
“So you think it would be okay? To have our ceremony in the garden?” Stiles asked.

“I do. I think we should invite Derek, but I can’t imagine that he’ll actually attend.”

Stiles looked up, his face hopeful. “Maybe after we’re formally bonded he’ll move on.”

Peter kept his thoughts on that matter to himself, and just shrugged. “Possibly.” They both fell silent for a moment, lost in their own thoughts.

“Are you going to wear a formal robe?” Peter asked finally, trying to lighten the mood, and return to their previous discussion.

Stiles wrinkled his nose. “I’m not that traditional. Besides, I’d probably trip and die if I tried to walk down the stairs in a floor-length robe. I was just going to wear something nice, in white.” He looked away, then back at Peter out of the corner of his eyes. “I might have already texted Micah about the whole thing.”

Peter smirked. “I guess I’ll have to do that myself. Other than your wedding outfit, would you like me to make all the arrangements or do you want to help with the planning?”

Stiles shook his head. “Nope. In this case, I want to go traditional and have you decide everything. I just want to show up and have it be amazing.”

“Oh, really? Is that all?,” Peter asked dryly. “Is there anything specific you absolutely do or do not want?”

“I want a traditional ceremony with really good cake. I want our first dance to be to the same song my mom and dad danced to at their wedding.” Stiles shrugged. “That’s pretty much it.”

“How on earth did I wind up with someone so easy to please?” Peter marveled.

Stiles smirked. “Because the role of super high-maintenance drama queen was already taken?” he suggested archly.

Stiles felt Peter go completely still beneath him, and Peter’s eyes narrowed into slits. Suddenly, he felt acutely aware of his vulnerable position, sitting on top of Peter, whose fingers were flexing against Stiles’s thighs.

“Umm...I was just joking?” Stiles blurted nervously.

“Were you?” Peter said, in a low, throaty voice. Stiles felt his heart leap, and the warm tingle he’d been feeling from sitting across Peter’s hips flared up low in his belly. He tensed his legs, and tried to shift his weight unobtrusively. Peter’s fingers, slid down and the up under the hem of his nightshirt. Stiles mouth fell open on a huff of air as Peter’s fingers moved up towards his hips. He considered giving in, taking it back, making it up to Peter. Then he saw the smug look on Peter’s face.

Stiles dropped his gaze, and looked at Peter through his eyelashes.

“I’m sor...right!” he said, and lunged off Peter, heading for the end of the bed.

He almost made it.

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“Well, this place still smells the same.”
Stiles elbowed Peter in the side. “Be nice. They did the best they could.”

Peter looked around and admitted, “It could be a lot worse.” He looked up at the long stretches of fabric hanging from the ceiling and the laser lights playing over the mass of appallingly young betas dancing around a stage with a surprisingly decent live band. Peter spotted a long table against the far wall and turned to Stiles, who was craning his neck to see above the crowd.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“That’d be great.” Stiles said distractedly. “I’m going to see if I can find Scott.”

Stiles fished out his phone, but before he could start texting, he heard a familiar voice calling his name.

“Hey Stiles, have you seen Lydia and Jackson?”

Stiles looked up and smiled at Danny, who looked dashing in his dark grey suit. He was standing next to a tall, dark haired boy who looked strangely familiar.

Stiles shook his head. “I just got here. Peter’s getting us punch.” Stiles cocked his head and stared at the good-looking boy standing by Danny. He looked strangely familiar, but Stiles couldn’t quite place him. “Do I know you?”

The boy smiled and leaned forward, offering his hand. “Hi, I’m Ethan.” Ethan took Stiles’s hand, then suddenly, he froze. “Are you… he leaned forward and took a deep sniff. “You’re an omega!”

Stiles winced a little when Ethan’s grip on his hand tightened. Ethan took a step forward until he was nearly nose to nose with Stiles. “Are you bonded?” He took another deep sniff, and suddenly looked crestfallen. “You’re bonded, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, hi.” Stiles said, taking a half-step back and still staring at Ethan, trying to remember where he’d seen him before.

Ethan was clinging to Stiles’s hand and Stiles was distracted enough to let him. “I had no idea there were any male omegas at Beacon Hills High. When did you present? Did you have a presentation party?”

“We just found out Stiles was an omega a few weeks ago.” Danny interjected, moving closer to Ethan. “He was keeping it on the down low.”

“I didn’t have a party. I didn’t want the attention.” Stiles tried to subtly pull his hand out of Ethan’s. Danny was starting to look annoyed, and Ethan seemed to be ignoring Danny entirely. “I bonded to a local alpha that I already knew.” Stiles felt someone step up behind him, and turned to see Peter holding two plastic cups.

“This is Peter, my bondmate.” Stiles said, jerking his hand out of Ethan’s and taking one of the cups. “Thanks, Peter.” He took the opportunity to step away from Ethan, closer to Peter.

Ethan turned his gaze to Peter instead, and frowned at what he saw. “You are so lucky.”

“Thanks,” Peter said dryly. “I like to think so.”

Ethan shook his head. “A male omega in Beacon Hills. God, I wish I’d known.”

“Really.” Danny said, and Stiles winced at the tone in his voice.
Ethan turned towards Danny, looking as if he’d just remembered where he was, and with whom. “I’m sorry Danny, you’re awesome, I just… Aiden and I used to dream about finding a male omega, and it’s just kind of crazy that I finally got to meet one, even if he’s already bonded. It’s kind of like finding a unicorn.”

All three men turned to look at Stiles who grinned awkwardly and made jazz hands.

Ethan turned back to Stiles and Peter. “Aiden and I are both alphas and when we went to register last year, the intake counselor told us that we’d probably never find omegas. When we told him we were gay he just told us to forget it, that we’d have better luck getting hit by lightning.”

“Ethan is a twin,” Danny said, trying to draw Ethan’s attention back to himself.

“We registered together just in case that was enough to catch an omega’s attention.” Ethan gave a wan smile, “You know, the whole sexy twin thing.”

Just like that, Stiles remembered where he’d seen Ethan before. “Ah…” he cut himself off. “That’s interesting.” he finished lamely. He clamped his lips shut and leaned back against Peter. The last thing he wanted to do was tell Ethan he’d seen his and his brother’s profiles when he was looking for an alpha and rejected them.

“What were you going to do if an omega picked you? Draw straws to see who got to bond to them?” Danny asked.

Ethan shook his head. “Twins can both bond to the same omega.”

Danny frowned. “Really? And you wouldn’t mind that?”

“He’s my brother,” Ethan said. “If one of us were lucky enough to meet a male omega...” Ethan stared back at Stiles and shook his head. “He’d do the same for me.”

Stiles tore his gaze away from Ethan’s and looked past him. “Hey, was that Jackson?” he asked desperately.

“I think it was,” Danny said, not even bothering to look. “Come on, Ethan.”

“It was nice to meet you.” Ethan said, as Danny towed him towards the refreshment table.

“You too,” Stiles said faintly, leaning more heavily against Peter. As soon as Ethan and Danny were engulfed by the crowd, Stiles turned to Peter and pressed himself into Peter’s arms.

“Ugh. That was so awkward.” Stiles mumbled quietly to Peter.

“Was he one of the ones you interviewed?” Peter whispered.

Stiles shook his head. He looked around but didn’t see Danny or Ethan. “No, I noticed his profile because he and his brother applied together for a single omega. It caught my eye but it sounded kind of weird so I didn’t ask for an interview. To be honest, I don’t remember anything else about their profiles so the twin thing did kind of work, I guess.”

Stiles shrugged and drained the rest of his punch. “Come on, let’s dance.”

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In the end, someone else wound up spiking the punch. Peter could smell the harsh scent of cheap
vodka from half-way across the room, but said nothing when Stiles picked up a glass, waggled his
eyebrows at Peter, and toasted with Scott before he slugged it down. Peter patted him on the back as
he hacked and coughed, ignoring Scott as he did the same, and said flatly, “You’re both going to
regret that later. Bad booze tastes even worse on the way back up.”

Stiles smacked his lips, and forced his grimace into an unconvincing grin. “It’s not that bad.” Behind
him Scott was nodding, with watering eyes. Peter rolled his eyes and dragged Stiles back onto the
dance floor.

Peter was acutely aware of all the eyes that had followed him and Stiles all evening. The chaperone
at the door had wanted proof that he and Stiles were indeed a bonded alpha and omega, and since
they hadn’t yet formally bonded, Peter had allowed his vision to flare red for an instant, just long
enough the woman at the door had gasped, and stumbled back a step. There’d been no further
questions, but he’d definitely been aware of the whispers and stares that followed them. From what
he’d overheard, everyone at Stiles’s school who wasn’t already aware that Stiles was an omega, and
bonded to a much older alpha, would be informed of those facts before the end of the night. He did
see one sullen young alpha watching them dance from the edge of the floor, but for the most part, he
didn’t over hear anything particularly negative directed at Stiles.

Peter wasn’t sure exactly how many more glasses of the punch Stiles drank, but he did notice that his
dancing deteriorated into clinging to Peter, and mumbling along to the music. When Stiles actually
appeared to doze off, Peter stopped dancing. “All right, that’s it. The dance is over.” Peter checked in
with Scott, who was sitting with Danny and Ethan, then dragged Stiles out to his car. He poured
Stiles into the front seat, then got into the driver’s side. The cold air must have revived Stiles
somewhat, because he lifted his head, and started blinking as Peter started to drive home.

“We should make out,” he said, words slow and careful.

“Really,” Peter said. “You fell asleep while we were dancing. I think you just need to go home and
sleep it off.”

“Nooo,” Stiles whined, “I wanna make out. Let’s go to the Point.”

“Let’s not,” Peter said, but Stiles was already asleep again. Peter quirked a smile at the sight of Stiles
half-cuddled in his seat, mouth hanging open. “Lightweight,” he murmured, and kept driving. Stiles
roused again when he pulled into the driveway and stopped the car. Stiles’s head jerked up, and
blinked around sleepily. He pawed at his seat belt until Peter reached over and helped him, then
suddenly his arms were full of Stiles. Peter tried to sit back into his seat, and Stiles followed.

“Ow.” Stiles was all knees and elbows as he climbed into Peter’s lap, and for a moment, they
wrestled awkwardly as Stiles’s leg got hung up on the stick shift.

“Let’s make out.” Stiles pressed a kiss towards Peter’s mouth, which landed on the curve of his jaw
as Peter turned his face away.

“We have a perfectly good bed upstairs.”

“Where’s your sense of adventure?” Stiles asked, smearing sloppy kisses on Peter’s neck.

“In bed, where you should be.”

Stiles pouted. “Come on, this is part of the Spring Formal dance experience. I never got to make out
with anyone in a car before.”

He opened his eyes wide, and said, “Please? Just a little?”
Peter gave him an unimpressed look at his blatant manipulation, but after a long moment, sighed, and wrapped his arms around Stiles.

“Fine. Come here, you brat.”

It took real effort for Stiles to kiss Peter in the cramped front seat while trying to work his shirt off. He banged his elbow into the window more than once, and it was hard to press his hips down far enough on Peter to get any friction going. The windows steamed up, shrouding them in a humid cocoon which only made their combined scents stronger. The concentrated scent worked on both of them, Stiles more awake and intent, and Peter suddenly much more interested. Peter had just unzipped Stiles's pants when someone knocked on the window.

“Seriously?”

“Dad?” The condensation on the windows reduced the person outside to a vague shadow but the voice was unmistakable. Stiles started pulling at his open shirt frantically and whacked his head on the ceiling with a noisy thump trying to fling himself off of Peter and into the passenger seat. Peter had to bite back a pained groan as Stiles’s hand batted against his erection.

“Stiles, are you okay?” There was a pause, and then a gusty sigh before the sheriff spoke again. “For god’s sake, you two, you have a room right there. Get inside before I have to run you both in for public indecency.” Stiles and Peter stared at each other as they listened to the Sheriff’s footsteps fade away, followed by the front door slamming shut behind him.

Stiles and Peter stared at each other. “Well, there you go,” Peter finally said, “The complete teenage formal dance experience.” Peter wasn’t sure which of the two of them started to laugh first, but they both joined in, and laughed together until they were breathless.

Peter got out of the car and helped Stiles out. Stiles immediately wrapped himself around Peter.

“Shhhh.” Stiles said in an over loud voice, while holding one finger over his lips. “It’s late.”

“Yes, I know,” said Peter, as he half-carried Stiles towards the front door.

“I want to take all your clothes off so I can suck your cock,” Stiles announced loudly.

Peter huffed out a laugh. “Whatever you like, my darling.”

Stiles clung to Peter, running his hands inside his unbuttoned shirt and along the curves of his hips. Peter fumbled with the keys, and then dropped them entirely when Stiles sucked one of Peter’s earlobes between his lips.

“Fuck,” Peter said, as he bent to scoop up the keys.

“Yes, please,” Stiles chirped, “that too,” and slid his hand down the back of Peter’s pants.

The door opened as Peter was trying to jam the key into the lock. Stiles and Peter both snapped up straight, and Stiles pulled both of his hands out from beneath Peter's clothing.

It was Derek. He stared at their disheveled state before his eyes dropped to the floor. “Sorry. I was in the kitchen and I heard you trying to open the door.”

Stiles pulled at his mis-buttoned shirt, and tried to smile. “Thanks for opening the door.”

Derek kept his gaze firmly on the floor. “You’re welcome. Good night.” He turned and fled up the
Stiles sighed and watched Derek as he left.

“I know,” Peter said quietly. “Come on. Let’s go upstairs.”

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Peter and Stiles had their bonding ceremony in the Hale’s garden. It was a beautiful late spring day and the peonies were in full bloom. Peter had arranged everything, as he and Stiles had discussed, and Stiles had watched the preparations all week with a growing sense of excitement. A couple of tents had gone up, and an iron arch had been erected in the garden and then swathed in flowers and ribbons. Stiles invited Scott and Melissa, Lydia, and Danny. Lydia brought Jackson as her date, but Danny told Stiles he’d be coming alone, without Ethan, with a wry grimace. Other than his dad, Stiles had no other family to invite, and for the first time since he’d moved in with the Hales he’d felt a pang of loneliness when he’d realized just how small his family really was. It faded when he realized that after today, the Hales would be his legal family too.

Most of the guests were Peter’s friends and family. Peter only invited the people he really liked, including a few close friends from his college and law school days, an aunt and a couple of cousins he’d been friends with since he was young, and his business partner Barbara and her husband. Stiles knew it was really very modest for a formal bonding ceremony, but by the time the RSVP’s were counted, there were going to be almost thirty people coming, most of whom he didn’t know.

Laura flew in from New York for the ceremony. Stiles had met her a couple times over the winter holidays, when he’d been her little brother’s intended. She’d been friendly and funny, but Stiles had still been a little intimidated by her. She was beautiful, and had the same kind of overtly commanding alpha presence as her mother. She seemed tense and distracted when she’d arrived the night before, and after exchanging greetings with everyone, had spent most of the night alone with Derek in his room.

Stiles got dressed in his room, with his dad’s help. Micah had sent Stiles a sleek white button down shirt, and fitted white trousers, and a half page of hand-written instructions on how to wear both items. Micah had also included a pair of shoes just in case Stiles wanted them. Stiles’s dad helped him roll up his sleeves, but Stiles skipped the shoes, opting for the more traditional bare feet. The whole process only took about fifteen minutes, before Stiles was standing in front of the mirror in the closet. He stared at himself, unsmiling in the mirror, wondering why he didn’t feel happier.

“You look so grown up.” His dad said pensively. “It feels like it’s been about a minute since your mom laid you in my arms for the first time, and here you are.”

Stiles turned and wrapped his arms around his dad. He pressed his forehead against his Dad’s shoulder for a minute. “Why am I scared?”

His Dad chuckled. “Well, you’d be pretty dumb if you weren’t. Biology is all well and good, but standing up in front of people you love and making a lifetime commitment to another person is pretty damn scary.” He urged Stiles’s head off his shoulder, and looked into his eyes, gaze steady and sharp. “Do you want this? Do you want to be with Peter?”

Stiles nodded. “I do, I really do, but I still want...I still want to be your son.”

His Dad’s face softened. “I know exactly what you mean. Even bonded, even if you have a hundred kids, or none, different name or not, no matter what you do, you’ll always be my son. I love you, Stiles. Always.”
Stiles blinked, and dropped his head back against his dad’s shoulder. His dad’s scent was a combination of things, his very faint intrinsic scent, his aftershave, his soap, their laundry detergent, but it was familiar, and breathing it in smelled like home, even now.

“You promise?”

“Always.” His Dad repeated, and Stiles relaxed as an anxiety he hadn’t even realized he was feeling started to fade.

Talia and Ollie were waiting for Stiles at the back door. Talia smiled at Stiles, and lifted up the circlet she’d made for him, in her role as head of the Hale family. She pressed the thin twist of wheat stalks and fresh lavender onto his hair with steady hands, then took him by the shoulders. She looked at him searchingly.

“Welcome to our family.” She said formally, and leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek. “I’m so glad.” Stiles smiled at her, then bent down to greet Ollie.

“Ready to do this, my man?”

Ollie nodded and held up the basket of flower petals. “I’m ready.”

Peter had hired a string quartet, which had been set up in the gazebo, slightly removed from the main area where the ceremony was taking place. They were playing softly, and Stiles took a deep breath when they started to play the song that was going to precede his entrance.

Stiles and his father walked out of the house together, hand in hand, followed Ollie. Peter was waiting at the foot of the aisle. As soon as Stiles saw him, everything else faded away. He’d seen Peter nearly every day since his first heat. They slept in the same bed, and ate at the same table, and despite this, seeing Peter in his sleek blue suit standing in the sun, Stiles felt like he was seeing him for the first time. His gorgeous alpha. His mate.

His dad hugged him and released him with a kiss on his temple. Stiles smiled at him, then turned eagerly to Peter, and took his hand.

“You look amazing.” Peter said quietly.

Stiles smiled harder, suddenly as eager and happy as he’d always imagined he’d feel on the day of his bonding. Impulsively, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss against Peter’s cheek before he pulled back to beam at Peter. “So do you,” he said.

Ollie took his duties as the flower-boy very seriously, and walked slowly in front of Peter and Stiles, tossing handfuls of rose petals with a look of deep concentration on his face. When Ollie reached the front, he looked around, and then handed the basket to Stiles before he darted over to his chair between Davey and Cora. There was a quiet murmur of laughter as Talia snatched the basket out of Stiles’s hand, and tucked it beneath Laura’s seat.

The actually ceremony was a bit of a blur for Stiles. Talia stood with Peter, and his dad stood beside him. The officiant was a longtime friend of the Hale family, who had also presided over Talia’s formal bonding. Unlike with beta weddings, there were no set vows, with each alpha and omega pair free to craft their own.

“Stiles has done me the honor of becoming my omega.” Peter turned towards Stiles, and smiled at him. “We will share out joys and sorrows together as bonded mates. I promise to guard his happiness as well as my own, to protect him, and provide for him and our children, to be faithful to him, and honest with him, for all the days of our lives.” He reached for one of the bonding bracelets and
carefully fastened it around Stiles’s wrist.

Stiles smile only grew, and the vows he had agonized over fell from his lips easily, honestly, and completely heartfelt. “Peter, I accept you as my alpha, my true mate and father to my children. We will share our joys and sorrows as bonded mates. I promise you my faith, my honesty, and my devotion. I will provide peace, comfort, and sanctuary, for you and our children, for all the days of our lives.” He fastened Peter’s bracelet on his wrist, and then squeezed Peter’s hand in his.

They both turned and signed the registry, and when they turn back to face their audience, the officiant introduced them for the first time as a bonded couple. Although they’d been physically bonded for months, it still felt different to Stiles to be introduced as Mr. Stiles Stilinski-Hale, with Peter at his side. He could barely stop beaming long enough to kiss Peter.

As soon as the applause faded, the music started up again. The string quartet disappeared during the ceremony, replaced by a DJ, and a swarm of waiters appeared with trays of drinks and hors d’oeuvres. Stiles and Peter were swamped by well-wishers and Stiles felt almost giddy from all the warm hugs he received. It took them a half hour to finally make their way over to the food tables and Stiles laughed when he saw the massive dessert table, which included not only a tall, fancy, multiple-layer cake, but also a large open bag of white sugar, with a large serving spoon stuck into it. The rest of the table was heavily laden with a generous assortment of cupcakes, cookies, and pies. Stiles and Peter cut pieces of cake for each other then passed the knife to a hovering waiter.

Stiles groaned when he took his first bite of cake. He turned to look at Peter with wide eyes. "This is amazing." Stiles said, then took another bite.

Peter was watching him with a smirk, his own cake untouched. “Every layer is a different flavor. That one is red velvet with cream cheese frosting.” Stiles turned back to the cake which was rapidly being sliced and set onto plates, then turned back to Peter with a faint look of distress on his face. Peter leaned in and whispered, “Don’t worry, I asked the caterer to set aside a slice of every layer for you for later.”

Stiles swallowed his bite, and leaned up to kiss Peter. “My clever bondmate.” He kissed him again, then drew back. "You take such good care of me."

There was a small dance floor laid out under one of the tents, and after he and Peter ate their cake, they made their way over to the dance floor. When the first strains of Otis Redding singing “That’s How Strong My Love Is,” started, Peter took Stiles into his arms for their first dance as a bonded couple. After a moment, John and Talia join them, and then slowly, other couples start to make their way onto the dance floor. The inside of the tent was bright with sunshine, and Stiles felt torn between staring at Peter and curling as close to him as possible, with his head on Peter’s shoulder. Then Stiles saw his dad dance into view with Talia. His eyes met Stiles for just a moment, and his dad gave him a soft smile. Stiles smiled back, then turned back to Peter.

“I used to listen to this song with my mom. She used to grab my hands and dance with me, and tell me about how she danced with my dad to this song on their first date and at their wedding. She loved music, R&B, jazz, Motown. I still have all of her albums.”

“Your mom had good taste.”

Stiles laughed a little. “Yeah, she did.” He craned his head back and looked at Peter. “She would have liked you.”

Peter hugged Stiles closer. “I hope so.”
Stiles and Peter took a break after a few more dances and they made their way back to the dessert table. Scott and Danny were both hovering near the sweets, so Stiles drifted away from Peter to chat with them. When a parade of waiters passed by, Stiles was delighted to discover the waiters had non-alcoholic cocktails, in addition to champagne. He chose a tall bright blue drink decorated with a wedge of pineapple and a little plastic monkey, and then looked around for Peter. Peter was only a few steps away, chatting with one of his friends, and he grinned and lifted his glass of champagne in salute when Stiles held up the tropical drink and gave a thumbs up. Stiles and Scott decided they should definitely try one of each kind of cocktail, so it wasn’t long before Stiles had to excuse himself to walk back to the house.

There was someone in the guest bathroom downstairs, so Stiles walked upstairs to use the one attached to his bedroom. He washed his hands and stepped into the hall when a small movement at the end of the hall caught his eye.

It was Derek, hovering at the door of his room.

“Derek?”

“I’m sorry…I just wanted…” Derek stepped fully into the hall and stared helplessly at Stiles. He took a few steps forward, then stopped, then almost unwillingly, took another step. Silence fell between them. “You look beautiful,” Derek said quietly.

“Thank you,” Stiles said, just as quietly. They looked at each other. Stiles had dreamed of this moment once, Derek seeing him on his bonding day, but he never could have imagined this. There were only a few steps between them, close enough that he could have touched Derek if he’d lifted his arm, but in truth, the distance between them was unfathomably, immeasurably immense, an ocean that could never be crossed. Stiles took a step forward and the weight of his new bracelet shifted around his wrist. It suddenly felt enormous, and Stiles fidgeted with a sudden need to hide it behind his back, before Derek could see it. “You’re welcome to come downstairs, if you want Derek, even if you just want to come have some cake.”

Stiles stared into Derek's solemn face, and he suddenly felt his eyes fill with tears. “It’s really excellent cake.”

Derek shook his head, and tried to smile. “Thank you...but, I don’t think I can be down there right now.”

“Okay.” Stiles stared at Derek. “I’m so glad that you’re still a part of my life.”

“Me too.” Derek’s voice broke a little on the last word. He tore his eyes away from Stiles and fled back to his room, shutting the door quickly behind him.

Stiles wiped his face and went back downstairs.

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Stiles woke up two nights later to the sound of a car driving up to the house. He and Peter were scheduled to leave the following morning for two weeks in Hawaii, and Stiles was too excited to sleep soundly. He opened his eyes, and listened to the car stop. He ran through the family in his head, but everyone was home, and as far as he knew, asleep. He thought it might be someone lost, someone who’d taken a wrong turn off the highway looking for the public entrance to the preserve, but then he glanced at the clock, and frowned at the time. It was still hours until dawn, too early even for a determined hiker interested in a sunrise hike. He listened intently, but the car didn’t sound like it was trying to turn around. The car idled for a while, and curiosity drove him out of bed to look out the window. He didn’t have a direct view of the driveway but he frowned when he didn’t see any headlights from the car lighting up the darkness. He felt the first prickle of concern, which only
intensified when he heard the car shut off, then the faint click of a car door opening, but without the following sound of the car door shutting. Something about this didn’t feel right to him. Stiles stared out the window for another minute but his instincts were screaming at him. He walked to the bed, and shook Peter.

“Peter, wake up. Someone’s here.”
Peter woke up immediately, sat up, and blinked furiously. “What’s going on? Are you okay?” he asked.

Stiles leaned closer to Peter and spoke softly into his ear. “There’s someone outside. They pulled up in a car, and they don’t have their headlights on. Something about it just doesn’t seem right.”

Peter wiped a hand over his face and climbed out of bed. He grabbed a shirt and pulled it on, then ran his fingers through his hair.

“Should I get my dad?” Stiles asked, still whispering.

Peter shook his head. “Let’s not bother him yet. Let’s go see if we can get a look at our visitor first. It could just be someone lost.” Peter grabbed his phone from his nightstand, and Stiles did the same. Peter opened the door of their bedroom without turning on the light and walked quietly to the guest bathroom down and across the hall from their bedroom. It had the best view of the front of the house on the third floor. Peter and Stiles both stood at the window and stared down at the gravel driveway that led from the main road to the house. It was a cloudy night and the only light was the thin illumination of the moon behind the clouds. Stiles could just barely make out the shape of a car past the edge of trees, but Peter couldn’t see anything.

They both stiffened when they heard Derek’s door open, and then heard the sound of his quiet footsteps walking down the hall. He stopped at their room, where their door was hanging open.

“Uncle Peter?” Derek whispered.

Peter and Stiles looked at each, and without speaking, Peter headed back to his room with Stiles trailing a few steps behind him.

Derek startled when Peter answered from behind him in the hallway. “Derek. What’s going on?”

Derek looked pale in the faint light coming in from the unshaded windows. His hair was rumpled, standing on end, and he was hunched in on himself in a way Peter recognized from when he’d seen him in LA. Even in the dark hallway Peter could see the gleaming white of Derek’s wide eyes.

“It’s Kate.” Derek held up his cell phone. “She…she just called me and told me to meet her outside.”

“Why?” Even in the muted whisper he was using, Peter’s voice was sharp.

Derek shook his head again and glanced at Stiles. He opened his mouth, then shut it. Peter waited.

“She...she used to say if I ever tried to leave her that she’d hunt me down and make me pay for it, but she never said what she’d do.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell us this?” Peter whispered.
Derek seemed to shrink into himself, away from Peter. “I thought…after I hit her…that she’d leave me alone. This is the first time she’s called me since….everything. I thought she was done with me.”

*I thought I was safe.* The words went unspoken.

“We need to wake up my dad.” Stiles said quietly, stepping forwards to stand beside Peter. “Whatever she has planned, her main goal seems to be to get you alone. We can’t let that happen. She might back down if she realizes that the Sheriff lives here.”

Derek stared at Stiles, stricken, as Peter slowly nodded.

The three of them stiffened when they heard the sound of a car trunk snap open.

“Peter...” Stiles started.

“Go wake up your dad. Try to stay quiet – we don’t want to wake up anyone else. Don’t turn on any lights. I’m going downstairs to check the locks. Derek...” Peter hesitated, and then said, “Follow me.”

Peter padded down the stairs as quietly as he could. On the first floor he tried to stay in the shadows. Since the house was so isolated, they rarely pulled down the shades and this evening was no exception. He double checked the back door, then the front; both were locked. He took up a position by one of the windows in the family room with the best view of the driveway, and gestured for Derek to stand behind him. They both stood there, straining to see or hear anything until Stiles and his Dad came down the stairs and joined them.

“Anything?” the sheriff asked quietly. He seemed alert, despite the hour and his disheveled hair. He was wearing a fresh uniform shirt hanging loose over his pajamas, and he was buckling on his holster as he walked.

Peter shook his head. “I don’t see or hear anything.” He looked at Stiles who tilted his head, and frowned. The three of them stood there, and waited. Stiles stiffened. “Definitely something clinking together, like glass, and something else that sounded like metal scraping against metal?”

“I should go out there,” Derek said. He swallowed hard when everyone looked at him. “I could just go out a little ways, and meet with her, see what she wants.”

John and Peter were already shaking their heads but it was Stiles who said, “What if what she wants is to get you outside so she can shoot you in the face? We already know she’s a total psycho.”

Stiles turned towards his dad. “Do you think we should turn on the lights? Let her know someone is awake?”

John hesitated, but shook his head. “I don’t think so. If she is targeting Derek we can’t be sure how far she’d be willing to go to get to him. If we scare her off, she might come back some other night and we might not be lucky enough to get a warning.”

The three of them were quiet for a moment. Then Peter said, “Call her.”

“What?” Derek asked.

“Call her again and try to get her talking. She might slip up and make her intentions clear. Play along with her, no matter what she says.”

Derek looked at Peter, then at Stiles before he slowly lifted his phone and called Kate. They shuffled
around until John was standing next to Derek, as close as he could get so he could listen to the
conversation. Peter and Stiles stayed where they were, knowing they’d have no trouble listening in.

“Where are you, Derry?” Kate’s voice was sharp.

Derek flinched at the nickname. Peter nodded at Derek encouragingly.

“What do you want Kate?”

“I already told you, I want to see you one last time. It’s the least you could do after you attacked me.”

Derek’s head drooped down as he fixed his gaze on the floor.

“I’m sorry.” He mumbled.

“Sorry!...” Kate stopped and took a deep breath. “I know, baby. I’ll be honest, I’m still a little mad at
you but you don’t stop loving someone just because you’re mad at them.”

Stiles and Peter looked at one another, and Stiles rolled his eyes. Kate’s voice had gone syrupy soft,
and patronizing.

“I know things didn’t work out, but I just wanted a chance to say good-bye in person. We were
married Derek. You were my husband.” Kate’s voice wobbled, and softened to an intimate whisper.
“I just want to see you. I’m moving up to Tahoe and I’m not coming back. Just two minutes, Derek,
please.”

Derek’s breathing heaved and shuddered and Peter felt his lips press flat. He’d thought Derek was
smarter than this.

Derek’s voice was choked when he spoke. “You just want to say good-bye?”

“That’s all baby. I just want to see you one more time.”

“I’m sorry I hurt you.” Derek said softly. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

“I know, sweetie. I never wanted to hurt you either.”

“Give me a minute. I’ll be right out.”

Derek scrabbled at the face of his phone until he managed to hit the disconnect button. When he
looked up, his eyes were glowing and his mouth was twisted into a snarl. His breathing was still
rough, but now, Derek unleashed the growl he’d been struggling to suppress.

“That...fucking...how can she think I’d believe she still cares about me? After the lies, and
the...the...all the horrible things she did and said...everything she did to me, how can she still think
I’d believe her about anything?”

“She doesn’t care,” Peter said quietly. “She probably is a psychopath, and she thinks this is the
fastest, easiest way to get what she wants, which is you, outside, and she will say whatever she
thinks works best to get you there.” Peter stared out into the dark yard. “I don’t think she wants to
give you a good-bye hug.” He stared out the window and could make out faint movement at the
edge of the yard. “She’s coming.”

The dark form that was Kate Argent stopped at the edge of the deepest shadows, not quite going past
the point where the trees gave way fully to the neatly manicured lawn.
“She’s here to hurt Derek,” Stiles said, his voice certain. “There’s no other reason for her to be here. Everything she’s done has been about hurting him as much as she possibly can, taking everything from him that she possibly can.” He looked at Peter, who was nodding.

“I agree.” Peter said. “She’s not going to be satisfied until she’s punished him, especially after he stood up to her.”

“At this point we might have a case for trespassing, at best.” John said quietly. “If she’s back in Beacon Hills we might be able to get a restraining order, maybe, but so far she hasn’t done anything I can arrest her for. It’s not against the law to ask to meet someone, even if the time and place leave a lot to be desired.”

Peter nodded grimly. “I know.”

“I have to go out there.” Derek held up his hand when all three men opened their mouths to protest. “She’s never really going to go away. What if I don’t go out there and she leaves? I’ll be waiting for her to come back for the rest of my life.”

“Derek…” Peter started.

“I know she’s here to hurt me but at least we know. I can just go out on the porch and let her come to me and you’ll be right here if she tries anything. I’m not much of an alpha, but I am faster than she is, and stronger. If she tries anything we’ll have witnesses and maybe we can actually get her to go away.” Derek took a deep, shaky breath. “I really just want her to go away.”

John shook his head. “I don’t know. Even an alpha isn’t faster than a bullet. We don’t have any idea what she has planned. She could be armed.”

“Exactly.” Stiles said.

“It’s dark outside.” Peter said slowly. “She’s a beta. Even if she does have a gun, she’d have to get pretty close to see Derek well enough to shoot at him with any accuracy. He’d be able to see the gun before she could see him well enough to aim at him.”

“What if she doesn’t have a gun?” Stiles asked. “What if she’s crazy enough to come up with something worse?”

“Like what?” his dad asked.

“I don’t know,” Stiles said, “Something crazy. A grenade or machine gun or something, something Derek wouldn’t be able to outrun.”

John and Peter exchanged glances, then looked back at Stiles.

“Don’t look at me like that! You never know. You can’t expect crazy people to use the same rules as the rest of us!”

“Shhhh…” Derek cautioned, glancing towards the stairs. “I have to do something. I can’t just wait for her to decide what she wants to do next. I can’t.”

“I’ll go outside,” Peter said slowly, staring past everyone. “John, you can let me out the back door, and I can circle around to her car. She left it open so I can get a look inside, maybe figure out what she’s planning. If I see a weapon, we’d have cause for you to arrest her.”

John looked torn, but nodded. “Actually, if Stiles lets us both out the back door, I can go around the
other way. If she does walk up into the yard, I’d have a better angle on her if I was behind the big bushes on the side of the porch than I would from inside.”

“What should I do?” Stiles asked.

“Stay here,” his dad said.

“What?” Stiles whispered, “The three of you are going to go play games with crazy Kate in the dark, and I’m supposed to, what, stay inside and wring my hands?”

“You can’t go out there Stiles,” Derek said.

“Why, because I’m not an alpha?” Stiles said harshly.

“No,” Peter said quietly, “because we are.” He waited until Stiles was looking at him, his face tight with hurt. “None of us have any doubts about how smart and capable you are, Stiles, but look at who we are. Your father, who is a trained police officer, your alpha mate,” Peter hesitated before nodding towards Derek, “Your family.” All of us love you, and all of us would be fighting our instincts to protect you if you were out there with us.”

Stiles stiffened, but his dad and Derek were both nodding, their faces solemn in the dim light. Stiles opened his mouth, then, shut it and sighed.

“Besides,” his dad said, “you have the best senses of all of us. Even inside you might be able to warn Derek if you see Kate about to try something before he can spot it himself.”

“If we’re going to do this, we need to go now,” Peter said. “Who knows what she’ll do if Derek keeps her waiting.”

“Don’t go outside until I come back,” Stiles said to Derek, and walked to the back door with Peter and his father. He and Peter listened, and then unlocked the door.

“Be careful,” Stiles whispered to his dad as John walked past. Stiles grabbed Peter by his hand before he could slip through the door. Leaning up for a quick kiss, Stiles whispered, “Whatever you’re up to, just be safe.”

Peter drew back, and looked at him. “Always,” Peter whispered, and after another quick kiss, he was gone.

Stiles locked the back door and returned to the front door where Derek was waiting.

“Let’s do this,” Stiles said. “Leave the door open part of the way so I can hear what’s going on and you can hear me. If you see her pull out any kind of weapon you run back inside and let my dad deal with her.”

Derek nodded absently, staring out at the dark yard, and Kate’s shadow at the edge of the yard. He reached for the knob.

“Derek.” Stiles stared at him for a moment, and then swallowed. “Be careful.”

Derek nodded, and stepped out onto the porch. He left the door hanging open and took a few steps forward. He could hear faint sounds of John and Peter making their way into position. Peter was nothing more than a rustle of damp grass as he moved towards Kate’s car, but John was noisier, despite going slower, hampered by his lack of alpha night vision. Derek winced at the snap of a twig and hoped that it had been too quiet for beta hearing. He hovered on the porch for a moment before
he walked down a step so he could sit.

Derek stiffened when he saw Kate start towards him. “She’s coming,” Stiles whispered, and that made it easier, knowing that Stiles was watching over him, and the sheriff, and Uncle Peter. He watched Kate’s dark form get closer, and wished he’d never met her.

Kate took a few steps onto the lawn. “Derry,” she said quietly, “Sweetie, are you really going to make me walk all the way over there? Can’t you meet me half way?” She said it quietly, her tone terribly familiar, cloying and condescending.

Derek shook his head, trying to look cowed when he was actually struggling not to transform. His fingertips felt sore and heavy and his vision was dimly red. He blinked, hard, but his vision wouldn’t clear. He felt a surge of panic as he realized that his transformed eyes might be shining brightly enough in the dark to warn Kate away. He slumped forward and covered his eyes with his hands.

“Stiles...I can’t look up. I, my eyes, I can’t...” Derek said under his breath.

“I can see her. Just keep breathing and keep your head down. Get ready to run back inside if I give the word,” Stiles said softly.

“I know you can hear me. Why won’t you come over and talk to me?” Kate’s voice was wavering now, sliding between syrupy and impatient. “Please sweetie? Just for a minute?”

“Don’t you dare move off this porch,” Stiles whispered fiercely.

“Derry?” Kate looked around, and took a step back towards the trees.

“Damnit. Derek, Peter, do not freak out,” Stiles said quickly and quietly, before he stepped out onto the porch and said in his normal voice, “Derek? What are you doing out here?” Stiles bent and ran his fingers through Derek’s hair. “Come back to bed, sweetheart.”

Derek’s head shot up, his transformation evaporating under Stiles’s sudden, shocking touch.

“Stiles...”

“Stiles?” Kate’s voice was sharp, shocked.

Stiles looked up and pretended to look for Kate. “That’s right. Stiles Hale, Derek’s bondmate. His omega.”

Kate walked forward, stopping halfway between the trees and the porch. “That’s impossible. You were about to go into heat when I...when we left. There’s no way...”

“Nope,” Stiles drawled, interrupting her, “False alarm. Although Derek’s lucky he got bored of his little ... whatever with you and came back when he did. I almost picked someone else.”

Kate took another step forward. Derek gave a low growl that made Stiles curl his hand around Derek’s arm and squeeze gently.

“He married me! He chose me over you!” Kate’s voice was low, and furious.

“Wow,” he said, drawing the word out long, and slow, “Derek said you were desperate. You really think any alpha would ever choose you when they could have a true omega mate?”

There was a frozen moment before Kate Argent suddenly moved. She lunged towards the house in short, fast strides. As she started to shove her hands down into her pockets, Derek yanked Stiles off
the porch and back into the house. The door slammed behind them and they fell tangled together to the floor just as something sounding like glass smashed outside. Stiles heard his dad yell, and then a blaze of orange light roared into existence outside.

“Fire!” Stiles said, and shoved at Derek, who was lying on top of him, trying to cover Stiles with his own body. Derek’s face was transformed, eyes red and glowing and he was frantic, running his hands over Stiles and asking him if he were hurt in a growl that was barely a voice. Upstairs a door slammed and suddenly Talia was there, yelling about the fire. She barely glanced at them before she was running towards the kitchen and then moments later Stiles heard the back door slam open.

Stiles closed his eyes and sighed. He took a deep breath and forced his body to relax. He knew there was no hope of getting Derek to relax while he himself stank of panic and fear. Just as he opened his mouth to tell Derek he was fine, to get off of him, Derek leaned in and pressed their lips together.

Stiles froze.

Derek’s eyes were shut, and he was pressing too hard, mashing his lips against Stiles’s without moving. Derek's panting breaths calmed as the kiss went on, and the hands that had been skimming over Stiles slowed, and wrapped around his shoulders, not holding him down so much as holding on. Derek pulled back, but only slightly, just enough to press back in with a soft, lingering kiss against Stiles's unmoving mouth. Derek whimpered when Stiles didn't kiss him back, but he didn't stop, pressing kiss after kiss against Stiles's lips. Stiles stared up at Derek, who looked far more like a man in pain than someone who was stealing a kiss. He felt a wave of pity and affection and grief pass over him with each tender, desperate press of Derek's mouth. Stiles's hands were gentle as he reached up to Derek's face and pushed him away. Derek gasped for breath as soon as their lips separated, but he kept his eyes clenched shut.

“I'm okay, Derek,” Stiles said softly.

“I'm...”

_Sorry_, thought Stiles, but Derek pressed his lips together and turned his head away without saying anything.

“You need to get off me. I need to go check on Peter and my dad.”

Derek jerked his head in a nod, and rolled off of Stiles. Stiles wiped his hand over his mouth, and stood up.

Everything was strangely calm when Stiles stepped back outside. There was a black scorch mark on the porch, which was mostly covered in foam from the fire extinguisher Talia was still holding in her hands. There was a pall of smoke in the air that was already being blown away by the night breeze. Talia was standing with Peter and John, all of them looking down at something in the yard. Stiles joined them and there was Kate Argent, lying in the grass. Her face was terribly pale and there was a gaping wound beneath her chin, feebly leaking the last vestiges of her blood onto the ground.

Stiles looked at his dad, whose gun was hanging loose in his hand. He was staring at Peter.

Stiles looked at Peter too. He was still in his pajamas, looking exactly like the man Stiles had gone to sleep with the night before, except for his right hand which looked black and wet in the moonlight, as if he’d dipped it in oil.

“You killed her,” Stiles said quietly.

Peter looked at him, face grave. “I did.”
Stiles stared down at Kate Argent’s body, at the spreading pool of blood soaking into the ground beneath her, then at Peter’s hand which was still dripping. He looked at Derek, who’d joined them, and was standing on the other side of the circle between Talia and Stiles’s dad. His face looked almost as pale as Kate’s as he stared down at her. Stiles reached forward and took Peter’s wet hand, entwined his fingers around Peter’s, ignoring how the blood was still warm against his skin. He looked back up into the wide-eyed stare Peter gave him.

“Good.”

John and Talia were staring at Stiles as if they’d never seen him before. Derek couldn’t seem to tear his eyes away from Kate.

“Peter…” John started.

“I went feral,” Peter said flatly. “You need to see what’s in her car.”

The sounds of sirens broke the silence and they all looked towards the road, except John, who said, “I called 911.”

“You should let your deputies look over the car before we go over there.”

Stiles looked at his dad, looking at Peter, then back down at Kate's body.

“Come on, sit.” Stiles said, pulling Peter a short distance from Kate’s body. “You’re probably shaky from going feral.” He pushed Peter down to sit on the lawn and straddled his lap. Stiles wrapped his arms around Peter’s shoulder’s and started running the fingers of his clean hand through Peter’s hair. He started murmuring to Peter, a soft croon, ignoring his dad and Talia entirely. “You did so well,” Stiles said in the same, soft voice, “You protected your family. It’s okay. You can relax now.” Peter stared up at Stiles, looking bemused. Stiles smiled down at Peter, and then Peter hesitantly lifted his arms and slid them around Stiles’s waist.

The sirens got louder and after a moment, John walked past them to meet up with the approaching cars. Stiles ignored that too, keeping his gaze focused on Peter.

"Peter," Stiles breathed quietly, "Trust me?"

"Always," Peter breathed back, his arms tightening around Stiles. "Always."

Stiles leaned down and kissed Peter. He could feel the exact moment when Peter tasted Derek on his lips. His entire body went rigid, and the arms around his waist snapped tight. Peter jerked away with a snarl, his eyes blazing in the dim light.

When the on-call deputy for the Beacon Hills Sheriff’s Department pulled into the driveway, the first thing he saw was the sheriff, half-dressed and waving him down. The second was the Sheriff’s omega son, wrapped around his bloody, enraged alpha mate.
Chapter 23

The trunk of Kate Argent’s car was a horror show of zip ties, electrodes, and razor blades. A couple of brand new car batteries had been sitting on a plastic bag containing old-fashioned iron manacles and a video recorder. Two full cans of gasoline sat next to a box of flares, and Kate herself had been armed with a gun, two knives, and a taser. The deputy who’d originally showed up had taken one look at everything and then called everyone else who was on call that night, and between the extra squad cars, the fire truck, the coroners van, and the ambulance, the yard of the Hale House was alive with noise and activity.

Talia walked over to Stiles and Peter. She stared down at them, silent for a long moment before she said, her voice low and urgent, “Neither of you say one word. Stiles, do not give any statements to anyone, do not answer any questions, nothing without talking to me first. You too, Peter. We know this was justified but we need to do this by the book, for John’s sake, if nothing else.” She waited but Peter just growled from where his face was buried in Stiles’s chest and Stiles just nodded. She walked down to the edge of parking lot, where John and two of his deputies were having a hushed discussion at the edge of the yard.

Stiles watched as Derek was escorted to an ambulance by a pair of paramedics. He had a quick glimpse of Derek’s blood-splattered back before he was draped in a blanket and whisked away. Another paramedic started towards them, but backed off when Stiles shook his head. The firefighters examining the porch gave them wide berth, as did the coroner. Peter’s breathing had slowed to normal, but Stiles stayed where he was, without speaking.

Stiles was watching one of the deputies set up lights around Kate’s body when his dad approached him. Talia was still hovering at Stiles’s shoulder. “You can both stay here. You’ll need to come down to the station in the morning and give statements, but it seems unlikely that Peter is going to be charged with anything.”

Talia opened her mouth, and John sighed. “Talia, give it a rest, okay. I’m not the enemy here. I have no interest in arresting my son’s mate, believe it or not. Given what we found in the car, and on the body, as well as what I know of her history, I agree this is a pretty clear cut case of justifiable homicide, even if Peter wasn’t covered by the feral alpha defense. I’ve turned this case over to Deputy Howard since I’m too involved, and he agrees, so let’s just all get some sleep and let my officers do what they have to do.”

Talia frowned but agreed, and went back inside to get dressed, so she could follow Derek to the hospital.

“Peter?” Stiles asked quietly, “Are you ready to go inside?”

Peter heaved a sigh and nodded his head. Stiles released Peter, wincing a little as his skin stuck to Peter’s shirt anywhere there’d been blood. Stiles stood unsteadily, then reached out a hand, and helped Peter to his feet.

“Do you two need a hand?” Stiles’s dad asked, frowning as Peter swayed on his feet.

“No. I’m okay.” Peter’s voice sounded rusty, but he wrapped his arm around Stiles’s shoulders and took a step forward. They walked back to the house that way, Peter’s steps getting steadier as he walked out the aches in his legs. The front door of the house was a total loss. Most of the glass had been shattered and it hung crookedly where one of the hinges had burned through. It was the center of a black scorch mark that still smelled vaguely of smoke, beneath a thick chemical reek. John
waved them off and walked over to talk to one of the firefighters. Stiles and Peter walked around to the back door which was intact, but hanging open.

As Peter and Stiles walked upstairs together, neither of them said anything until they were in their room, with the door closed.

“I need a shower,” rasped Peter.

Stiles bit his lip. Peter’s voice sounded cool, and distant, in a way he’d never spoken to Stiles before.

“Derek kissed me,” Stiles blurted. “I didn’t kiss him.”

Peter mouth quirked to the side, in a grimace that wasn’t quite a smile. “I assumed it was something like that, once I calmed down.”

“Peter, I...”

“Stiles, my darling, I am not angry with you. I’m exhausted. I’m filthy.” Peter raised his hand. Even dried, the blood was a shocking red in the bright light of their bedroom. “I killed someone tonight.” Peter’s lips pressed together, and he swallowed. “I just really want to shower, and wrap myself around you, and sleep for the next ten hours. Everything else can wait until morning.”

Stiles nodded, suddenly feeling self-centered and stupid. “Of course. I’m sorry. Why don’t you get in the shower and I’ll bring you something to wear.”

Peter nodded wearily. “That would be great, thank you.”

The shower started up as Stiles picked out fresh clothing for Peter, and himself. He slipped into the bathroom and hung the clothing on the towel rack, then hesitated, looking at Peter standing in the shower. He took a step forward, then shook his head and wheeled around to the sink. Stiles rinsed with Peter's mouthwash, and slipped out of his blood-stained clothing. He walked into the shower, and wrapped himself around Peter, who was bracing himself on one arm on the wall and watching the rust-colored blood rinse off his other arm and swirl down the drain.

“She deserved it.” Stiles said quietly.

“I know.” Peter said. “I just never imagined that I could do something like that quite so easily.”

Stiles frowned at the odd tone of Peter’s voice.

“And it was, Stiles, so very easy. I saw that... that portable torture chamber she had in her car and I just knew, right at that moment, she had to die.”

“Peter...”

“I ran right by your father. He had his gun out and was yelling at her to stop and turn around and I ran right by him and wrapped my hand around her throat and dug my claws in and yanked.” Peter shook his head. “That was it. She didn’t even have time to take another breath. She just fell and looked up at me and she was gone.”

They were both quiet for a minute, before Stiles picked up a bar of soap and started cleaning the blood off Peter’s arm in long smooth strokes.

“I would have done the same thing.” Stiles said, smiling a little when Peter’s head jerked up to look at him. “Family is precious. We all knew as soon as she showed up that she was there to hurt
Derek.” Stiles snorted. “Hurt him more, I mean. What do you think she would have done with that stuff in her car? I could hear my dad’s deputies talking about it. Manacles and car batteries? Peter, she was planning on torturing Derek. How could you not go feral when you saw that?”

Peter looked at Stiles uncertainly. “Stiles, I…”

“You WERE, Peter. Just because you weren’t all roaring and crazed like a feral alpha in a TV movie doesn’t mean that what you saw in Kate’s car didn’t hit you right where you live, right in the alpha instincts that say protect.”

Peter stared at Stiles long enough that Stiles finished washing his arm of the blood and started on his chest. Peter closed his eyes at the warm touch of Stiles’s hand and the soap. “I feel like I should feel worse,” Peter murmured, “But I don’t.” Peter drew Stiles into his arms and buried his face into Stiles’s neck, and sighed, deeply. “So you don’t think I’m a terrifying murderous beast?”

“Nope. Sorry,” Stiles said, and pressed his hips a little closer to Peter’s.

Peter glanced down, and then looked back at Stiles with a single raised eyebrow. “Seriously?”

Stiles flushed. “What? I’m sixteen and you’re naked! What did you think would happen?”

Peter snickered and yanked Stiles a little closer. “I’m trying to unburden my tortured soul to you and this…” he ground up against Stiles in a way that made him groan, “This is how you respond?”

“I was totally listening,” Stiles said defensively, then groaned again when Peter dropped his hand between their bodies and wrapped Stiles’s erection in his broad palm, giving it a firm, twisting stroke. Stiles’s eyes slipped closed and he leaned forward to rest his forehead against Peter’s shoulder. “I’ve read that sex is a classic therapeutic technique after battle.”

“I’m not sure it actually qualifies as a therapy,” Peter said drily, even as his hand continued to move, pulling and twisting until Stiles was panting open-mouthed against his skin.

“Yes it...oh...it...Peter...wait, what?” Stiles stammered out, before he pressed his face against Peter’s neck and came to the sounds of Peter laughing.

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Talia represented Peter and Stiles and Derek as their attorney and coached Stiles and Derek through giving their statements. She insisted on doing the same for Peter, despite his grumbling. Between the corroborating statement from the Sheriff, and the wealth of evidence found in the trunk of her car, Kate Argent’s death was ruled a justifiable homicide. Derek had required stitches for a few of the cuts on his back from the shattered front door, but was otherwise unharmed, and returned home the same morning. Talia hired a general contractor to deal with the front porch and front door, and paid their landscaper overtime to deal with the yard.

By the time everything had been settled, Peter and Stiles would have barely had a day or two in Hawaii before school started again for Stiles, so they decided to cancel their trip and take a longer vacation over the summer. Between dealing with the legal proceedings surrounding Kate’s death, and canceling their travel arrangements, it was the day before school started before Peter and Stiles had a quiet moment completely alone in the house. Stiles sprawled on their bed, working on his assigned reading, when Peter came over, sat down, and waited until he had Stiles’s attention.

“So, Derek kissed you.” Peter said.

Stiles nodded and sat up, dropping his book on his nightstand. He’d known this was coming. Peter
had been distant and moody when they'd been at home, spending more time secluded in his study with his door closed, and less inclined to linger at the table after dinner. Stiles would have been more worried if Peter hadn’t also been overtly affectionate towards him, lingering in bed in the mornings, and holding him close even as his gaze was lost in the distance.

“Yes. He tackled me back into the house when Kate attacked, and then he kissed me. I didn’t kiss him back. I didn’t ask him to kiss me. I’d never do something like that to you.”

Peter smiled at him, his eyes warm and affectionate. “I know. I know you and he could live in the same house for a hundred years and you’d never betray me. I think that’s why I’m even able to have this conversation with you at all.”

Stiles stared at Peter, “But if you know that, then what conversation are we having exactly?”

Peter turned until he was staring out the window.

“I…” he started, and stopped. Stiles had never heard Peter sound so uncertain.

“What is it Peter?” Stiles asked, his heart suddenly starting to race at Peter’s odd, stilted behavior.

“When Derek kissed you…did you want to kiss him back?”

“I told you, I’d never do that to you, Peter, not ever. Kissing him back wasn’t even an option.”

Peter frowned a little, and shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. I…I know you love Derek.”

Stiles was quiet for a long moment, and then he nodded slowly. “Yeah, I do. But I love you more. You’re my mate.”

Peter smiled at Stiles and seemed to relax a little. “What if you could have both of us?”

Stiles shook his head. “I’m not going to cheat on you with Derek. I can’t believe…”

“No, Stiles, please, just listen. I mean, what if you could be bonded to both of us?”

“What? That’s impossible.”

“And if it wasn’t?”

Stiles stared up at Peter, a gathering frown on his face. “You want to share me with someone else?”

Peter grimaced. “Not particularly. But in this very specific instance, I’d consider it.”

Stiles wrapped his arms around his chest, and scooted back until his back was pressed against the headboard of the bed. He had to swallow before he could ask, “Don’t you want me anymore?”

Peter stared at his downcast face and pulled Stiles into his arms.

“Oh god, Stiles, of course I do. If I didn’t care for you so much, I’d never even consider this for a moment.”

“Consider what, Peter? I don’t understand.”

Peter sat back against the headboard and pulled Stiles against his side. He held Stiles against his side, and sighed. “I’m not explaining this very well. Let me back up.”
“That boy we met at the dance, the twin. When he mentioned bonding to the same omega as his brother I was intrigued. I had a vague memory of a story my great-grandfather told me about an omega with two mates so I started looking into it.” Peter squeezed Stiles closer. “I didn’t have any plans, mind you. I was just curious. I asked my friend in LA and he sent me a couple of journal articles of twins bonding to a single omega. It’s vanishingly rare. Even though twins are genetically similar enough to fluid bond a single omega, not very many twins choose to go that route.”

“That’s why they don’t bother teaching about the possibility?” Stiles asked curiously, “I didn’t even know it was a possibility until I got Ethan’s profile.”

“I assume so,” Peter said. “I also went looking through the Hale library, and further, and I thought I’d find more cases of twin bonding.”

Stiles shifted, and turned so he could see Peter’s face. “But you didn’t.”

Peter shook his head. “Not exactly. Most of the stories I found of omegas bonding multiple mates were twin alphas, but not all of them. I found a couple stories of non-twin brothers bonding to a single omega, and in one of the Hale family journals I found one case of a father and his daughter bonding to the same female omega.”

“Yuck.” Stiles said. “That is not okay.”

Peter smirked a little. “Well, it was a different time. In every case I found of omegas having multiple mates, the mates were always close family members.”

“Like you and Derek.” Stiles said. He drew back, his eyes wide. “You think I could bond with Derek because he’s your nephew? Like, really actually bond with him?”

Peter nodded. “I wouldn’t even have brought it up otherwise. We’ve talked enough about omegas leaving their alphas for me to know that you wouldn’t want to have a sexual relationship outside of a mate bond.”

Stiles shuddered. “No way. It’d be like being someone’s sex toy.”

“There are no guarantees that it would work. There’s no how-to manual, just a couple of case studies, and old folk tales, but it might be possible.”

“That would be horrible,” Stiles said quietly. “If we tried to create a mate bond and failed.”

“That’s a possibility. But if you two created a mate bond you’d have two fluid bonded mates, one of whom is young enough you wouldn’t have to worry about being left alone when I die.”

Stiles stiffened and pulled away from Peter entirely.

“Peter…”

Peter turned towards Stiles and took up Stiles’s hand. “Stiles, I know that was your biggest fear about our age difference, that I’d die and leave you alone.”

“You’re not allowed to die.” Stiles said sharply. Peter just looked at him, and Stiles looked away. “I don’t want to talk about it. So you’re doing this entirely for me?”

“No, not entirely. I’ll admit part of the reason I can even think about offering this is because I care about Derek as well.” Peter’s voice turned pensive. “He’s always been my favorite, of all of Talia’s kids. He takes after Marcus far more than Talia, and I know quite intimately what it’s like to grow up
as the odd one out. Talia was always the perfect quintessential alpha and being her younger brother was … difficult. Laura is Talia’s mirror image, so I suppose I’ve always had a lot of sympathy for Derek. Sometimes I think he would have been better off being born a beta, if only so he wouldn’t have had so many expectations piled on him.”

“So he’s your favorite nephew and that’s why you want to share me with him? Like...like a pie?” Stiles pulled his hand out of Peter’s and wrapped his arms around his knees.

Peter’s distant gaze snapped back to Stiles. “What? No. Of course not.”

“That’s what you’re proposing, isn’t it? You want me to have sex with some other alpha and bond and...is this about Olivia? Is this so you can run around with other people and not feel guilty?” Stiles voice was tremulous, and angry.

“This has nothing to do with Olivia...” Peter took a deep breath. “Stiles, I love you. I haven’t regretted for a single second that you are my bonded mate, and I could be completely happy with you, and just you, for the rest of my entire life. I am in no way offering to share you with just anyone. I am not trying to suggest in any way that I would be okay with you running around with other alphas. Ever.” Peter’s voice dropped into a growl on his last few words and he had to stop, and clear his throat. “I’m saying that I love and trust you, and I love Derek enough that if you wanted to try and form a bond with him, I would be willing to accept that, and to try to make it happen. If you think about it, and you decide that’s not what you want, then this discussion will be over and I will never mention it again.”

Stiles jerked his head in a nod and slumped against Peter’s side. There was a long silence between them before Stiles spoke again. “I just don’t know, Peter. You’re everything I ever wanted. I love what we have together. What if we try this and it messes everything up? What if it works, and you’re resentful of having to share me? Or even resentful because I even wanted to try?”

“This isn’t a test, or a trick, my darling. It’s not even a certainty. It’s at best, a possibility we could pursue if you wanted it.”

“Why are you even bringing this up? I don’t know if I even want possibilities.” Stiles pulled away from Peter and glared down at him. “It’s supposed to be easy! One alpha, one omega, bonded forever, the end, nothing more to say, and now you’re telling me that might not be the end and I have to make a choice. If I say yes then I risk what I have with you, and if I say no, then it’s my choice to turn my back on Derek instead of just a function of biology.” Stiles sighed, then flopped back against Peter. “How could I refuse to take a chance on Derek? How could I look at him, knowing that I might have been able to bond with him but was too scared to try? Do you really think it might work?”

Peter shook his head. “Like I said, I can’t be certain. There does seem to be a reasonable chance but...” Peter blew out a deep breath. “We’d have to try this with your next heat.”

Stiles reared back. “That’s only a couple months away.”

Peter nodded. “I know. Honestly, I don’t even know if that’ll be enough time for Derek and I to do our part.”

Stiles suddenly looked uncertain. “Wait, do the two of you have to…you know.” he waved his hand around suggestively.

Peter shuddered. “Absolutely not. We would absolutely never have sex with each other, not now, not ever. We would just need to be much...closer.”
“What? But we already live in the same house. You just told me you love him. What’s left if you’re not going to have sex with each other?”

Peter made a face. “We’d need to be as close as, well, as close as twins, as the closest of brothers. I’d need to scent him and have him scent me. I’d have to feel enough affection and closeness with him I could override my instincts about having another alpha near my bonded mate, even when you’re in heat.” Peter shifted uncomfortably. “You saw what happened when you kissed me on the lawn. We’d need to ease into increased contact slowly. Right now, even talking about it makes me want to shift.”

“Peter,” Stiles said slowly, “You’ve told me what I get out of this, and what Derek gets out of this, but you haven’t told me what you get out of this.”

Peter looked away.

“It’s complicated.”

Stiles huffed a laugh and leaned against Peter more heavily. “I know you are but you didn’t answer my question.” He flinched away when Peter poked him in the side, but stayed quiet.

Peter sighed. “I knew something was wrong, every step of the way, with Derek running out on his bond with you, and away from his family.” Peter looked down at Stiles. “From the moment Talia told me he’d run away I knew something wasn’t right but almost as soon as she told me about Derek, she raised the possibility of me courting you.” Peter went silent for a long moment, and when he started speaking again his voice was quiet, rueful. “I try not to lie to myself but I honestly don’t know how much the possibility of having you for my own affected my actions.”

Peter stroked his hand down Stiles’s side and sighed again. “I’m still not sure, even now.”

Peter tangled his fingers with Stiles’s. “On top of that, I’m not so convinced that losing you is something he’s going to get over. I think you underestimate how special you actually are, Stiles. When I think of how close I came to never having you in my life, like this...” Peter’s hand squeezed gently. “Let’s just say I understand better than anyone else ever could, exactly what Derek has lost.”

Stiles murmured something under his breath and Peter released Stiles’s hand as Stiles’s curled up to hide his burning face against Peter’s side. Peter waited until Stiles settled down before he continued.

“The worst thing is that it wasn’t his fault, not really. He made some poor choices, yes, but he also fell into the hands of someone who deliberately set out to destroy his life. The idea of giving him back some of what she stole from him is very satisfying, I have to admit.”

“It’s too bad she’s not alive to appreciate it,” Stiles muttered darkly.

“She died thinking she had utterly failed,” Peter said lightly. He couldn’t quite make out what Stiles mumbled against his side but the satisfied curl of Stiles’s mouth was unmistakable. Peter bent over and pressed a warm kiss against the corner of Stiles’s mouth.

“When I think about this idea dispassionately, I like the idea of you being protected and supported by two alpha mates who would adore you, especially considering our age difference.”

Peter ignored Stiles grumbling, and continued. “Stiles, if you think about this, truly sit and think about this and decide that trying to form a mate bond with Derek is not something that you want, then that’s that. We don’t have to discuss this again. This isn’t anything I want to persuade you to do. It’s something I want to offer as a possibility. It is entirely up to you if we even try and Derek doesn’t need to know anything about this if you decide against it. If you decide against it, I think it would be
kinder to never even mention this. He will eventually, hopefully, be a friend to you, and a part of your family, and he doesn't need to be anything more, if that’s what you want.”

Stiles sighed. “Derek’s such a mess. How can we trust him to make any kind of reasonable decision right now? He might say yes without thinking about what it would really be like.” Stiles shook his head. “I don’t know. I need to think about it. I kinda thought I had my future all mapped out and I just can’t wrap my mind around what this would mean for us.”

Stiles sat up and turned to meet Peter’s eyes. “But Peter, maybe you should start getting closer to Derek anyway.”

Peter looked at Stiles quizzically.

“Even if I decide not to try this, Derek needs to have someone solidly on his side. He’s just so lost. It barely feels like he lives here, or that he’s even living at all. He hides in his room and runs and he barely spends time with anyone. He’s needs someone, I think, and it can’t be me.”

Peter looked at him somberly and nodded. “You're right. I will.”
Derek was staggering with exhaustion when Peter finally called him into the library and asked to speak to him. He had been expecting it for days, knowing that he owed both Stiles and Peter an apology, but feeling lost whenever he tried to find the words. He hadn’t been able to get the image of Kate’s dead face out of his mind. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her lying on the lawn, staring up at him in accusation with wide glazed eyes. He felt terrified all the time, and telling himself that Kate was dead didn’t make him feel any better. When he slept, his dreams were a tangled mess of Kate, and Stiles, and then Peter pulling him away from kissing Stiles, ripping his throat out, and leaving him to fall on the lawn next to Kate.

Stiles had been staring at him whenever he thought Derek wasn’t looking. Derek couldn’t count the number of times he’d looked up at dinner and found Stiles staring at him, or through him, with a look on his face that Derek couldn’t quite decipher. One night, Stiles had vanished with his father shortly before dinner. When they’d returned home after midnight, Derek had still been awake, huddled on the living room sofa, staring at his phone with blurry eyes. After that evening, John had joined Stiles in staring at Derek, although he also stared at Peter, and at Stiles. Derek couldn’t bring himself to meet anyone’s eyes, and started hiding in his room again, whenever he could.

When Peter cornered him one morning after everyone else had left the house, it was almost a relief. He followed Peter to his study and listened to the door click shut behind him with a shiver. Peter walked over to the loveseat set in the bay window and sat on it, gesturing for Derek to join him. Derek did, his feet dragging as he crossed the room. He slumped down into the loveseat, as far away from Peter as he could manage, and wrapped his arms around his chest. He took a deep breath and told himself he deserved whatever Peter might do.

“Derek.”

Derek didn’t look up from the floor. He couldn’t bear to see the look on Uncle Peter’s face, whatever it might be.

“Derek, look at me.”

“I’m sorry,” Derek blurted. “It was all my fault.”

“What are you sorry for, exactly?”

“I’m sorry I kissed Stiles. I didn’t...I didn’t plan it, I just...”

“That sounds like something you need to be discussing with Stiles, not me.

Derek’s head jerked up. “What?”

“Generally, if you’re sorry about kissing someone, you need to talk to them directly.”

“But... aren’t you mad at me too?” he asked.

Peter shook his head. “No. I’ve been worried about you.”

Derek froze.

Suddenly Peter leaned over and pulled Derek across the sofa and into a warm hug. Derek whimpered as he sank into the dizzying familiarity of Uncle Peter’s hug, overlaid with Stiles’s sweet
omega scent. For the first time, the comfort he was being offered outweighed the grief that Stiles’s scent usually triggered in him. His arms slowly came up and he turned his face away, embarrassed at how much he needed this, even as he clung to Peter with desperate hands. It was a little awkward leaning across the sofa but Derek didn’t care. He expected Peter to be angry, and to be offered a loving touch instead was devastating.

“I think that we...no, forget that. I have made a mistake. I wanted to give you time and space to heal but you’re not. I suspect that you’re sitting in your room and blaming yourself for things that are not your fault.”

Yes they are. Derek thought, then pressed his lips together to stop the words from tumbling out.

“You need to know that you still have a family that loves you. No one is angry at you Derek. We’re still here; we’ll always be here, all of us.”

Derek clenched his burning eyes, and choked out, “But...I...,” before the words withered in his mouth. He felt the familiar wash of shame and self-loathing wash over him. “I....” He wanted to apologize but he wasn’t even sure where to start.

Peter sighed and only hugged him tighter. “I should have spoken to you earlier. Look, no one can ever be prepared for someone like Kate Argent. She was a crazy, malicious bitch who just wanted to hurt someone. You didn’t do anything to deserve what she did to you.”

Derek could feel Peter’s voice as a faint rumble against him as he spoke. He wasn’t sure if feeling the words lent them a particular gravity but he listened to Peter, really listened, and considered what he was saying. He let himself imagine, for just a moment, that Peter was right.

“That makes it worse,” Derek said finally.

Peter shifted to stare down at him, but Derek didn’t move.

“It just happened....” Derek’s voice wavered, and faded. “That’s what everyone said about Dad. It just happened. No one to blame, Mom said, no one’s fault he died. It just happened. Then Kate happened and now you’re saying it wasn’t my fault.” Derek pulled back a little from Peter and twisted until he could look into Peter’s eyes. “What if it keeps happening? I lost Dad, I lost Stiles, everything with Kate...if it just happens, why does it keep happening, Uncle Peter? Why does it have to keep happening to me? Is there something wrong with me?”

Peter’s face blurred, and Derek dropped his face down so his uncle wouldn’t have to see him crying. He let go of Peter, forced his hands to release Peter’s sweater and wiped his face on his sleeve. He pulled back more, and shifted until he was sitting in the opposite corner of the loveseat. He fought the urge to curl up and tried to force his breathing to steady. He laced his fingers together and stared at them.

“It has to be my fault,” Derek said quietly, his breath hitching as he spoke. Derek concentrated on his breathing while he waited for Peter to speak. He could feel the rapid beating of his heart at the base of his throat, half-afraid Peter might agree with him, and half-afraid that he wouldn’t.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Derek,” Peter said, speaking slowly, obviously choosing his words with care. “And it wasn’t your fault. I don’t think you’re cursed, or destined to suffer, or whatever else you’ve been telling yourself. I think that sometimes terrible things happen, no matter what choices we make, just like sometimes wonderful things happen without us having done anything to earn them.”
Derek looked back up at Peter, in time to see him shake his head.

“I wish I had some wisdom that would explain everything, but I don’t. I do know that as terrible as those things were, you survived, Derek. You still have your whole life ahead of you.”

“I have nothing!” Derek’s voice was anguished, loud as a shout as he gave voice to the truth that thumped through him with every heartbeat. “I’ve only ever wanted one thing my entire life and Kate stole that from me.” Derek looked up at his Uncle. “What am I supposed to do now? Who am I supposed to be if I’m alone?”

Derek regretted the words as soon as he spoke them. Peter was frowning.

“Derek... A mate should add to your life, not be your life.”

“But Stiles would have been my life,” Derek said quietly. “Alpha and omega, joined together, ‘til death, the way it was meant to be. Getting bonded to him was going to be the start of my future, the start of everything. We were going to figure everything out together, build a future, a family, everything, together. But now I’m alone.”

Derek stared back down at his hands. “I don’t know what to do.”

Peter was quiet for long enough that Derek started to dread his response.

“You’re eighteen, Derek. You don’t have to have everything figured out right now. Even if you were bonded right now, you’d be facing some of these same decisions.”

Derek stared at his uncle uncertainly. Uncle Peter had always been one of the smartest people he knew, and his calm, confident voice cut through the roiling knot of fear and despair that was wrapped around Derek’s heart.

“You don’t have to do everything, decide everything, Derek. Start with just one thing. Finish high school.”

Derek stiffened, but Peter continued. “I’ll go with you and we can talk to your teachers together – we’ll figure out what you need to do to finish your degree. You don’t necessarily need to go back to classes at Beacon Hills High if you don’t want to.”

A hand came to rest on the back of his neck and Derek shuddered at the touch and pressed into it. He had shied away from touching everyone, after Kate, and now, with the warm, heavy comfort of Peter’s hand against his skin, he couldn’t remember why.

“There’s no shame in needing a little help.”

Derek dropped his head into his hands and Peter had to lean forward to catch what he said next.

“I’m supposed to be an adult. An alpha.”

“That doesn’t mean that you have to do everything by yourself. Just because you turned eighteen doesn’t mean that your mom suddenly stopped being your mom, or that I’m no longer your uncle. No one expects you to wake up the day of your birthday with all the answers.”

“But Kate said...,” Derek trailed off, hearing Kate as vividly as if she were standing behind him, her falsely sweet voice dripping directly into his ear. He shivered as he felt her phantom touch against his skin.
“Kate Argent was crazy,” Peter said succinctly. “I don’t think you should put much faith in anything she may have said to you. Ever.”

Peter’s sharp, familiar voice cut through Derek’s memories of Kate, and then it was just him and his Uncle Peter, sitting together on the couch. Peter looked at Derek, and Derek wondered what exactly Peter was seeing in Derek’s face when Peter reached out, and slowly, deliberately, pulled Derek back against his side. Derek closed his eyes, and let himself be held.

* * *

Derek didn’t realize how much space Uncle Peter, and the rest of his family had been giving him until it was suddenly gone.

His mom started waking him up in the mornings, something she hadn’t done regularly in years, but the flurry of her walking into his room, snapping open all the blinds, and flipping on his stereo was all painfully, wonderfully familiar. Peter had set up a meeting with Derek’s teachers the day after their talk, and the next afternoon he’d walked out of Beacon Hills High with a stack of materials and a plan to finish the last three classes he needed in order to graduate online. Peter had been a steady presence at his side, supporting Derek but letting him do most of the speaking, and Derek had been shocked to realize that he was actually excited at the idea of finishing high school.

Derek and Peter worked out a schedule, and Derek discovered the wi-fi in his room mysteriously no longer seemed to work. He started working at the dining room table, and he was unsurprised when Stiles and Cora started joining him after they arrived home from school. It became a routine, and even though he still hadn’t apologized to Stiles, Derek found himself spending more time with Stiles than he ever had before. Sitting close to Stiles every day, Derek couldn’t help but sink into Stiles’s scent. It had changed, no longer the electric wild honey scent that haunted Derek’s memories. Stiles’s scent had mellowed, was richer, deeper, thick with contentment, mingled with Peter’s scent which only made it more familiar, and more comforting. The scent sank into Derek with every breath, day after day, telling Derek he was home, that he was safe.

Derek noticed his mother and Peter coming home earlier, bringing their work home and lingering more in the shared spaces in the house rather than retreating to their rooms. Peter made a point of speaking to Derek every day, sometimes going over Derek’s school schedule or an assignment, sometimes just a few minutes to check in. His mother reinstituted game night every Saturday, something which had fallen away after Laura had left for college. Davey asked to join Derek on his runs, so twice a week Derek chose a short, flat trail they could run together. Davey was easily distracted and they spent almost as much time turning over rocks and dragging sticks in the stream as they did actually running. Derek’s time alone dwindled to almost nothing but Derek didn’t resent it. Every passing day left him feeling more settled and safer than he’d felt since he’d snuck out of his home all those months ago.

One afternoon Derek looked up and realized that he and Stiles were alone. The late afternoon sun was pouring through the windows and Stiles was lit by the bright golden light. Derek stared at the curve of Stiles’s jaw, the smooth length of Stiles neck, the little wrinkle between his eyebrows as Stiles stared down at his notebook, and Derek had to close his eyes against the wave of grief that washed over him. He’d started to think that he might be okay, that Stiles and he could just be friends, and the sudden ache of loss was all the worse for how unexpectedly it had hit him.

“I miss you so much,” he blurted.

Stiles looked up.

“I know it’s stupid. I know you live here now and I know it’s stupid to miss someone sitting right
next to me, but I do.”

“It’s not.” Stiles said softly. “It’s really not.”

Derek looked at Stiles and felt for a moment like he was totally understood, that Stiles saw right into the tangled mess of his brain and his heart and really understood what Derek was trying to say. As much as Derek was starting to like this Stiles, Peter’s Stiles, there was always a part of him that mourned the boy that he’d been courting, the mate he’d never have. Looking into Stiles’s steady, somber gaze, Derek felt like maybe Stiles understood, and might feel the same way about Derek.

“I’m sorry I kissed you without your permission. I just...” Derek looked down. “I just never...”

He forced himself to look back up at Stiles. “I used to imagine that. Kissing. Every time I saw you. I imagined what it’d be like... And that night...,” his voice trailed off weakly. It was an excuse, and a poor one. He could still remember how crazed he’d felt, how desperate and furious. He’d been terrified of Kate, terrified for his family and for Stiles, and when he’d looked down and seen Stiles staring up at him, all Derek could think was that he didn’t want to die, never having kissed Stiles even once.

Stiles reached out his hand and Derek stared down at it before he tentatively moved his hand to meet Stiles’s. Stiles folded his long fingers around Derek’s and Derek stared down at the contrast between their hands. They’d held hands a lot during their courtship, and the warm familiarity of this particular touch made his heart ache.

“It was a hard night for all of us. It’s okay.”

“I would have cherished you.” Derek said quietly. “You were everything I ever wanted. Not just because you were an omega.” Derek’s fingers tightened for a moment. “If Kate...if she, if everything had never happened, I would have spent the rest of my life loving you.”

Stiles stared at him, and after a moment, he nodded. “I know.” They stared at each other, and then Stiles stood up and pulled Derek up with him. Stiles stepped into him, and Derek’s arms wrapped around Stiles, even as Stiles did the same. Derek instinctively dropped his nose against Stiles’s skin and inhaled. Stiles smelled of family, home, omega, and still faintly like the boy he had been courting. Derek inhaled again, feeling himself grow calmer, even as the ache in his heart grew sharper.

Stiles drew back, and he was staring at Derek the way he’d been staring at him since the night Derek had kissed him, his eyes shuttered and uncertain. Derek froze when Stiles started to lean forward. Derek’s eyes fluttered shut at the first touch of Stiles’s lips against his, and for a moment, everything else fell away. It was everything he’d imagined, everything he hadn’t managed to steal the night Kate had come for him. Stiles’s lips were plush and soft, moving against Derek’s in a way that made Derek feel dizzy. There was just the barest hint of tongue and breath and Derek found himself leaning forward, wishing he could fall into the kiss, into Stiles, and never emerge. This was the kiss he’d dreamed of when he’d been courting Stiles.

Derek stopped when he felt Stiles’s hand come up to cradle his cheek. He knew he should straighten up, open his eyes, move away but he stayed where he was, anchored by the warm press of Stiles’s hand. He didn’t move when Stiles’s hand slid away. He didn’t realize he was trembling until he was pulled back against Stiles into another hug.

Derek wasn’t sure how long they stood like that, before he forced himself to release Stiles, and step back. Stiles opened his mouth as if to speak, hesitated, then closed it, his gaze suddenly clear and calm and sad.
“I …,” love you, Derek thought. Thank you. I’m sorry.

“We should get back to work,” Stiles said gently, and turned back towards the table.

Goodbye, Derek thought, and sat back down across from Stiles.
Peter was ready for the day to be over. There was a storm hovering over Beacon Hills and between the gusting winds and short bursts of rainfall, there had been several small accidents that turned his commute home into a painful crawl. He’d had to get out of his car on the preserve road multiple times to clear fallen branches, and he’d been caught in a brief shower, leaving him soggy and aggravated. When he’d finally arrived home, Talia wasn’t there, and since it was her night to organize dinner, Julia ended up throwing together a meager dinner of frozen pizza. Ollie and Davey had been trapped in the house by the weather all day and had devised a game that seemed to consist of equal parts shrieking and running up and down the stairs. By the time they’d finally been corralled and sent to bed, Peter was struggling to remember why he’d ever given up his apartment in San Francisco. Talia arrived home hours late, and in a terrible mood and had gone straight up to her room. Peter joined Derek and Cora at the dining room table after dinner and they worked together companionably for barely an hour before the lights had flickered, and gone out.

Peter sighed, then got up to help Julia find the flashlights. It wasn’t uncommon for the house to lose power during storms so they had an entire drawer in the kitchen dedicated to flashlights and battery-powered lanterns. Even with their enhanced alpha senses, additional light during a black out was welcome, especially for the younger kids. Derek packed up his computer and headed up to bed with a flashlight while Julia and Peter worked together to place camping lanterns anywhere they might be needed during the night. Peter took a lantern for himself and headed up the stairs.

Peter paused when he walked into the bedroom. He stared at the strange construct that had taken over his bed and wondered what Stiles was up to. Stiles had excused himself to bed early, but Peter hadn’t thought much of it at the time. He could see part of at least three blankets, and the wheels of his desk chair which seemed to be serving as a support, and bit back a smirk. He shut the door behind him, and locked it.

“Stiles?” he called out.

“In here.” Stiles voice was a little muffled, a little breathless, but understandable.

Peter was definitely smirking now. “Did you build yourself a little blanket fort?”

There was a prolonged silence before Stiles answered. “No?”

Peter started to unbutton his shirt as he walked towards his bed. He set the lantern on his night table.

“Okay,” he said in a far too reasonable tone of voice, “Then what exactly is it that you’re hiding in, on top of our bed?”

A flap on the side of the fort lifted and Stiles’s face popped out.

“Why don’t you join me and see?” Stiles asked, but Peter barely heard him. Even in the low light from the lantern Stiles’s cheeks were a hectic pink and a hot wave of scent rolled out from the blankets. Peter felt a roar of arousal surge over him.

“Are you in heat?” Peter growled. His claws erupted as he fumbled with the buttons and he have up with a snarl, ripping his shirt off entirely. Stiles eyes went wide. “When did this happen? Why didn’t you call me?”

Stiles opened his mouth, then shut it again, then ducked back behind the blanket. Peter could feel his vision shift, could suddenly see more clearly into the narrow opening Stiles had left, the shift of pale
limbs as Stiles twisted himself in the confined space, lying back and letting his thighs fall open. He groaned and Peter watched as he started to slide one hand down between his legs.

Peter didn’t even remember how he got his pants off, just yanked and ripped as he crawled his way onto the bed and into the dark space where his mate lie waiting. The space was dark and redolent with Stiles’s scent, and the scent of lube. Peter paused only for an instant, shaking off a vague sense of confusion even as he crawled forward, rubbing against Stiles as he went. Stiles shifted, writhing against the press of Peter’s body. Stiles lifted his hands to clutch at Peter’s shoulders and Peter growled at the fresh wave of Stiles’s scent that they carried.

“Do it Peter, fuck me.” Stiles lifted his legs to wrap around Peters side and ground up against Peter’s erection. “I’m wet and open and I…” Stiles’s voice cut off with a gasp as Peter reached down and pressed himself straight into Stiles’s body in one hard, steady, unstoppable thrust.

“Oh yes,” Stiles breathed, “Do it. I’ve been waiting for this all day.”

Peter drew back and snapped his hips forward, and they both groaned.

“Come on Peter, harder, come on...”

Peter growled and grabbed Stiles's thighs. He heaved upwards, folding Stiles nearly in half, and reared up on his knees. Stiles's yell was abruptly muffled as something clattered and a heavy blanket fell across them, plunging them into a muffling darkness. Peter didn’t stop, throwing his entire body into the next stroke of his hips, and the next. Stiles flailed and threw his arms back to brace himself against the headboard, and Peter leaned forward a little so he could press as much of his skin against Stiles as possible. One of Stiles’s legs slid off to the side and something else fell to the floor with a thunk but they were both beyond caring. Peter was slamming into Stiles now, each slap between their bodies stinging with the force of his thrusts. They were both sweating, and the hot damp dark space between them was thick with their combined scents. Another shift of the blankets and suddenly Peter could see Stiles, his eyes clamped shut, his mouth wide open, one hand pressed against his open mouth, as he panted and groaned, and demanded Peter fuck him harder.

Peter’s eyes opened wide when he felt his knot start to form, not entirely, but enough that on his next stroke forward there was a noticeable pop that made them both yelp.

“Are you…?” Stiles panted, and Peter pulled out. “Oh god, you are…” Stiles threw his head back. “I can’t believe this worked.”

Peter glanced up from where he’d been staring down at where they were joined. “What?”

“Never mind, tell you later.” Stiles rocked his hips up and Peter fell back into fucking Stiles. Even only partially swollen Peter’s knot was exquisitely sensitive, and Peter couldn’t stop the sounds that fell from his lips as he surged in and out of the blazing tight heat of Stiles’s body. His knot never entirely formed so he was never forced to stop, never locked into place - he could experience the sheer desperate pleasure of pushing his soft, swollen knot into Stiles’s slick heat over and over. He leaned over Stiles, and Stiles reached up and dug his blunt nails into Peter’s back and came, muffling his yell into Peter’s chest. Peter snapped his hips forward, racked with his own orgasm but unable to stop moving, unable to stop chasing the incredible pleasure of fucking into Stiles’s body until his shaking arms gave out.

Peter flopped to the side and he and Stiles just panted. The sound of the storm outside were suddenly loud again and Peter spared a moment to hope that it had drowned out some of the noise that he and Stiles had been making. At least the Sheriff was at work, Peter thought giddily, before he reached out and pulled at the blanket that was only partially draped over them.
Peter forced his head up to stare at Stiles, who was still panting with his mouth open. Peter reached out and wiped at Stiles cheek with a thumb and his eyebrows rose when the rosy color on Stiles’s cheeks came off in a smudge. Stiles smiled at Peter wearily, his eyes already half closed.

“Are you wearing make up?”

“Yeah. I read about this in one of Lydia’s magazines.”

Peter shifted to his side and groaned. “I don’t think I can feel my legs.”

“Nap now, complain about the awesome sex later,” Stiles mumbled.

Peter wanted to protest but he could feel it too, the urge to curl up with Stiles in this nest of blankets that reeked of them both, press against Stiles’s warm, damp skin, and just close his eyes. So he did.

Stiles woke Peter up when he shifted and wiggled out from under him. Peter groaned, but opened his eyes in time to see Stiles vanishing into the bathroom. He shifted his body and suddenly became aware he was lying in a tangle of unpleasantly damp blankets. He heaved himself to his feet and pulled off the layers of blankets until he came to a relatively dry layer of sheets. He extracted one of the least damp blankets for the bed, and tossed the rest into the hamper.

Stiles had a definite hitch in his step when he came out of the bathroom. “This is stupid,” he grumped. “How can something that feels so awesome in the moment suck so bad like an hour later?”

Peter snorted. “That’s what you get for trolling trashy magazines for sex tips.”

Stiles crawled into bed. “Well, it was tips for beta women married to alphas on how to mimic an omega heat so I thought if it worked for them, that it’d be awesome for us.” He shifted to cover himself with the blanket and winced. “Ow. Okay, I am not going to be able to sit for a week.”

Peter snorted, and went into the bathroom. He swabbed himself down with a towel, biting back a groan at how tender everything felt, and then re-joined Stiles back in bed.

“So…I’ve made a decision. About that thing we talked about.” Even with the noise of the storm outside, Stiles was careful to lower his voice. Peter tensed, although he tried to hide it.

“And?” Peter asked quietly.

Stiles pulled back from Peter until they were face to face, their lips nearly touching. Stiles stared at Peter for a moment, and then leaned forward to press a soft kiss against his mouth.

“Thank you,” Stiles said, his voice barely above a whisper. “Thank you for even thinking to make that offer. I know it can’t have been easy for you. When you promised that you would guard my happiness, I never imagined how seriously you would mean it. Thank you for offering me a choice when I didn’t even know one existed.”

Stiles pulled back a little and took a deep breath. “I know there’s a chance I might lose you. But you never know what will happen. My mom should have outlived my dad by thirty years, but instead a car swerved into the wrong lane and he wound up losing her.”

Stiles smiled shakily. “I want what I’ve always wanted.” He reached forward, pressing one hand against Peter’s chest. “One person to love, with my entire heart for as long as we have together.”
Peter felt utterly stunned. His mouth opened to speak, and stayed open, as he fought desperately to figure out what he wanted to say.

“But...Derek...” Peter kept his voice quiet, barely a breath of sound. “Have you...”

Stiles blew out a breath. “I’ve thought and thought about it until I felt like I was going crazy. I read all the articles you gave me, and found articles of my own, and let me tell you, betas get up to some crazy kinky shit, like, you would not even believe. They have whole websites and organizations dedicated to having multiple partners. I even talked to my dad about it.” Stiles made a face. “My poor dad. I think he’s had to hear and think and be way more involved in my love life than he ever wanted.”

“Even if it was one hundred percent certain that a second bond would work, when I really thought about it, I realized that’s not what I want. I don’t want to feel divided between two mates. Derek and I, well, we kind of talked yesterday and I don’t think that Derek would want that either.” Stiles shook head. “That’s one thing we share. We both want someone to love with our whole hearts, someone to be devoted to, to, well, cherish. Even if it was something that I wanted, I don’t think he would ever really be happy sharing someone he loves.”

Stiles slid his hand from Peter’s chest to cradle his face. Peter felt shocked, and fearful, and terribly exposed. He hadn’t realized until that moment how certain he had been that Stiles would want to pursue a second bond with Derek. He’d turned over the situation before he’d approached Stiles, thought through every possible outcome, and he just couldn’t see Stiles choosing any other way. As much as he loved Stiles, as much as he knew Stiles loved him, Peter was always aware that he’d never been Stiles’s first choice.

“I love Derek, I do, but I love you more. I choose you, Peter. Just you. You’re the one that I want. You’re everything that I want.”

Peter felt numb, half frozen until he suddenly felt his face contort. He lunged forward to bury his face against Stiles’s shoulder and tried to smother his ragged breathing against Stiles’s skin. He felt a hard knot of anguish and triumph rise up in his chest as Stiles’s words settled over him, into him, like sparks igniting a fierce, incandescent joy.

“Besides,” Stiles murmured “Even if you...I won’t be alone. I’ll have our family, and our children, and all the memories that I plan to make with you.”

Stiles was silent for a moment, before he added, “Like this blanket fort thing, which I totally plan to do again.”

His words startled a wet sounding laugh from Peter who shook his head without lifting it.

“Let’s see how you feel about it after you have to sit through breakfast tomorrow,” Peter muttered roughly.

Peter reared back, and forced himself to be still under Stiles’s searching gaze. He felt stunned anew by the honest affection he saw in Stiles’s face, and he let himself be pulled down into a kiss.


Peter was lost in the warm pleasure of kissing his mate when the howl of the wind was interrupted by the sounds of breaking glass.

Peter and Stiles froze for a moment, their heads cocked as they tried to figure out what had happened.
“Was it the storm?” Peter asked, but even as he spoke Stiles stiffened beneath him.

“Gasoline,” Stiles whispered.

They looked at each other for only an instant before scrambling out of bed. Stiles didn’t bother with underwear, just grabbed his crumpled pajama bottoms and yanked them up. A muffled curse from his side said Peter was doing the same thing. Stiles grabbed his phone and fumbled with it before he cursed and shoved it in his pocket.

“It’s dead.”

Peter looked down at his phone but before he could say anything there was the dull concussive thud of a fire igniting.


Stiles ran to the door and pulled it open. Peter followed and hesitated even as Stiles bolted down the stairs to the second floor. He heard Stiles knocking on Julia’s door, calling her name, and he crossed the hall to the guest room instead. He started towards the window when he heard a gunshot ring out from outside the house, punctuated by the sound of breaking glass. He wheeled around and started back towards the stairs, heart pounding when he heard Stiles screaming his name.

Peter ran.
Chapter 26


*Wake up wake up wake up,* Stiles thought, but didn’t stop moving. He pressed the wadded-up pillowcase tighter against Talia’s side, ignoring her groan of pain.

Behind him he could hear the kids crying, all of them, even Cora, and Julia’s low voice as she tried to comfort them wavered like she was on the verge of crying herself. The only light in Ollie and Davey’s room came from a small battery-powered lantern sitting on the dresser but even so, everything felt unreal, too vivid and far away at the same time. Talia’s blood was just a dark stain under his hands and his nose burned with the smell of smoke and gas. Stiles felt caught in a terrible sense of déjà vu, as if he could walk down the stairs and Kate Argent would be standing on the lawn with a triumphant smirk twisting her lips. Stiles shook his head, and he almost didn’t understand what the sound of feet running down the stairs meant until suddenly Peter was there.

“Stiles! Are you okay?”

Everything snapped back into focus with a rush as soon as he heard Peter’s frantic voice, and he looked up at Peter and yelled, “Get down!”

Peter didn’t ask questions, just dropped down into a crouch by Stiles and Talia, his face pale, eyes wide as he took in the blood on Talia’s shirt, her pale, twisted face, and the fire escape ladder laying in a heap on the floor under the open window.

“Was she hit?”

“I don’t know,” Stiles said grimly.

“I don’t think so,” Talia said, gasping a little as the movement of her chest sent Stiles hands sliding against her side. “I saw something move outside and I jumped away. I think the glass got me when the window shattered.”

Stiles looked down at the size of the stain on Talia’s shirt, and just pressed down harder, eliciting another groan.

Stiles looked down at the size of the stain on Talia’s shirt, and just pressed down harder, eliciting another groan.

Peter fumbled out his cell phone and cursed. “I’m not getting a signal.”

“The house line is dead,” said Julia. “My phone too.”

Stiles said grimly, “Someone must be jamming the phones.”

“Argent,” Peter said flatly. “Must be.”

“What? You killed her,” Talia said.

“Not Kate. Her father. Gerard.”

“Peter,” Talia’s voice was sharp. “Why do you think it’s Kate Argent’s father?”

“He’s former military, and works with some crazy militant anti-alpha group. I was worried he might try to go after Derek so I hired someone to keep an eye on him.” Peter shook his head. “They were supposed to notify me if he ever left LA.”
“Mom, we need to go,” Cora said from behind them. “The smoke is getting really bad.” Davey started coughing, as if to agree.

“Derek’s room,” Talia said. “It’s on the other side of the house, the farthest from the stairs. Shut the door behind you and stay low. Stay away from the windows. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Mom…,” Cora started.

“Just go, sweetheart. I’ll be right behind you, I promise.”

Talia waited until the kids had left the room before she turned to Peter. “Do you think we can negotiate with him?”

Peter shook his head. “I doubt it.”

Stiles started coughing and shook his head. “We need to talk upstairs. We can’t stay down here.” He met Talia’s eyes. “Do you think you can walk?”

Talia pressed her lips together in a hard, flat line. “I can walk.”

Peter used his claws to rip a sheet into strips and he and Stiles tied a clumsy bandage against her side. Talia was crying freely by the time they finished but still managed to crawl to the hallway, where they helped her to her feet.

Julia was waiting for them when they got to the foot of the stairs.

“Derek’s not here.”

“What?” Peter and Talia asked in unison.

“He’s not in his room and the window’s open. I checked the guest room and your room, Peter. He’s not here.”

Talia turned to Peter, her eyes already glowing red. “Do you think they have him?”

“I don’t know,” Peter answered, frowning. “That doesn’t make sense.” He started to cough, and shook his head as he pulled Talia forward.

They hurried up the stairs as fast as Talia could stand to go, and down the hall to Derek’s room. The smoke was starting to fill up the hallway and they slipped into Derek’s room, trying not to open the door any more than they needed to. Cora, Davey, and Ollie were huddled on the floor by the bed. Peter helped Talia sit beside them, while Stiles snatched up Derek’s blanket and stuffed it under the door. As soon as Stiles sat down, Ollie crawled straight into his lap, and Davey wedged himself between Stiles and Talia. Cora and Julia shifted until they were all huddled together, as close as they could get. For once, the warm press of bodies didn’t bring Stiles any comfort. It only reminded him of how much he had to lose.

“His phone is still here.” Cora said. She grabbed Derek’s phone off his nightstand and fiddled with it for a moment before her shoulders slumped. “No signal.”

“It doesn’t make sense.” Talia said, “I don’t smell any strangers in here.”

“But then why would he have left?” Peter looked at Derek’s open window, at the tree outside. “It wouldn’t have been hard for him to jump to that tree and climb down but why would he have left in the middle of the night?”
“Do you think he heard Argent and went out to confront him?” Talia asked.

Peter hesitated but shook his head grimly. “I don’t think Derek would be so reckless. I don’t know if he even knows anything about Gerard but I can’t imagine him jumping out of a window in his pajamas without his keys or his cell phone to confront a group of strangers sneaking up on the house.”

“If Derek could jump out of the window, we could use that to get out of the house.” Cora said.

Peter stood up and edged over to the side of the window so he could look out without presenting too much of a target. The entire yard and the surrounding trees were brightly lit from the fire. He could just make out a dark shape standing framed by the gazebo. He retreated and sat back on the floor.

“There’s someone out there,” he said quietly.

Stiles looked up from where he was nuzzling Ollie. “Are we surrounded?”

Peter nodded grimly. “I’d bet on it. Argent is former military. I doubt he’d leave much to chance. Everything has been too fast and organized.”

“The power going out,” Stiles said.

“None of the phones working,” Talia added.

Peter nodded again. “The timing – during a storm, maybe even John being at work,” He added.

Stiles felt a cold clench of panic. If Gerard actually had planned it down to that level of detail he’d likely planned for every possible escape attempt that they might make. He met Talia’s bleak gaze and they both turned to Peter.

“Do you think he’d let just the kids come out?” Talia asked.

“What?” Cora asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Be quiet, Cora,” Talia snapped.

“We need more information,” Peter said flatly. “I’ll be right back.”

“Peter…” Talia started.

“I’ll be careful,” Peter said, and headed into Derek’s bathroom. He emerged with a damp towel wrapped around the lower half of his face and pulled the blanket away from the bottom of the door. He disappeared into the hallway with a puff of grey smoke.

Peter ducked low in the smoke filled hallway and went as fast as he dared. The yard was brilliant, lit by the spreading fire and the men outside weren’t even trying to hide. He kept to the side of the windows, trying not to present a target as he checked each side of the house and made his way to the guest bathroom.

There were two men standing in front of the house, both armed and watching the fire with blank faces. He recognized one from the final report he had received from Norman. Gerard Argent.

He didn’t look much like his daughter. He was dressed entirely in black but he hadn't bothered to wear a mask. The stern lines of his face were relaxed, and he was standing like a soldier at ease, a rifle resting lightly in his hands. The man standing next to him fidgeted a little, glanced back over his shoulder at the driveway every few minutes, but Argent looked entirely calm, and patient. Any faint
hope Peter might have had that Argent would set the fire and then leave soon enough for them to escape unnoticed vanished. Peter shivered as the skin on the back of his neck prickled and his stomach clenched as he realized just how much trouble they were all in.

Peter reached out and pushed up the window, careful to keep his body to the side. He leaned over and pitched his voice to carry over the noise of the fire.

“Gerard Argent. My name is Peter Hale. I’m the one that killed your daughter. No one else here had anything to do with it. I’ll surrender myself to you if you’ll let my family go.”

Argent answered without a pause. “Do you love your family, Peter?” His voice was cool, raised, but not yelling, not angry. That calm voice speaking almost conversationally over the combined noise of the storm and the fire was laying a trap for him. He closed his eyes for a moment as he realized that there would be no reasoning with Argent, no logical argument that might make him reconsider. He felt the prickle of his transformation sweep over him and fought down the urge to roar his defiance at the threat standing outside of his house.

Peter took a deep breath. “Yes I do.”

“Then you understand why this is happening,” Gerard said. “From the moment you murdered my daughter, you and your entire family were dead, you just didn’t know it.”

“We have children in here! They haven't done anything!” Peter’s voice was harsh, ripped out of him in an uncontrollable shout.

Even with the distance between them, Peter could see the thin smile on Gerard’s face lit by the flickering light from the fire.

“I don’t care.”

*

Peter slipped into Derek’s room as fast as he could but a thick cloud of smoke followed him, drawn in by the open window. He dropped to the floor and he could see from the bleak look on Stiles’s and Talia’s faces that they had overheard his exchange with Gerard.

“I counted at least one man on every side of the house, two in the front. Six all together but there might be more back in the trees. They were all in black and hard to see. He glanced at the kids and lowered his voice, even thought they were all sitting so close there was no way they couldn’t hear. “All of them were armed.”

Peter and Stiles looked at each other, then at Talia. They turned almost as one to look at Derek’s window.

“We can’t stay here.” Talia said.

“How about the attic?” Cora asked tentatively.

Peter shook his head. “We’d be further from the ground and there’s only a couple small windows up there.”

Peter stared at Derek’s window. “I’m going to have to create a distraction at the other end of the house. I’ll try and draw as many of them as I can to that side and you all need to jump to the tree and head for the woods.”
“Whoa, wait a minute, what do you mean create a distraction?” Stiles asked, just as Julia shook her head.

“The tree’s not that far away but that’s a long way down. I’m not sure Davey or Ollie can make that climb without help.” She swallowed, and then admitted, “I’m not sure I can make it myself.”

Stiles looked at the kids, and at Talia sitting slumped holding her side.

“I need to do it, Peter. I’ll make the distraction.”

Peter was already shaking his head.

“It has to be me. I’m not strong enough to help everyone down that tree, but I’m fast. I can create the distraction and give the rest of you time to get out. You just need to get far enough away from the house to escape the range of whatever cell phone jammer Argent is using and you could call for help.”

“Stiles…”

“You’re stronger than I am, Peter. You can help everyone down to the ground. I should be the one to make the distraction.”

Peter opened his mouth to protest and Stiles leaned forward and laid his hand against the side of his face.

“Peter, you know I’m right. There isn’t a safe option here. I might get…hurt trying to escape out this window just as easily as I might creating a distraction.”

Peter seized both of Stiles’s hands in his. “But you’d be out. You’d have a chance.”

“I have just as good a chance of getting out this way too. I’ll make a distraction in the front then bail out the guestroom window. There’s a ton of bushes on that side of the house. There’s only one guy on that side and by that point he’ll probably be distracted. I can head for the trees from there.”

Peter never stopped shaking his head, and his grip on Stiles’s hands was becoming painful.

Stiles’s voice became gentle. “It’s the only way.”

Peter’s grip was crushing, and Stiles felt strangely calm as he looked at the desperate look on Peter’s face. He could see the frantic calculation in Peter’s eyes as he tried to think of something better, safer than the plan they were discussing.

“Peter…there’s no other way. We need to move, now. We’re almost out of time.” Stiles turned to Talia. “Are there any guns in the house? Flares? Anything like that?”

Talia shook her head. “My father had a hunting rifle but it was in a box in the garage.”

“I’ll figure something out.” Stiles said, then paused as something crashed ominously somewhere in the house. “Get ready to go as soon as you can.”

“I don’t want to jump out the window,” Ollie protested.

Stiles leaned forward and pressed his forehead against Ollie’s. “I know but we need to get out of here.” Stiles closed his eyes, then leaned forward and pressed a hard kiss against Ollie’s forehead. “You are so brave, Ollie, I know you can do it.” Stiles turned and drew Davey against his side. “You lead the way for Ollie, okay? As soon as you hit the ground you run straight into the preserve and
“don’t stop, okay.”

“Stiles…” Cora said, her eyes filling with tears.

Stiles leaned forward and gave her a hug.

“It’ll be okay. I’ll see you in the preserve.”

Stiles hugged Julia, then turned towards Peter.

“Stiles…”

Stiles reached out and tangled his fingers with Peter’s for an instant, then let go. “I love you, Peter,” Stiles said quietly. “I’ll see you soon.”

Peter swallowed down his fury and terror and resignation and watched Stiles disappear in a puff of thick grey smoke. He closed his eyes for a moment, then turned to his waiting family.

“As soon as we hear something we’re going. I’ll go first and take care of the guard. Talia, you follow me, then everyone else. Cora, help Ollie. As soon as your feet touch the ground everyone runs to the trees as fast as you can, and run as far away as you can. Don’t stop until you can’t run anymore, then find a good hiding place and stay there until one of us comes and gets you.”

There was a crash of shattering glass from the front of the house, and a scream. Peter and Talia looked at each other.

“Was that…?”

Peter sprang up and looked out of the window. The guard was staring intently towards the corner of the house and even as Peter watched he took a few steps towards the front of the house. A gun shot rang out, followed by another crash. The guard moved forward, his attention entirely turned towards the side of the house.

“That’s it.” Peter said grimly. “Let’s go.”

He took a few running steps and launched himself out of the window.
Chapter 27

Peter made it to the ground before the guard noticed, dropping down as fast as he could, barely bothering to steady himself against the tree. His feet slammed into the lawn, and he took off towards the nearest guard before the aftershocks of the fall finished rising up his legs. The guard’s head jerked up, and his rifle followed, swinging into position even as his finger tightened on the trigger. The guard was fast for a beta, but Peter was faster, and he wrapped a hand around the barrel and pushed it away just as it went off. Peter heart flinched back from the explosion of sound but the rest of his body didn’t hesitate, just lurched forward with claws outstretched. The guard jerked back and instead of wrapping around his neck, Peter’s claws dragged down the man’s chest. Peter punched forward when the man opened his mouth to scream and crammed as much of his hand into the man’s open mouth as he could, muffling the noise. He barely registered the desperate bite of teeth against the back of his fingers as he ripped at the man’s soft belly with his other hand.

Behind him he heard Talia’s voice, hushed and urgent, barely audible over the ringing in his ears, and the noisy rustle of the wind. There was a sudden, sharp, pained scream – Davey? - but he forced himself to ignore everything except the man under his hands. He didn’t hear the other guard until he heard another gunshot ring out, and felt a sudden, sharp burn tear across his back. He dropped the body he was holding. Peter whirled around, took one, two, running steps, leapt, and landed on the man standing at the rear corner of the house.

Peter had never really fought anyone before, not really. He’d had a few childhood scuffles, a couple of arguments in college that had ended with some mutual shoving and one dodged punch, but never anything serious. Peter had never taken any classes or had any kind of training, had never needed such a thing in his orderly, peaceful life. The man beneath him very obviously had, and he struck out furiously, landing a flurry of hard, jolting punches and kicks on Peter’s body. The man’s face was grim, determined, and his intent obvious as he struggled against Peter. It might have been a very different fight if Peter wasn’t feral, almost insensate with rage and running on pure instinct. His entire mind had been given over to a single consuming desire: the need to rip and rend, to slaughter these intruders who dared to come into his territory and threaten his family. Peter’s body acted without hesitation, his alpha strength and reflexes roaring to life.

He slapped the man’s gun away, then the knife that appeared seemingly out of nowhere. The man rammed a fist into Peter’s side and he rocked as the impact landed with a sickening crunch. The man tried to pull back for another strike, but Peter jerked the man close and darted forward with his teeth. The squelch and spurt of blood only made him press forward, until he could fill his mouth, bite down, and jerk back with a snarl, spitting out a mouthful of wet meat. The man’s rasping breath transformed into a wet gargle of spurting blood. Peter let him drop and looked for the next enemy.

“Peter, help!”

Peter whirled and saw Cora struggling, half-way down the tree with Ollie clinging desperately to her back. He glanced toward the house, and when he saw no new threat, ran towards the tree. He didn’t bother to slow down as he approached, just reached up with his claws, and leapt straight up until he was high enough to cover Cora and Ollie with his body.

“I got you,” he growled, “keep climbing.” Peter climbed with them, half-supporting their weight, as they scrambled and skidded down the tree. Ollie refused to let go, even when they finally reached the ground, his eyes clamped shut and his arms locked around Cora’s neck. Peter helped steady Cora on her feet.

“I can carry him,” she gasped, “help mom.” Cora started towards the trees in an awkward run, and
Peter forced himself to look away and back up to where Talia and Julia were climbing down. Talia had transformed and was using her claws, but Julia was struggling. As Peter watched from below, her grip slipped, and she slid down straight onto Talia, who grunted and started to lose her grip as well. Peter scrambled up the tree again, and supported Talia, giving her a chance to dig her claws into a deeper grip. Before they reached the ground, his head jerked up at the sound of a roar, bestial and furious, and strangely familiar, loud enough that for a second the noises of the burning house and the storm faded away.

"Peter!"

Julia's voice reclaimed his attention, and he wrapped an arm around her back just as her grip was failing. They descended together in a barely-controlled fall, and landed heavily. Peter heard another roar, followed by an answering volley of gunfire. Julia yelped, and then slapped a hand over her own mouth, as she struggled to her feet.

“Derek!” Talia gasped, clutching her side which was dark with blood, and she took a step towards the house. She swayed, and groaned in frustrated rage.

“No!” Peter barked, voice garbled around his exposed fangs, “I'll get him. Get the kids to the trees!”

He didn’t wait for Talia’s response. Peter turned towards the front of the house and broke into a run on all fours, head thrust forward, throwing himself forward in great bounding leaps as he headed towards the front of the house.

* * *

Stiles pressed himself against the floor, as close as he dared with the scattered glass lying around him. He sucked in a breath of smoky air and winced as another shot from outside hit the window nearby and broken glass rained down from the splintered frame. He reached out tentatively and winced as he felt the glass cut into his hands. He hadn't counted on crawling through broken glass as part of his escape plan, but it was better than getting too far from the floor and breathing the thick smoke that hung in the air.

His diversion had worked better than he could have hoped. He hadn’t managed to hit either of the men directly with the volley of items he’d thrown at them, but they’d been forced to jump back when the makeshift molotov cocktail he’d made from Peter’s favorite decanter of whiskey had exploded at their feet. At least one of the men had been splashed with the burning alcohol and he had heard some shouting before they’d started firing at the window.

He crawled as fast as he could, bending low to the floor where the smoke was the thinnest for each gasped breath. The floor was radiating heat, and the image of what must lie directly below terrified Stiles. He had barely made it down to the second floor to create his diversion - the heat and smoke boiling up the stairwell had made him hesitate, his arms full of possible projectiles he’d scooped from his room and the bathroom, but the thought of Ollie’s pale, terrified face had forced him onward.

The fire had spread in just the few minutes he’d spent creating his diversion. He could feel himself panicking, his breath catching and heaving. He scrambled forward in blind desperation, ignoring the sting of the glass on his hands and knees. He had left a trail of blood by the time he reached the hallway. He pressed his face to the floor, took a gulp of air, and stumbled to his feet. The smoke was a grey wall that even his eyes couldn’t penetrate. Every step echoed back from the floor in a chorus of creaks and snapping wood that sent his heart into his throat. Stiles closed his eyes against the sting of the smoke, and groped his way across a hallway that suddenly felt entirely unfamiliar. The months he’d spent walking through these halls guided his steps as he headed towards Ollie and Davey’s room at the back of the house. The floor under his hands radiated heat like on open oven and lack of
air was making him dizzy.

“Oh god, please let them have made it out,” he thought frantically. His hand snagged against the door frame and he groped his way across the floor and towards the window. He whimpered as something behind him crashed. He stood and threw the window open without any thought of being quiet or hiding. He gasped as a gust of wind and moisture whipped in for a moment before it suddenly billowed back out, drawing the heat and smoke with it. Stiles didn't bother to look around to see if there was a guard. With the fire at his back like a pushing hand, he clambered out the window and let himself drop down, his heart hammering. “Oh god please,” ...he thought, “please let this work..."

The fall was short, the landing brutal. The bushes weren't nearly as soft as he'd always imagined. It felt like he'd landed on a tangle of razor-sharp knives. What felt like a thousand new scratches and scrapes appeared all at once and started to bleed. He gasped for breath, too hurt to do anything other than try to breathe. “Get up,” he told himself. “Get up and run!” The words felt unreal and the idea of moving was completely ridiculous. The air was a little better outside. The winds were whipping away the worst of the smoke, although it was still thick with the stink of burning wood and plastic. The stars were blotted out by clouds and smoke. Stiles started upwards, eyes blurred with tears, and watched as the smoke rose in a thick column into the dark sky.

A roar came from the other side of the house. It wasn't Peter, but it was male, and he jerked, and then forced himself upright when it was answered by gunshots.

“Derek,” he thought. “He's back?… or they had him all along?” His body felt suddenly, shockingly awake, and he forced himself to move. Every movement was agonizing, as if the bushes that had cushioned his fall had driven every tiny broken branch into his skin. He was sobbing by the time he managed to roll off the bushes and onto the ground. He was sobbing by the time he managed to roll off the bushes and onto the ground. Another furious roar drove him to his feet and he wavered, torn between heading towards the front of the house, and running towards the preserve. He reached down and slid his hand into his front pocket. The screen of his phone was smooth under his fingers, undamaged in the fall. He lifted it to the sky, but there was still no signal. He took a shaky breath and started towards the preserve.

***

Peter rounded the corner of the house. Argent and another man were standing with their backs to Peter, guns raised and firing into the darkness. Even as Peter watched, the man with Argent cursed, ripped goggles off of his face, and threw them to the ground.

“I can’t see shit with these things on.”

There was a scream from the darkness, out past the light from the blazing house, and it was followed by another roar.

“Keep firing damn it!” Argent yelled.

“We’re going to hit Mike!”

“Mike's already dead! Keep shooting!”

Peter didn’t hesitate, just plowed into them both, the entire weight of his body backed by the momentum of his run. He aimed his claws for the shape he thought was Argent, reaching for his throat even as they flew through the air. Argent was trained too, already throwing his elbows back even as he fell, and Peter grunted when one of his desperate shots hit his side, right where he’d taken the punch from the guard. Something crunched and Peter gasped for breath as they landed heavily on
Argent and the other man both started rolling as soon as they hit the ground. Peter’s claws dragged, then caught on Argent’s vest, and he was wrenched to the side as Argent threw his weight to the side. He growled and pushed himself towards Argent rather than try to pull against him. He grabbed at Argent with his free hand, and grunted when his claws struck against something unyielding, and snagged. He used his weight to keep Argent from standing up, and kicked out until Argent was on his back, lying half on top of him. The other man had gained his feet and brought his gun around.

“Take the shot!” Argent barked, struggling against Peter’s hold.

“I don’t have a clear shot!” the other man yelled, the point of his gun wavering.

“Then find one, damn it!”

The man took one, two steps forward, and a step to the side. Peter snarled as Argent bucked and kicked against him, trying to throw his body to the side. Peter felt one of his claws snap off and grappled for a better grip. He flinched when something slammed into the ground next to his head just as the gun went off and he heaved Argent up higher, using him as a shield even as he scrambled to shove his claws into Argent’s chest. The gun went off again. Peter shivered in satisfaction as he felt Argent’s entire body jerk against his an instant before he felt a hot pinch against his shoulder. He felt another one of his claws snap and suddenly his hand was free. He didn’t even spare a thought for the second man before his hand flew up and dug into Argent’s throat.

“Take...” Argent’s final words vanished in a wet gurgle and Peter eyes snapped shut as a sudden wave of hot blood poured down from the body above him.

“Shit! Gerry! Fuck!” There was another shot, and then a scream that Peter only half-heard under a familiar roar. He shoved Argent’s body to the side and staggered to his feet. Peter swiped at his face with his arm and blinked away blood until he could make out the two figures tangled together on the ground. Derek had transformed and was clawing at a man even as he struggled to stab Derek with an enormous knife. Peter leapt forward, grabbed the arm with the knife, and pulled it away. The man’s wild, terrified face swung towards him, eyes wide and panicked. Peter bared his teeth in satisfaction as the movement gave Derek the opening he needed to sink his claws into the man’s neck and tear it open.

“Peter!”

Peter spun around, his breath torn from him by the sound of Stiles’s voice. The sight of his mate limping towards him across the fire-lit lawn forced a thrill of terror down his spine. His head jerked towards one side, and then another, looking for the next threat.

“Peter, it’s okay. They’re all dead. I walked all around the house. There’s no one left.”

By then Stiles was in reach and Peter couldn’t resist. He snatched Stiles desperately into his arms. The impact of Stiles’s body against his hurt. From the gasp Stiles gave, and the scent of fresh blood that clung to his skin, he knew Stiles must be hurt too, but Stiles was here, walking and talking, and back in Peter’s arms. Peter hadn’t been certain he’d get to have any of those things ever again. Peter’s terror and fury drained away, and with it the wild energy that had kept him moving. He swayed a little as he pressed his face against Stiles’s neck and inhaled deeply, frantically seeking out the faint scent of Stiles beneath the smoke and blood. It was there, barely, faint and sour with fear and pain, but there, and Peter felt his eyes start to burn.

He felt Stiles shift, raise his head, and a moment later, he heard it too, rising and falling over the noise
of the storm and the fire. Sirens.

“Dad,” Stiles breathed, voice low and utterly relieved.

“How...” Peter started.

“I called them,” Stiles said. “I headed towards the road as soon as I got out and called the station as soon as I got a signal.”

Peter looked at Stiles. “My brill...”

“Where’s Mom?”

Stiles and Peter both turned. Derek was standing near the man he had just killed, hands still raised and dripping blood onto the body between his feet. He was almost naked, bare from the waist up and the tattered remains of an old pair of shorts barely hanging around his hips. He was still transformed, dappled in bruises, raw scrapes, and splashes of blood, both eyes nearly swollen shut and starting to darken.

“Cora? Ollie? Are they...”

Peter released Stiles and approached Derek slowly, keeping his voice gentle. “She got out. They all did. They’re hiding in the preserve. Everyone’s safe.”

Derek closed his eyes, groaned in relief, and started to tremble as Peter slowly approached him. “We’re all safe.” Peter wrapped his arms around Derek as carefully as he could, ignoring the blood on both of them. Derek tensed, then sighed, his fangs and claws receding as he slowly relaxed, then went so limp he nearly slid out of Peter’s arms. Stiles stepped forward and wrapped his arms around both of them. Derek’s head snapped around and his eyes gleamed scarlet for an instant.

“You’re hurt.” he growled.

“Just a little,” Stiles said.

“We’re safe,” Peter repeated, and the three of them clung together for a long moment for before Peter straightened with a groan.

“Come on,” Peter said. “We need to find everyone.”

They turned together, Peter and Derek flanking Stiles without thought or discussion, and had barely taken a handful of steps towards the tree line when Cora erupted from between the trees and headed straight for them.


“It’s over. Where’s your mom?” Peter asked.

“They’re hiding. I think Julia broke her foot, and Ollie latched onto mom and won’t let go and she’s still bleeding every time she moves so everyone’s hiding under Derek’s old tree fort all together.”

“That was not the plan,” Stiles muttered, then shook his head when Cora gave him a worried look. “It’s okay. You can tell them to come back. I called my dad and told him to bring everyone, fire, EMS, everyone. They should be here in a minute.”

Even as Stiles finished speaking the Sheriff’s car roared up the driveway and he slammed to a stop so fast on the gravel path that the back of end of his cruiser skidded out before it shuddered to a stop.
He jumped out of the car and started towards the burning house at a run.

“Dad!”

“Stiles!” He turned sharply and headed for them. Peter was aware of how they must all look, bloodied and bruised, standing huddled together on the lawn, and he had a sudden, sharp memory of standing on the lawn over Kate Argent’s dead body with her warm blood dripping off his fingers. He started when Stiles hand slid into his, just as it had on that night, but when he turned towards Stiles, his gaze was fixed on his father.

“Oh my god, Stiles! Are you okay? What happened? Where’s Talia? The other kids? What...”

“Argent,” Peter said flatly. “Argent happened. He surrounded the house with armed men and set it on fire.”

Behind them the house collapsed in on itself with a crash of splintering wood and there was a chorus of shouts from the firefighters who were frantically unloading their equipment.

“Talia and the kids are in the preserve,” Peter added. “They’re going to need some help. Some of them are injured.”

“It looks like they aren’t the only ones,” the sheriff said, turning a critical eye on each of them. He turned to wave over the paramedics who’d just pulled in behind the fire trucks, before he turned back. “God, Derek, you must be freezing.” He shrugged out of his jacket and wrapped it around Derek with gentle hands.

“Did Argent call you out of the house?” Peter asked.

Derek shook his head. “I went out for a walk and I heard yelling so I came back.” Derek shivered. “They were all around the house when I got here, all in black, just like Kate, and holding guns. Then I saw Stiles start throwing stuff at them so I went after one of the guards standing back by himself.”

“You went for a walk?” Stiles asked incredulously. “In the middle of the night in just your shorts?”

Derek’s eyes flicked to Stiles and then Peter, and then dropped. He drew his head down into the collar of the Sheriff’s jacket and mumbled, “Uh, I... I couldn’t sleep last night so I thought I’d go for a walk.”

Stiles stared at the hot flush crawling up Derek’s face and had a sudden sense memory of throwing his head back and screaming into the walls of the tent.

“Oh my god, Derek, can you hear us from your room?” Stiles blurted.

Derek tried to sink down further into the Sheriff’s coat but he’d run out of collar. He gave a lopsided shrug. “Sometimes.” He looked up and looked at Stiles. His lips quirked, just the tiniest bit. “You’re pretty loud.”

It was Stiles turn to blush and he wasn’t sure if he was more embarrassed or horrified.

“Yeah, he really is.” His dad muttered.

Stiles’s head swiveled around to stare at his dad, then he turned to Peter who was smirking.

“Oh my god,” Stiles moaned, and turned to bury his face against Peter’s shoulder.
Peter laughed, and wrapped his arm around Stiles with a groan of pain.
Chapter 28

Epilogue

There was enough room for everyone around the Stilinski’s old dining room table, but just barely. They’d had to buy some extra folding chairs and a box of extra dishes, and once they were all seated they were sitting elbow to elbow, but no one complained. Davey set the table as best as he could with his arm in a cast, with Ollie helping him. Julia stumped around the tiny kitchen, newly mobile for the first time in the aftermath of the fire, finally off of crutches and into a walking boot. She’d cracked multiple bones in her foot and ankle on her fall from the tree, and had been in a series of splints and casts which had limited her time on her feet. They’d eaten a lot of pizza and take-out, in the month since the fire.

“That smells amazing,” said Stiles.

Julia smiled and handed him a basket of rolls. “It’s just so nice to be able to get around without those stupid crutches. I felt like celebrating.”

“I know what you mean,” Stiles said. He’d just started back to school a few days before. Although nearly everyone had been injured in the aftermath of Argent’s attack, it had been Stiles who’d ended up stuck in the hospital the longest, nearly two weeks thanks to all the smoke he’d inhaled. He’d suffered through a short stint in the ICU, narrowly avoiding intubation, and still had a handful of inhalers and pills when the doctors had finally released him home.

Talia arrived just as Julia was pulling the salmon from the oven, and Cora clattered down the stairs when Julia called everyone to the table. They gathered around the table, and there was a lull as dishes were passed, and everyone started eating.

“So any updates on when’s the new house is going to be done?” Peter asked.

Talia sighed. “I just talked to the contractors today. They’re still saying at least another four to five months, even with all the overtime.”

Everyone at the table sighed at that, even John.

“I never thought I’d say it, but I do miss having all that space.” John said.

They’d been crammed into the Sheriff’s house for the past month. Peter and Stiles were in his old room, on a newly purchased queen sized bed, but so were Ollie and Davey, on a pair of mattresses on the floor. John was sharing his room with Derek. Talia, Julia, and Cora were crammed together into the guest room. They’d talked about renting another house or apartment during the construction of the new house, but there was nothing large enough for all of them nearby, and no one felt like being separated.

“I miss my kitchen,” Julia sighed. “I swear I will never take counter space for granted ever again.”

“I miss my secret clubhouse,” Ollie said glumly.

“Privacy,” Peter added, looking towards Stiles.

Stiles looked back and muttered, “Soundproofing.”
John snorted and raised his glass towards his son.

“Speaking of which,” Peter said, “I think Stiles and I will be spending this weekend at the coast.”

Stiles perked up and smiled brightly at Peter.

“Really?”

Peter smiled and reached out to take Stiles’s hand in his.

“Got an all clear from my doctor and the harpy.”

Julia scoffed.

“Harpy? Really Peter? Debbie is so nice, I don’t know why you call her that,” Julia said.

Peter scowled.

“Nice to you, maybe. She’ll always be the harpy as far as I’m concerned. Even for a physical therapist she’s a stone cold sadist. No medical professional should use that much sarcasm with her patient.”

Talia opened her mouth to reply, but another voice interrupted.

“But she helped, right? You feel better, don’t you Uncle Peter?” Davey asked anxiously.

Peter’s face softened.

“Much better, Davey. The surgeons fixed me right up. Look.”

Peter rolled his shoulder, and then lifted his arm straight up into the air.

“See? It doesn’t hurt at all. I just don’t like it when people nag me.”

“That’s cause you’re super bossy,” Ollie piped up, “Like Mommy.”

Stiles caught Derek’s eye, where he was hiding a smirk behind a roll, and grinned.

“Yes, yes he is Ollie. Super-duper bossy, just like Mommy.”

Stiles laughed when Talia and Peter both turned to stare at him with nearly identical disgruntled looks.

“Maybe we should all take a little vacation,” Julia said, and then clarified hastily when Peter gave her a look. “Not this weekend, but soon, maybe after the kids are done with school for the year.”

“That’s a really good idea,” Talia said thoughtfully. “We could rent a nice, big house at the beach and spend a couple weeks relaxing.”

“That sounds great, Mom,” Cora said. “We haven’t been to the beach in forever.”

“I wanna go swimming! And look for sand dollars!” Davey shouted.

“Me too!” Ollie said. “And I want to build a giant sand castle!”

“John, you should come with us,” Talia said.
Stiles stared at his dad hopefully even as Ollie, who was sitting next to him, started to cheer.

John looked thoughtful, and then nodded his head. “I could probably do that. I have some vacation time coming due, and we’re finally fully staffed as of a week ago.”

“How’s the new deputy? Settling in okay?” Stiles asked.

“Yeah, she’s been great. She’s a little intense, but I think once she settles down she’s going to be an amazing asset to the department. She’s talking about restarting the community self-defense classes we used to offer.”

Cora looked at John.

“Self-defense classes? Like martial arts?”

John nodded and spooned some more corn onto his plate.

“Yeah, she does a couple as a hobby, in addition to the training she got as a US Marshall. Nothing’s set up yet, but I thought that once it’s organized it might be good for us to go and support her.”

“I’ll go,” Cora said. “I’ve been wanting to learn more about self-defense.”

There was a momentary silence as Talia and John exchanged glances. They all still had some lingering issues about the night of the attack, and all of them had had a bad nightmare or two, but the frequency of Cora’s nightmares didn’t seem to be lessening, and even a month later she struggled to sleep peacefully through the night.

“That’s a great idea, honey,” Talia said.

“Maybe we can sign up together,” Stiles said lightly. “I’ve always wanted to learn how to throw someone over my shoulder.”

John waited a beat, and then turned to Derek. “You know, Derek, I think you should check out the class.”

Stiles tilted his head and stared at his dad through narrowed eyes. That entirely too casual tone in his Dad’s voice was the sound of his dad trying to be sneaky. He’d heard it before. Although from the lack of reaction around the table, none of the Hales had come to recognize it yet. His father met his suspicious stare with a bland look and turned back to Derek. “In fact, I was thinking you might have some extra time on your hands this summer, until classes start up at the community college.”

Derek looked puzzled.

“Me? But I don’t know anything about martial arts.”

John shrugged.

“Well, you’re smart and in pretty good shape. I bet you’ll pick it up pretty quickly. Braeden’s going to need some help getting stuff up and running, and you’re familiar with Beacon Hills. I thought you might have some extra time on your hands this summer, until classes start up at the community college.”

“I guess,” Derek said.

“Great!” John said heartily. He turned to Talia, ignoring Stiles’s curious face. “So, when do you want to go? June? July? I’d better get working on the paperwork if I’m going to join you at the
beach.”

Stiles closed his mouth and stared more intently at his dad, who was suddenly very enthusiastically going over options about where they should go with Talia and Cora and studiously ignoring Stiles.

Stiles turned towards Peter and found him already looking at him, his gaze fond. His suspicions derailed and all he could think about was the fact that Peter and he hadn’t been able to do much more than hold hands as they both recovered from the injuries they’d sustained during the night of the fire. He’d spent more than one sleepless night after they’d both returned home from the hospital, clinging to Peter’s hand, listening to him breathe beside him, and feeling desperately grateful they had both survived.

Peter leaned forward until their shoulders were brushing, and turned until he could press a light kiss against Stiles’s hairline. “God, I’ve missed you.” he murmured. He reached out and took Stiles’s hand.

Stiles shivered, and pressed towards Peter. He squeezed Peter’s hand, running his thumb over the faint scars on the backs of Peter’s fingers.

“Me too.”

“Stiles? Peter? What do you think?”

Peter turned towards Talia but didn’t pull away. He shifted instead, lifting his arm to drape it around Stiles’s shoulders. They were sitting so close together that it was easy for Stiles to shift into the embrace. He let his eyes drift around the table as everyone made suggestions about their summer plans, pausing for a moment on Derek. He was smiling, watching Ollie and Davey as they used rolls to make a model of the sandcastle they planned to build. Derek seemed to be smiling easier these days, finally starting to relax and believe that Kate was behind him. His injuries had been relatively mild and he’d slipped easily into taking care of the more injured members of the family. He’d been endlessly patient with the younger kids, and even weathered a tantrum or two from Peter, who’d been trapped in a shoulder immobilizer between surgeries.

Derek glanced up and their gazes met for a moment. Stiles didn’t hide the warm affection he was feeling, and Derek’s smile didn’t waver as he turned back to help Ollie and Davey balance another roll on the pile. Next to him, Cora was contributing her own roll to the structure, and grinning as it started to list dramatically to the side. Talia was waving her fork in the air, trying to talk over Peter, and his dad was saying something under his breath to Julia, who was laughing quietly. Under the smell of dinner Stiles could smell the warm mingled scents that had come to mean his family was together, and they were safe, and happy. Stiles sighed, squeezed Peter’s hand, and joined in the conversation.

End Notes

Thank you to everyone who took the time to read, and especially those who took the time to comment. I really appreciate each and every one.

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